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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 1 -

-Author-
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[LiberSpark]

– STORY –

In a world where magic is long but a thing of the distant past, where humans have the potential of harnessing a dormant power within them, called Battle Force…

A man from modern-day Earth finds himself suddenly waking up in the body of Norton Lorist, a youth of noble descent that had been exiled from his homeland in the North by his family to Morante City, the capital of the Forde Trade Union on the pretext of pursuing his studies.

Little did he know what would await him when he receives a summons from his family years later to return to the Northlands and inherit the position of the family head…

This is the tale of his life before the summons…

This is the tale of his journey northward and the allies he gathers along the way…

This is the tale of his rebuilding his family's dominion and keeping it safe from other power-hungry nobles…

This is the "Tales of the Reincarnated Lord".

NORTH
GRINDIA
BATTLE HISTORY
I DUKE LOGGIN CAMPAIGN : NORTHLAND
II BATTLE OF FIRMROCK : DUKE LOGGIN
III BATTLE OF FIRMROCK : SECOND PRINCE
IV BATTLE OF KOBO CITY
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NORTON
WILDNORTH TOWN
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BLACKMUD MARSH
BLADEDGE MOUNTAIN
BULLHORN HARBOR
BULLHORN BAY
SILOWAS ISLAND
WHITEBIRD TOWN
FIRMROCK CASTLE
MORGAN HILL
BLACK FOREST
MAGICAL DRAGON MOUNTAIN
TERRA INCOGNITA
LOGGIN DUCHY
GILDUSK CITY
SHAZIN
KENMAS
KENMAS SUSPENSION BRIDGE
ROMI RIVER
FELIM METROPOLULIS RIVER
HENOLIH SUSPENSION BRIDGE
FISABLEN DUCHY
NORTHEASTERN PLAIN
IBLIA KINGDOM
JILIN HARBOR
ANDINAQ KINGDOM
LUCY MOUNTAIN
LICHTANA CITADEL
NADEGAS CITY
MADRAS DUCHY
KOBO CITY
EGRET LAKE
VANDES CITY
SHARISKE CITY
SHABIJ
ANDERSON HILL
WINDBURY
PARKER DUCHY
TAIAN
BENZ CITADEL
GREEN PLAIN
KRISSEN EMPIRE
MELEIN DUCHY
FORUND DUCHY
CLOUDSNAP MOUNTAIN
GELDOS CITY
LORMO DUCHY
BLANCO MOUNTAIN
ARMATRIN HARBOR
FREDERIKA
REDLIS KINGDOM
SEA OF GRIEF
HANAYABARTA
NUBITE HARBOR
HAVLIONS
SHYARSIA
SILVER RIVER
FALIK PLAIN
KALIA KINGDOM
MORANTE
HIDEGOLD BAY
FORGE TRADE UNION
SEAVIEW CITADEL
RELIC ISLAND
KHAVISTAN GRASSLAND
KHAVISTAN KHANATE
SOLAR SEA
FEYERS
TERIBO KINGDOM
CALISTO HILL
TERRA INCOGNITA
DWARVEN KINGDOM
TENDANENT MOUNTAIN
URUBAHA DUCHY
GOLDEN COAST
GOLDEN COAST
ROMON EMPIRE
CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 0
Prologue

Singwa hung high up in the sky as always, sending light and warmth down to the streets.

The massive statue of Singwa, the God of the Sun, Light and War, under the illumination of sunlight, stood shiny and gleaming at the shrine, exuding an air of magnificence.

Morante City, the capital of the Forde Trade Union, was the largest trade and port city in the Grindia Continent.

This city had the largest amount of shrines dedicated a pantheon of deities, earning the city the moniker: The City of Shrines.

It also had the most academies on the whole continent, among which included seven of the top ten highest ranked ones, causing it to also be known as the Academy City.

This was the most populated city on the Grindia continent; it had a population which numbered almost eight hundred thousand.

Over here, businesses flourished and people came and go. The amount of gold coins circulating in the daily economy of the city usually amounts to millions. Countless mercenaries, swordsmen, adventurers, artisans, peddlers as well as the common folk and slaves each with their own dreams and aspirations.

The bards often sang about how this city was a favored land of the gods, a land rich with wealth and prosperity…

The second largest waterway on the Grindia Continent, the Silver River, silently nourished the Falik Plains and entered the seas from the west part of the city, giving rise to a bay filled with hidden treasures and a great maritime armada.

The vast and rich Falik Plains, thanks to the abundant sunlight, produced various goods including honey, allowing the city to grow larger and larger thanks to the yearly

harvest.

167 years ago, the Archduke of the old Falik Empire, Forde Morante suddenly announced a reform that led to the relinquishing of the hereditary feudal lord system and the adoption of the republic system. Serfdom was also abolished, liberating up to 400 thousand serfs. This reform greatly startled the various nations on the continent.

Greatly advocating trading as a means to develop the nation, Archduke Forde Morante rallied six other merchant guilds under one banner, forming the Forde Trade Union and began to trade with various other countries. This was later recorded in history as the Great Forde Reformation.

The newly-founded trade union embraced freedom and openness, causing hordes of wealth-hungry people to flock over as well as inciting jealousy from various other powers.

The Krissen Empire, one of the three great empires of the Grindia Continent, declared the Great Morante Reformation to be illegal and proceeded to invade the Falik Plains, starting a war the lasted more than a hundred years.

The newborn Forde Trade Union however did not yield. Rallying countless slaves under the banner of freedom, they met the invasion with similar appalling force. For more than a hundred years, blood stained across the Falik Plains.

Two Krissen emperors, more than ten dukes and countless elite soldiers fell at the Falik Plains to the forces of Morante City. However, the bright blue flag of the Forde Trade Union stood proud and tall.

Over the countless years of war, the trade union grew stronger. With 100 thousand warriors and clever plots, they dealt the empire a final blow that brought down the sole Sword Saint of the empire, winning themselves twenty years of peace and sending the Krissen Empire down the path of decay.

Following the Krissen Empire's last emperor's death by sickbed, the three princes started an internal power struggle for the throne, further crippling the already dying empire and allowing the trade union to be free of their threat and to rise and prosper. Within those twenty years, the trade union apexed and became the top superpower on the Grindia Continent. The influence the union had on trade throughout the continent was immeasurably great.

Morante City, the city that persisted, the capital of freedom. Originally, it was known as the Seaview Citadel. To commemorate the great deeds of Forde Morante for fending off the Krissen Empire's invasion, the name was changed to Morante City. To accommodate for rapid economic development, the Forde Trade Union commissioned for thirty six other districts to be built outside the citadel's walls as well as a new wall surrounding the newly-built districts, dividing the city into the outer walls and the inner walls.

But Morante himself didn't call the different sectors of the city that. He termed the inner part the Upper City Sector and City Core. The west outer part was called the Academic Sector, which contained about twenty academies of various disciplines. The northwest part of the outer city contained the Naval Sector, the Port Sector the Business Sector, which occupied the most space, and the Camp Sector which was where non-residents usually resided. To the northeast of the city was the Garrison Sector and the rest of the east and south parts were the Residential Sector.

Although Morante City was the capital of the Forde Trade Union, the union's highest council was not responsible for the city's management. Instead, the city's management was handled by a mayor in the City Core who was elected once every five years by the union council. After the mayor's five-year term, the council collects evaluations from one representative from every district and decides if the current mayor will take on another term.

The Forde Trade Union was faced with powerful underworld syndicates which resulted in sky high expenditures during the time of its formation. So, to prevent corruption and to streamline the administration process, they set up a brilliant new policy from a mercantile perspective: They legalized the syndicates and put them in charge of the security, taxes and hygiene of the various districts of the city. This achieved multiple things. Firstly, each and every syndicate kept each other in check and prevented the rise of an uncontrollable major syndicate. Second, this decreased the city management's expenditures and human resources by a huge fraction. Lastly, it also made the syndicates easier to manage. For example, should the citizens of a district be unhappy with the management of the syndicate in charge, the city council will remove said syndicate with the cooperation of other syndicates.

Initially, this policy was not met with much favor. However, that all changed within two years. The security of the area was greatly improved and the crime rate greatly decreased as well. The expenditures saved from having to suppress the syndicates went to the development of infrastructure, further improving the living standards of

the city residents.

This result greatly surprised the naysayers of the union and it also prompted many kingdoms to reevaluate the management of the city. The conclusion was that the effectiveness of the syndicates' management greatly surpassed that of the many kingdoms' own officials, who were great embarrassments in comparison.

This was Morante City, a haven for merchants, filled with vigor and rife with many curiosities. Some called it heaven while others called it a city of devilish temptation and deprivation.

During the day, the streets were filled with the sound of rowdy merchants and the shrines resounded with hymns of prayer, while the nights were full of merry debauchery. This was Morante City, the city that never sleeps.

Chapter 1
Red Grace Inn (1)

Two large bags were slung on each of Norton Lorist's shoulders, with another large shoulder-width rucksack hanging from his bag. His left arm held a yellowish-green rattan box while his right was wrapped around a bunch of rolled up beast skins which were resting on his shoulders. A red double door with a white wine glass painted on top of it was kicked open by him; he looked like a big, clumsy bear as he toiled and stumbled, struggling to squeeze himself through the doorway which was wide enough to let two bulky men go through at the same time.

It was three in the afternoon. This was the time when the inn was at its quietest. The main hall of the inn only had three people in it. The red-nosed bard old Mike, who's had a little too much to drink, slept very soundly face down on the table. At the table beside the fireplace sat old Hope the cobbler and the retired postman old Tom, both of whom were previously immersed in a card game, stared wide-eyed at Lorist who had just barged in.

Nodding at Hope and Tom, Lorist laid his luggage on the ground in front of the counter and stacked them up into a pile. He placed his bear fur cap on the table and shed his black leather jacket and subsequently removed two swords of different lengths that were slung on his waist and laid them on the table. He let out a long sigh, knocked on the table and called out. "Old Char? You here? Where is he... Hey, your wine barrel's being carried away!"

"My god, it's Locke..." said Tom as he finally recognized Norton Lorist without his jacket.

Hope couldn't resist anymore and stood straight up. "Hey, Locke. It's been quite some time now, about... half a year? We thought something happened to you. Did you bring back some star-spotted deerskins that I wanted?"

Pointing towards the beast skins on the floor, Lorist said "I got three of them wrapped up inside. Go check it out yourself."

A thin and tall old man emerged from the door behind the counter. Seeing Lorist

standing at the counter, his glum face lighted up with a hint of a smile. "You're back!"

This old man was the boss of the Red Grace Inn, Brennan Charlando, whom Lorish referred to as Old Char. Don't take his limping walk for granted; nobody could even conjecture that this expressionless, quiet old man behind the counter was actually a One Star Gold Swordsman. Most of the patrons of that inn never had a clue.

"Hey, Old Char. Get me some blackcurrant ale. Oh, and ask McDuffin over there to cook me a big meal. For half a year I've been having meager rations... I miss the food here so much!" said Lorist without a shred of hesitation.

"I got it." Charlando served Lorist a large mug of blackcurrant ale. "Drink some of this first. I'll go wake McDuffin up."

"Oh, and, could you check the goods out for me? I brought a bunch of things back from this excursion. I wonder if it matches up." said Lorist as he watched Old Hope fumbling through the beast skins.

Charlando nodded and disappeared behind the door.

"Yawn..." A sleepy-eyed woman subsequently came out from the door. "Who is it? Don't you see that everyone's taking a nap? You must have a screw or two loose if you come at this hour for a meal, sheesh."

That busty woman was dressed in tight clothing which accentuated her curvaceous figure. This was the head serving girl of the inn, Louise.

"Cough..." Lorist choked up and blushed. No matter who it was, there was no way of completely staying calm when faced with the first woman they had a physical relationship with. That was especially the case with Lorist, who was even more nervous in front of Louise. Back then during his twentieth birthday, the drunk Lorist had his virginity taken by Louise, who said that it was her gift for his "passage into adulthood". Some amount of fear still lingered in Lorist's heart even after all these years.

"Oh my! Our Locke's back! I've missed you so much over these six months... Come, give your big sis a hug." Louise's eyes gleamed as she saw Lorist and all traces of sleepiness vanished from her eyes as she spread her arms and leapt towards him.

Louise hugged Lorist over the counter and forcefully planted two kisses on his cheeks.

"Did you return just recently? Look at you, poor Locke... You've gotten so much thinner and tanned during the past six months! All of were worried about you and couldn't get our minds off you. You didn't send us any letters for so long. We were really worried something bad happened to you..." Louise started chattering on.

"Come on, aren't I back here safe and sound? This expedition to the Relic Islands brought me far overseas, there was no way I could contact you. And, don't you know the ferry to the Relic Islands only operate once every six months? What are you worried about? Don't you guys have any confidence in my abilities?"

"With your Three Star Iron power level? Haven't you heard about all the Silver Swordsmen who perished on the Relic Islands... We hear a lot of stories like that in the inn." said Louise without holding back at all.

"Eh? But I, a Three Star Iron Swordsman, has never lost a match to even one Silver Swordsman..." said Lorist as he scratched his nose, embarrassed.

"Those are just sparring matches in the academy! How could those compare to life and death battles with magical beasts? Your competitors were just going easy on you. I really don't get what those old bastards at the academy see in you. They could've just picked one Silver Swordsman out of so many others... Why did they bring you along as a bodyguard instead?" Louise felt that it was extremely unfair to Lorist for him to be expected to carry out tasks meant for Silver Swordsmen given his rank as an Iron Swordsman.

Lorist could only laugh bitterly. Louise was only concerned about him. How could she understand the pain of having his battleforce stuck at the Iron rank for so long? In order to join this expedition, Lorist had to pester and bug Academy Head Levins and was even forced to agree to multiple unfair terms including serving as the assistant for the whole expedition team before the old bastard agreed to bring him along.

The adventurers of the Grindia Continent all knew that it was suicidal to visit the Relic Islands without the power of a Silver Swordsman. Granted, non-combatant researchers who were protected by bodyguards were exceptions. Although Lorist had to serve the researchers throughout the expedition, he ventured just as much as the rest of the Silver Swordsmen. He managed to traverse a number of dangerous areas, even those that were potentially lethal to Silver Swordsmen.

The time taken for the trip to and from the Relic Islands took up two months while the

actual time spent on them was four months. Lorist himself felt that his abilities had improved nevertheless after experiencing all those life and death battles with the magical beasts and walking the tightrope of life multiple times. His swordsmanship got sharper and his movements got more agile. Even the sensitivity of his senses improved. But the sole goal he had aspired to reach during this trip was never achieved; his battleforce didn't manage to break through the Iron rank. He was still stuck at the peak of the Iron rank.

How he had regretted his decision back then. For some reason unknown to even him, he decided to use Ki-refining principles he remembered from his previous life to cultivate his battleforce. One focused on the meridians pathways while the other focused on the blood flow. One trained the internal parts of the body while the other trained the external. They were akin to oil and water! His brain must have cramped up for him to even decide to do that! In the end, even with the high class Blazing Battleforce technique passed down by his family throughout generations, he ended up at a dead end and has remained stuck at the Iron rank for three years now, unable to progress to the rank of a Silver Swordsman. Originally a universally praised genius in swordsmanship, he has become a joke in the academy.

"Hey, brother Locke, you're finally back. So glad to finally see you again..." The fatty who snapped Lorist out from his self brooding was the head chef of the inn, McDuffin. Wearing a mottled blue apron, he struggled as he squeezed his large belly through the door behind the counter.

"Hi, McDuffin. Man am I glad to see you too." said Lorist as he raised his cup of ale. "Do you have any nice food around? I just got back and haven't even had my breakfast and lunch yet. The only thing I had back on the boat was a black wheat bar."

"Oh my, why didn't you say so earlier? Stop drinking that ale, it won't go down well given your empty stomach. McDuffin, is there anything you can serve up quick?" Louise said.

"Hmm, there's some roasted goose in the oven, but it's still unseasoned. In the wok we have some bean and ribs but it's still cold, I'll have to heat it up so it'll have to wait. Ah, right. I have some goat meatballs still steaming over there which I can get you right away. Louise, go into my room and look into the chest beside my bed. There should be some cream bread inside. I was planning on having that for tea, but I guess you can go get that down for Locke..." said McDuffin who seemed reluctant to part from his cream bread.

Louise went off in a hurried manner.

"Alright. I'll have some roasted goose and ribs. McDuffin, fry me a herring, make me some green bean blood sausage, fried eggs with shrimp, cabbage and mushroom as well as another glass of fruit ale." said Lorist as he made his order.

"That much? Can you finish them?" McDuffin looked at Lorist with a hint of doubt.

"I'm so hungry I can swallow a cow whole. Go make the food, after that we'll have a good drink together."

Just after McDuffin returned to cooking, Louise brought a plate with some steaming hot goat meatballs and two pieces of cream bread over. "Eat these quick. You don't want to upset your stomach."

"Whoa, Locke... This is great! These are the skins I want! Look at all these star spots..." Before Lorist managed to stuff the bread into his mouth, Hope's praises rang out from behind him. He was raining praises upon the three beast skins he cradled so very dearly in his arms.

"Oh, I better go back to get some cash. I'll be right back." Old Hope let the deerskins down and rushed out of the inn with a speed that was unfit for a man of his age.

"Eh, why's he in so much of a rush?" mumbled Lorist with his mouth stuffed with meatballs. Louise only shrugged.

"This old bastard was talking about you nonstop that I actually thought he was worried for you. Turns out he was only looking forward to the skins you promised him..." said Tom the retired postman as he raised his ale cup and took a swig.

Just as Louise served up the green bean blood sausage, old Hope burst through the door, sweaty and huffing ragged breaths as he rushed over to Lorist's table. He took out fifteen gold coins from an intricately striped leather purse, counted them meticulously and instantly got ready to take the deerskins home.

"Hey, wait a second old Hope. Are you sure you're paying the right price?" Without others noticing, Boss Charlando appeared in front of Hope and pressed down on the skins on the table.

"What's wrong with you Charlando? Locke doesn't have any objections, does he?" said

Hope, glaring fiercely at Charlando.

"Just because he kept silent doesn't mean he doesn't have any opinions on the price. Right now, a skin like this costs 7 gold and 8 silver Fordes. Don't you think it's a little much to take three away for only 15 gold Fordes?"

Old Hope's face turned red. "But six months ago we set the..."

"You didn't set any exact price when you ordered the skins at that time and arbitrarily decided it to be at the market price back then. You'll have to have some rather thick skin to suggest a market price from six months ago. Right now, the supply of star-spotted deerskins on the market is getting lesser by the day, giving a significant boost to its value. I believe he can easily get eight gold Fordes for one of these skins in the market. The shoes you make with these can already sell for ten Fordes and you can make ten of theme with these. If you don't agree, you better give up on buying it and I bet I can get a better price for Locke if I sell them at the market."

"That's right. Two days ago there were two mercenaries who said that purchasing the star-spotted deerskins from the Relic Islands would cost 5 gold Fordes a piece. Think about the shipping and import fees. Aren't you just taking advantage of him? Locke got you three quality skins from so far away! You can't just do this to him!." said Louise as she rushed up to Hope with a fierce gaze and rolled her eyes.

Old Hope bitterly went back to Lorist's table and took out another seven gold coins. "I didn't bring any silvers with me..."

One gold Forde was worth twenty large silvers. Old Hope still owed four silvers.

"It's alright." Lorist shrugged with magnanimity.

Seeing Old Hope rushing to leave, Louise felt really dissatisfied. "You didn't have to be so generous. That old one got away good. You could get a great meal with four silvers."

Lorist smiled and said "What? Old Hope got on your nerves?"

Louise instantly exploded. "That miserly bastard... He feels up all of our serving girls and doesn't even give them any tips! And he orders a cup of ale worth five coppers and stays at a table for the whole afternoon!"

It wasn't weird for serving girls in the inn to be felt up by patrons. It's just part of their

job, to serve and to flirt. But patrons who don't tip well was always met with the disdain of the serving girls. Those patrons were the most unwelcome kind.

Chapter 2
Red Grace Inn (2)

Brennan Charlando didn't give off any impression that he was the owner of the inn. Ignoring the endless chatter of the head serving girl, Louise, he took a few beast skin parchments, knelt on the floor and rummaged around the rattan box, the beast skins as well as the bags, as he mused:

"Two pieces of Dark-scaled Rhinoceros skin, this is Throm the Armorer's order..."

"Five pieces of Crimson-eyed Black Fox skin, for old Park from the leathersmith's..."

"Three pieces of Gold Python skin, Jason from the weaponsmith's needs these to make scabbards..."

"One Striped Wildebeest's tendon, Jecks wants to use this as a bowstring..."

.....

"What is this?" said Charlando as he lifted up a greyish-white, meter-long bone.

Lorist put down the roasted goose and said, "It's a legendary Razorbeak Owldragon's humerus that is used by the indigenous Remandotu people on the island as staves. It's both light and tough. I believe Sir Maleiff asked for this."

According to legend, the Razorbeak Owldragon came about thousands of years ago from experiments conducted by ancient magi by cross-breeding nightowls and draconians, which resulted in the creation of a large flying beast that was savage and adept and combat. Only, it has already been extinct for a long time. The only complete skeletal specimen was only found a hundred years ago at the Relic Islands by an expedition team sent by the Magi State. It was named as such due to its seemingly large body and razor-sharp beak.

Sir Malieff was one of the more high-ranking regulars of the Red Grace Inn. Rumored to be a noble from some faraway republic, he came over to Morante City and lived a life of seclusion in a house near the inn, citing his hatred of war as the main for his

leaving his country. He is a man who likes to collect weird and eccentric items.

"Oh." That's just another one of Sir Maleiff's eccentricities. Placing the bone down on the floor, Charlando took out a leather pouch that contained several test tube-like glass containers which contained liquids of different colors. "What about this?"

"Seven types of magical beast blood, as request by Professor Simpkin of White Rose Academy. He said he got an ancient tome that detailed a recipe for a potion that required the blood of these magical beasts. He wanted to see if he could synthesize the potion mentioned in the book," explained Lorist.

Only now did Charlando notice the small labels at the bottom of the containers, with names of various magical beasts, including, Dark-gold Pythons, Greenback Direwolf, Dark-scaled Rhinoceros, etc.

"That old guy Simpkin sure has a lot of money to throw around. Replicating a potion? That's ludicrous! Mana doesn't even exist anymore, and the magi are not faring any better. How can you make potions without mana?" mused old Tom as he shook his head incessantly.

"Then what about this thing?" Charlando waved around a large, sealed bamboo container that was almost a meter long. Sounds of flowing liquid could be heard as he shook it around.

"Erm....." mumbled Lorist, embarrassed. He hesitated a moment before replying "That's some Terrence-donkey Whip I got for Els....."

The Terrence-donkey Whip was a native product of the Relic Islands which was famous for being a potent sexual stimulant. It was very popular among the nobles, especially the men whose sexual potency withered early.

"Pffft!" Upon hearing about Els's request, Louise laughed her guys out nonstop.

Charlando looked grim. "What is wrong with him... This little runt using aphrodisiacs at his ripe young age... Skirt-chasing all day long without actually doing anything useful... I gotta teach him a lesson! Leave that with me and tell Els to see me when he asks about it.

Els, or Brennan Evanport, was one of the syndicate heads three districts away. He was a Two Star Silver Swordsman as well as Charlando's one and only family member; his

nephew.

The table was cluttered with utensils and plates. Finishing what's left of his ale and burping in satisfaction, Lorist called for McDuffin to clear the stuff up. "Big sis Louise, go see if old man Luke from the back street is busy. If he isn't, I'd like to get a haircut and a beard trim. Oh, and, get me a room upstairs and prepare the bath for me. And, please get the clothes in the rattan box washed and go buy me some new ones at Auntie Misha's as well. Put that bill on my tab."

Old Luke packed his tools and came over with little delay. At this hour, there was usually little to no customers for the barber shop behind the inn. Putting a black linen cloth around Lorist, and placing a shiny silver mirroring plate on the table that was just cleaned up by Louise, Luke took up his scissor and walrus tusk comb and asked, "Would you like your usual cut?"

On the Grindia Continent, nobles from certain countries were expected to wear a certain hairstyle to differentiate themselves from the commoners. There was no rule for commoners though and they chose whatever hairstyle they liked, though sometimes hairstyles like ponytails gained popularity and many people followed suit. Aside from the slightly inferior barber tools, everything else pertaining to hairstyles were pretty much the same with that of Lorist's previous life.

Lorist has always preferred a crew cut for two reasons: In his previous life he served as a soldier for seven years and it has become something like a habit to him. It was also much easier when it came to styling his hair.

"Yup, I'd like the usual," replied Lorist as he straightened himself in his seat.

Old Luke cleared his throat and said, "Actually, lil' Locke, your hair is very lush and black. I bet you would be able to easily charm countless young maidens if you kept a ponytail."

"Get out, that kind of hairstyle requires so much effort to maintain. It's too much trouble. By the way Luke, why don't you tell me about the things that happened here during the past six months?"

Old Luke loved to gossip when he gave haircuts. He was very well versed with the rumors and stories being passed around in the local grapevine.

Luke made a thoughtful expression as he continued tending to Lorist's hair. "Well, it's

been pretty much the usual. Two months ago, Lind, the one who runs the roadside fruit stall, had his stall run over by a startled horse. Despite that, the owner reimbursed him with four gold Fordes and he even profited from that incident. Just last month, Watt the butcher's wife got into some trouble with a mercenary. The funny thing is: the mercenary actually got slashed in the shoulder by Watt, a person who hasn't even awakened his battleforce! What a joke!

"Idle gossip aside, three months ago it was announced on the newspapers that the war in the north finally ended, most of it thanks to the various trade unions slaving away for two years nonstop. A peace treaty was signed and the northern market seemed like a gold mine to many. For two whole months the papers were filled with recruitment notices for mercenaries and northern business investment advertisements. There were also multiple reports of people getting attacked by bandits though."

"Oh, the Krissen Empire finally stopped attacking?" Lorist really didn't expect such a big historical event occurred in the six months he went on the expedition. As for the peace treaty, nobody really treated it seriously as the Krissen Empire had been enemies with the Forde Trade Union for more than a century, during which at least three major conflicts erupted between the two powers. Why would the Trade Union bother to settle anything, given that the empire had already began to tear itself up since the start of the power struggle between the three princes for the throne of the late Krissen Emperor six years ago? It was already a blessing that the union did not take advantage of the empire's situation.

"What does the treaty entail, exactly?" Lorist was very curious about the specific agreements between the two powers. The northern empire's princes and dukes has been at odds with each other for almost six years now, uprooting the once stable foundations of the empire and crippling the economy, causing much poverty and famine. Even the nobles had to rely on loans to maintain daily life. If anything, it was much more believable for the trade union to have been involved in putting the empire into this predicament.

"Hmm, I really didn't pay much attention to the details of the treaty. I'm just a barber, you know. I've never really been into these confusing political things..." said old Luke with a blush.

"I know about it!" beamed old Tom with a bright smile. As a retired postman, he has always liked to pay attention to the political undercurrents on the continent. "There

were three main clauses. First, the empire is to be partitioned into three kingdoms and seven grand duchies. In other words, the Krissen Empire has ceased to exist and there will no longer be any northern invasions. Secondly, the stability and security of the trade routes are to be maintained and taxes will remain the same for all nations, regardless of whether they are kingdoms or duchies. Additionally, the subsidiaries of the trade union shall be allowed to conduct business freely in any territory. The third clause states that the trade union is to give loans to the seven nations with different interest rates ranging from 13 to 70 percent depending on the nation."

"Brother Locke, aren't you a northerner yourself? I remember you riding in a carriage with some kind of insignia, usually the kind used by nobles. Given that the war is no longer ongoing, wouldn't you like to go back to your hometown for a visit?" said McDuffin as he reminisced the time when he first met Lorist in front of the academy entrance ten years ago.

"Lil' Locke, are you really a citizen of the Krissen Empire? A noble at that?" exclaimed old Luke with a surprised tone.

Back when the Krissen Empire was still standing strong, conflicts between the empire and the Forde Trade Union were common and battles frequently happened on the Falik Plains. Many of the soldiers were led by the nobles who really caused the folks of the trade union a lot of grief. Although not everyone in Morante City would actually assault anyone of the empire, nobody had any good impressions on them either.

"To be precise, I came from the northern parts of the Krissen Empire; I'm a northern highlander. The highlands should be located thousands of kilometers from here, which is way too far and impractical for soldiers over there to come over. The march itself would take more than three months. My father was a baron and his barony was situated in the far north. I have an elder brother as well as a younger brother. I guess that makes me the second son, which means I won't be inheriting the barony at any rate. The fact that I'm so far out here means that my family has abandoned me. I've had to rely on myself for seven whole years since I lost all contact with them. That's why I now consider myself a Moranite and have nothing to do with the north or my family anymore," explained Lorist.

"That's right. Many nobles send away every child but the heir to the land to prevent infighting and strife, usually by means of exile, separation or marriage. Lil' Locke's case is pretty common. After all, his family does have a hereditary title," appended old Tom.

Luke worked quickly and finished the haircut as well as the shave. He ended the session by applying a final layer of oil to moisturize the skin.

Lorist stroked his clean-shaven chin with satisfaction and paid old Luke a small silver coin. He subsequently asked McDuffin to get Luke and Tom a glass of ale and put it on his tab. He took his swords and went upstairs with Louise.

There were eight rooms on the second floor of the inn, four on each side of the corridor.

As they arrived on the second floor, loud sounds of men and women during intercourse resounded throughout the corridor.

Lorist asked with much curiosity, "Who is the one getting it on at this kind of time?"

"That's Jumile. She picked up the three Blackbear brothers from the streets for seven large silvers. They've been at it for three hours or so. I wonder if she can still get up tonight."

"Jumile was also one of the serving girls of the inn. As for the Blackbear brothers, Lorist knew for a fact that all three of them were low-ranked mercenaries, usually only working on short escort missions and miscellaneous tasks for others. All three of them were burly and tanned and people started calling them the Blackbear brothers and eventually, the name caught on and stuck.

Louise brought Lorist to his room, which was situated at the far right end of the corridor. The bathtub was already set up and filled with hot water.

Taking out a pink fragrant bar of soap and a white linen cloth, she subsequently collected the clothes on the ground and placed the wallet, the sword belt and the waist bag on the table and was just going to leave, before turning back and asking, "Lil' Locke, are you free on the night three days from now?"

"I don't know, what for?" Lorist popped out from the water and took a deep breath.

"There's this girl from the village who wants to work here as a serving girl. She's looking to sell her first time for quite the sum, about two gold coins. Since you've made quite a profit this time around, why don't you help me out?"

"Hmm? Doesn't the inn already have you, Jumile, Shala and Nina? Is it going to hire

another one?"

"Nina just got married last month and isn't coming back. The girl from my village is also going to work here for two to three years for some money before going back to the village and finding someone to marry. I promised her that her first client would be a handsome and magnanimous young lad. Come on Locke, help me out, won't you?"

"I... I'll think about it later," said Lorist in an awkward, muffled voice as he submerged his head back into the bathwater.

Chapter 3
Dawn Academy (1)

Lorist slept soundly the whole night until he was awoken during noon the next day by the noises in the main hall. Lazily lying by the bedside, he waited some time until the hall had quieted down before slowly pulling himself out of bed.

A set of new clothing lay beside the bed, among which included some grey linen undergarments, a dark green wool shirt, a black leather vest, a grey wool coat, some white socks as well as a pair of black pants. There was also a pair of black leather boots beside the clothes.

Lorist was very satisfied with Louise's purchase; she knew what he liked best: clothes with dark, unassuming colors. He thought the other mercenaries who often wore bright colors looked even more ridiculous than clowns. However, that set of clothing shouldn't have come cheap. It probably cost more than one gold coin.

Fully-dressed and wearing his new boots, he slot two daggers into his boots and equipped his mini-crossbow on his left arm. He then pinned his shorter sword to his belt buckle and slung the long one on his back. Ruffling his wallet and waist pouch, he checked if he left any belongings in the room before locking the doors behind him and heading downstairs.

The lunch hour is already over and there were only twenty or so people chatting and drinking in the main hall as they listened to Mike singing "The War of the Gods" in a wistful tone. This was an epic poem that depicted the conflict between the magi and the gods thousands of years ago. Only, the author of the poem was sympathetic towards the gods. The author described the humans who were led by the magi as the frenzied attackers, and mourned for the fall of the gods. Aside from this one flaw, the poem had beautiful language, unpredictable plot twists as well as brilliant pacing. The tale has always captivated the people of Grindia and has even been adapted into stage plays, musicals as well as other entertaining performances in bars.

Lorist went to an empty table and took a seat. Several acquaintances raised their cups and silently made a toast as a greeting, before refocusing their attentions on Mike's performance.

Louise appeared before the table and said in a low voice, "When I saw you sleeping so soundly in the morning, I just couldn't bear to wake you. You look great in these clothes. Do they fit right?"

Nodding, Lorist said, "They're great. Many thanks to you. Anything I can have to fill my belly with?"

"We just got a fresh batch of cod just now. Do you want one?"

"Alright, get McDuffin to fry the fish for me. I'd like some rib soup, one omelette rice with some sausages and a cup of blackcurrant ale as well. I'm going to the academy later this afternoon."

"Coming right up. I'll get McDuffin to work faster since you're gonna be busy."

"Wait," called Lorist as Louise was just about to leave. "I'm not in a rush to go to the academy later. Louise, I'd like the room for a few more nights, and leave my laundry inside when it's done. Get Mike a cup of ale too and put it on my tab."

Full and satisfied, Lorist exited the inn and waited for a little while by the street until he saw a horse cart taxi passing by.

Rapidly waving, Lorist said, "Get me to the Dawn Academy."

"Alright, it'll be fifteen coppers. Sit tight." The brown-clothed driver flicked the thip and the Delemont Striped Horse raced towards the destination.

After ten or so minutes, the horse cart stopped in front of the entrance of the academy. Lorist paid the driver one silver coin, which was worth 20 coppers, with five coppers as a tip for the driver. The driver showered him with gratitude by as he got off the cart.

Dawn Academy was situated at the western part of the Academy Sector. It offered courses in multiple disciplines and was ranked the fifth among twenty or so academies in Morante City and ninth among all the academies on the Grindia Continent.

A statue of a girl who looked about twelve to thirteen years old slaying a gigantic dragon with a jeweled sword could be seen at the entrance. This brave young girl was the Dawn Goddess Loria. She is the daughter of Singwa, the god of light, sun and war, and Daphlyn, the Silvermoon Goddess. In the Grindia mythos, it was said that the

Dragon King of Darkness hated the lights Singwa emitted as he patrolled the world. By means of a trap, it managed to send the five divine horses that were pulling Singwa's chariot down the road to the Abyss. In this critical moment, Loria acted and successfully slayed the Dragon King of Darkness, returning the horses back onto their normal trajectory, allowing the god of the sun to once again illuminate the skies of darkness. It was at that moment Loria was granted the title of the Dawn Goddess.

The dawn, the time when the day breaks, the time that signifies the coming of light. In the Grindia mythos, Loria the Dawn Goddess was emblematic of bravery and hope.

Circling around the gigantic statue that was jokingly interpreted by some students of the academy as a lustful dragon pushing down a young girl, Lorist stood right in front of the main entrance of the academy. The entrance of the academy had no gates or doors. It only consisted of the statue and a boulevard that led straight into the academy.

Sighing, he reached into his waist pouch and took out an iron badge which was about one inch large and pinned it in front of his chest. On the black badge was an embossed image of a greatsword with three stars on top of the blade. That represented his Three Star Iron battleforce rank.

There was nothing he could do about it: one had to wear one's battleforce badge in order to enter the academy. Aside from that, professors, teaching staff and students all have their own respective badges that must be worn at all times within the premises.

Lorist put on another badge beside his battleforce badge. On it was an image of a long sword plunged straight into the ground with a half-risen sun beyond the horizon in the background. This badge was gold in color unlike his battleforce badge. It represented his status as a dual instructor in both swordsmanship and battleforce awakening.

A few teenagers wearing the uniform of the academy came over from upfront. They should all be freshmen. Lorist recalled that the recruitment day was almost one month ago. As he watched these teenagers jump around in excitement, he reminisced his own times as a student here ten years ago. Time really flows quickly and unceasingly.

At first, these students didn't pay Lorist much heed. After all, there were many students of his age in the academy. But once they saw his golden badge, they all

hurried to pay their respects.

Lorist merely nodded and smiled before continuing onward. At the Dawn Academy, students were required to pay the respects to the instructors.

Some sounds of chatter could be heard behind Lorist. "That must be Instructor Locke, the legendary Black Iron Gold-ranked instructor of our academy!"

"He has a gold instructor badge even with his battleforce at the Three Star Iron rank. The rumors were true… I even heard that he's invincible against Silver Swordsmen, earning him the nickname of 'Silver Undefeated'!"

"I really hope my battleforce instructor will be him… I heard that all his students three years in a row have awakened their battleforce without fail! They're already at the Iron rank now."

"I heard the seniors say…"

……

On the Grindia Continent, one's battleforce and swordsmanship represented one's strength. The four different ranks of battleforce included Bronze, Iron, Silver and Gold, which were further divided into three sub-levels for each rank. Beyond that was the level of Blademasters and Sword Saints. People like Lorist who were stuck at the Three Star Iron rank for more than three years were far and few. Aside from breaking through to the Blademaster level, which required deep levels of insight, when one reached the third star level of their rank, their battleforce would usually break through to the next rank quite easily. This was why Lorist was so harshly berated in the academy.

Ten years ago, a carriage with an insignia of a roaring bear brought a 14 year-old noble youth from the Krissen Empire to Dawn Academy. McDuffin, who was selling food by the entrance of the academy with his parents, clearly remembered that scene. The youth that came down from the carriage had an ugly, unwilling expression on his face. He viewed McDuffin and his family with much disdain. That youth was extremely cold and prideful.

Not even one month later, McDuffin heard that that youth got into a fight with someone in the academy and got badly beaten up. He had to rest in bed for three whole months.

The next time he met that youth, McDuffin didn't see any trace of who he was before; in front of him stood a smiling, bright young man whose face radiated endless curiosity. He stretched his hand out towards McDuffin and said, "Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Norton Lorist. What's your name?"

In the coming months, McDuffin got to know that Lorist befriended him because he couldn't stand the food provided by the academy anymore. Stale rice, black bread, potato mash and vegetable soup were served for all three meals every single day. Lorist had no choice but to go to McDuffin's stall for some variety to sate his cravings.

McDuffin couldn't forget the time when Lorist showed his culinary skills at his family's stall for the first time. His parents stared wide-eyed at the dishes he cooked up that emitted wafts of mouth-watering aroma. Even his siblings had their eyes glued to the food.

At that time, McDuffin's parents' stall only sold baked apples and potatoes as well as smoked sausages, soybean and some other common dishes. They were quite satisfied with a daily income of a few large silver coins. But after Lorist's arrival, their stall quickly became one of the must-visit places for food in the Academy Sector, reaching its peak of profit.

The young McDuffin quickly learned all the "hometown dishes" of Lorist, who was also happy to teach him everything. Lorist himself pointed out that McDuffin had a knack for cooking. The young McDuffin even believed Lorist's hometown to be a haven for good food and was planning to go on a "pilgrimage" to the holy land of food.

When Lorist finally had enough with McDuffin's annoying pestering he told McDuffin that those recipes came from a secret cookbook passed down only in his family and that nobody else in his hometown could make food like that. It's a shame so many ingredients listed in the book could no longer be found. But Lorist easily improvised and cooked out dish after dish of delicacies.

It was at that moment when McDuffin relinquished his desire to visit Lorist's hometown.

Time passed incessantly and five years passed quickly. Having saved up a hefty sum, McDuffin's parents stopped running the food stall and bought a small farm in the countryside to do some farming and his siblings tagged along. McDuffin also got a well-paying job as the head chef for the Red Grace Inn. Lorist was only nineteen back

then and his battleforce was at the Two Star Iron rank. He was promoted to an instructor by the academy due to his stellar swordsmanship and was viewed to be a growing talent with a bright road ahead of him.

Five years after, McDuffin was still the head chef of the inn while Lorist became a legendary figure in the academy, due to his dual instructor qualifications. However, with his Three Star Iron battleforce unable to break through, he became the laughing stock of the academy. With much mockery and disdain, his peers referred to him as the powerless genius swordsman.

Usually, academy sword instructors of higher ranking academies were usually of the Silver rank and above. That was even more so the case, given that Dawn Academy was ranked number nine out all other academies on the whole Grindia Continent with most other instructors' battleforce being at least at the Three Star Silver rank. Lorist was the only exception who was a dual gold ranked instructor with a Three Star Iron battleforce, easily earning the envy and hostility of his peers.

The reason he got a gold rank instructor badge was due to the fact that all his students managed to awaken their battleforce for three years straight. This 100% success rate was unprecedented. Even only 25 out of 26 students from noble families had their battleforce awakened in one Blademaster's battleforce course. The one who failed was deemed to have little force circulating in his blood. At that time, that was the highest recorded rate of success for battleforce awakening courses. Usually, only two thirds of students will be able to awaken their battleforce.

However, the moment Lorist was put in charge of his first battleforce awakening course, all 17 commoner students who no instructor wanted to help successfully awakened their battleforce one year later. The second class which was attended by 31 other people also had a 100% success rate. During the third year, his course was attended by 59 people, among which included 10 students of noble descent who went out of their way to apply for the course. But, the most eye-catching ones were the three students who previously failed to awaken their battleforce.

One would still stand a chance at awakening their battleforce even after the failed first attempt, albeit with a lower success rate. However, a year later, all three of them successfully woke their battleforce. This didn't only stun the people of the academy, it also greatly surprised the whole of Morante City. Lorist had since become a legend who managed to awaken the battleforce of three students who has already failed once, earning him his golden battleforce instructor badge.

As for his gold swordsmanship instructor badge, Lorist got it from winning duels. He has battled students as well as instructors of the Silver rank more than a hundred times without a single loss, earning him the nickname "Silver Undefeated".

Walking along the boulevard, Lorist thought back at every effort, gain, loss, bliss and grief throughout his ten years at the academy with an air of sentiment and nostalgia.

Chapter 4
Dawn Academy (2)

At the end of the boulevard was a crowded plaza. Lorist couldn't help but wonder why the plaza would be so crowded at a time like this. What was going on there?

By the time Lorist arrived at the plaza, the sound of chatter rose audibly.

"Instructor Locke is here…"

"That's Norton Lorist?"

"Where? Which one of them is him?"

"That one. That's Instructor Locke……"

"....."

Lorist emerged from the crowd of people.

A rough looking man with a bearded face wearing an old leather armor ran towards him while unsheathing his two-handed greatsword. Raising his blade high, he roared, "Aha, Lorist! I'm here to request a duel with you…"

The two-handed sword emitted a glowing light that signified his power as a Two Star Silver Swordsman.

Different battleforce ranks were easily distinguished. Bronze battleforce gave one a slightly buffed look and greatly increased one's strength, agility and endurance when it circulated through one's body. Iron battleforce mainly focused on the protection of the body. For example, it can be used to fortify the hands, causing them to radiate a faint glow and have the toughness of iron, greatly increasing their defensive capabilities multiple times more than that of an average person's.

Silver ranked battleforce excelled at the attacking aspect. Silver Swordsmen can project their battleforce onto their weapons and make them emit various forms of

sword glows, with the length of the glow indicating the Star rank of the swordsman.

As for Gold Swordsmen, they can gather their battleforce to execute ranged attacks. Beyond that was the level of Blademasters, who could project their battleforce onto anything from flowers to blades of grass and use them as invincible divine weapons to eradicate their enemies.

Sword Saints, however, were more like legends. Not much was known about them, though it was said that they can utilize something along the lines of a "domain". There were only about four or five known Sword Saints on the Grindia continent. Nations which had the backing of a Saint had incredibly stable foundations. That's why these Sword Saints were kept hidden from the masses and were shrouded in mystery and enigma.

Lorist looked at that man holding the raised greatsword with a look of admiration. That guy must have quite a few gold coins to spare for him to dare to draw his sword like this in the academy, he thought.

"Stop!" A loud cry rang out as a troop of black uniformed swordsmen marched towards the plaza.

Sword glows pointed at his throat, lower torso and chest, the brutish man stood still without moving an inch. The scary part was that two of the sword glows that were pointed at him were much longer than his own. The owners of those swords were definitely Three Star Silver Swordsmen.

The few other men who came with the brutish man hurriedly attempted to hide their weapons.

"You, you, you, and you, the one wearing a chainmail, yes you! And that other one in the blue clothes! And that one wearing the leather hat! You guys are really brave… For you to even dare to unsheathe your weapons in the academy! Bring them to the Enforcement Department!" A fat man appeared before the men and shouted loudly.

Those who were named by the fat man attempted to escape.

"You dare to run from me!? You guys, apprehend them and double their fines!" said the fatty with a cruel expression.

"Yes sir!" said the black robed men as they made the chase.

If the students of the academy were asked to name one most wretched people in the academy, that person would definitely be that fat man who was also the head of the Enforcement Department. His name was Charade and was called by many as the "Deathly Miser".

As the head of the Enforcement Department of the academy, Charade never scolded or physically punished the transgressing students. Instead, he gave them a very huge fine. If the students couldn't pay up, the department has got just the solution for them. The Enforcement Department provides loans for the fined students. And to make sure they repaid their loans, the department also found jobs for them and made them work until their debts and interests were paid up in full.

Once, there were two students who broke the rules and did not have the money to pay the fine. The fatty merely smiled and said, "Don't worry about the money. As long as you can work, it'll be fine."

Without delay, they were sent to the mines for three whole months. It was also rumored that they almost got sodomized there. After the three month term, the fatty called for someone to go bring them back. A tear-jerking scene soon unfolded: the two students knelt and desperately hugged the ones who were sent to pick them up, refusing to let go.

After the black robed men apprehended the ones who tried to escape, the fatty walked towards the one who brandished the greatsword leisurely. He motioned for him to sheathe his sword, which the man soon did with much haste.

"Have you come to the academy to rob and kill?" asked the fatty with a "courteous", wanting tone.

The burly man replied with a flustered look, "Umm, no-nope. I came here after seeing the notice issued by the academy."

"Notice? What kind of notice allowed you to come terrorize our students? I don't ever recall seeing anything like that," said the fatty with an expression of intense curiosity.

"What?" the man let out a startled cry. "It's that duel notice that you guys put up! It says that any Silver rank contestant who can defeat the Black Iron Gold-ranked Instructor Locke gets to take his place as gold-ranked instructor and will be rewarded a hundred gold coins! That's the reason I came…"

"Oh, it's that notice. That's right, the academy did put up something like this. But, are you sure you checked it out properly?"

"Of course I did! The words on that notice were larger than my fists! How could I have missed anything?" roared the burly man loudly.

"Well, then. Tell me the fine print on the notice! It was never stated that you could come in randomly and just pull your sword out in public!" shouted the fatty, whose expression had suddenly turned dark, glaring at the burly man.

That man winked and coughed out, "I was just worried that someone would beat me to Lorist! I didn't see no fine print!"

"It was stated very clearly on the notice. Didn't you say that you had read it carefully?"

"You mean those words that were smaller than my fingernails? That was the fine print? Who reads those? I only read the words at the top…" The man's voice grew softer and softer. He looked like he just realized his grave error.

"Did you think the academy would just let anyone barge in like that with a sword in hand? Of course there were terms and conditions! We at the Dawn Academy are the elites of the Grindia Continent. Everything we do has to follow strict protocol. It is stated that any Silver ranked individual who wished to challenge Lorist was to report to the Enforcement Department. You see that white stone building over there? That's the Enforcement Department! You must go there and apply for a duel and pay a registration fee of ten gold Fordes. After that, we will notify you the time and place for the duel within two or three days. If you don't show up at that time, it will be considered your loss by default and we will not return your registration fee.

"You won't profit if you don't invest. It might cost you ten gold Fordes, but think about it: your opponent Lorist is but an Iron ranked swordsman with somewhat better swordsmanship. If you had won, not only would you get a hundred gold Fordes, you will also be employed by the academy as a gold-ranked sword instructor! A gold-ranked instructor's salary is ten gold Fordes a month. You can easily buy a house in this city and settle down here with that kind of money."

Charade talked like a patient salesman with the brawny man nodding to every one of the points Charade made.

"It's such a shame…" said Charade with his expression turning glum as his tone

changed. "You actually ruined such a good chance by not reading the notice carefully and committed such an act at our academy. Not only have you broken the rules of our academy, you have also greatly insulted the academy and caused deep mental anguish in our students! That's why, you must be punished before you will be allowed to register for a duel."

"Punishment? What kind of punishment?" asked the brawny man, scared.

"Oh, don't worry. According to our academy's rules, we will not cause you any physical harm. We only ask you to pay a small fine. This matter will be settled if you hand over five gold Fordes," said Charade with a pleasant smile on his face.

"What! Five gold coins?" The brawny man could never imagine having to lose five gold coins just for drawing his blade. "I… I don't have that kind of money…"

"That's perfectly okay. You can borrow it from some friends. If you can't do even that, the Enforcement Department can find you some work which will guarantee the repayment of your debt." The fatty got a little impatient after hearing the man's reply. He waved for the men in black to bring the transgressing men back to the Enforcement Department.

By the time this ended, only half the people who were at the plaza remained.

Lorist turned to look at Charade with a grim expression.

"Deathly Miser! What are you up to this time!?"

The fatty replied with a face full of smiles, "Haha, isn't this brother Locke? It's so nice to see you again! I've missed you so very much."

"Cut the crap. What's with that notice you guys put up?" Lorist said while glaring at Charade.

The fatty let out a long sigh and said, "Brother, weren't you troubled by the constant challenges you received from people last year? Didn't I come out with a solution to that problem that also profited us both by charging anyone who wanted a duel with you for five gold coins, from which I took two and the rest went to you? Us brothers earned quite a bit after 57 duels last year. However, that old bastard took note of our little business..."

Charade pointed at the sky, hinting at the pressure from his higher ups. "Just two days ago the old bastard came looking for me and told me that you still didn't manage to break through during your excursion at the Relic Islands. The other academies mocked that of all the people in Dawn Academy, you, a Three Star Iron Swordsman, was appointed a dual gold ranked instructor. To teach those people a lesson, we decided to put up that notice, mainly to attract the Silver Swordsmen from other academies to challenge you and see for themselves your ability."

"Is that all it is?" Lorist didn't believe for one moment that that was all it is.

"Erm……" the fatty hesitated. "And, we also wanted to earn some money from this. The old bastard said that I didn't think far enough and that I was satisfied with only just a little over a hundred gold coins. He thought that if we offered a tempting gold reward, it would attract even more people, even if we raised the dueling fee by two times. Of course, the old guy said that since you're the one doing most of the work, you'll still receive your cut of three gold coins per duel. The enforcement division's share got cut to only one gold coin per duel for arranging the dueling location and maintaining security during the duel. The rest of the money will go to the academy."

Lorist understood that the "old bastard" referred to by Charade was no other than Academy Head Levins. "The old guy isn't afraid that I'll lose a match?"

"Hehe," laughed the fatty, "I myself trust you wholeheartedly. Even though I'm a Three Star Silver Swordsman, I know full well that I will not last more than twenty bouts should I battle with you. Based on your 57 wins last year, we at the Enforcement Division don't doubt you one bit!"

"But I find it weird that the old bastard has so much faith in you that he set the reward prize so high. Oh, did you spar with Instructor Claude during your trip to the islands? I heard you took more than 200 moves from him without losing. Is that true?" said the fatty as he recalled the rumor.

Instructor Kellen Claude was a Three Star Gold Swordsman and was heralded by most as a person who would one day break into the Blademaster level. He was the chief swordsmanship instructor and was the only other person in the academy other than Lorist who had a gold swordsmanship instructor badge. He got it because of his skill while Lorist got his by winning 30 straight duels against opponents of a higher battleforce rank than him. Additionally, Lorist would lose his appointment as a gold ranked swordsmanship instructor if he loses even one duel.

Instructor Claude already wanted to spar with Lorist ever since he heard of Lorist's 57 wins. However, he was hesitant to do so as his battleforce rank was far beyond that of Lorist. The expedition to the Relic Islands, however, presented itself to be an opportunity for him to spar with Lorist. The excuse was that Lorist's aptitude had to be assessed to determine whether he was fit to attend the expedition.

Lorist endured more than 200 moves and finally lost due to the sheer difference in battleforce power, which was already an amazing feat in itself.

"How did you know?" asked Lorist, as there were only three people present during that duel.

"The old bastard himself told me," exposed Charade without blinking an eye. "He said that even though he wasn't well versed in the matters of battleforce or swordsmanship, Instructor Claude's high evaluation on your abilities, which included your undefeatable status among Silver Swordsmen and your swordsmanship that far surpasses most Gold Swordsmen made the old bastard very confident in you, so much so that he's willing to bet such a large amount of money on you. Ever since his duel with you, Instructor Claude has also entered seclusion training to attempt to break through to the Blademaster level."

"Huh……" Lorist was speechless. Just like that, he was swept into this money-making scheme by the academy head right after returning, causing him to feel incredibly annoyed. "I'm going straight to meet that old bastard!"

Chapter 5
Young Noble

"Excuse me, but may I have a little bit of your time?"

A man came up behind him and asked politely just as Lorist was going to turn around and walk away.

Lorist turned to his back and looked; it was one of the students who remained at the plaza. This young noble youth donned an intricately cut shirt under a white leather vest with baggy pants that were decorated with threads of gold. Numerous diamonds that were set on his boots could be seen gleaming in the sunlight while the collar of his shirt boasted two golden buttons. On the outermost layer was a refined black linen coat that was fastened tightly around his body by a black belt. The youth exuded an aura of elegance with a hint of defiance in his eyes.

The guy had a superficial smile that was typical among nobles which caused Lorist to feel a sudden impulse to throw a punch at his face. Although that person looked familiar, Lorist felt much disdain towards his condescending, prideful gaze which held no one else in any regard.

"What business do you have here?" asked Charade with a serious tone.

"Greetings, Instructor Charade. I'm only here to ask if Instructor Locke has missed me since we last met," nodded the youth to Charade and subsequently turning his gaze to Lorist.

"My dear Instructor Locke, I, your former student, has come to pay my respects to you. I am eternally grateful for the guidance you have provided during these past few years. I heard that you've been unable to progress in your battleforce training. That's certainly too bad. As of late, I've managed to break through to the Three Star Silver rank and I have decided to return to the academy to offer my thanks for your lessons and advice. To my surprise, I've heard that you will be accepting duels from Silver ranked students, and that really awed me, since there's a great disparity between your battleforce and that of Silver Swordsmen. I got the news a little too late and ended up being placed behind a number of your other challengers. My only hope is that you

defeat all the others so that I may taste your blade and receive your education again. Please try hard for this student's sake."

After saying all that, the noble youth bowed, before retreating a few steps and walking away.

What's going on? He seemed sincere when he said all that, but something still felt off. What's up with that guy, thought Lorist. He proceeded to ask Charade, "Who was that guy? He just came up to me with five or six other followers and said some really weird stuff. Somehow, he looks kind of familiar."

Charade rolled his eyes. "Come on, you really don't remember him?"

"Well, I kind of remember seeing him some time ago… But I really can't recall who he is. He did seem like he was some kind of big shot though… He looks pretty loaded too," answered Lorist honestly.

Charade clapped his hands in amazement and said, "He lost to you in a duel before. Remember three years ago?"

"Three years back? What happened at that time?" Lorist still couldn't recall that incident.

"Sigh… Even if you can't recall it now, that guy couldn't forget it even if he wanted to. When you were first appointed as an official swordsmanship instructor three years ago, that bloke brought a group of other students to ambush you. He was the main perpetrator of the incident that occurred during the last dual elite course, and was also the one that you punished the hardest. He ended up bruised all over, with several broken ribs and got bandaged up like a large mummy," recalled Charade painfully.

Oh, so it was that guy. Lorist finally remembered.

Every three years, the Dawn Academy has special training session for the students who excelled in both battleforce and swordsmanship. It was called the "dual elite course" and was also regarded as one of the most difficult courses offered by the academy. Given that the students that attended the course were the top among their peers in both disciplines, and that most of them were nobles with their own unique battleforce techniques passed down through their families, the students were extremely arrogant and prideful and would not accept an instructor who lacked the necessary qualifications.

Three years ago Lorist was just appointed as an official swordsmanship instructor and had been given the task of teaching the dual elite class. Naturally, there were students who looked down on him, but all of them were utterly defeated by Lorist. That youth just now was ranked one of the top two in terms of swordsmanship and was also an assistant instructor of the dual elite course. He was swiftly defeated in a duel with Lorist after merely three blows. Unable to suppress his hatred after his loss, he managed to manipulate the other students into attacking Lorist en masse while he himself attempted to strike at Lorist while he was occupied, desiring to put an end to Lorist's life with the cruelest method available to him.

Lorist, unable to suppress his anger at that guy's actions, utterly pummeled him to the point where he could not go through daily life without assistance and was bedridden for more than six months.

"Oh yeah, didn't you say he went away to recover and even decided to leave school? Logically speaking, shouldn't he be brimming with hate and desperately trying to kill me? Why did he even come to pay his respects?" asked Lorist as he stroked his chin, annoyed.

"Hahaha…" laughed the fatty, "This is a custom of the nobles. Even if they were facing their archenemy and was going to challenge them to a duel to the death, they would still extend their greetings and salute the enemy. This is called ‘being chivalrous'."

"Who is he to come over like that and spout all that insincere nonsense about me not letting him down and fighting my way to him! So what if he's a Three Star Silver Swordsman! I've defeated tons of people of that caliber!" said Lorist, disgruntled.

"Hehe, you better look out for that youngster. Do you know his family background?"

"I can't remember anything else about him, not even his name…"

"You… Sigh, forget it. Let me tell you. That kid is called Sandoz Hirda and he's the second son of the Archduke of the Kalia Kingdom, Sandoz Lyam. You do know about the Kalia Kingdom, right?"

"Of course I do. It's one of the neighboring nations of the Forde Trade Union and was located somewhere southeast of the union, I think," answered Lorist after contemplating for a while.

"To the east of the Kalia Kingdom is the Romon Empire and to its south lies the

Khawistan Khanate. Do you know why there has been no conflict between the Kalia Kingdom and the two major powers right next to it?" asked Charade seriously.

"I don't know," replied Lorist honestly.

"That's because the Kalia Kingdom has a Sword Saint. Neither the Romon Empire nor the Khawistan Khanate wishes to agitate that person. The Kalia Sword Saint is also known as the 'Tempest Sword Saint'. According to rumors, he revealed his power once when he was still only a Blademaster: when the rain poured, he could pierce every single raindrop with his sword and after the shower, an area of three meters from the spot where he danced with his sword was completely dry, causing his name to instantly soar to fame."

"That Sandoz Hirda whom you've beaten up has since become the disciple of the Tempest Sword Saint. Think about it, three years ago he was merely a One Star Silver Swordsman, Right now, he's already at three stars. He must have trained very hard all this time to settle this grudge with you. Some rumors say that he challenged those of the same rank as him and defeated them with merely two to three strikes. It seems that he's confident of being able to take that gold swordsmanship instructor badge from you. You better watch out, Locke, he's not your average small fry. Let me check his number..."

Charade took out a few sheepskin scrolls and scanned through them for a while. "It's here. He's your 284th challenger. He must have registered just yesterday afternoon."

"Huh?" Lorist exclaimed, starting. "Fatty! When did the registration start!?"

"Two days ago…" said Charade as he silently smiled. "As of now, there are more than 350 applicants. There were 30 others when I was walking over from the Enforcement Department just now. I believe it'll hit 400 by today…"

Lorist flicked his middle finger at Charade. "I'm really gonna give it to that old bastard! Does he want me to die!? How is that even remotely reasonable?"

The fatty snickered like a fox who just stole a chicken. "The old bastard just rebuked me this morning for not being able to see the big picture. He said that we should open the registration to the whole of the Academy Sector, and after that, Morante City! Maybe when this gig gets big, we can even let challengers from the Falik Plains come! In time, news of this will spread throughout the continent and there will be more

challengers than we can count! By then, the profit we'll make from the registration fee will increase exponentially and our academy's reputation as well as influence will also rise… I'll be sending some students to go post the notices around the city later this afternoon, especially in the taverns and mercenary guilds… I'll need even more notices for those places."

Hearing that, Lorist staggered and almost fell face first to the ground.

The fatty delivered the final blow, saying, "The old bastard already said that he hopes that this year there will be as many as 3600 challengers. This way, he can arrange 10 duels per day for you. That's actually going rather easy on you."

"Bam!" Lorist fell straight to the floor, struggled to get up, flashed two middle fingers at Charade and walked away swiftly.

Charade was still yelling, "Locke, you better be careful of Hirda! Don't be careless and lose to him!"

Hirda can just go to hell. He's just a Three Star Silver Swordsman, thought Lorist as he dismissed the possibility of him losing to Hirda entirely. Lorist felt ever more confident in his abilities ever since his four months of training at the Relic Islands, Over there, a leader of some mercenary group who was a Two Star Gold Swordsman had been trampled and roughed up by a Dark-scaled Rhinoceros while he easily took care of that beast with a single strike.

Should he challenge Instructor Claude or any other peak Three Star Gold Swordsman to a duel, Lorist believed that it would take more than a 1000 moves before a victor can be decided, and he might just be the victor. Lorist wasn't being conceited or boastful; although his battleforce was only at the Three Star Iron rank, he gained much benefit from training in the Aquametal Ki Technique passed down in his past life's family.

Just by squeezing his palms, he could easily pulverize a thumb-sized rock into fine grains. This was the power of the "Inch" component of the Aquametal Technique. In his past life, he had trained in the technique for more than 30 years, but he hasn't even reached the peak of the Bright Stage of the technique; the Dark Stage was even further away. However, in this world, by training his battleforce with the Aquametal Technique, he managed to achieve the Dark Stage within a short span of four years. Maybe this world was more suited for training the internal energies of the body.

Silver battleforce could be projected onto a sword and cause a sword glow to form which can only be blocked by weapons that are also infused with battleforce. battleforce infused weapons could easily dominate and overcome common weapons or shields. While Lorist himself couldn't form a sword glow, he could still infuse his weapon with battleforce or internal energy and grant the weapon extraordinary strength and sharpness that rivals even those of weapons that emanated sword glows. Only, that effect was usually unnoticed by most other people as the energy was hidden from the eye and focused within the blade.

Currently, he could circulate his battleforce with some methods from the Aquametal Technique at will and perfectly coordinate his body motion and his strikes, allowing him to execute forceful, fluid movements while maintaining a stable breathing rhythm, and every step he took was silent and stealthy as well as being firm and stable. His dantian contained boundless Ki energy which rapidly regenerated before he even got to use it up. That was the power of one who has reached the Dark Stage, as described by his family's technique manual.

The only difference was that the Aquametal Technique manual states that at the Dark Stage, the meridian points at the temples would swell up. Lorist's temple meridian points, however, were still flat and ordinary. He figured that it could be due to him training in the technique using battleforce. Since that had no observable repercussions, Lorist didn't worry about it too much. His was more troubled by that darned academy head who was treating him like a money printing machine. He didn't mind dueling others himself and was already used to it. Furthermore, this body's enhanced dynamic vision gave him quite an edge; Lorist had never considered Silver Swordsmen to be a threat.

Ten duels a day wasn't strenuous for him either. It only took a few sword blows to end the duels; his usual swordsmanship classes required him to participate in ten or more mock battles to give his students some hands-on experience, and the fact that he had to point out his students' flaws made that even more troublesome than simple dueling. The only kind of combatant who would pose an actual threat to him were those who were at least of the Two Star Gold rank. Then again, no self respecting Gold Swordsman would stoop so low to challenge him to a duel.

His main frustration was that he had been ordered to duel others rather than asking for the duels himself. To him, that wasn't the same at all. That old bastard was profiting off his labor while he had to do all the work! Lorist solemnly cursed that old bastard to one day be buried and crushed to death by all those gold coins he made.

Chapter 6
The Origins of Battleforce

In front of him was the main lecture building of the Dawn Academy. Its design was like the form of a large bird spreading its wings, with both of the 'wings' enclosing a central plaza; it looked like a bird that was embracing the central area. The main hall had five floors that served as the main offices for instructors of the various disciplines taught in the academy. The other two wings only had four floors which comprised 80 classrooms altogether and could fit up to 4000 students in total at any given time.

To the left of the mini plaza between the wings was a white stone building. Originally, it was a defense outpost, but in recent times it has been used as an office for the Enforcement Department as well as the Department of Student Affairs. To the right of the plaza was a small forest which was an ideal place for training and even romantic rendezvous.

To meet with the academy head, Lorist had to go through the main hall of the lecture building, circle around the assembly ground and canteen, pass through the herb garden and research building that were used mainly by the academy's herbalists and finally the library before he arrived at the main administration building, which was previously an abandoned training ground. The academy head's office was on the top floor of the administration building.

Despite being a multidisciplinary academy with more than 153 years of history, the Dawn Academy wasn't famous for their battleforce or swordsmanship courses. Most other schools that ranked above them usually had a Blademaster in charge for the two courses.

Rather, the academy was more famous for accounting, archaeology, language studies, herbalism as well as magical beast studies. They were also quite renowned for their painting and music composition courses.

To ensure that their students were multitalented and holistic, the Dawn Academy insists that all students choose two other professional disciplines and one arts course besides their main battleforce and swordsmanship courses or they will not be allowed to graduate. On the other hand, the academy does not care about how long it takes to

graduate as long as the fees are paid.

Besides the few renowned courses, the academy also has multiple other disciplines for students to choose from, namely, construction, sculpting, city management, business management, knight training, horsemanship, ship building, smithing as well as leather tanning. They even had one course specially designed for descendants of noble families among which included flower appreciation and fine-dining courses.

Although these other courses were not the academy's best ones, they still held a certain standard and only hired qualified instructors. As these courses only taught the basics of the disciplines, students could easily pass them and graduate, provided that they put in a decent amount of effort into it.

Lorist took up accounting and knight training as his additional professional courses. This was chosen ten years ago by his uncle who also handled all of his family's business affairs. His uncle thought that learning accounting would benefit Lorist even if he doesn't end up inheriting the title of the family head as he can always inherit his position as the head of the family's trading group.

As for knight training, that was chosen because his family had a glorious military history and considered martial prowess paragon. Lorist also showed tremendous talent as he had awakened his battleforce at the young age of 14. Had it not been for the grave error he committed in the past, he would not have been exiled to Morante City by his father.

Being exiled meant not being able to receive the traditional knight training of his family. At that time, Lorist's uncle thought that it was not good for Lorist to not have any training in this field and chose knight training as the other professional course he had to take.

What his uncle didn't expect was that before even a month has passed since his precious nephew's enrollment, due to his overbearing arrogance, Lorist had got into some trouble with several other students and ended up beaten to the brink of death. It was at that time that another consciousness took over young Lorist's body.

Because of that, Lorist only took one year to complete the accounting course since to the current Lorist, the subject was merely some crude, simple arithmetic on the level of mathematics classes taught to fourth or fifth graders back in his previous life.

However, the current Lorist had some initial trouble with his knight training. Had it not been for his already fit body, he would've suffered quite a bit during the arduous three years of the course. He had to start of as a squire of other knights and carry out many miscellaneous tasks for his seniors as well as manage their armors and take care of their horses on top of attending his own physical exercise and training sessions in the skills of a knight. After three years of bitter training, he finally obtained his pass for the course.

Despite all that, he could only become a knight apprentice, unlike his other course mates. That was due to his Iron ranked battleforce. Only Silver Swordsmen could become full-fledged knights.

That being said, the main cause for his stunted battleforce training was due to a mishap in the cultivation of the Norton family's Blazing Battleforce. Ever since inheriting the memories of the original owner of the body, he knew that he was in possession of a hand-copied version of the Blazing Battleforce manual that only allowed him to train up to the Three Star Iron rank. At that time, his battleforce had just recently been awakened and it would take him a few more years to reach the Three Star Iron rank, so he wasn't in a hurry to obtain the rest of the manual.

Battleforce training was very much different from the Ki-refining techniques he had encountered in his previous life. He was forced to train the Aquametal Technique passed down in his family by his grandfather at the young age of seven back then. Battleforce training, however, did not start until one reached the age of 15 or 16; one could not awaken one's battleforce at too young an age when the pulse wasn't strong enough to agitate the magical beast factors present in the blood.

Legend says that thousands of years ago, the world was rife with magic and great magi and sages dominated the world. They called the Grindia Continent the ‘main plane' and set off to the stars in search for other planar worlds. In one of their countless expeditions, the magi discovered a worrying problem. The magi usually travelled in small numbers and did not have much prowess in close combat to fight the warriors of the other planes. Thus, they returned to the Grindia Continent to figure out a solution for the problem.

Initially, the magi resorted to taming magical beasts, but they soon felt that it wasn't that great of a choice, as the beasts had relatively low intelligence and could not efficiently comprehend the magi's instructions. Problems solved with magical beasts usually ended up messy or bloody.

One day, after long periods of brainstorming, the magi got a spark of inspiration and injected blood from strong magical beasts into humans who could not train in the art of magic, and through the use of a magic formation, battleforce was manifested.

Battleforce totally changed the world of humans. Possessing techniques to train in battleforce, the magically inept humans could thrive against magical beasts without the protection of the magi. Not only did that greatly lessen the magi's responsibilities to protect the normal humans hence allowing them more time to pursue their own interests, it also provided the magi with a formidable army.

Following that discovery, various other types of blood from different magical beasts were integrated into the human body and thus different types of battleforce attributes were identified. At that time, battleforce awakening and training occurred with the aid of magical formations. The magi also categorized the different ranks of power and their difference in abilities. With the extensive research conducted by the magi, battleforce training got easier and faster and humans with battleforce started showing up everywhere, with their training speeds getting faster and faster. In time, Sword Gods roamed the world and Sword Saints were littered all over the place.

Those thousand years were the most glorious era of the humans. The countless planes conquered by them supplied Grindia with an massive amount of resources and riches. At that time, the fairies sang for the humans, the halflings cooked them wondrous delicacies, the dwarves built them majestic palaces, the dragons served as their mounts, the minotaurs plowed their fields, the beastmen herded their livestock; all the other races revered the humans and treated them with utmost respect.

However, something happened and sparked the beginning of the end. Some magi explorers of the boundless void discovered the desolate ruins of a race of gods on an abandoned plane. The magi soon got to know that all the resources available in the countless planes did not even add up to an iota of the resources on the plane of the god race. On that plane were countless high grade magical materials, the purest of ore mines as well as the legendary, arcane secrets of immortality.

All of the magi turned their focus to the land of the gods. They formed large and powerful parties of magi and rallied armies of Sword Gods and invaded the plane of the gods.

The war waged by the magi against the gods lasted a thousand years. Countless different nations on that plane were eradicated and the blood of countless magi and

Sword Gods tainted the battlefields. No side emerged victorious from the war; both parties were left crippled and ravaged. The event was just as described by ‘The War of the Gods', blood stained the skies, countless brilliant stars fell like meteors, human greed triggered earth-shattering change and darkness enveloped the world……

The actual factor that kick-started the downfall of the humans was the gradual depletion of the once omnipresent magical force, causing the great magi to lose their main source of power. Nobody knew the cause of such a phenomenon, but all of them were convinced that the era of magic was coming to an end.

As the magi lost their last strands of power, the previously subordinate Sword Gods and Saints reckoned that their time had come, and that the main driving force in the near future of Grindia was the battleforce that they possessed. For their own selfish ambitions, they began to fight among each other. No longer bound by a pact with the magi, they murdered, pillaged and destroyed to their hearts' desires. They hated being under the control of the magi and vented their anger on the majestic structures built during the age of magical civilization. They would not be satisfied until every one of them were reduced to ashes.

Founding their own kingdoms or nations, they towered over the common folk and were worshipped by their subjects. But in their arrogance, they had forgotten that without the magi's aid in the first place, they did not have the right to own what they had. As they grew older, they discovered that their descendants could not inherit their fantastical abilities and were only ordinary men as they didn't know how to draw out the innate battleforce in their blood. Their empires and legacies they built were left with no eligible heir.

When the last Sword Saint breathed his final breath, a thousand years of darkness descended onto the human inhabitants of Grindia. Having lost their ultimate means of defense, the humans could not fend off the dreaded magical beasts and were helpless against their assaults. They had no choice but to live in seclusion for the sake of survival.

The human population on the continent was reduced up to two thirds during the thousand years of darkness.

However, one lone warrior miraculously awakened his battleforce in a battle to the death with a magical beast while he was hunting. Using the power of his newly-awakened battleforce, he killed the savage beast and survived. Fortunately, the

settlement he lived still had an ancient battleforce manual that was passed down by his ancestors.

The curtains of the night were lifted and the rays of dawn once again shone upon the humans. The awakening of this sole warrior's battleforce was a silver lining and brought great hope to the human race, prompting the survivors to cooperate and research alternative ways to awaken battleforce.

In the long years of battling against magical beasts, the humans slowly began to understand the dynamics of battleforce and grasped the means of battleforce awakening. Without the magical formations of the magi and given that the battleforce manuals left by their ancestors were not applicable to them, the humans could only learn from their experiences in battle through the process of trial and error. Their progress was slow, but steady.

Another thousand years elapsed and the humans have once again become the overlords of the Grindia Continent. Battleforce was no longer an arcane discipline and has become common knowledge. Stimulating the innate magical beast factor in their blood to awaken their battleforce and training to achieve higher levels of power allowed the humans to turn the tables against their once again thrive over magical beasts and become the predators instead.

No longer having any threats to their survival, the once unified humans broke apart again into different tribes and creeds and once again competed among each other for their own agendas and goals for hundreds of years up until present time.

Historians opined that the end of the magic civilization marked the end of magic age as the foundations for their technology had long been eroded. According to them, magical energy did not just disappear. It was actually replaced by another force that could resonate with the magical beast factors in the blood of humans that once again allowed the awakening of battleforce.

It was thought that if a family had produced Sword Gods or Sword Saints in the past, their descendants would have a higher chance of awakening their battleforce as the magical beast blood that their ancestors had assimilated were from stronger magical beasts, and that was believed to be the main factor of the relatively high success rate for battleforce awakening of the descendants of such families.

That line of thought caused many noble families to pay more attention to their family's

marriages in the name of maintaining a purer bloodline, even forcing siblings into marriage in certain instances.

Chapter 7
The First Days since Reincarnation

To Lorist, that theory regarding battleforce awakening couldn't be more wrong and he held the opinion that research efforts into battleforce awakening was heading down the wrong path. It was just like one of the Confucian sayings in his past life: everything starts off pure and unblemished until it is tainted by the whims and agendas of those in power. The sycophantic[1] Grindian historians were somewhat like that. For the sake of gaining favor with the nobles, they were willing to come up with nonsensical theories regarding the relationship between battleforce awakening and noble family bloodlines to justify the necessity for the exalted, towering existences of the noble families.

That line of thinking was contradictory as well. If the history on the origins of battleforce was true, then that would mean that the Sword Gods and Saints from whom the noble families had descended were merely cannon fodder created by the magi. In the battles depicted in 'The War of the Gods', army after army of Sword Gods were sent to die on the battlefield. There were easily thousands of Sword Gods in an army and most of them perished anyway. Even most Sword Saints could only barely survive should they possess miraculous luck. Lorist really wondered what the nobles thought about the fact that their ancestors were created to be expendable human shields.

Even though the original owner of Lorist's body was a noble, having been raised in a society based not on familial heritage but rather individual merits in his past life, he could not appreciate the difference in status between the nobles and the common folk as the inhabitants of this world did. To him, he still felt like he was that small time urbanite craftsman past his forties who's busy managing his little workshop.

That fateful night, he only met up with his former comrades for some drinks. How and why did he wake up in Norton Lorist's body the next day? The small time workshop owner was shocked and frantic. Fortunately, the body unto which his soul had reincarnated had been badly hurt and could not move in bed for two whole months, giving him enough time to reorient himself and assimilate the memories of the body's owner. And given the original owner's detestable personality, his caretakers could not

be bothered to pay much attention to him, allowing the sudden switch in behavior go unnoticed.

In his past life, he was born in a small town in the Jiangnan Province of China into a relatively well off family, which, incidentally, also had a tradition of martial cultivation. His grandfather was a practitioner in the ancient Chinese medicinal arts and was also a martial arts expert who had trained to the realm of the Dark Stage. He recalled that his house had an Eight-Immortals Table[2] that had a small bump on the surface with a diameter of a small winecup. In his childhood, a red-faced man from Henan came to challenge his grandfather. His grandfather poured himself and the man a cup of wine, made a toast, and slowly pushed the winecup against the bump on the table until the surface of the table was completely level and flat. The red-faced man stared wide-eyed, saluted his grandfather, and left without touching his wine.

His father has always had a weak body and his second and third uncles worked far away from home. His grandfather raised his father and his siblings very strictly and had forced them to learn Chinese medicine since their childhood. They trained incessantly: in the morning, they memorized the meridians of the body while in the night, they studied recipes for herbal concoctions. Their days were tough, but nevertheless fulfilling. During Lorist's childhood in his past life, he was very playful and caused much trouble in that little town he lived in with his cousins.

But he got sick of his insipid lifestyle and wanted to explore the vast world around him. Given his poor grades in high school and his tendency to get into fights, he eventually quit school and joined the army.

His seven years in the army was not an uneventful one. He worked his way up to the rank of a sergeant. But the times have changed; the country desired peace and stability and society has shifted its focus towards the economy instead. The army, once beloved by the people, has fallen out of the citizens' favor and gradually faded into the background, solemnly enduring and silently protecting their country. When the next conscription period arrived, he retired from the army after getting news about his parents' ill health and returned home to inherit his father's crafts workshop.

The transition from a soldier to a businessman wasn't an easy one. From making souvenirs to forging antiques, he did whatever he could as long as it paid off. Thinking back, the hopes his grandfather had placed upon him to become a famed practitioner of Chinese medicinal arts and perpetuate the family's traditions were never fulfilled. Years later, he made quite a bit of money off his business but gained quite a bit of

weight. He couldn't recall how long it had been since he last trained in the Aquametal Technique.

Even though he got married and had several kids, owned a luxurious car, and lived in a grand mansion, he still felt that his life was empty and devoid of any meaning. That was why occasionally, he would meet up with his old comrades to have some drinks and talk about the good old days while they got drunk on the nostalgia. Who knew, during one of these drinking parties, he woke up in the body of Norton Lorist the next day.

According to the memories of Lorist, also referred by many as Locke, his family had been enfeoffed a dominion in the northern highlands of the Krissen Empire. Although his father was only a baron, the land enfeoffed to the Norton family was incredibly vast, though most of it were desolate mountains and the population under their rule only numbered thousands. His family was not very wealthy, with only a small town and castle under their control as well as a small copper mine that served as their main source of income.

Originally a hunter, the progenitor[3] of the Norton family joined the army of the founding emperor, Krissen I, as a scout after hearing a call to arms echoed by a group of traveling bards. He has since experienced hundreds of battles and accomplished many deeds, winning the trust and favor of the emperor and granted knighthood, despite being of peasant birth.

Following the campaign that had stabilized the foundations of the empire, Krissen I asked his loyal vassal what he wanted. The Norton family founder said that he wished to return to his homeland and live out the rest of his life there. Looking at the old knight whose hair had already turned white, Krissen I let out a long sigh and took out a map. Seeing that the northern highlands were mostly desolate mountains, he drew out a large area and granted the territory to the knight, who was subsequently styled baron, and granted him the highly-ranked Blazing Battleforce manual, hoping that the baron's descendants will continue to safeguard the northern borders.

In present day, seven generations had elapsed since the first ancestor of the Norton family. Lorist's father had two other brothers. He was the eldest among them and had inherited both the land and the title while his second brother, Lorist's second uncle, joined the royal guard in the capital. Lorist had never met this uncle of his. He only heard that his second uncle was doing quite well in the capital. His third uncle was the head of business affairs of the Norton family and also the one who brought Lorist to

the Dawn Academy.

In his memories, Lorist's mother was a pretty and gentle woman. His grandfather on his mother's side was a great merchant who incidentally had used quite a sum of money to purchase a title for convenience in future business dealings. He also had another uncle, his mother's brother, who was a hardcore bibliophile. Lorist had a strict father, a reckless and brawny elder brother and a loving mother. His childhood was a happy one until that day when his mother died from giving birth to his younger brother, causing him to lose her for good. He was only seven at that time.

Lorist, who was no longer the center of attention in his family, had always blamed his mother's death on his younger brother. He felt that his younger brother had taken away his precious mother as well as the affection given to him by his family, and considered him to be the main cause for his woes. He despised his brother from the depths of his heart.

It only took one year for him to awaken his battleforce at the age of thirteen after he started to receive the Norton family's formal training, resulting in him gaining much praise from his usually strict and serious father for greatly exceeding his expectations. Happily walking into the garden, he saw his brother sitting near the well, playing with one of the female servants. Feeling a sudden rush of hatred, Lorist pushed his younger brother down into the well.

The servant screamed in terror and within a moment, he was instantly surrounded by people. Feeling great rage, his father slapped him hard and knocked him out cold.

He woke up in a small bedroom and saw the head butler, Gleis, looking in his direction with a contemptful gaze. He informed Lorist that he was grounded until his father decided on his punishment. Before he left, he told Lorist that his brother had been rescued and had suffered no physical injury but was in a state of shock and was down with a cold due to being submerged in cold water for too long.

Three days later, the verdict had been set: he was to be exiled from his homeland to Morante City where he would further his studies. Without any summons from his family, he was forbidden to return to his home.

Both his elder brother and the head butler pleaded for his sake, but his father was resolute with his decision, reasoning that in the harsh and desolate environment of the northern lands, the Norton family wouldn't have survived this long without unity

and harmony among the family members. "The thing Lorist did greatly shocked everyone; he had attempted to murder his blood-related, five-year-old brother! Even if he was forgiven this time, it would only sow seeds of conflict and disharmony in the family. That is why I have decided to exile him," declared his father.

Frightened beyond his wits after waking up in a body of a fourteen-year-old youth, the confused workshop owner suffered from conflicting and intertwining memories and couldn't reconcile his two contrasting identities. Ten days later, he managed to calm down and conjectured that maybe, he had crossed into a parallel world, much like the plotlines of the many webnovels he had read.

Although he had inherited the memories of the young Locke, the world in which he had reincarnated still awed and mystified him to no end. Given the extent of his injuries, he was wrapped up in bandages and looked very much like a mummy. Unable to move and wracked with pain, coupled with the longing for his folks of his past life, it wasn't uncommon for tears to be streaming down from his eyes.

After more than ten days, the workshop owner finally accepted his predicament and steeled his resolve to continue to live on as Norton Lorist, or, Locke. To better understand this new environment, he paid his plump, freckled caretaker more money and requested her to read to him books about the history of this world. The original owner of the body took no interest such topics and had little information about it in his memories.

The plump female caretaker brought him a book titled ‘The Ten-thousand Year Annals of Grindia'. Lorist was initially shocked at the title because a civilization that could have ten thousand years of recorded history must be a rather advanced one. Though, after the caretaker started reading, Lorist understood that most of it weren't proper historical records but rather a collection of myths and legends one after another. Only the final two to three thousand years sounded more accurate.

According to the legends, the fairy race ruled Grindia millenniums ago and humans were merely a small race that lived under the rule of the fairies. At that time, the fairy race had been in conflict with the dragon race for thousands of years and the humans, who were under their protection, also suffered as a result. Amidst the long years of war, a tribe of gremlins used their wisdom and intellect to create a never before seen type of magically-powered war machines and achieved victory for the fairy race.

However, the machines greatly polluted and damaged the environment and a faction

of nature-loving fairies revolted, causing another conflict to erupt. The surprising thing was: the lofty, nature-loving fairies who vowed to teach the other faction a lesson were decimated under the might of the gremlin-made magical war machines. In the end, the gremlins rose to supremacy and became the masters of Grindia.

Despite that, the gremlins who were by nature curious and intrigued by the mysteries of technological discoveries and inventions had no intention of ruling the continent. After a hundred years of chaos and anarchy, the beastmen from the western part of the continent invaded and brought with them a bloody trail of death and destruction.

The gremlins' mighty war machines fell one after another to the suicidal, savage assaults of the blood-drinking beastmen with their thick, tough hides, bringing an end to the rule of the gremlins.

The beastmen who had just ascended to the apex of the Grindia continent erected a reign of fear and violence, eventually prompting all the other races to unite and revolt.

This was the start of yet another war that lasted hundreds of years. The humans strived to learn every type of craft from the many other races who were struggling against the beastmen. They studied the arcane arts of magic and warfare from the fairies, construction and forging from the dwarves as well as trading and engineering from the gremlins, and, with their large numbers, became an indispensable force in the war against the beastmen. When their beastly oppressors had finally been chased back to the wilderness in the west, the humans took up the mantle of the strongest race of Grindia.

After that came the prosperous golden age of the magical civilization which lasted thousands of years until the mages initiated a large scale war with the gods. The end of the magical age came suddenly as the magical energy on the continent started to dwindle inexplicably.

Chapter 8
Battleforce and His Days as a Mercenary

During the two months he lay in bed recovering from his injuries, Lorist spent all his time to gather information about Grindia's history, geography, folk tales as well as travel journals to gain a rough understanding about this new world he found himself in.

To Lorist, this world seemed quite similar to Medieval Europe at first glance, given that it had stuff like titles and knights. In his past life, he had also forged a number of knight armor replicas and sold them for a high price online.

The people here greatly resembled white caucasian Europeans, but according to his observations, the culture in this world was far more advanced than that of the people of the Middle Ages in his previous world. However, the food culture did seem quite primitive here. He was served oatmeal, black bread and mashed potatoes with salt almost every day and ‘suffered' without end to the point where he suspected that the reason his caretaker was so plump was due to her sneaking away all the delicious stuff from his meals.

With his mind full of such thoughts, he asked one of his caretakers, Kelly, to see if he could have a different menu for his meals.

Kelly said that this was the staple menu for the sick students of the academy.

Lorist responded by insisting to be served the regular meals instead.

And so on the second day, Kelly brought over a piece of black bread, some mashed potatoes and a bowl of vegetable soup (with only two leaves in it) which replaced the usual oatmeal.

With a face full of tears, Lorist ate the food feeling utter anguish and despair.

One of the differences between the people here and Europeans was the way they put their surnames in front followed by their given names at the back in a way that was similar to the Chinese naming scheme. In a book covering the topic of noble family

history, it was stated that during the thousand years of darkness, brave warriors who challenged the magical beasts on their own and returned alive would be granted a title by the village chief. Names like Whitemont, Tusk, Hawksoar, etc. would be appended before their names and, in time, those titles became family names. Norton, for example, meant raging bear in the ancient language of the fairies.

The most glaring difference between this world and his own was the presence of the two moons in the sky. The first larger silver moon was called Daphlyn and it was personified as the Silvermoon Goddess and also known as the Goddess of Love. The smaller, blood-red-colored moon which hung in the night sky like a crimson, crescent fang was called Sufanna the Bloodmoon Goddess and also served as the Goddess of Vengeance. According to the legends, when Sufanna reveals itself as a full moon, it would signify the beginning of another major conflict on the continent.

Both the Silvermoon Goddess and the Bloodmoon Goddess were wives of Singwa, the God of the Sun, Light and War. That was also the reason why in Grindia, marriage between a man and two women was permitted. But one could only be allowed to do so if one was economically able to support having two wives. The status of the second wife was not one whit inferior to that of the first wife and both wives were entitled to the same amount of love and care from the husband. That was why most people, even nobles, only took one wife to avoid too much hassle.

The more Lorist read about the history of the world, the more confused he felt. That was because the Grindia Continent was very large and humans only occupied a third of it. The rest of the uncharted territory were comprised mostly of desolate plains, forests or mountain ranges. But the many culture and history books he had browsed through had maps of the continent that were mostly similar to each other. It is said that these maps were left over from the age of magic and had been mapped by the magi during their travels around the continent.

The language used on the continent was known as the common language. All people on the continent spoke that language and no alternative dialects had ever developed. The script resembled alphabets and were comprised of 32 characters which could be formed into words by putting two or three characters into a diamond-like shape. In the books, it was said that this language had been developed by the magi specially for the humans' use. The magi also knew several other languages of other races including that of the ancient fairies, dragons, gremlins as well as some other tongues that contained mysterious magical power.

The most surprising part was that the maps of Grindia were drawn on a round globe, and the people of Grindia understood that they lived on a spherical celestial object. However, they didn't refer to them as planets, but rather as planar worlds. Some books from the age of magic described that there were other planar worlds and they were also sphere-like objects that were suspended in the empty void of space.

If the maps accurately depicted the Grindia Continent, then the legends about the magi must have been true; there was simply no other explanation. If that were the case, that meant that the civilizations on the continent evolved in a straight path that greatly relied on an individual's training in magic followed by battleforce, unlike the civilizations in his previous life which pursued advancements in science and technology instead.

It was at this moment when Lorist suddenly felt interested in the mysteries of battleforce. After carefully researching his hand-copied version of the Blazing Battleforce manual and using it to train, he came to understand that the key to channeling battleforce was blood circulation.

The people of Grindia call the points where blood vessels intersect ‘nodes'. The human body has 72 major nodes and 360 minor nodes as well as another 1080 miscellaneous nodes. Through sensing the elemental energy in the surrounding environment, one can increase one's blood circulation rate and will the blood to circulate through specific nodes in the body, resulting in the generation of a unique, explosive life energy that can be harnessed to greatly increase one's strength, speed as well as reaction time. This was the power of battleforce.

To Lorist's surprise, battleforce also came in various types or attributes. Recalling the Chinese medical books he had memorized in his childhood, different parts of the human body corresponded to one of the five different elements. The skin, nose, large intestines and lungs belong to the metal attribute. The tendons, eyes, liver and gallbladder belong to the wood attribute. The bones, ears, kidneys and bladder were of the water attribute. The blood vessels, tongue, heart and small intestines corresponded to the fire attribute. And finally, the muscles, spleen, mouth and stomach belong to the earth attribute. However, battleforce had more than 5 different attributes categories.

The nodes from the eyes to the jaw produced light type battleforce. The nodes from the back of the head down to the tailbone produced dark type battleforce. Water type battleforce came from the nodes around the kidneys and bladder. Nodes from the right

chest up to the gallbladder and liver produced wood type battleforce while the nodes around the right abdomen corresponded to the fire type. The left chest trained in metal type battleforce while the left abdomen nodes trained in the earth attribute. Finally, the several major nodes from the shoulders up to the upper thighs produced wind type battleforce. Besides the more common attributes, some exotic kinds of battleforce attributes like the blood attribute or the ice attribute existed as well.

In most cases, the training of battleforce involved picking several major nodes on the body to form a pentagram (a five-pointed star) or a hexagram (a six-pointed star) and speeding up and isolating the circulation of the blood in the body through the minor nodes in between the star shape to manifest battleforce. To reach the point where manifested battleforce can be projected according to one's will was the main aim of training. Lorist felt that the theory behind battleforce training was very similar to the art of training the internal energy of the body that he had come across in his past life.

However, battleforce training was not as flexible in that one cannot train in battleforce of different attributes. For example, if one trained in an earth attribute battleforce, one cannot train in any other battleforce with different attributes. While training in other attributes would not cause one any serious harm, one would be forever stuck and be unable to advance to the next level. Then again, many different types of battleforce techniques existed. There were roughly more than ten low-ranked null attribute basic battleforce techniques that only allowed one to train up to the Iron rank at most; these were commonly used by armies to train their soldiers.

There were two main advantages that came with training null attribute battleforce. First, there was no attribute requirement and anybody could train in them. Second, it was relatively easy to train in null attribute battleforce techniques: one could quickly and easily sense the elemental energy, and the pentagram points used to manifest null attribute battleforce only required the activation of a small amount of minor nodes, reducing the difficulty even further for practitioners to grasp the flow of the energy.

It is common practice to introduce students in battleforce awakening courses to basic battleforce techniques before allowing them to pick a mid-ranked or high-ranked technique with attributes that suit them when they reach the Iron rank. However, most battleforce manuals on the market only allowed one to train up to the Silver rank. Gold rank battleforce manuals were relatively rare and cost a small fortune.

Very much interested in the Blazing Battleforce technique he possessed, Lorist trained hard in that technique and was not worried about not having the rest of the technique

from Silver rank onwards because according to his inherited memories, his third uncle comes to visit him once a year to check up on him and provide him with some money to pay for the school fees. That's why, he thought he could ask for the rest of the technique once he trained to the peak of the Iron rank. But who knew right after three years he came to the world, his uncle stopped visiting without notice and vanished without a trace. The year after, the third prince of the Krissen Empire sparked a civil war and permanently cut Lorist's contact with his family in the far north.

Lorist wasn't too perturbed by the loss of contact with his family and was even a little thrilled, given that the original owner of his body was exiled from home in the first place. He would no longer have to worry about his identity being exposed anymore. The problem was his living cost: he probably wouldn't have any trouble with food; he could always go to McDuffin's roadside stall, or, in the worst case, eat the meals provided by the academy as all three meals of the day were already included in the school fees. The food provided definitely wasn't delicious, but he could live with it. The real problem was paying the tuition fee.

At that time, Lorist had already been at the academy for three and a half years. Having obtained his certification for both his knight training and accounting professional courses, he could already graduate without problems. However, in the three years since Lorist had crossed over to this world, he had already formed close relationships and familiarized himself with the city and already considered Morante City his home. Where would he go even if he were to graduate? Having just broken through to the Iron rank at the age of 18, with Lorist's abilities, it was indeed a little bit early for him to go exploring the foreign world.

Additionally, for the sake of better understanding the world of Grindia, Lorist applied for another two extra courses just last year in herbalism and magical beast studies. He subconsciously thought that the more he learned, the better off he would fare and adapt in this world. And, much to his advantage, he was reincarnated into the most developed and civilized city on the continent and not some run down village in the desolate wilderness, saving him much time and effort in learning about the world through trial and error. Who knew where he would end up should he be a little less fortunate as he was.

A professional course would cost around five to eight gold Fordes per semester. Magical beast studies was relatively simple: one studied the subject simply by looking at drawings of the magical beasts and memorizing any effective means to kill them as well as the valuable parts each beast had. One would not have much trouble passing

the course if one's memory was good enough. Herbalism, on the other hand, was much more demanding. One had to be able to differentiate one herbal plant from another, understand the appropriate methods of storing different herbs as well as experimenting with different combinations of herbs. The experiments usually took up quite a bit of money.

During the first three years, Lorist's third uncle usually brought him some new clothing and delicacies every time he came over to visit him and also left thirty or so gold coins, sometimes even more when business was good, for him to cover his living costs and tuition. Lorist wasn't reckless with his spending either. He only used the money on paying servants and buying books from time to time and ended up with up to thirty gold Fordes in his savings.

To McDuffin, thirty gold Fordes was a rather large sum. But to Lorist, it was only enough for about a year and a half to fund his studies and other necessities.

So, he searched for other means to earn money for the sake of remaining in the city. He was subsequently brought to a mercenary guild by some of his friends and successfully registered as a low-ranked Bronze Mercenary and started taking up missions.

Despite that, given Lorist's experiences in his past life and his good eye for opportunity, he got a good idea for a business during one of his missions and roped a few friends in to gather some starting capital. Buying a large number of beast furs, he commissioned some tailors to sew them into backpacks that were very commonly seen in his past life. Being a new design that did not hamper movement and was conveniently and quickly equipped onto one's back, his stock of 400 bags got sold out in an instant the moment he brought them back to the mercenary guild. Lorist and his friends each earned a share of more than ten gold Fordes and struck a few more times when the iron was still hot, earning him another seventy to eighty gold coins.

Right when he was about to start a leather factory with his friends to mass produce these backpacks, he noticed that there were a lot of ripoffs on the market which greatly lowered the price of each bag, causing Lorist and his friends immense anger and frustration as he gave up on the notion.

That business venture made Lorist quite a name among the people of the mercenary guild and earned himself some respect from his friends. In actuality, Lorist had a bunch of other ideas that could earn him more money, but he thought it was better to

stay low-key and not attract too much attention to himself. The money he had on hand at that time was already more than enough for him to live without worries. Since then, he spent most of his time at the academy studying and occasionally took up some mercenary missions. During the holidays, he would form small teams with several close friends and go on expeditions to kill some low-ranked magical beasts. Spending his days rather leisurely, he was already among the ranks of the mercenary veterans within merely three years.

Chapter 9
Dynamic Vision

On the sixth year of his new life when his current body was 20 years old, Lorist discovered something troubling.

Lorist had fared pretty well for the past few years and had already grown from being a low-ranked errand running Bronze mercenary into an Iron ranked mercenary veteran.

Lorist was also quite well known in the Dawn Academy, given that he applied for another three professions after completing his magical beast studies and herbalism courses, among which included archaeology, ruin exploration as well as language studies. Having been among the ranks of the mercenaries for quite some time, he came to understand that the legends surrounding the magical civilization was not without basis and was true to a certain extent.

In one of his excursions with his buddies a year before, Lorist visited an already excavated small ruin that was said to be a tower that used to be a magus's residence. The colossal tower that reached out beyond the clouds described in books was no longer standing, but the discovery of the three basement floors shocked them. Large, smooth walls made from stainless steel shone like a mirror, seemingly unworn from the passing of time. Lines stretched across the floor up to the walls and intersected to form a complicated, three-dimensional magical formation diagram and chunks of neatly-arranged rocks with archaic fairy script could be seen in the vicinity. These could be the cornerstones that served as the foundation of the magical formation.

Every one of them in his group dreamed about gaining boundless wealth and fame for discovering this ruin but felt it wasn't too realistic. Most of the ruins that humans once inhabited had already been excavated and studied and were no longer of much value with only a few exceptions that possibly lay hidden somewhere in the lush, dense forests or the desolate mountains. Given their abilities and the magical beasts that lurked around such areas, however, it would have been a suicidal effort. They could only daydream in vain of the glory and riches that awaited.

Lorist however was ecstatic and marched forward with enthusiasm. Having read

‘Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' in his past life, he had always been fascinated with magic and wanted to become a mage himself. Too bad he arrived on the Grindia Continent a little too late. Had he crossed over to a few thousand years earlier into the age of magic, his dreams in becoming a great magus might just come true.

At that time, Lorist, having just recently obtained his qualifications in magical beast studies and herbalism, was wondering which courses to sign up for next. Given that Dawn Academy's archaeology, language studies and ruin exploration courses were quite highly-ranked, he decided to sign up for them during the following semester.

Ruin exploration refers to the research and study of the architecture and the purpose of buildings left behind from the age of magic as well as the means to excavate such ruins with as much care as possible to avoid damaging the ruins. Archaeology dealt with the distinguishing and handling of artifacts found in ruins and was concerned with determining the purpose and worth of such artifacts. Language studies was the hardest of the three, given that the languages of the fairies, dragons, gremlins that the magi used were said to contain mystical power and people without magical affinity could not truly grasp the language; even if someone did manage to learn a couple of words, he would only be able to make similar sounds but be unable to reproduce the archaic power contained within each word.

These magical languages by nature could not be easily passed down through the generations. But the magi of the time frequently inscribed the script of these languages onto stone tablets to record important information. These days, the field of language studies can only rely on the characters on the tablets to slowly decipher the actual meaning of the words by matching the drawings that was occasionally found next to the characters. So far, the largest achievement in the field of language studies was the ability to distinguish words of the fairy language from that of the gremlin language. Not much progress had been made however in understanding the language of the dragons.

These three courses were closely related. Lorist quite cynically summed up the essence of these three courses into two words: grave robbery. The only difference between this and actual grave robbing was that it was legally endorsed by the various powers on the continent and it was common practice for people to raid and explore such ruins, loot the artifacts inside and auction them off to gain wealth and fame. Archaeologists, however, were dissatisfied with such a phenomenon and deemed such acts destructive and unethical.

Lorist believed that once he obtained those qualifications, he would live a rather adventurous life as both a researcher and explorer, venturing around the continent in search of thrills. What he didn't expect was that the act of applying for all three courses would draw so much attention to him. If he were to graduate with qualifications in seven professional courses, while he may not be the first in the academy's history to do so, he wouldn't be too far off from being the last one.

Attending these courses weren't that much of a burden to Lorist. What he was truly worried about was his stunted battleforce training due to the lack of the following Blazing Battleforce manuals for the higher levels.

This wasn't an uncommon occurrence in Grindia. Descendants of noble families intentionally brought battleforce or swordsmanship style manuals in parts with them in fear of the techniques being leaked out and would only request for the rest of the manuals when they reached a certain level. But Lorist could not do so as he had already lost contact with his family for years. The Krissen Empire in the north was in much chaos due to the infighting among the three princes of the empire and caused Lorist to be unable to reach out to his family. Seeing that the conflict was likely to continue for a few more years, he wouldn't be so stupid to wait and do nothing until the day he manages to contact his family finally comes.

Even if he had the patience to wait, he had to continue training to keep his body in peak condition. Already resigned to his situation, he motivated himself to train in some other abilities.

Just a few months after he crossed-over and started training in swordsmanship, he noticed that this body of his had a unique gift of dynamic vision: it was the ability to accurately focus and see the trail of objects moving in high speeds.

Lorist wasn't too unfamiliar with the ability either. When he was still a soldier in his past life, in one of the training drills, he was in charge of leading his special ops team stealthily into the base of the other side, thinking that it was going to be a piece of cake. He didn't expect all his team members to get eliminated from the simulation by merely one guy and decided to rush into him with a grenade in hand, intending to perish along with him. The sensors on their uniforms let out some smoke, which signified their ‘deaths' in the training exercise. Offering that other soldier a cigarette, he curiously asked how he managed to avoid the concentrated barrage of bullets. Most people wouldn't be able to survive such an assault.

That guy cockily told Lorist that he wouldn't be able to pull off what he did and explained that his natural gift of dynamic vision made any fast moving object appear slow in his eyes. That's why he was able to easily avoid the bullets and was practically invincible as he struck Lorist's teammates down. The only thing he didn't expect was Lorist's suicide bombing and was trapped in a corner without being able to do anything in retaliation.

Lorist was really envious of that man's natural talent but was told that it could be learned with sufficient training. He said that pilots would also need to have good dynamic vision but the training process was extremely nauseating to most people and encouraged Lorist to try it out and experience it for himself.

The man sighed and continued to say that his natural dynamic vision was unlike those that people could obtain from training in that it put a lot of stress on the mind. While the vision one could obtain from training was certainly inferior to his, it was more than sufficient for the average person for most intents and purposes.

At that time, Lorist didn't understand why that man sighed and did some reading on the internet about the ability and discovered many training methods one could use to train one's dynamic vision. One of the methods involved sitting on a chair that turned at extremely high speeds and having someone hold large cardboards with words written on them beside the chair and trying to read the words on the cards while spinning around. Within merely ten minutes of trying it out, he collapsed feeling intense vertigo and discomfort and couldn't stomach any food for up to two days.

It is said that if one perseveres through the training, in time, one would be able to see clearly the faces of passengers through the windows of a speeding train.

But the intense discomfort caused by the training made Lorist think that such an ability wasn't worth the pain. He subsequently gave up on the training.

The present Lorist, however, fully understood why that man sighed on that day.

Initially he was exhilarated to discover that his new body had this ability. Through intense focus, he could even see each distinctive flap of the wings of a passing fly. In sword battles, no matter how agile and quick the opponent, Lorist only perceived a slow moving sword and could easily come out with a counter to break his opponent's move.

However, the utilization of this ability was extremely mentally taxing. Before, he wasn't able to use it for too much a time. As he used this ability more and more, however, he noticed that his mental endurance increased in tandem with the amount of time he could sustain his dynamic vision. Even when he was not in deep focus, his sense of the environment around him had grown ever more sensitive; a fact he figured out during one of his magical beast hunts.

The main problem, however was that his body's reaction couldn't catch up with his senses'. When he first discovered this ability his battleforce was at the One Star Bronze rank. For a time he could still keep up with his improving dynamic vision as his battleforce grew and was unparalleled among his peers in swordsmanship, causing him to be appointed as an assistant swordsmanship instructor.

But ever since he got stuck at the Three Star Iron rank, Lorist found that his movements couldn't keep up with his ever improving dynamic vision. In time, his body would no longer be able to keep up with his reaction time.

Given his performance as an assistant instructor a year before, he was then promoted to a full-fledged instructor. But that incident caused many Silver ranked instructors and students much dissatisfaction and even prompted many Silver ranked students to challenge him to duels. It was then when Lorist first encountered the problem of his body's movement speed.

Given the complete defeat of the first few Silver ranked students who challenged Lorist on behalf of a swordsmanship instructor, that instructor decided to join the fray himself. When the duel started, Lorist began to feel pressure; this was a man who had rich experience in real life battles and was not like some people whose skills were visually impressive but outright impractical. Every strike of his was fast, damaging and straightforward. Some of his moves were even willing to suffer a small hit in order to land a bigger one!

Under Lorist's intense concentration, the moves of the enemy were broken one by one. To the people watching the duel, Lorist's moves were flexible and flawless. But he himself felt the opposite: there were a few times when he clearly found weak points in his opponent's strike but his body wasn't able to move in time. There were also a number of times when he could clearly see the trajectory of the sword but was only barely able to avoid them. That duel only ended with his narrow victory.

Chapter 10
Aquametal Technique

I can't continue on like this, thought Lorist as he decided to use a very troublesome method to get out of his training limb: training in another mid-ranked battleforce technique of the same attribute up to the Silver rank temporarily and return to the Blazing Battleforce once he obtains the rest of the technique.

This method of training was not unprecedented, but it really pushed the cultivator's perseverance and concentration to the limit. Even if certain battleforce techniques had the same attributes, there were fine differences between the nodes used to form the hexagram circulation path in the body. That was especially the case with the minor nodes involved in the circulation. If any unnatural changes occur, such as the formation of unintentional connections between certain circulation nodes, it would cause even more complications. The cultivator must first forget and suppress their previous training habits before training in another technique from scratch.

There really was no easy way to go about this.

By the sound of its name, the Blazing Battleforce seemed to be of the fire attribute. Lorist had no way of confirming the type, however, as the hand copy he possessed only had the name on the cover and jumped right into the hexagram circulation diagrams for the Bronze and Iron ranks, not containing any shred of additional information at all.

Therefore, he spent a small fortune and obtained a mid-ranked fire attribute Scorching Flame Battleforce technique. It is said that one could reach the peak of the Silver rank with it. But, when Lorist opened the page, he was dumbfounded.

The Scorching Flame Battleforce technique's hexagram circulation diagram differed too much from that of his own technique. That was especially the case with all of the major nodes. How could he bring himself to train in that?

At first, he reasoned that the difference was due to the technique being mid-ranked while his own Blazing Battleforce being a high-ranked technique. But then again, no matter the rank, battleforce techniques of the same attribute should not differ so much

in terms of the major nodes. To further investigate the issue, Lorist purchased a few more mid-ranked fire attribute techniques and compared them. The rest of the techniques had node points that were largely similar to those of the Scorching Flame Battleforce but were all incompatible with those of his own Blazing Battleforce. That could only mean that the Blazing Battleforce was not a fire attribute technique.

Gosh, what other attribute could it be if it wasn't a fire type technique?

Without a choice, Lorist got several other mid-ranked techniques of different attributes among which included water, wood, metal, earth, even ones with light and wind attributes. After some careful research, he concluded that the Blazing Battleforce had no connection to any of the attributes of these other techniques. This was a very worrisome conclusion for Lorist and made him reconsider whether the Blazing Battleforce was a fire attribute technique after all, with the cause for the different diagrams being the difference in rank.

But something happened during this time which removed the notion from his mind. Due to the lack of progress in his training, Lorist decided to focus his thoughts elsewhere during the academy holidays. He formed a small party with a few other friends and decided to go to the Sunset Mountains to hunt some low-ranked magical beasts.

The Sunset Mountains was the home of a rare magical beast called the Gold-horned Flamefox. Its fur could change according to the seasons: the colder the temperature, the redder its fur would turn, making the demand for its fur very high in the market. And the golden horn of the fox also emitted a fragrance which repelled bugs. It was also rumored that once the horn was ground to dust, it could improve the endurance and performance of the ‘male organ'. This caused the Gold-horned Flamefox to be hunted to the point of near extinction.

Lorist and his gang were fortunate enough to discover the trails of a Gold-horned Flamefox during that trip and had spent three days and nights before finally tracking down and slaying the beast. However, as they prepared to depart from the mountains, they discovered some people who lusted after their haul.

Places like the Sunset Mountains had always been lawless areas where the strong devoured the weak. It was common for adventurers or mercenaries to be on their guard for other humans as they hunted magical beasts.

Having been hunting low-ranked beasts around the outskirts of the mountains, Lorist's group did not attract any unwanted attention from the other hunters. But that changed after they got the Gold-horned Flamefox.

The ones who blocked their path were seven Silver ranked mercenaries who belonged to a mercenary group with a reputation for robbery which was based at at a town near the mountains. That mercenary group probably started paying attention to Lorist and gang when they were purchasing some necessities at the town and decided to send seven Silver ranked experts to take the spoils by force.

Lorist's group only had five people with three Iron ranks and two Silver ranks. Fully aware of the disparity in power, the robbers not only demanded Lorist's group to hand over their haul, but also to leave every equipment they had on their hands besides their undergarments behind. Charade was also present in the group at that time and was at the One Star Silver rank. Being the miser he is, he got enraged by their demands and attacked without another word. The rest of the group soon followed suit and went all out on their attackers.

To the robbers' surprise, three of them instantly fell to Lorist and his gang. Two of the remaining four were preoccupied with keeping Lorist at bay while the other two cried out for help under the relentless attacks of Charade and the other three of Lorist's gang.

The struggle ended with Lorist sticking his blade through the back of an escaping robber. Of the seven Silver ranked mercenaries, two were dead and five others were hurt badly. This was the first time Lorist had killed since he crossed over to the Grindia Continent, and to his surprise, he did not feel an ounce of rejection or nausea following the act of killing.

The deathly miser stripped the seven mercenaries of all their belongings, staying true to his name and leaving them stark naked. The group of five profited a little from this fight and even found a high-ranked earth attribute battleforce manual on the body of the guy who attempted to escape but was struck down by Lorist. It was called the ‘Myriad Mountains Battleforce'.

But nobody in his squad trained in the earth attribute and Lorist himself didn't know what his attribute was. The battleforce manual was useless to them and was better off sold off for a few hundred gold coins.

But Charade remembered that Lorist was collecting battleforce manuals for research purposes in order to break through the Iron rank. Additionally, Lorist contributed most to the previous fight and handled five of the robbers himself. Had it not been for Lorist's abilities, they would be hard-pressed fending off seven Silver ranked mercenaries. And so, the rest of the group came to a unanimous decision and decided to give Lorist the battleforce manual.

After splitting the spoils and returning to Morante City, Lorist started to analyze the high-ranked earth attribute battleforce manual. Comparing it to a mid-ranked earth attribute battleforce, he discovered that they had many similarities. Most of the major nodes that constituted the hexagram circulation paths were roughly the same, with the only difference being the high-ranked technique having more complicated paths among the minor and miscellaneous nodes between the major nodes.

Scratching his head in futility, he understood that the Blazing Battleforce he trained in definitely did not belong to the fire attribute given the glaring differences it had with other mid-ranked fire attribute techniques.

On one hand, he could only train the Blazing Battleforce to the peak of the Iron rank and could not advance from there. On the other, he couldn't figure out what attribute his technique belonged to and didn't dare to rashly pick up any other mid-ranked technique to train in. In time, his body would no longer be able to keep up with his ever improving dynamic vision. He didn't want his movements to be slower than his awareness during battle.

What should he do? How would he progress in his training? These thoughts kept Lorist awake for nights. *Ugh… What's with this accursed Blazing Battleforce technique…*

As he tossed about in bed one night, Lorist suddenly recalled the sight of his grandfather training in the Aquametal Technique. Startled by his sudden insight, he thought, *That's right! Why don't I try training in the Aquametal Technique?* That technique held an even higher place in his heart than the Blazing Battleforce as it was the hereditary technique of his real family in his past life!

He remembered the scene when he struggled to maintain the horse stance with his cousins under the instruction of his grandfather. He was surprised that he could still recall the training methods, Ki pathways, the body meridian map, the Aquametal foundations as well as the Aquametal Sword Techniques. It was like they were imprinted upon his soul.

With his eyes tearing up in nostalgia, he got off his bed and took up the horse stance, basking in the moonlight that shined through the window in his room.

The first form of the Bright Stage of the Aquametal Technique: Immutability of A Thousand Cliffs.

Be focused with a calm heart, breathe in thrice and let it out all at once. Let me meld into the void and forget my physical existence.

All of a sudden, a red sun leaped up from the oceans, illuminating the world. For some time, the oceans and rivers remained calm without a wave. Without warning, a giant tide rose from the seas and formed a great cliff in the middle of the ocean. The peak resembled a blade which cut through the giant, crashing waves with unwavering and everlasting vitality.

After some time, the raging waves started to weaken and calm. The vast ocean quickly returned to its former tranquil state and was smooth as a mirror. Only that towering cliff stood unmoving, proudly overseeing this vast realm.

Full of delight and surprise, Lorist slowly opened his eyes. The training speed was too fast! In his previous life, it took him three years of training under his grandfather's tutelage to reach the point when he could visualize that scene of the vast ocean in his mind. In this life, however, it only took him one try to enter that realm. This was unimaginable.

Now that he had mastered the first form, it would only take him two or three months of training for him to be able to start the second form, ‘Timeless Waterflow‘. In his previous life, he took three years to master the first form and six for the second. After that, he enlisted in the army but never quite reached the third form, the ‘Robust Warhorse'. After he retired and inherited his father's workshop, he often neglected his training and only practiced half-heartedly. That was one of the greatest regrets he had in his past life.

The first three forms of the Aquametal Technique wasn't actually that complicated. The first form focused on the twelve standard meridians whereas the second and the third prioritized the unleashing of the eight extraordinary meridians[1]. Once the eight meridians worked in concert with the twelve standard meridians to form the Major Cycle, one would reach the peak of the Bright Stage and had a chance to progress into the Dark Stage.

But training in the first form required one to be able to feel the Ki flowing through the twelve standard meridians as well as visualize the realm of the raging sea to train and fortify one's mind and soul to the point that it would be unshakable by anything and be able to remain calm at all times, even if Mt Tai itself were to come crashing in front of oneself.

Lorist didn't expect to be able to reach this point in only one training session. Even though his body was sweating heavily, he felt energized and refreshed like never before. In his excitement, he picked up his sword and started swinging away. His body moved as his mind willed as his sword soared through the air. This feeling was hard to put into words. The lag between his intentions and his movements did not exist anymore.

Sheathing his sword, Lorist decided to continue training and stabilizing his foundations by practicing in the first form once more. However, just as he went into the horse stance, he was startled to find that his battleforce had disappeared.

The battleforce that lurked in his veins could not be felt anymore. Lorist let out a cold sweat, quickly sat down with his legs crossed and started to meditate. He tried to manifest them like he usually did and felt the circulation of battleforce within the hexagram circulation path in his body. Just as he was about to let out a sigh of release, the battleforce dissipated from his body.

What is going on? Frustrated that his battleforce kept giving him problems, he tried again for a few times but the same thing happened over and over. *Sheesh. I don't even want to care anymore. Let's go back to training in the Aquametal Technique,* thought Lorist, disheartened.

Just as he was preparing to visualize the small realm after he got into the horse stance, Lorist felt that his meridians was filled to the brink with some kind of energy. *Huh? Why does this feel so familiar?* He calmed himself down and continued his inspection. *Wait, isn't this battleforce? Why has it gone inside my meridians?* No wonder he trained that quickly in the Aquametal Technique. It was due to the presence of battleforce.

But he didn't know whether training in the Aquametal Technique using battleforce was a healthy practice or not. Nevertheless, the increase in his body's strength and agility that allowed his movements to synchronize with his will was beneficial. Lorist decided that he'll keep on training like this and cross that bridge when the time comes.

Chapter 11
Incador Medal

After one year of cultivating the Aquametal Technique, Lorist reached the second form of the Bright stage, Timeless Waterflow. The second and third forms of the Bright stage prioritized unleashing the eight extraordinary meridians and linking it with the twelve standard meridians to form the Major Cycle to achieve a state of robust vitality and harmonizing the polar energies of Yin and Yang within the body.

Following the unleashing of the eight extraordinary meridians, it would only take a few months to unleash the Yangwei and Yinwei meridians, after which one can train in the third form of the Bright stage, the Robust Warhorse. Lorist had not reached this level before in his past life. This technique he had inherited from previous family was pretty beneficial after all. The astonishingly fast training speed of the Aquametal Technique was so great a source of joy for Lorist that he forgot he was using battleforce to train in it and made him feel extremely hopeful of his progress in the future.

But Lorist, deeply engrossed in his training, did not pay attention to the way others around him viewed him. He went to the academy as usual to attend his courses as well as coach his students in swordsmanship. Eventually, he stunned everyone in the academy with the 100% success rate of his first battleforce awakening course.

Lorist met his first love since coming to this world around this time. Their similar history with their respective families served as a pivot for their growing intimacy and motivated them to strive and build their own happy future.

Nothing much changed until that day when Lorist had a talk with the fat, Deathly Miser.

"Hey, fatty… Aren't you looking at me a little funny? Is there something on my face?"

"I feel sorry for you. I don't know if you even know about it…."

"What are you feeling sorry for? Isn't my life fine as it is right now? I don't need your sympathy."

"Is that so? You say you're fine as you are? Locke, let me ask you. How long has it been since you've trained your battleforce?"

"Umm, about that… It's true that I've been neglecting my battleforce training. But that's hardly my fault. My family's battleforce attribute is totally different from that of a majority of battleforce techniques. And, given that I don't have the rest of the manual, I couldn't train in it even if I wanted to."

"Then what are you gonna do? Are you going to remain at the Three Star Iron rank forever? You're gonna wait for the conflict in your homeland to subside before reaching out to them for the rest of the technique?"

Shrugging his hands in futility, Lorist said, "What else can I do? It's not like that's getting in the way of my current life so I'm not in too much of a rush."

"Sheesh, you… Can't you just try harder?" said the fatty solemnly. "Didn't Instructor Claude say that you should continue to train in your Iron rank battleforce until it reaches the peak density in your veins and go experience some life threatening battles? You might be able to stimulate the full potential of your battleforce amidst the heat of battle and break through to the Silver rank even if you're using the hexagram circulation path for the Iron rank. Brother, you're already at the peak of the Iron rank. Perhaps, if you took another step and got a little push, you might just break through and become a Silver Swordsman! You can't just give up like that!"

"That's not the point. What are you so worried about? I'm passing my days just fine, why would I go out of my way to go fight life-and-death battles? I can afford to wait a few years. Who knows if I might encounter a high-ranked magical beast and perish if I did decide to go train… That's not a decision I can make lightly."

"Look at you… You're still so young, where has your ambition gone? You were not like this before. High rank magical beast aside, you were fearless and not hesitant at all when you pulled out your sword and faced off with five Silver ranked attackers. Magical beasts should be even easier to handle than the likes of men. Let's go to the mercenary guild and find a suitable date to go training and complete some missions in the meantime for some quick cash."

Shaking his head adamantly, Lorist said, "I don't have that kind of time now. I have my hands full with the academy and helping Wenna with her business."

Wenna was Lorist's girlfriend's nickname.

Charade let out another bitter sigh. "Love and women are the downfall of great heroes. Didn't you say that yourself? Look at the you now. Ever since you started dating Wenna, you've never left Morante City even once! You can't go on like that! You are definitely a person with a bright future ahead of you. Don't just idle about and waste your life away!"

"Haha, don't don't have such high expectations for me you cursed fatty. To be honest with you, I don't have any great ambitions myself. I only desire to get a large house on Brinn Hill when I earn enough and settle down there with Wenna and live out the rest of my life in bliss," said Lorist as he laughed.

Brinn Hill was located somewhere to the south of Morante City and was near the Hidegold Bay. It had great scenery and was one of the most expensive areas in the city to live in. Only the richest of the rich could afford to reside there.

Charade shook his head and said, "You're talking about tens of thousands of gold for a mansion on Brinn Hill. I think you're much better off spending only a few thousand gold coins to get a four-storey building in the southern sector of the city and collect some rent while you're at it. There's nothing good about the sea breeze on Brinn Hill either."

Charade faced Lorist and continued solemnly, "Then again, brother, you should really make more effort in your training and get to the Silver rank quick so that nobody can say anything about your abilities. I'm only telling you this for your own good."

Feeling a little suspicious, Lorist asked, "What's going on? Is there something I should know about?"

"Sigh, the Silver ranked Instructors in the academy are probably plotting something. I think they want the academy to fire you as a swordsmanship instructor because of your Iron rank battleforce. They think you're not fit to be an instructor for an academy that's ranked the top ninth on the whole continent. That's all I have to say. You go back to see your Wenna if there's nothing else."

Surprised, Lorist exclaimed, "What the heck! What does my battleforce rank have anything to do with them? They can't make me resign as a swordsmanship instructor! Even with their Silver battleforce rank, there's no one among them who can match up

to me in a duel!"

"It's not uncommon for people to get jealous," said the fatty faintly, "Even with your Iron rank battleforce, they wouldn't mind if you had better swordsmanship than them. What they didn't expect was that all the students in your battleforce awakening course successfully awakened their battleforce. Not only was this a miracle, it made them feel even more worthless. How do you think they'd feel when they can't even match up to an Iron rank instructor? They won't be satisfied until they kick you out of the academy."

If all of the SIlver rank instructor grouped together, the academy would probably be pressured to remove Lorist from his post.

"The best solution as it is now is for you to try breaking through to the Silver rank. Once you're a Silver Swordsman, they won't be able to do anything to you. That's why I suggested you to go experience some life-and-death battles," said Charade earnestly.

Letting out a bitter laugh, Lorist shook his head. He couldn't bear to tell Charade, who was earnestly concerned about him, that he was training in the Aquametal Technique he got from his past life and that his battleforce constantly leaked through his hexagram circulation path into his meridians. There was no way he could explain it to him.

"It's too hard. Without my family's battleforce manual, there's almost no way for me to break through without the following hexagram circulation path diagrams. You yourself said that the hexagram path of my battleforce technique was like nothing you've ever seen. Even if I were to engage in life-and-death battles, there's no guarantee that I would be able to break through within a short time frame."

"Then there's only one other way for you to secure your position in the academy. Have you heard about our academy's Gold Instructor Badge?"

"I know about that. Didn't Instructor Claude have one himself? Instructor Welledor who's in charge of the knight training course, Instructor Wensen from the horse traning course and even Instructor Loboff from the herbalism department possess those too. Isn't that badge given to anyone whose battleforce is at the Gold rank?"

"No, I'm not talking about that badge. There's another gold swordsmanship instructor badge in our academy. A hundred years ago, there was a One Star Silver rank student

in our academy who had won 30 straight duels against Two Star Silver instructors and rose to fame instantly. The academy employed him as a swordsmanship instructor and even made him a gold instructor badge. However, the student joined the army and went to fight in the Battle of the Silver River and successfully killed three imperial knights who were all Gold ranked fighters during an assault on the town of Ried but subsequently died from his injuries after the fight. To commemorate his deeds, the academy preserved his gold instructor badge and decided that anyone who was able to gain 30 consecutive victories with opponents of a higher rank (even those 1 star above) would gain that instructor badge and receive the same treatment as normal Gold ranked instructors. But should one lose even once to anybody, one would lose the qualifications to wear that badge as well as one's position as a Gold ranked instructor."

Charade continued explaining, "Nobody within a 100 years has been able to get 30 consecutive victories like that student and the medal currently lies forgotten in the academy's hall of honor. Why don't you try obtaining that medal to avoid getting kicked out from the academy? I bet that it won't be too hard for you to win 30 duels."

"There really was such a thing?" Lorist rubbed his hands and continued, "I'm definitely getting this gold badge. Fatty, what was that student called?"

"His name was Raven Incador. Had he survived the battle with the Gold rank experts of the Krissen Empire, he could have become a Blademaster. It's a shame he died so young. The special gold badge is called the Incador Medal," said Charade while lamenting the loss of such a talented man.

"Alright, fatty, let's figure out what I should do next. You mentioned there was a group of Silver ranked instructors plotting against me? Give me the names of all of them. I'll challenge them one by one," said Lorist as he licked his lips deviously, like a predator deciding on which part of its prey to enjoy first.

The following ten days in the academy was rife with excitement.

Lorist sent out letters of challenge to the instructors listed by Charade but none of them really cared much about it and even thought that it was a joke. Some of the instructors even tossed the letters into the trashcan, laughing and exclaiming, "You think he's qualified enough to challenge us?"

Given their arrogant attitudes, Lorist no longer held back either. He barged into the class of several instructors and challenged them in front of their students. Feeling rage

and humiliation, the instructors pulled out their swords and wanted to teach the impudent and disrespectful Lorist a lesson he would never forget. In quick succession, one by one the instructors were beaten and sent to the academy medical center.

The students of the academy were ecstatic. It wasn't every day when one got to see a proud, aloof instructor get beaten up by an Iron ranked instructor. As Lorist marched towards his next target, a crowd of students followed behind him and even told him the other instructors' locations.

"Instructor Locke, Instructor XX's over there. Are you gonna challenge him?"

"Instructor XX and instructor XX are over there, hold them back! Instructor Locke is coming over for them…"

"Over here, quick, Instructor Locke.."

The crowd was stopped by ten or so Silver rank instructors from advancing and the other instructors insisted that the academy management come in to handle the situation and take care of Lorist, who has disrupted their courses and sent seven of their colleagues to the medical center.

Some Silver ranked instructors hated Lorist to the bone and even shouted for him to leave the academy and that he was not fit to be an instructor there.

Following that, several Gold ranked instructors including Instructor Claude came over and investigated the issue.

Lorist told them this, "I want the Incador Medal."

The crowd was bewildered and didn't know what it was.

Charade, who was maintaining the order of the student crowd, explained it to the other instructors.

Following that, the gold ranked instructors finally understood that it was an academy tradition and even they could not do anything about it. They could only report it to the higher ups and await their decision.

Lorist was unfazed and believed that this commotion wasn't his fault. To begin with, he only did this because the instructors who ignored his letters of challenge and didn't

treat it seriously.

Those who understood the situation looked pitifully at the Silver ranked instructors, who started to feel pressured and anxious.

Without much delay, Academy Head Levins announced his decision. "Lorist, keep at it. It would be a shame to see the Incador Medal continue to gather dust. I'm rooting for you."

But he also mentioned that Lorist was not to disrupt the classes of other instructors and carry out the duels after work hours.

The Silver ranked instructors were stunned and made excuses to take some time off from work to avoid the calamity that was to come. Several others went to other academies and applied for jobs there. The remaining ones grudgingly agreed to duel Lorist under the witness of Instructor Claude and the other Gold ranked instructors and the jeering students. One by one, they lost to him and were finally let off.

Chapter 12
The Pawn and the Announcement

Instructor Claude rushed into the Academy Head's room with a face full of worry.

Sitting behind a large desk and browsing through a document, Academy Head Levins lifted his head and asked curiously, "What's wrong? You look very anxious. Has a fire broken out?"

"Um, there's no fire, sir. Academy Head, are you going to just leave it be? Another three of our Silver ranked instructors have just resigned today," said Instructor Claude.

"Oh, I know that," nodded Levins as he stood up. "Would you like some tea or some macks?"

Macks was a beverage that was quite similar to a chocolate drink; the beans would let out a rich, fragrant aroma when ground and boiled with water. It was even rumored to be the favorite drink of ancient fairies as well as the legendary magi of the past and was quite highly priced.

"I'll be fine with some plain water. Right now the Silver ranked instructors are extremely afraid of being challenged to a duel by Lorist. If this keeps on going we'll be even more understaffed and will find it hard-pressed to maintain our usual classes. It's one thing if the students only spectate the duels, but they are also eager to see Lorist beat the crap out of all the Silver ranked instructors in the school. Every day a whole bunch of them would follow him around in anticipation of such a scene; it's quite pressuring and humiliating to the instructors Lorist challenges," explained Claude.

Levins lifted a silver kettle on the table and poured some water for Claude and asked, "Has Lorist lost a match yet?"

"No. He's fighting his 28th duel today and hasn't even lost one match, and I don't think he will either. I've seen a few of his matches and I believe those Silver ranked instructors wouldn't be able to put up a fight with Lorist at all. Most of them lose within ten sword bouts when dueling Instructor Locke," replied Claude.

"Then there's no need to do anything. We can stop him after he gets the Incador Medal."

"But Academy Head, 13 of the 28 instructors he challenged have already resigned due to the humiliation of losing to him in public. Even several of those who hasn't received any challenge from him left in fear as well."

"If they don't even have the courage to face failure, I wouldn't stop them from leaving. We don't need spineless cowards like those in the Dawn Academy."

Laughing bitterly, Claude continued, "Academy Head, say that as you may, but think about how we're supposed to maintain our regular classes with the sudden loss of more than 20 Silver ranked instructors. There are already three swordsmanship classes that can't continue anymore due to the sudden vacancy, with the students left with nothing to do but to wander around in the academy."

Slowly moving up to the window and gazing outwards, Levins said, "Claude, don't you feel that our academy has been stagnating for some time now, much like a pool of still water?"

"Hm?" Instructor Claude tilted his head as he did not understand what the Academy Head just said.

"While our academy has only 13 Gold ranked instructors, the Silver ranked instructors number a staggering 129 people! Even the rest of the Iron ranked instructors and the assistant instructors only number 42 people, with another 31 people being non-combatant professors who focus on other disciplines. The academy management staff consists of 45 people, the Enforcement Department has 68 and the other miscellaneous workers number 76 people. Apart from them are roughly 5000 students. Given that kind of ratio, don't you think the Silver ranked instructors hold a little too much influence?"

Levins turned to Claude and said with a smile, "We have always put more focus on the actual abilities of a person when we intend to appoint someone as an instructor. Since when has it been based on their battleforce? If it were like that, doesn't mean that a cripple like me who can't train in battleforce should resign as the Academy Head as well? As Silver ranked instructors, not only do they not continue to strive for perfection, they harbored jealousy for people more skilled than them, banded together and formed their own hierarchies and even dared to put pressure on the

academy when anything starts to go against their favor."

"This time, the reason I let Locke do as he pleases was partly due to Charade's support as well. It is time that we wake up the Silver ranked instructors of the academy and remind them that their status in the academy is not dependant on their battleforce ranks but rather their actual skills. If there's anyone who's unsatisfied with this policy, they're free to resign for all I care."

Wiping sweat off his forehead, Claude said, "Then, what do we do about the suspended classes? Should we start recruiting new instructors?"

"There'll be no need. I already negotiated with the city's garrison general and will be having ten or so retired military officers who are all of the Gold rank to come over and be replacement instructors for a while. If we still lack people, we can appoint some promising students to be our new instructors, but only if they're truly capable."

"Duly noted. I suppose I'll make my move now," said Instructor Claude as he put down the cup on the table and turned towards the exit.

"Wait," said the Academy Head. "There's still two other things. First, when Locke gains his 30th consecutive victory, carry out a small ceremony to award him the Incador Medal. Second, put up a notice that states that instructors of the Dawn Academy cannot refuse challenges from other instructors or students. Those who do not comply should leave the academy. Hmph, if I don't force them like this, they won't continue to strive to improve their skills."

"No problem. It will be carried out."

"Oh, and you mentioned three classes having no instructors in charge at the moment?" Levins gave it some thought and continued, "When Locke gets the Incador Medal, assign him to take charge of these three classes since they lost their instructors because of him in the first place."

"Wow, is that for real?" thought Instructor Claude, speechless.

In only three sword strokes, Lorist forced the instructor he challenged to admit defeat.

This was his 30th duel. There was a small stage about the height of a person beside the dueling venue. It was like they knew without a doubt that Lorist would win. Instructor Claude stood solemnly by the stage beside a beautiful female student who

held a box that was about 30 centimeters wide, presumably containing the Incador Medal within.

Lorist was still in a rather good mood after his victory; he found the duels he initiated for the past ten days to be quite addictive. The feeling of owning the other Silver ranked instructors completely was quite pleasant. Maybe he could negotiate with Instructor Claude about whether he could continue dueling for another twenty or more times and create another record within the academy and rename the Incador Medal after him.

Too bad Instructor Claude rejected the proposal immediately and pulled him up to the small stage. All the students cheered as Lorist received the Incador Medal.

During the ceremony, Claude announced two things. He first congratulated Lorist for obtaining the Incador Medal and the history and explained the tradition behind the medal. After the long speech, he finally said something that is of direct relevance to Lorist, that is, Lorist was to be treated as a Gold ranked instructor in the academy and shall receive the same benefits and entitlements as a Gold ranked instructor.

The second announcement came directly from the academy administration. From that day onwards, no instructor is to refuse a duel from students or other instructors for no justifiable reason and the result of every duel would play a part in the yearly instructor evaluations. Should an instructor refuse a duel for no reason up to three times or should they lose too many duels, the instructor will have to relinquish their instructor badge. The rules and protocol of dueling was also announced to the crowd, namely, an instructor may not challenge a student, a person of a higher rank may not challenge those of lower ranks, etc.

But that special rule concerning challenges directed to lower ranks didn't apply to Lorist because he was the holder of the Incador Medal. Since he got it by getting consecutive victories against opponents of a higher level in the first place, he must still accept challenges issued by Silver ranked instructors even though his battleforce was only at the Iron rank. Lorist will lose both the Incador Medal as well as the Gold rank instructor privileges should he lose even one duel.

Unbeknownst to Lorist, he was serving as a pawn in the Academy Head's plan to change the academy's attitude and as a whip to pressure the Silver ranked instructors. He did, however, feel that the timing for the second announcement was a little too coincidental with his obtaining the Incador Medal.

Initially thinking of bringing his winning streak above 50, Lorist came to understand after the second announcement that there will no doubt be flocks of students and Silver ranked instructors coming to challenge him to take the Incador Medal from him. On the bright side, he would not lack opponents to battle against. But it was pretty unfair for others to be able to take the Incador Medal from him after winning against him only once while he had to get 30 consecutive victories against opponents of a higher rank.

Without giving Lorist too much time to figure out the implications, Instructor Claude went before Lorist and talked to him sincerely, "I have good news and bad news for you, Instructor Locke. Which would you rather hear first?"

Analyzing Claude's behavior but not finding anything weird about it, Lorist said, "Let me hear the good news first. At least it'll cheer me up a bit."

"The good news is during this month, there will be ten retired Gold ranked military officers coming to the academy to take on posts as Gold ranked instructors."

"Huh? I can understand that it is good news for the academy, but what does it have to do with me?" asked Lorist curiously.

"Because, the bad news is you have to take charge of the three classes that have lost their instructors because of you. You are to handle their swordsmanship classes until the end of this month before the new Gold ranked instructors come. This came from the administration so there is no ground for negotiations. Consider this a light punishment for stirring up so much chaos in the academy."

Already crumbling, Lorist complained, "Where would I find a place to teach so many students at once?"

"Just use the school field."

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Looking at the noisy crowd of students that Charade brought over which easily numbered more than a hundred from the stone platform on the school field, Lorist exclaimed, "Gosh, didn't you say there were only three classes? Why are there five classes worth of students over here!?"

Charade said as he laughed bitterly, "Don't blame me for this. Who asked you to defeat

all those Silver ranked instructors within only three or four bouts? Now, the students are starting to get picky about the standards of their sword instructors and no longer want the Silver ranked instructors to teach them. That's why they're here now."

"Sigh, it appears that I have to go down for a bit. They're taking so long just to get in line, talk about discipline…"

After making his rounds around the field, Lorist returned with a handful of letters of challenge. "I already received more than 20 challenges in a single class! How am I supposed to survive this!?"

Looking at him with a sympathetic face, Charade said, "What did you think the Enforcement Division is here for other than to regulate the students and maintain order? Now that you're a well-known figure in the academy, the administration has sent us to make sure there won't be a stampede."

"I don't think I can live on like this… Other instructors have almost nothing to do compared to the hundreds of challenges I've received within three days… Even the Iron ranked students want a part in that, I really don't know what's going on in their heads. Fatty, this brother of yours is starting to regret listening to you in the first place… The Incador Medal has brought me nothing but trouble," said Lorist miserably.

Charade replied in an encouraging tone, "Keep it together, brother. Even though you got a lot of challenges, I bet most of them were made in the heat of the moment. They are no threat to you, given that you can easily take care of them in two or three strikes. Even taking on twenty of them is only a warmup session for you. These are just small fry. What you should watch out for are those with actual skills that will come later. Oh, the students have got into their lines. Aren't you gonna start your class?"

Lorist looked at the students who were lined up messily across the field and savagely barked, "Practice the eight basic sword moves for a thousand times!"

Chapter 13
Academy Head Levins

Overlooking the vast school field, Lorist stopped in his tracks and reminisced the times when he stood on the old platform instructing the hundreds of students who attended his swordsmanship class…

"Huh? You want to learn a high-level sword skill, but not the basic sword moves? You're saying that even three-year-olds can pull that off? Bullshit! You're trying to run even before you've mastered walking! Do you know the difference between sword skills and swordsmanship? Yeah, you. Answer my question."

"Wrong! Your explanation only barely scrapes on the surface of the truth! Listen up to what I have to say, no one else will be so good-hearted to tell you this in the future. Swordsmanship is about using the most suitable and efficient method to take down your enemy in the least amount of time. Sword skills on the other hand is the combined execution of several efficient sword moves. It's still too early for you to start training in sword skills! To do so would be akin to trying to build a house without first laying the foundation. The house would crumble instantly once a strong wind blows by."

"Now, as to why I asked you to focus on the eight basic sword moves, the answer is simple. No matter what kind of sword skill, it would definitely involve a combination of these actions: thrusting, slashing, raising, parrying, flicking, sweeping, swiping and guarding. I want you to train it to the point where all eight moves become a natural reflex movement of your body. This way, even if you can't see the path of your opponent's sword, your body would be able to react to the strike by using these basic moves and save you from certain death. Only when one trains to this point can one claim that they are able to defend themselves with swordsmanship.

"Oh, I forgot to mention that this is how I personally train as well. I believe you guys have seen how I took out those Silver ranked instructors. The main reason I won was because these eight basic sword moves have been ingrained into my body so deeply that they have become a natural reflex. What I relied on to win was the most reliable eight basic sword moves rather than some ‘ultimate sword skill'. That's why I could

win easily in only a few bouts.

"As for sword skills, I would only be harming you if I let you train in them before you master the eight basic sword moves. Without the basics, your sword skills are only good for spectacle and showing off and are of no practical use. Alright, enough of that. Focus and train in the basics seriously for a thousand times. Twenty of you whom I deem most focused will personally receive further instruction from me."

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Time really flies. It has already been three years since then. The Incador Medal had already been returned to the hall of honor and is awaiting its next owner. Ever since Lorist got the Gold ranked battleforce instructor badge, he requested the academy to custom make a new badge which represented the status of a Gold ranked instructor in both battleforce and swordsmanship and returned the Incador Medal to the academy. Anyone who wants that medal must once again gain 30 consecutive wins against higher level opponents.

When he asked for the special medal to be made, he said, "Wearing three different medals on my chest is way too unseemly. Someone might even take me for a badge seller! Why don't the academy make another medal that will represent these two?"

The academy administration found his reasoning to be sound and agreed to the request.

What is the old bastard up to this time, Lorist thought. He didn't believe what Charade had said about the academy desperately needing the money gained from the registration fee. If the academy was really that financially unable, it wouldn't be able to stay among the ranks of the top ten on the Grindia Continent.

In the three years Lorist has been interacting with Academy Head Levins, he came to the conclusion that Levins was a cunning and devious person. If one was not careful, one might end up counting the money Levins gained from selling oneself out without knowing! It was always wise to keep one's guard up when dealing with him.

Back when Lorist had decided to join the expedition to the Relic Islands to clear his mind of his relationship troubles as well as to take the opportunity to train against mid to high-ranked magical beasts and try to break through to the Dark stage from the Bright stage, he went to see the academy head to sign up for the expedition.

It ended up with Instructor Claude battling him to test his abilities. After that, Academy Head Levins used the excuse that Lorist didn't qualify to join the expedition with his battleforce rank and forced him to agree to several conditions before finally giving him the greenlight.

Standing outside the office of the academy head, Lorist took a deep breath, calmed his ragged breathing from climbing up five flights of stairs and knocked on the office door

"Come in."

Lorist pushed the door open and walked into the room.

"Oh, Locke, you're back."

Nodding, Lorist said, "Yes, academy head. I've returned."

WIth a sincere smile, Academy Head Levins said, "Come over here and take a seat. Let me make you a cup of macks. The macks beans this year taste pretty good."

"Oh, academy head, you don't have to be so courteous. I'm not thirsty at all," said Lorist politely as he refused the offer.

"Just take a seat. You don't have to show any restraint here. Just treat this as you would your own home," replied Levins as he ground the macks beans in a small silver cup and poured the grinds into a silver kettle before adding some water to it and boiling it.

"Locke, have you heard about the duel notice the academy released on your behalf?"

"Yes I have. But, there's one thing I don't understand. Has the administration set this up just to collect registration fees from the challengers like Charade has mentioned? Is there some other reason that I'm not aware of?" Lorist was slightly dissatisfied as he was the one who had to duel all those people.

"Hehe, Locke, I know you have some thoughts on this, since the plan has been passed without your approval. I would feel the same if I were you. But I really have to trouble you as this is an urgent matter. I hope you can gain some face back for our academy and teach the other academies a lesson."

Leaning towards Lorist from his chair, Levins said, "The situation right now is a little

complicated. Let me explain it to your from the beginning. I hope you will understand my woes.

"Do you know about the Yellow Ribbon Academy that's situated right next to us?"

"I do. They are quite famous for their butler training and bodyguard training courses," replied Lorist.

"Two months ago, their academy head, Sir Knight Yarisborg, passed away from a heart attack. It happened before he managed to write a will and to nobody's surprise, his children started squabbling over the inheritance. None of them wanted to succeed Yarisborg's position as the academy head and they decided to sell the place and split the money among themselves. Our academy immediately sent some people to negotiate and acquired the academy for a price of 180000 gold Fordes."

Levins seemed really proud of himself as he talked about the acquisition. Although the Yellow Ribbon academy was not particularly highly-ranked (it was ranked at the lower bottom among the twenty or so academies in Morante City), the academy did have a history of sixty years and the grounds it covered was one third of that of the Dawn Academy. 180000 gold Fordes for all that was a pretty good deal, even more so if one takes note of the fact that the Yellow Ribbon Academy is right next to the Dawn Academy. The Dawn Academy could easily assimilate the Yellow Ribbon Academy's resources and facilities by removing the separating walls between them.

"Oh, that's great. By assimilating that academy, ours will become more impressive as well. We might even rise in the ranks among the top ten academies on the continent," praised Lorist.

"That might be the case, but the burden of emptying our treasury of 180000 gold Fordes puts a bit of pressure on us as well," said Levins as he poured Lorist a cup of steaming hot macks.

"Here's some milk and honey crystals. Add as much as you please. Being the old man that I am, I prefer the original taste more," Levins said as he lifted his cup and gave it a light blow or two in an attempt to cool his drink a little.

"The tuition fee our academy collects amounts to about 70000 gold Fordes a year. The various societies also contribute roughly 30000. Including some miscellaneous business our academy owns, the yearly income of the academy amounts to 110000

gold coins more or less. It might look like a lot, but our expenditures aren't a small figure either. Every year the academy pays about 60000 gold coins to our staff and instructors and use 10000 to 20000 gold on teaching materials, most of which goes to the maintenance of lances and swords used in our knight training and swordsmanship courses respectively."

"Other than that, the academy provides up to 10000 gold in scholarships for needy students as well as up to 30000 gold for research, especially those conducted in herbalism. The expedition to the Relic Islands this year also cost us more than 4000 gold. In short, after deducting the upkeep from the revenue, the academy only ends up with about 10000 gold of profit annually. When times are bad, however, the academy might even sustain losses of several thousand gold Fordes."

Letting out a long sigh, Levins continued, "The 180000 gold Fordes used in acquiring the Yellow Ribbon Academy was no doubt an astronomical amount, but it was an opportunity that couldn't be missed to further strengthen and expand our academy. But from the day our academy was first formed till now, the highest amount of money the administration could bring out even after mortgaging several of our side businesses amounted to only 15000 gold Fordes. After the assimilation of the Yellow Ribbon Academy, some more money would need to be spent on modifying some infrastructure. That's why I decided to go to the Association of Academies to apply for a loan of 50000 gold Fordes for our academy's development."

The academy head seemed a little agitated at this point. "What I didn't expect was there was someone who dared to humiliate our academy! That bastard Weston said, ‘Why don't you fire all your Silver and Gold ranked instructors? That way you'll be able to afford the assimilation! After all, I heard your academy has a Gold ranked instructor whose battleforce is merely at the Iron rank, maybe you should promote the rest of your Iron ranked instructors to Gold rank and make up for the deficit! I bet their salaries are certainly much lower than instructors with higher battleforce ranks'.

"What the heck is with that guy! He's just spewing rubbish! I immediately started arguing with him. You know what else he said? He accused us of making up a rumor about you, Locke the Silver Undefeated, for the purpose of attracting more students to our academy! He even said that several of the instructors that left after losing to you that year was actually forced to let you win on purpose so that you can get the Incador Medal to trick students into joining us!"

Seeing Lorist clasp his cup until veins showed up on his arms, the academy head's

expression showed a satisfied smile. "In a fit of rage, I made a bet with that bastard. I said that you wouldn't lose even one match against all the Silver ranked instructors of the Saint Marceau Academy. Immediately after that, the rest of the academy heads wanted to join in the fray as well. In the end, the Dawn Academy made a bet against the rest of the academies, stating that if you defeat their Silver ranked instructors, we will get the loan of 50000 gold Fordes without having to repay it. If you are to lose even one match, we will have to pay back double the amount and even host a banquet to publicly apologize to them."

"Locke, please forgive me for my recklessness. I am truly apologetic for having signed you up for so many duels. I really couldn't swallow the insult and humiliation they were showing the Dawn Academy and carelessly agreed to the bet with that old bastard of the Saint Marceau Academy."

The Saint Marceau Academy was ranked eighth among the top ten academies on the Grindia Continent and the fourth among the twenty academies of Morante City, just one rank above the Dawn Academy. All the students and instructors of the Dawn Academy held surpassing the Saint Marceau Academy in the rankings as their ultimate goal. By the same logic, the people of the Saint Marceau Academy are also striving hard to prevent that from happening. The two academies were natural enemies. And the old bastard Academy Head Levins mentioned was Academy Head Weston of the Saint Marceau Academy.

Lorist stood up and said, "Thank you for the macks. It really tastes quite good. I'll take my leave now. Don't worry, I won't let you down."

"Don't be in such a rush. There's another thing that I have to settle with you," said the academy head as he tugged on a string that was connected to a bell. With little delay, a middle-aged female clerk came over from the neighboring room.

"Leanna, please bring me the file with Instructor Locke's name on it from the archives," instructed the academy head.

Receiving the file and opening it, he took out a copper key and said, "Lorist, as a dual Gold ranked instructor of our academy, you should have been given a residence by the academy administration. Before, we didn't do so because our resources were limited, but ever since the acquisition of the Yellow Ribbon Academy, we now have much more land than we previously had. That's why for the past month the academy has commissioned for a residential area for Gold ranked instructors to be built around the

Moon Lake. Your house is labeled the 35th Moon. Just go over there and see Aunt Skali, the person in charge of your neighborhood."

Just as Lorist was leaving after he took the key, Academy Head Levins stopped him again and said, "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you two things. Your battleforce awakening course will start in seven days with many more students than the last time, so we have moved the venue of the course to the great hall of the Yellow Ribbon Academy. The other thing is the academy has already approved the formation of the Swordsmanship Society and you have been nominated to be its chairman. The society can carry out its activities in the training hall of the Yellow Ribbon Academy. So, please draft up the rules and regulations of the society and submit it soon. The Enforcement Division has also suggested to appoint some of the elite members of the society as their reserve staff. Don't forget to discuss it with Supervisor Charade."

"Alright, academy head. I know what to do."

Chapter 14
Lakefront Residence

A cold breeze blew past and woke Lorist from his thoughts. He just noticed that he had been hoodwinked by the academy head yet again.

The acquisition of the Yellow Ribbon Academy, the request for the loan, the insult the academy received from the people at the Association of Academies and even the bet with the other academy heads were all caused by Academy Head Levins. Yet right now he had successfully retreated to the sidelines without having take responsibility for any of his actions and made Lorist shoulder all the burden.

Now that he had been put on the frontlines, he had to bear the responsibility of defending his Silver Undefeated title, fight for the future development of the academy as well as be the beacon of hope for the rest of the instructors and students of the academy. That old bastard laid it all out to him, dug him a large pit, and Lorist jumped into it himself willingly. He couldn't even take it easy on the duels. Otherwise, he would be drowned alive by the rebukes of his fellow colleagues should he cause the academy to lose the bet.

There really wasn't anything Lorist could say about the old bastard for betting against the rest of the academy heads. The problem was Charade, who was going all over to put up that duel notice and thinking of making a big buck from this affair. Even if Lorist went back to see the old bastard about this, Levins would only say that there was no harm in doing so and find some way to sweet talk him into accepting it anyway.

Turning his head to look back at that greyish-green tower, he saw the white curtains of the academy head's office flapping away in the wind and made a mental note to stay away from that old fox if there wasn't a good reason to go see him, lest he get fooled by him again.

Holding the copper key in his hand, Lorist decided to go check out the house the academy has allocated for him so that he can move over there if he likes the place.

In actuality, he had already been granted a room back when he got the Incador Medal. However, that room was at the instructor dorms and that was the headquarters of the

Silver ranked instructors. Lorist knew that he wasn't liked by those instructors one bit and returned the room key to the academy. He decided he would be much better off if he shacked up with his girlfriend and stayed outside the academy.

The Moon Lake was located at the south of the academy. Favored by many students as a great place for relaxation and romantic rendezvous, it was a circular, crystal clear lake with a magnificent view across its shores. Originally belonging to the Yellow Ribbon Academy, the hill to the north of the lake was once a small mulberry forest. The mulberry trees were cut down and replaced by lofty villas with unique architectural design. According to Academy Head Levins, that was the newly-developed residential area for Gold ranked instructors.

With the walls separating the two academies having been knocked down, Lorist easily reached the hill by walking along the cobblestone path. He circled around the bamboo fence that surrounded the small hill and soon made his way to the entrance. Lorist was greeted by the sight of a two-storey wooden housing with a large double door.

A worker dressed in servant's uniform brought Lorist to the first room at the end of the wooden building. It was a large office with five tables within. A white-haired woman could be seen in the room with her head lowered, seemingly working on something. The worker pointed to her, indicating to Lorist that she was Supervisor Skali.

Taking Lorist's copper key and verifying the inscribed words on it that said '35th Moon', Supervisor Skali smiled sincerely and said, "So, you are our academy's legendary Gold ranked instructor Iron Locke. I've heard so much about you. Haha, I was in charge of several of the academy's shopfronts throughout Morante City before and wasn't at the academy often, so I never actually saw you in person."

Lorist wasn't too surprised at the fact. Having been at the academy for more than ten years and making quite a name for himself, he was familiar with most of the administrative staff of the academy.

Skali personally showed Lorist his new room. She was a rather talkative person. "Locke, your residence is quite near the shore of the lake, so it'll be rather quiet around there. House No.34 is quite a distance away, Instructor Marlin lives there. You should be acquainted with him, right?"

Lorist lightly nodded. Instructor Marlin was one of the retired military officers that

joined the academy as a Gold ranked instructor three years ago to take over the SIlver ranked instructors that left. He was a frank person whose two favorite things in life are alcohol and his horse. He sometimes even jokingly referred to his horse as his second wife. Married to a beautiful gentle woman and father to a cute little daughter, he brought his family as well as his horse over to the academy when he first took the job. According to him, Jenny, his horse, had saved him on multiple occasions on the battlefield. That's why he dedicated so much of his time to care for it.

His residence was a small villa made of rock and wood and was two storeys high, with an attic on the top floor. Being at the far corner of the Moon Lake with not many buildings in the area, it was indeed quiet as Skali has mentioned. The roof of house no.34 could barely be seen from the courtyard.

The courtyard was pretty vast and took up most of the land of the surrounding area with a row of holly trees enclosing it. Although the house was near the lake, a well was built on the courtyard nevertheless. Lorist inspected the well and noted its square bluestone walls. The bottom of the well was covered with fine, white sand that was presumably used to cleanse the well water.

Two wooden structures could be seen on the courtyard as well. As Skali was unlocking the villa, she said, "That's the stable. You can keep up to two horses there. The other building is the garage where you can keep your horse cart when you're not using it. You can use it as a storehouse as well if you don't have any horses. Ah, it's finally open. I better grease this key, otherwise it won't turn easily... Come on in."

The first room they entered was the main lounge. In it was a fireplace as well as a sofa. On the walls hung several tapestries[1]. Although they were not anything expensive, they provided the house with a warm, homely atmosphere. Nodding, Lorist noticed that the furniture has already been prepared and he did not have to take care of it himself. As a person who hated troublesome things, he was really satisfied at how everything in the house had been prepared for him beforehand.

"The kitchen and dining hall are at the back. To your left are two servant rooms and to your right are the bathroom and storeroom. You can also use the empty space below the stairs as an extra storage space. Let's go upstairs," continued Skali.

On the second floor was another lounge along with one master bedroom with two other guestrooms. There was also another bathroom on this floor as well as a study room. The master bedroom was rather large and had its own bathroom and dressing

room. The attic could be accessed from the stairs at the second floor lounge.

Smiling, Skali said that by the time Lorist starts a family and has his own children, he could even renovate the attic into a toddler's room. She thought the kids will definitely love it.

Lorist retorted by stating that he's single and won't be having any children soon.

Piqued by Lorist's statement, Skali asked Lorist about the type of girls he likes and so that she can recommend someone to be Lorist's wife.

Thanking Skali for her goodwill, Lorist rejected the offer by saying that he's in an important juncture in his training now and cannot shift his focus onto other things. He also had to duel all those challengers in the coming days. That finally diffused Skali's eagerness in finding Lorist a new partner.

Moving back to the lounge on the ground floor, Supervisor Skali asked Lorist what he thought about the house and mentioned that he could switch to another one should he not like the quietness of the area, as out of the 52 villas in the residential area for Gold ranked instructors, only 38 of them was occupied and there were 14 villas which he could pick from.

Lorist expressed his satisfaction with this particular villa and told her that he would be working to move his luggage over tomorrow.

The supervisor pointed at a green rope hanging by the fireplace and said, "Instructor Locke, this rope is connected to a bell in the management office. Should you need any assistance, just give the rope a pull or two and we'll send someone over. Given that you've just moved in, I believe that you don't yet have a servant yet. Please don't hesitate to ask the management to send someone over to help you with your tasks."

Pulling on the rope, she continued, "I have just sent for some cleaners to come over since you're moving in tomorrow or the day after. The place has started to gather dust after a while, especially the handrails on the stairs..."

"Supervisor Skali, isn't this building a little far from the management office? How is the rope tethered all the way to there?" Lorist asked curiously.

Letting out an enthusiastic smile, Skali explained, "That's simple, an underground bamboo pipe network houses the copper wires that are connected ropes like this.

When you pull on the rope, it actually tugs on the copper wires underground that's linked to a bell with your room number on it. There is a wall in the management office that has over a hundred labeled bells. By checking the bell that rings, we are able to tell very quickly which house requires our assistance. I actually borrowed the design of this system from the ones that I've seen at some large merchant offices."

A little while later, some knocks could be heard on the door. A tough, burly female servant came in. Lorist broke into a smile the moment he saw her. "Kelly, it's you."

This servant was the one who had looked after Lorist when he had first crossed over into this world. Having not seen Kelly for a number of years, Lorist noticed that her previously plump figure had become more sturdy and fit.

In the beginning when Kelly first got the job, she didn't like the original owner of Lorist's body very much as he was a rather spoiled noble brat who looked down on everyone. Nevertheless, she carried out her caretaking task professionally as she had been paid to do so and did not bother to talk to Lorist much. But after the current Lorist crossed over and possessed that noble youth's body, he increased Kelly's salary and got her to read some books aloud to him as he yearned to learn more about this foreign world. In time, Kelly's sympathy for this poor young noble who had left his homeland at so young an age grew. It was like her maternal instinct kicked in and she started to show true concern for Lorist. Slowly, their relationship got better and better. Had it not been for Kelly's sudden family circumstances that prompted her to return home, Lorist would have wanted her to work for him for the long term.

"Ah, it's Young Master Locke!" Kelly greeted Lorist with much vigor.

"What happened to your family at that time? Back when I had just finished recovering from my injuries, I tried to ask the people at the management office but they only said that you stopped working there because of some family issues."

"Oh, at that time, my grandmother had fallen sick. I went back home to take care of her for half a year until she passed away. After that, I worked the fields at home and six years passed in a flash. By that time, my children had already grown up and I could leave the household to them without any issues. That's why I decided to come work at the academy again," explained Kelly as she struggled to count the years she stayed home with her fingers. Lorist wanted to laugh; he knew that Kelly wasn't good at arithmetic. Who knew that after all these years that habit of hers didn't change at all.

Turning to Skali, Lorist asked if he could have Kelly work for him. While the supervisor agreed to his request, Kelly herself wasn't willing with the reason being that she wouldn't get to do much for Lorist as he only lived alone, making her unable to earn enough money for her sons' dowries when they marry.

Smiling bitterly and shaking his head, Lorist mumbled, "My, how simple minded you are..."

They eventually settled with Skali's suggestion: hiring Kelly as a long term helper. She would be paid 5 large silvers per month for coming to tidy the house up twice a day. Kelly's eyes instantly lit up.

Kelly eagerly said that she could come over to clean the place tomorrow. Lorist gave her an extra key and subsequently sent Skali and Kelly to the door as they left. Looking back at his new residence, he thought, so, this is my new home, huh.

Having lived in the Grindia Continent for ten years, he has finally got himself a house. This was the place where he suddenly found himself in and it was the harbor for his troubled soul at that time. Taking a walk around his house to give it a look or two more, delight sprung up from within his heart. Even though his mood had been spoiled from his meeting with the academy head before this, he really felt like singing at the top of his voice right now.

There's still one thing I have to settle, thought Lorist as he stood by the window of the master bedroom on the second floor with his eyes focused on the Moon Lake, recalling the scene when he first met her. His felt a hint of pain deep in his heart. That relationship he had spent three years in had evaporated just like that. Was the title and power of a noble that important, so much so that she ditched him for another man despite all he had done for her, even at the cost of casting away the business they had built together?

Well, let bygones be bygones. I should probably settle this today. Grasping his fists and sending a forceful punch towards the wall, Lorist steeled his resolve.

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[1]Tapestry: woven textile (cloth) art pieces.

Chapter 15
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (1)

As the sky darkened, the streets gradually crowded with people rushing home. Lamp light and the smell of burning wax emanated from the buildings that lined the streets. Perhaps, the only thing it the minds of these people now was the desire for a nice, warm meal.

A horse cart-for-rent slowly traveled by. The driver pulled on the reins from time to time, steering the Delemont Striped Horse away from the pedestrians. The horse pulling the cart started to feel a little annoyed and snorted.

“Mister, we’ve arrived at Phoenix-tail Flower Street in the east sector of the city. Where would you like to be dropped off?” asked the driver respectfully.

Ah, thought Lorist as he looked around him. He pointed at a corner and said, “Just a little bit further. Do you see that four-storey building? Just drop me off at that alley near there.”

The horse cart stopped by the alley as instructed.

“How much is it?”

“It’s 30 coppers, sir.”

Receiving the two small silvers that Lorist handed him, the driver fumbled around for 10 coppers of change.

Lorist only took five and said, “Keep the rest. Take it as a tip for your great service.”

Happily removing his hat and bowing his head in gratitude, the driver said, “Thank you very much for your generosity. I wish you a good night.”

The people of Morante City predominantly used four types of coins issued by the trade union. The first one was the gold coin, also known as a gold Forde, which had the portrait of Archduke Forde Morante on it. The second type was a large silver coin that

depicted a large ship. Officially, it was known as the 'silver sailboat', but most people just call it a large silver. The third coin was also silver, albeit only a third of the size of a large silver, and it depicted a picture of the city walls. Originally referred to as a 'wall silver', most people just call it a small silver due to its relatively smaller size to the silver sailboat coin. The last most circulated coin type was called the 'yellow copper' coin and it had a simple pentagram pattern on it. People simply referred to them as coppers.

A gold Forde was worth twenty large silvers, a large silver was worth five small silvers and each small silvers was equal to twenty coppers. The use of these coins have grown with the expansion of the Forde Trade Union's influence and power. Many areas have already adopted the Forde coins as their de facto currency. Some kingdoms and duchies even stopped producing their own currency in favor of the trade union's and sent their gold and silver reserves to the trade union in exchange for their coins.

The fruit seller by the roadside stared in a daze as Lorist approached and hurriedly greeted, "Hey, Locke. It's been quite some time since I've since you, almost half a year I think. Come, try some strawberries. It's really sweet."

Smiling, Lorist returned the greeting, "Uncle Girald, how's business? I went somewhere overseas on an assignment from the academy a while back and just got back recently."

Taking a bite out of the strawberry, Lorist said, "Wow, this is great. Uncle Girald, give me two kilos of this. Oh, and I'd like a box of honey candy as well."

"Coming right up," said the stall owner as he packed the goods Lorist asked for. Inspecting his surroundings and making sure nobody was within hearing range, he quietly asked, "Locke, what happened between you and Miss Windsor? During the six months you weren't here, I saw her bringing a middle-aged nobleman back to spend the night and leaving together the next morning. Oh, and, last month a group of bodyguards and knights came by and caused quite a ruckus by chasing away a few horse carts. They said that Miss Windsor and Master Birmingham was returning to their homeland to claim their dominions. Do you know about this?"

Half nodding and shaking his head, Lorist said, "I know some of it, but not everything. Uncle Girald, I've already broken up with her before I left. I'm only here today to move my stuff. If you need anything from me in the future, you can find me at the academy as I'm living there now."

“Oh, so that was it… Sigh, it’s such a shame it didn’t work out for you two. Oh well, I’ll give you a discount! Three small silvers will do,” said the stall owner as he sighed and packed the strawberries and candy into a paper bag.

Lorist paid the man and said with a smile, “Sometimes people are meant to go their own separate ways and relationships can’t be forced. If it doesn’t work out, there’s no point in getting disappointed over it. See you, Uncle Girald.”

Lorist’s face darkened as his smile vanished once he turned away. *She actually brought a man back to spend a night here and caused rumors to spread…* This was done to force their relationship to a close. *My, isn’t she ruthless…*

The alley was quite narrow and only allowed for one horse cart to pass through at any given time. Beyond the ten-meter-long alley was a small lot with three four-storey crimson red buildings in the center with some other wooden houses beside it.

A four-year-old girl wearing a flowery skirt sat alone in a corner of one of the wooden houses with her head down, seemingly playing with something. Seeing Lorist come out from the alley, the girl blinked, stared in a daze, and rubbed her eyes before jumping up and down in joy and rushed towards him.

Her smile was as refreshing as spring water to a thirsty traveler and it warmed Lorist’s heart from deep down. Laughing, Lorist knelt down, held the girl up, and spun her around for a few times.

“Hey, little Loney. What are you doing here? Where’s your grandma?”

“I’m waiting for dad to come home. Grandma is cooking,” replied Loney with a childish tone.

“Hehe, my little Loney’s so cute. Come here, let brother Locke give you a kiss.”

“I don’t wanna…” complained Loney as she laughed and struggled to avoid Lorist’s kisses.

But Lorist managed to do it anyway.

“Ew!” Little Loney rubbed her face with her hands and pouted. “Brother Locke’s a bad man, you didn’t come visit me for so long and now you scrape my face with hair stubs on your face. I’m gonna tell my dad and have him smack your buttocks…”

“Hahaha,” laughed Lorist heartily. He took out the box of candies and said, “Look at what I’ve got here?”

“Ah! Those are Loney’s favorite honey candies! Brother Locke is the best!” Loney’s attitude changed immediately the moment she set her sights on the box of candies.

Handing the box to Loney, Lorist said, “Don’t eat too much of this at night, alright? Otherwise your teeth will start to hurt.”

“I know, thanks big brother! I’m going to show it to grandma!” Hugging the box of candies, Loney ran away at full speed.

Loney’s father was called Morandel and he was a Silver Swordsman that served in the city garrison. As Loney’s mother had passed away at a young age, Loney was brought up mostly by her grandmother. Everyday, Loney waited for her father to come home, but her dad only had three days off his shift every month, which he often used to spend time with Loney.

Seeing Loney’s silhouette vanish into the building, Lorist carried his paper bag and turned towards one of the four-storey crimson buildings. This was the place where he had lived for the past three years.

The door opened soon after Lorist used the knocker. The female servant gasped in shock as she was caught off guard by Lorist’s sudden appearance.

Showing a warm smile, Lorist asked, “Lina, may I come in?”

“Ah, of course, Master Locke.”

Closing the door, Lina the servant girl fidgeted about nervously behind Lorist, not knowing where to place her hands.

Handing her the paper bag, Lorist said, “I got this from the stall at the alley. It’s fresh and sweet, please help yourself to some.”

“Oh, thank you Master Locke. You’re always so generous,” thanked Lina hastily as she accepted the paper bag.

It has already been half a year since Lorist had been here. Feeling a pang of nostalgia, Lorist said, “Don’t be so nervous, Lina. I’m just here to get my stuff. It’s still in the room,

right?"

"Ah, yes. After you left, the mistress locked the room up and no longer let us in. I've only seen her go inside it a number of times herself."

"I see the furniture here has decreased quite a bit. Are you guys planning to move as well?" asked Lorist as he looked at the empty hallway.

"That's right. The mistress has sold this place that she inherited from her family and is planning to leave by the end of the month."

"Did she sell the shop at Rotary Street too?"

Shaking her head and shrugging, Lina said, "I'm don't think so. But, I've heard Suzy say that they've already found a buyer and are still conducting negotiations."

Letting out a big sigh, Lorist said, "I guess your mistress is planning to leave this place for good."

Nodding, Lina said, "Master Locke, let me go get you a cup of tea."

"Alright. Since I won't be able to drink the tea you make anymore in the future, might as well savor it now while I still can."

Lina brought the tea over in a short while. Lorist breathed the aroma in deeply and praised, "It still smells great. Lina, your tea making skills are still good as ever."

Lowering her head, Lina whispered, "Master Locke, are you really breaking up with the mistress?"

Looking solemnly at the cup in his hands, Lorist replied after a short pause, "Lina, it wasn't my intention to break up with her. She's the one who's forcing me to do this. I believe you know very well what your mistress has been up to in the past year I've been away. She is willing to cast everything away to reclaim her family's dominion in her homeland. As for me, I can't do anything besides wishing her the best."

Lina hesitated for a bit before adamantly saying, "But… But I think that our mistress was wrong in this. She shouldn't have broken up with you…"

"Lina, not everyone thinks the way you do. Your mistress has her own considerations

as well," Lorist replied with a smile.

Standing up, Lorist continued, "Alright, thanks for the tea, Lina. I'm going to go upstairs to arrange my stuff and move it away by tomorrow."

"Ah, Master Locke, let me go get you a candle."

Pushing the door open, Lorist stood outside the room he was so familiar with in deep thought. Lina approached him from behind with a candle in hand and asked, "Master Locke, are you okay?"

Breaking out from his trance, Lorist took the candle and said, "Oh, thanks Lina, Leave me alone for a bit. I need some time to think."

Nodding, Lina replied, "Alright, Master Locke. Please pull on the bell rope should you need anything else. I will be downstairs."

Placing the candle on the table, Lorist slowly sat on the chair by his study table and reminisced the old days: the days when he sat at that very table designing clothes nonstop with her…

The times when the both of them cut and sewed the cloth on the floor themselves to save cost on materials…

The arguments they had over the store decorations…

And on that fleeting moonlit night, when she shed her sleepwear in front of him…

When they lay beside each other with her flirtatiously licking his chest, pleading him to draw more clothing designs for her…

This was a rather old-fashioned love story.

……

That year, Lorist was only 20 years old and had just been appointed as a swordsmanship instructor for the academy. Charade prepared a feast for him at the Enforcement Division building as a celebration and both of them drank and ate merrily. After that, Lorist, in his sleeplessness, stepped out of the building and wandered around the academy. Gradually, he made his way to the Moon Lake and

heard a faint sobbing. Intrigued, Lorist approached the source of the sound and discovered a lone girl bawling by the lake.

At that time, Lorist didn't know what to do as he thought that consoling someone with a broken heart wouldn't do much help. But that changed the moment the girl leapt into the lake.

Carrying the unconscious girl back to the Enforcement Division building, he woke Charade up and they both cared for the girl until she regained consciousness. That girl was rather beautiful, but she did not utter even one word. But that didn't stop the fatty from finding out about her situation the day after.

That girl was the daughter of a viscount of the Jigda Kingdom. Her name was Windsor Prinna and she was 18 years old. For reasons unknown, two grand dukes of the Jigda Kingdom broke into armed conflict. The unfortunate Viscount Windsor had sided with the losing side and had his castle and dominion invaded, effectively becoming the first sacrifice of the conflict. His dominion was split up between several powers and the viscount heeded the war god's call and left the mortal realm for the afterlife. Naturally, Madam Windsor and her seven-year-old son became captives.

In a conflict between nobles, while the losing side would not suffer any direct harm, it wasn't uncommon to hear the women provide entertainment and companionship for guests at drinking parties. While Madam Windsor was middle-aged, she still retained the air and beauty of a lady and was quite popular in the soldier camps. Half a year later, the two grand dukes started peace talks and the conflict in the kingdom subsided. Having lost the influence over their dominion, the Windsor family hostages had been released as they no longer had any value. But Madam Windsor had already become pregnant with a child of someone she didn't know. To spare herself from the shame and humiliation, she left the place and sought out her eldest daughter Prinna who was studying in Morante City for help.

The young Miss Windsor who had lived a life of ease and luxury could not ever imagine for something like this to happen. When her mother came over with her brother, she was like a majestic phoenix who had suddenly turned into a common hen as she had lost her father's support as well as her source of income. The once prideful young mistress humbled herself and asked some of her admirers to lend a hand, hoping that they could reclaim her family's land for her.

However, she was harshly humiliated; the nobles, knowing that the Windsor family

had lost their dominion, did not extend any shred of help. The despairing young mistress couldn't take it anymore and decided to end her life and slipped away from the dorms midnight to the Moon Lake nearby.

Charade also discovered that Viscount Windsor had some other properties in the east sector of Morante City, namely, a mansion and two shop lots. They could still live quite a comfortable life even without their power over their dominion.

Lorist noted aloud that the property could be used as capital to rebuild the Windsor family.

Suddenly, the girl who kept quiet the whole time appeared before Lorist, greatly startling him, and said with her charming eyes wide-opened, "Did you just say that the Windsor house could start over…?"

Chapter 16
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (2)

The young Miss Windsor, with her wide, charming eyes, was truly beautiful. At that moment, she seemed like a lone rice plant standing amidst a rice field that had been destroyed by a flood as she stared hard at Lorist with a hint of hope in her eyes despite her hopeless situation.

Being a person who had experienced many things in two very different worlds, Lorist was surprised to find that the desperate pleading of a weak, gentle girl had managed to shake him to the core and temporarily depriving him of his rationality. He gulped down a cup of water in one go, avoided the gaze of those mesmerizing eyes and said in a stuttering voice, "M-m-miss, if you do-don't mind... I... I can t-try to help you... a-analyze the si-situation of the Windsor family... and see if there's something w-we can do about it..."

Naturally, the young miss Windsor agreed. Charade handed Lorist another cup of water and said, "Drink up. You're already stammering."

Gulping another cup of water down and calming his mind, Lorist looked at the poor, fragile mistress of the Windsor house who had a woolen blanket wrapped around her. Feeling pity for the poor girl, he made a cup of hot tea, placed it on the table, and beckoned Charade to bring some snacks over.

Looking towards the blanket-clad girl, Lorist let out a warm smile and said, "Miss, why don't you warm yourself up and help yourself to some food first before we start our discussion?"

When Lorist brought the girl back from the lake yesterday, she was already unconscious, not from choking on water but rather her languish and suffering. While Lorist and Charade feasted their eyes on her beauty, they did not dare to change her into a new set of clothes and tried to dry them instead by laying her down beside two braziers[1]. After that, they wrapped a blanket around her to keep her warm.

Only just noticing her predicament, she clasped the woolen blanket and nodded her head lightly with a slight blush on her face. After she ate some food and tidied herself

up in the bathroom, she changed into a female student uniform Charade brought her and showed herself in front of the two men, who were subsequently stunned by her refreshed, beautiful look.

Snapping out of his daze, Lorist noticed her lips curve slightly. That girl was obviously delighted at the men's reaction.

Taking out a white sheepskin scroll, Lorist started scribbling down the situation of the Windsor family. "Let me list out the troubles the Windsor family is facing according to what I heard from Charade. Please let me know if I miss something out."

Number one: The Windsor family lost their dominion due to the conflict and had it divided among four other neighboring families. The original garrison soldiers and the local officials have been relieved of their duties and the remaining members of the Windsor family has been chased out of the land. It was apparent that the new lords of the land wished to relinquish any influence the Windsor family members still had on the people of the dominion.

Number two: None of the nobles of the Jigda Kingdom, including the duke to whom the Windsor house pledged their allegiance, wished to lend the Windsor house any aid. Although the Windsor family had a rightful claim to that land according to the kingdom's laws, the other nobles have already unofficially recognized the four neighboring families as the rulers of the land and refused to say anything on the Windsor house's behalf.

Number three: As Viscount Windsor had perished due to his injuries from battle, there was no one else within the Windsor family that had the ability to lead the dominion's soldiers. As the heir of the viscount was still only a seven-year-old boy, he was of no direct use to the current situation. Madam Windsor, on the other hand, was busy worrying about who the father of her child she was pregnant with was. There were more than 45 suspects but there was no way to determine the father within a short period of time. The young mistress of the Windsor house was a girl who had not awakened her battleforce, so she was of no immediate help to the situation either.

"She's actually my stepmother, not my biological mother. Right now, only I can call the shots in the Windsor house," proclaimed the blushing girl with a hint of anger and embarrassment.

After some more explanation on the young mistress's part, Lorist came to understand

that the current Madam Windsor used to be a widow to another baron. She got to know Viscount Windsor and eventually had an affair with him and got pregnant with the current young master, after which she got married and officially became his second wife. She had lived in the capital with her son until she moved to the dominion three years prior when the first wife of the viscount passed away. She was only 35 this year.

Charade, before knowing of her actual age, joked about the desperateness of the invading soldiers who had managed to knock her up, as he had estimated Madam Windsor's age based on that of this young mistress. In actuality, she was still under 35 years old and was still in the prime of her womanhood.

The stricken young maiden did not even notice the thoughts of the two men wander. Both of them let their fantasies run wild as they imagined the 'pleasurable' life the current Madam Windsor must have led in the army camp. Both men looked at each other with a funny gaze and snickered in a low voice.

Suddenly, the young mistress declared, "I will not forgive them for tarnishing the honor of the Windsor house and will definitely reclaim my dominion. Those who stood idly as they witnessed our demise will definitely pay..."

Picking up the sheepskin scroll on the table, Charade gave it a light poke or two and interrupted the young mistress's declaration. "According to the description of the situation, the Windsor house is already beyond salvation. Even if you were to wait ten or so years for the young master to mature, it is hard to say whether the people in the dominion will still stay loyal to the Windsor family. Having lost the dominion and lacking an immediate heir, the Windsor family is in deep trouble. I think you should just let it go and live out the rest of your life pleasantly with the property your father had left you in Morante City.

Lorist fully agreed to Charade's statement.

The young mistress was stunned to hear that. But she could not refute even one word of what he said. Her large crystal-like eyes started watering as she stood there without uttering a noise, anguished, with her shoulders shaking involuntary...

Lorist felt pained when he saw that sight. He breathed a long sigh, stood up, and handed her a facecloth as he told her, "Actually, there *is* a way that might help you reclaim your dominion..."

Her quiet sobs suddenly stopped and she asked him with teary eyes, "Is that true?"

Looking at the scroll again, Charade said, "It's impossible..."

Lorist, taking out another sheepskin scroll and a pen, began to mumble as he jotted down several points on the scroll, "Number one, people. Number two, spying. Number three, goal. Number four, logistics. And finally, support."

Pointing at the words he wrote, Lorist looked towards the other two and started explaining. "The first main factor is the people. Although Viscount Windsor has passed away on the battlefield, many of his loyal subjects have survived and are scattered across the various villages around the dominion. Madam Windsor and her son only managed to come over to Morante City due to having a group of surviving garrison soldiers escorting them along the way. The Windsor family should not give up on the people who are still loyal to them and rally them up so that they can be sent into the dominion and seek out others who still hold the Windsor family in their hearts.

"These people who will eventually form a resistance against the current lords will serve as a reminder to the people in the dominion that the Windsor family has not given up on them.

"However, the leader for the resistance army must not be casually appointed. Ideally, it would be someone who is highly respected who used to serve under the viscount directly and is powerful enough to defend himself. Do you have such a person in mind?"

The girl gave it some thought and nodded, "I think Uncle Somm is perfect for this. He used to be a knight of our family and is of the Two Star Silver rank. He was a trusted subordinate of my father and served in his personal cavalry guard. Right before my dad died on the battlefield, Uncle Somm got wounded and was sent along with his family to my father's manor to undergo treatment. My mother's escort brought a letter from him that states that he had already mostly recovered still couldn't ride a horse properly yet. He will be coming over to join me in another one or two months. Oh, and Uncle Somm's daughter, Lina, used to be my personal handmaiden."

"Not bad. According to your description, he indeed is an ideal candidate for the leader of the resistance. Let's move on to the second point: spying," Looking at the slightly confused girl and Charade, he asked, "Do you know what spying is about?"

"I know," the girl scrambled to answer, "Isn't it about secretly hiring spies to gather information? They'll hang out at places like taverns and pay attention to any strangers that show up. The dominion lord in turn pays them for the information they gather."

Charade nodded and agreed to her description.

Lorist shook is head and disagreed, "No, not that kind. It's way too obvious. If it were me, I would pick the tavern owners, servants, smiths, fishermen, farmers, tailors as well as the guards to be my eyes and ears. These people are the ones who can really observe the enemy's every action, even their every meal, without arousing any suspicion."

"But what's the point of knowing what they eat? Wait, are you going to use poison!?" asked the girl with her face pale, as if she had come to understand the sinister truth.

Charade was surprised by the sudden enlightenment. "Of course! As long as we have these people working for us, nothing can escape us and we can easily respond to any of the enemy's moves!"

Looking at the confused young mistress, Lorist said, "Miss, did you hear what the fatty said just now? Think about it, if we have this network of people feeding us information, we can anticipate the enemy's every move and respond accordingly. This would also serve to cover the resistance army's tracks and set the enemy forces on a goose chase, hence allowing the resistance more freedom to expand their influence."

The girl blushed as she came to understand what Lorist had just said.

"The non-combatants, ex-officials and the ex-soldiers in the dominion who are still loyal to the Windsor family would be the perfect for this job. They can serve as your resistance's eyes and watch the enemy's every move and find the perfect opportunity for the resistance to strike.

"The next factor would be the goal of the resistance. The focus of the resistance army should not be on attacking the castles of the rulers nor their soldiers but rather their tax collectors, officials, spies, convoys as well as their storehouses. This would effectively blind the current rulers and make them unable to effectively take action against the resistance. Eventually, these attacks would serve to bleed out the current rulers and wear them out gradually. The army must be organized into many discrete units so that they can react to any situation swiftly and effectively.

"The fourth point we have to emphasize is logistics. To ensure the resistance has enough momentum to keep their operations going, there must be secret bases where the fighters can rest and recuperate. The Windsor family should provide them with resources such as weapons, food and even women. Only by setting up many bases across many locations can the resistance army hold together in the long run.

"Finally, you cannot neglect support. Forming the resistance army is not just about sending people there and ordering them around. To ensure that the army remains under the control of the Windsor family and remain dependant to it, the family must actively support them with resources and manpower. One way to do this is to hire Silver ranked mercenaries on a mission-by-mission basis for each major operation. This will allow the resistance army to put sufficient pressure on their enemies while minimizing the casualties.

"As long as this holds up for several years, the resistance army would become a nightmare for the rulers and they will come to regret their decision to split the dominion of the Windsor family among themselves and want to be rid of their responsibilities on governing the land. At that time, the Windsor family can just step in and negotiate with the current rulers and even offer them some form of reimbursement. I believe they would be glad to return the lands to the Windsor family," concluded Lorist.

"So there was a way to get it back after all..." mused Charade.

The girl, on the other hand, was revigorated and a hint of life returned to her gaze.

"But there are two repercussions by using this plan," Lorist said, dampening the mood once more. "With the existence of the resistance army, the lords of the dominion might let their frustration out on the people of the land. Even if the Windsor family does reclaim the land one day, a lot of money must be spent in order for the people and the economy to recover. Another thing is that the Windsor family will be on hostile terms with the four neighboring noble families after regaining power and must expend lots of money to hire a group of elite soldiers to ensure the protection and security of the dominion. My point is, this whole exercise would be futile if you don't have the money to fund it. According to my rough estimate, it would require at least a thousand gold coins to maintain this operation each year."

Gathering a thousand gold coins per year was definitely not an easy task. Even Lorist, who was recently appointed to be a swordsmanship instructor for the academy, only

had a monthly salary of 3 gold Fordes. As for Charade, being the head of the Enforcement Division, he boasts a monthly salary of five gold Fordes. Their job was already considered to be among the most high paying ones in Morante City. McDuffin's family, before meeting Lorist, only earned up to six large silvers every day and even that was enough for them to live a comfortable life and have some plenty left over for savings.

How was the Windsor house going to reclaim their dominion given the state of affairs of their finances?

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[1]A portable heater that works similarly to a fireplace.

Chapter 17
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (3)

The young mistress of the Windsor house snapped out of her delusion, reevaluated her family's situation and started to tear up again. "But… I'm already running out of money…"

Looking at those beautiful, tear-filled eyes, Lorist said in an attempt to console her, "Don't cry. Doesn't your family still own some property in the city? This is what you can use to start the whole operation! Once your business builds up and begins to make a profit, you can start the operation according to the five points I've highlighted. I definitely think that your family can once again reclaim your dominion one day."

"Leaving that mansion of yours out, those two shopfronts owned by your family at Rotary Street is already worth a lot. They are situated at the city center of Morante City and the rent there is rather high. The fact that you own two shopfronts in that area gives you an edge over many others in starting a new business. Even the multi-million Gold Horn Merchant Guild started as a small establishment that did petty errands for others six years ago. I believe that with adequate management and a good business model, it would not be too hard for you to earn a profit of 1000 gold coins per year," added Charade.

The girl lifted her face, rubbed her cloudy eyes, and asked, "Then what kind of business do you reckon would earn me 1000 gold coins per year?"

"Oh no!" The fatty seemed to have remembered something and left in a hurry. "I forgot that I have to patrol the academy. With the weather being so hot recently, I bet many of the students would feel way edgier than normal and start to cause trouble! The Enforcement Division should be rather busy during these days. Heck, now we even have people trying to drown themselves in the Moon Lake! Now, we can even take it easy at night! You guys keep talking, I'll take my leave."

The girl's face reddened at the comment.

Gracefully bowing towards the girl, he whispered beside her ear, "He'll have a way for you," and whooshed outside the room.

Lorist was beginning to have a headache as it seemed very likely that the young mistress of the Windsor house already had her eyes set on him. She followed him in and out all day and even waited outside when he had to go to the washroom, attracting the attention of many students and causing rumors to spread.

“Come on, young mistress. Cut me some slack, will you? What do you want?” pleaded Lorist towards the stubborn girl.

“Who asked you to rescue me? Now, you have to take responsibility for it.”

“My gosh, what’s wrong with me saving your life? How should I fulfill that responsibility?”

“I want you to help me…”

“No way, that’s too complicated and troublesome.”

“Since you could think up a plan for me to get my dominion back, surely you could also figure something out for me to start my business…” the girl said coquettishly as she stomped her leg like a spoiled brat.

Lorist’s resolved wavered. “I won’t do it if there’s nothing in it for me…”

Smiling brightly with a hint of embarrassment, the girl said, “Then, how about I become your girlfriend?”

Lorist was instantly entranced by her seductive smile and yielded.

The suggestion Lorist gave his new girlfriend was to stop all business proceedings of the shops at Rotary Street with the Jigda Kingdom and to revamp them into a premium women’s boutique.

The girl stared wide-eyed at Lorist as he explained, not knowing what a premium boutique was. From her experience, noblewomen usually wore tailor made clothes by personal tailors or their handmaidens and never purchased them from anyone else. Most of the clothes at the stores focused more on utility rather than aesthetics and was usually marketed to smiths, mercenaries, office workers, housemakers, hawkers and other common city folk. No noble would ever lower themselves to wear clothes like that lest they want to end up walking jokes.

Lorist followed up with a patient explanation, “What we’re trying to do is not to make common clothes like most other clothing stores out there. We are trying to appeal to the noble market, especially the women. We will focus on party dresses and accessories that cost at least ten gold coins per set.”

“Is that really viable? Why would anyone in their right mind buy something at that price?” asked the girl to her new lover with much doubt in her eyes.

“Of course. As long as the designs are unique, a fashion trend would no doubt start. Given the nature of the nobles to only buy the best and most expensive things and their tendency to compare and compete with one another, we would succeed in no time.”

“Then, who will be in charge of designing the clothes?”

“Me, of course,” proclaimed Lorist with a face full of confidence.

In actuality, he had already come out with this idea for quite some time and only decided to start working on it for the sake of his girlfriend. Being a craftsman and a forger, he naturally had a certification for fashion design in his past life. It would not be an overstatement to even say that he was an expert in making dresses and gowns fit for even princesses.

During his time as a factory owner in his past life, he received a rather big business order. A rich businessman who wanted to throw a birthday party for his seven year old daughter had contacted Mattrel, one of the biggest toy companies in the world, to make 108 dolls that were about the size of his daughter at a price of 100000 RMB each (roughly 15000 USD) and specified that each of the dolls should have two different princess dresses that could be changed in and out of. In essence, he had requested for 108 dolls of the size of his daughter with another 216 sets of dresses and gowns.

The executives of Mattrel was left flabbergasted at the magnitude of the order. Did he come to them to order toys or clothes? If it were priced at 100000 USD each, then it would not be a problem for the company to hire professional fashion designers for the task. But 100000 RMB was not nearly enough for that kind of spending. So, they decided to just let one of their factories in China figure up a way to produce the clothes at a lower cost.

While the rich businessman wanted the original products produced by Mattrel

themselves, he forgot that many of them were actually manufactured in China and that Mattrel was only responsible for branding, designing and marketing. Once the order reached the Chinese factory, the people in charge were also wracking their brains for a solution. While it would be easy to change a small part of the mold at a low cost to produce a new line of dolls, that wasn't easily achieved with the dolls' clothes. Should they resort to outsourcing this to clothing companies? It wasn't an easy task, especially when the request specified for the clothes to each have a unique design. This also meant different materials for different clothes, especially when princess-themed clothing would require certain special crystals or materials to decorate them. In the end, one of the persons in charge who was coincidentally an old comrade of Lorist decided to call him up for help.

Within three months, Lorist spent all his time researching. He watched various films that featured extravagant dresses, read all sorts of fashion magazines as well as studied the various exotic dresses movie stars often wore to the red carpet. His research material stacked up all over his office and his coworkers even joked that his office had become an archive for the whole of humanity's fashion culture.

Spending days and nights discussing and planning with several other fashion designers, he finally came up with more than 500 designs which he submitted to Mattrel's factory in China which then sent it to the rich businessman to select from, after which the selected designs were sent back to Lorist's factory to begin the production. This very order earned him more than 500000 dollars and he even deliberated whether he should change his factory's focus to children's clothing instead.

Having crossed over to Grindia for more than 6 years, Lorist already had a firm understanding of this world. Being the largest trading city on the continent, Morante City had visitors from all over the world and was also the central hub for the latest trends. However, to Lorist, most of these trends were nothing but jokes. What use did he have for popular things that ranged from soft beast fur shawls, well-written poems to durable, exquisite swords?

The nobles of this world had a custom of making their own clothes. But Lorist discovered that the designs of those clothes had not changed much from hundreds of years ago. The only noticeable difference was the improvement of the materials and the slightly different embroidery on the clothing. Most noblewomen, young or old, including the young Miss Windsor, had their personal tailors or handmaidens make their clothes which didn't really differ much from one another. The only things the

ladies talked about during parties or banquets pertaining to clothing was the intricacies or details of the embroidery.

That's why Lorist firmly believed that the dresses he designed would definitely make most noblewomen go crazy for them. It was natural for women to continually beautify themselves. It's a shame that Grindia's fashion culture was so primitive and undeveloped unlike that of his previous world, where fashion designers brainstormed day and night to come out with a new, novel design.

So, to dispel any suspicions his new girlfriend might have about his ability that was painfully apparent in her gaze, he decided to show off a bit by drawing her a rough sketch.

The girl subsequently brought her new boyfriend back to her house in the east sector of the city, much to her two maidservants' surprise, as the usual haughty mistress of theirs had picked someone who looked so average to be her boyfriend. They thought that Lorist's clothes were rather ragged and that the Iron rank badge he wore on his chest was quite unsightly.

Not knowing of the thoughts his girlfriend's maids had about him, Lorist went up to the third floor to a room with sufficient lighting and asked for a pen and paper to start drawing. Initially, the young Windsor was weirded out by the relative revealingness of the clothes that accentuated one's body curves and thought that Lorist was a cheap pervert. But as the design neared its completion, the girl quieted down and had her eyes glued to the drawing, already fantasizing how she would look in that dress, much to Lorist's surprise.

Lorist gave her face a light slap and woke her from her daydream. The girl, blushing, grabbed the design and said, "I'm gonna have one made right now…", and rushed out to find her handmaidens.

Lorist shouted to her as she went out, "Then, what about me?"

"Just stay in that room and draw me more of those! I'll have someone send some food up during dinner!" said the girl.

Chapter 18
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (4)

Had it not been for his swordsmanship class at the academy, Lorist would still be locked in the young mistress's room and drawing more designs for her. The mistress's two servants, after seeing a number of Lorist's drawings, changed their attitudes towards him immediately and were suddenly more attentive towards him, making sure he had everything he needed, much to Lorist's surprise.

While he was still there, he let the three women pick out 24 dresses and 8 party gowns out of the fifty or so designs he had drawn and spent an entire afternoon teaching them how to cut and sew. The women would then be working on the 32 sets of dresses for the time being. Lorist named the lineup the Autumn Goddess collection and planned to use that as the debut clothing lineup for the store.

Before he left, he also encouraged the women to use their imagination and make any amount of changes they wanted to the clothes as they saw fit when they were making them. Lorist explained that it would help prevent people accidentally wearing the same dress. For example, wouldn't it be extremely awkward to dress identically to another person in a ball?

"Every woman was a unique angelic being that had descended from the heavens and it is only fitting for them to each wear different, unique clothing to bring out fully their magnificence and beauty. Even if the base design for the clothes is similar, with small alterations here and there, each dress would still remain unique, understand?" Lorist proclaimed.

After Lorist had left, Miss Windsor noticed that her two handmaidens were stunned by the speech and a look of admiration could be seen in their eyes. Feeling a little elated and grumpy, the young mistress rebuked them, "What's wrong? Have your hearts been stolen by him?"

Suzy repeated the line to herself in a low voice, "Every woman was a unique angelic being that had descended from the heavens... What a great saying..."

Lina sighed and scratched her head in frustration, saying, "Young mistress, I know it's

wrong to think so, but Master Locke looked so gentle and handsome when he said that just now. I believe that he's the kind of person that charms you more the longer you get to know him... You have really found a great boyfriend."

The young mistress sighed lightly and said, "It's a shame most men out there are only all talk and pales so much in comparison to him. We should start working harder too. These clothes will determine the future of the Windsor house."

"Yes, young mistress. We'll give it our all," said the two women, nodding.

After two days, Lorist paid them another visit and was surprised at what he saw. *Have they turned into rabbits? Why are their eyes red and why do they look so pale?* Upon questioning them, he discovered that they had been pulling all-nighters and have only slept as little as eight hours all this time and often neglected their meals. Although they were worn out, they only managed to produce four sets of clothes over three days and nights of hard work.

With a palm to his face Lorist said, "Silly girl, can't you hire someone to help you out? At this rate, you wouldn't even finish the Autumn Goddess collection when spring next year comes! How are we supposed to start the business?''

"Aren't we supposed to keep the designs secret?" the young mistress argued with much fatigue in her voice.

"Weren't you planning to rent part of your mansion out? Why don't you make that a small workshop and hire some skilled seamstresses across the neighborhood to do the sewing after you guys finish cutting out the parts of the clothes. For the most part, you only have to monitor and guide them. What's the point of earning any money if you'll end up too sick to spend it?"

Nodding, the young mistress agreed, let out a big yawn, and went upstairs to get some rest. At that moment, the two servants only had one thought in their minds: Wow, Master Locke is looking manlier than ever!

Having given his instructions, Lorist monitored their progress for a few more days and was satisfied with the current production rate of the clothing workshop. He then started to plan how he would decorate the two shopfronts on Rotary Street.

After a period of brainstorming, Lorist had drawn up a rough plan for the decorations. His only concern was the cost was a little high at roughly 60 gold Fordes. He

subsequently broke into an argument with his girlfriend over the issue.

The young mistress believed that they shouldn't spend so much money on the decorations of the shop and that it only had to be clean and simple. "We're only selling clothes. There's no need to poke a hole in our wallets for useless decorations!" said the young mistress.

Lorist pressed on and said, "We can only raise the price of the clothes if we decorate the shop lavishly. We must show that the clothes at our store have been spared no expense and deserve every gold coin listed on the price tag! To do that, we must ensure that our store looks elegant and classy. Besides, the money spent on the decorations would be earned back easily after selling one or two sets of clothing."

Why doesn't she understand such a simple principle? Lorist was rather frustrated at her adamant refusal. After that, Lina secretly told him that the young mistress was seriously lacking in funds and only had about 10 gold coins left in their savings. She wasn't even sure how she would finance the clothing workshop as well as her household with the amount of savings she had left.

Suddenly coming to an understanding, Lorist merely nodded and left. After several hours, Lorist returned with a large bag and placed it on the table. Gently gazing at the young mistress, he said, "You could've just told me that you lacked the money. I'm your boyfriend for Sol's[1] sake, there's no need to bear the burden by yourself. We should face issues like this together. These here are my savings, 160 gold coins. It should be more than enough to pay off the expenses of the clothes shop for two to three months."

Staring at the bag with her large, beautiful eyes, the girl leapt into Lorist's embrace and broke into tears of joy, tightly hugging Lorist as she cried.

Lorist lightly pat her on the back a few times. He understood that recently, she has been facing huge psychological stress ever since getting the news of her family's conundrum, was refused help from almost everyone she sought out and even contemplated suicide. After he had saved her, she started to see Lorist as a beacon of hope for her family and started dating him in hopes that he would participate and contribute to her family's resurgence.

While she was rather confident in the quality of the few clothes that they had produced, she was still worried about how to run the business. The extra money spent on hiring other workers only served to increase her anxieties and prompted her to be

in a hurry to sell the clothes so that she will have enough money to keep the business going. Furthermore, she was hesitant to ask Lorist for help as she had dated him not out of true love but with the intention of using him to reclaim her family's dominion.

As her sobs intensified, she let out all the bottled feelings within. The two handmaidens could only watch as Lorist continued to calm her down. "Come on, stop crying. You'll start to look ugly when your eyes start swelling. What would I do with an ugly girlfriend?"

Breaking into a small chuckle, she slapped Lorist on the back and said, "Why you!", but continued to bury her face in Lorist's chest. Her crying slowly subsided and she fell asleep in the end.

From that day onwards, she asked Lorist to start calling her by her pet name, Wenna, as it was quite absurd for a boyfriend to have to refer to his girlfriend as 'young mistress' all the time. Lorist gladly did so as per her request.

Two months later, the newly renovated Windsor Apparels and Accessories started operation. However, within three days of its opening, it did not have even one customer. The reason was simple, the decorations and furnishings rivaled that of a palace's. Although the shopfront wasn't that big, it had four neatly-dressed Silver Swordsmen standing guard at the entrance. The goldcloud tiles on the doorstep only served to increase the store's imposingness and made most people subconsciously avoid the place.

Worried sick and not having any appetite, Wenna blamed Lorist for over-decorating the shop and causing the 32 sets of clothes in the Autumn Goddess collection to unsold. As she was about to break into another bout of tears, Lorist merely stretched lazily on his seat and said, "Calm down. It's just not time yet. We're not like other clothing shops. If we manage to sell even one set, we can last another month. We don't have to meet a daily quota like those other shops to even break even. The moment we get our first customer, our sales would instantly soar as well."

"Pfft, who would believe you..." grumbled Miss Wenna as she stared at the entrance with much anticipation.

On the fifth day, the one person came to check out the shop. It was the male owner from the jewel shop right opposite them. He has been quite curious about their clothing store ever since it opened, given that they even had four Silver Swordsmen

guarding the place.

Having resisted his urge to find out more for a few days, he finally gave in to his curiosity. Upon reaching the entrance, the guards pointed at the sign on the entrance that said that men were not allowed to go in alone without being accompanied by a woman. Another line of words were written in gold below the first statement: This establishment serves high class ladies and the accompanying men are expected to behave gentlemanly at all times.

The man could only return to his store, annoyed. His wife was curious about his bad mood and asked him what had happened. He told her about how he was refused entry at the store and his wife offered to accompany him to the store later along with their daughter.

In the end, he managed to enter the store with his wife and daughter, but he regretted his decision immediately, as the two women in his family had already been entranced by the mystical dresses on the mannequins as well as the beautiful, reflective crystals on them that sparkled under the subtle illumination of candlelight.

"Oh blessed be the heavens... What a gorgeous dress..." mused the man's wife.

"I really want to own this... It's like it came right out of my dreams... It has to become mine..." said the daughter with clouded eyes, unable to see anything else but the glory of the dresses on display.

Gingerly, the jewel shop owner took a peek at the price tag of the clothes and it made him shiver in fear. Since when have dresses cost a dozen of gold coins? And gold Fordes at that?

He looked back at his wife and noticed her standing by a mannequin wearing a black velvet dress that was accessorized by crystals with a glow that rivaled that of the stars in the sky, exuding a mysterious aura of majesty. The dress, priced at 188 gold Fordes, snapped the boss out of his bafflement and prompted him to pull his wife out of the store.

However, his wife's feet seemed to have taken root on the ground and didn't budge no matter what he did. Pointing at the price tag and desperately trying to snap her out of it, he pulled on her arm and said that they couldn't afford it, only to have his hand shaken off as his wife said, "I can afford it with my own personal savings."

At this moment, a voice that sounded like an angelic hymn rang out beside the jeweller's ear. "I'm sorry, respected customers, this gown, 'The Chant of the Night', can only be purchased by those with noble titles."

Elated, the man quickly dragged his wife away from that dress and for the first time in his life, he thanked the existence of the nobles who had helped saved him 188 gold Fordes, which would usually take him an entire year to save up.

But his happiness was short-lived as his wife and daughter ended up spending up to 60 gold Fordes on some other clothes in the store. The man did not understand why a piece of female casual wear would cost more than one gold coin in this store. In other common clothing stores, that kind of money could easily get them more than ten pieces of the same thing. But he understood from the fervid eyes of his wife that should he stop her from buying anything, he would be spending the whole night kneeling by the bed instead of sleeping in it.

Though, the visit to the store had not been a total disaster. Having made a purchase of more than 60 gold Fordes, the whole family was invited to the second floor for tea and pastries as the tailors made special adjustments to the clothes so that they would better fit their new owners. The man, sitting on a comfortable, luxurious sofa, was rather pleased with the service the store had provided.

Three days later, the jeweler brought his wife and daughter to attend a banquet organized by a merchant guild and noticed that they had become the center of attention of the banquet. Like a majestic empress and a gorgeous princess, donning their awe-inspiring night gowns, they attracted the attention of countless people and became the main focus of the partygoers. The jeweler suddenly felt that the money spent on the dresses wasn't such a bad investment after all.

From that day onwards, luxurious carriages visited the store one after another, sending countless ladies of all ages flooding into the store. With the boutique being overcrowded, Lorist had to politely refuse entry to the accompanying men and set up some tables outside the store so that they may have some tea there while they waited. It wasn't an uncommon sight to see noblemen having tea under the sun at Rotary Street in the following days.

At the end of the month, Miss Wenna stared with her mouth agape at the pile of gold coins on the table. "That's our profit for this month!?"

Lina said in a restless tone, "Yes, my mistress, it's already my seventh time answering that question. For the last time, all the 3083 gold Fordes on the table is our profit for this month!"

Jumping in joy and leaping into the arms of Lorist, who was gently smiling at them nearby, she gave him a kiss and said unceasingly, "Thank you... thank you Lorist..."

"Ouch, that hurts! Silly girl, you're biting me, not kissing! Wait, don't tell me this is your first time kissing someone? Let me show you the ropes then..."

The two of them started to make out without giving any heed to anyone else.

"Oh, how embarrassing..." said Lina, as she shielded her eyes and stared at the two lovebirds through the gap of her fingers.

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[1] As the top god of the Grindia Pantheon is Singwa, the solar god of light and war, characters often swear in his name. Sol is also latin for the sun.

Chapter 19
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (5)

With the hard-earned money in hand, the reinvigorated Wenna purchased the three-storey building that was right next to their boutique. Completely renovating the place and linking the new building with the other two shops, the area of the boutique effectively doubled. Heeding Lorist's suggestion, she also build a T-shaped stage and hired a few young maidens with decent figures to act as the models for their boutique.

One month ago, the ex-captain of the garrison of the Windsor house came over from the dominion, bringing back with him ten or so servants and guards who used to work in the Windsor Castle. The new rulers of the place had fired them and they had wandered in the dominion aimlessly until just recently, after hearing that Miss Windsor was willing to offer them jobs in Morante City.

Among them were a father-son duo who both happened to be cobblers that used to serve the Windsor house. Their arrival was a delightful surprise to Lorist and soon, Windsor Apparels and Accessories expanded their catalogue of items to include their own shoes, which naturally took Morante City by storm. While there were a number of shops that tried to replicate their products, most noble customers knew to seek out for the distinct logo of the Windsor brand, which depicted a small mermaid. Windsor, in the ancient language of fairies, referred to the mermaid. Even the Windsor house's insignia depicted a warrior mermaid with a three-pronged fork.

Right now, it was almost customary to wear dresses and gowns by the Windsor brand to attend parties hosted by the elites of Morante City. There was even one such occasion where the daughter of a merchant guild chairman cycled through 17 different dresses and seven different high-heeled shoes throughout the party, effectively turning her father's banquet into an advertising event for Windsor Apparels and Accessories.

Now that the business was running without a hitch, the young mistress assigned the task of managing the boutique to Suzy and the clothes workshop to Lina while she started to plan to reclaim her dominion.

Lina's father, Knight Somm, had already arrived at Morante City a month before,

bringing Lina's two younger brothers and her mother along. However, Somm's injuries were not fully recovered yet and he still had to rest and recuperate for a period of time.

Somm was a silent, well-built man. Lorist sometimes doubted whether he was actually Lina's biological father given their totally different personalities. *How does a solemn, loyal man like him have such a nosy and meddling daughter?* Lina did resemble her mother quite a bit though, but her mother was more gentle and amiable, whereas she had a sharp tongue and never hesitated to speak out on anyone.

The ex-garrison caption also brought some news from the old dominion. As the new rulers of the place were harsh and ruthless towards the dominion folk, the people there longed to be under the rule of the Windsors like before. Additionally, many of the old soldiers and guards that had lost their jobs had resorted to survive through banditry and were causing quite a lot of chaos in the area.

This wasn't an uncommon phenomenon on the Grindia Continent. Usually, when a new lord comes into power, he would introduce certain tax policies that greatly burdened the local folk to make up for the losses he has incurred throughout the conquering process as well as to make sure the people under his rule knew who's in charge. When the people in the dominion finally revolt one day, the new lord would take the opportunity to eliminate the ones who opposed his current rule and make an example out of them. In time, the new ruler would loosen his iron grip on the people so that they will eventually naturally cast away their loyalty to their previous lord and fully devote themselves to the current one.

Lorist believed that this was the perfect opportunity to sneak a few of their agents into the old dominion, a sentiment that Knight Somm also shared. With that, Miss Windsor ordered Somm to bring a group of ten or so people back to the dominion to form the resistance army after her 18th birthday and her coming-of-age ceremony, with their first priorities being setting up several hidden bases throughout the dominion, recruiting the soldiers and guards who used to work for the Windsor family as well as forming their spy network to monitor the situation of the dominion. After the initial phase, she would then start sending martial and material support to the resistance so that they may begin to disrupt the new rulers' affairs.

The coming-of-age ceremony was a tradition of the nobles in Grindia. It represented the entrusting of hopes and ambitions of the senior generation to the younger generation. For males, they would be bequeathed a ceremonial sword from a warrior in the family while females were crowned with a floral tiara. After some

congratulatory words, the whole family would party and enjoy themselves at a banquet.

But Wenna's ceremony was rather simple and had only a few attendees. Placing a floral tiara on his mistress's head and sprinkling some sacred water unto her, Knight Somm expressed his wish that she would live a fruitful life and one day find someone she can truly devote the rest of her life to so that she would live on happily as a virtuous wife and a proud mother in the future.

After the coming-of-age ceremony, the Windsor house ceremony of succession was carried out. One by one, the old folks of the Windsor family walked towards the seated, tiara wearing girl and paid their respects, passing their hopes and responsibilities onto her as the new head of the Windsor house and pledging to her their unwavering loyalty. Even the pregnant Madam Windsor and her son went forward and bowed in respect.

When everyone present had paid their respects, the new head of the Windsor house stood up and summoned Hurd, the ex-garrison captain, drew a sword and tapped it against both his shoulders as he knelt, and proclaimed, "During the times of the Windsors' fall from power, it was you, brave warrior, who held on to your duties and responsibilities to us and gave hope and protection to the people in the midst of chaos and despair. As an acknowledgement to your noble deed, I, the eleventh head of the Windsor house, Windsor Prinna, grant you the title of Knight Protector of the Windsor house."

Knight Somm took a few steps forward and shouted, "Knight Hurd, are you willing to become the last line of defense of the Mermaid Castle?"

"I am willing!"

"Are you willing to die fighting under the banner of the mermaid?"

"I am willing!"

"Are you willing to march into battle without a shred of hesitation upon hearing the call of the mermaid?"

"I am willing!"

"Are you willing to devote the rest of your life in service of the house until you take

your last breath?"

"I am willing!" shouted Knight Hurd, with each call louder than the previous as he trembled in fervor.

"Then I welcome your entry into the fellowship, my brother!" Knight Somm strided forward, lifted Knight Hurd from his kneeling position and gave him a big hug.

The onlookers broke into a thunderous round of applause.

Overlooking the ceremony as the main witness, Lorist recalled a similar scene from the memories of the body's original owner, where the young Lorist officiated one such knighting ceremony in the Norton household. Only, there were much more people back then and the atmosphere was even rowdier.

After the ceremony, Lorist and Wenna finalized their plans before Knight Somm and Knight Hurd began their journey back to the old dominion. Refusing the two knights' invitation for her to go back to the dominion with them to participate in the resistance, Wenna announced her plans to found the Windsor Trading Company that she would use to purchase weapons and equipment as well as hire Silver ranked mercenaries which the resistance will need.

Additionally, she also reminded Knight Hurd to train diligently in the high-ranked battleforce technique that she had acquired for him as a gift for his knighting ceremony at a high price before working on anything else. With his current Three Star Iron, wood attribute battleforce, it wouldn't take him more than half a year to break through to the Silver rank. But Knight Hurd said that he could not sit around training when his comrades are busy working away. In the end, Wenna gave him the task of organizing the reception of the equipment and manpower that she would later provide.

Lorist also warned Knight Somm that their current objective was not to form a large military force to go against the dominion lords but rather to build a spy network and to set up several strongholds in the dominion. He instructed that they were to avoid all conflict with the forces of the current dominion lords and focus on survival and information gathering for the time being.

Deep in the night, Lorist found it hard to fall asleep. He noticed that he had an incorrect impression on the noble families of this world after witnessing the knighting

ceremony just hours before. He found it hard to reconcile the noble, just and loyal qualities the knights of the family had displayed with the notion that nobles were prideful, blood-sucking and self-serving monsters that took advantage of their subjects as they were often depicted in the comics and novels he had read in his past life. What he witnessed today made him cast away that stereotype and acknowledge that there were in fact honorable. righteous nobles who fought for a just cause.

The door to Lorist's room slowly opened and a girl wearing a floral tiara clad in white silk pajamas slipped in. Taking a look at the empty bed, she frowned and said to herself lightly, "Where has that fellow gone at this time of the night?"

Lorist let out a snicker from the balcony and greatly startled the young girl. She turned around immediately and said angrily, "What are you up to this late into the night? Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

Without a word, Lorist pointed a finger towards himself, to the room, then to the girl, posing her a silent question of what *she* was doing in his room at this time of the night.

Swift as a breeze, the girl leapt into Lorist's embraced and wrapped her hands behind his neck, saying in a whisper, "I was too overwhelmed by happiness to be able to sleep tonight. Lorist, thank you. Had it not been for your help, I wouldn't be standing here today. Not only did you give me hope, you also gave me a future..."

Closing her eyes, she proceeded to give Lorist a kiss, to which Lorist responded passionately. As they continued, Lorist's rationality slowly gave way to his instincts.

Pushing Lorist away, the girl said in a shy tone, "I want to... I want to dance for you."

Under the illumination of the moonlight, the barefoot girl's feet started moving about on the dark-red, wooden floor. Her pure white pajamas fluttered about in the calm of the night, seemingly emanating a soothing fragrance, as her body moved like the moon fairies of legend, offering a dance to the Silvermoon Mother Goddess.

When she finally stopped her dance and unmovingly basked in the moonlight, she seemed like a precious statue of unparalleled beauty.

Her face reddened again as Lorist gave her two thumbs ups. She proceeded to untie the knot of her pajamas and let it fall to the ground, revealing every inch of her bare, smooth skin in front of Lorist as her breathing intensified.

"Lo-Locke, do you think I'm pretty?", she asked in a soft and stuttery voice. It was at that moment when Lorist finally lost every shred of self-control that remained in him.....

.....

During that fleeting, dreamy, moonlit night...

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Hehe, it really does sound like an old-fashioned love story...

Chapter 20
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (6)

Lorist used to think that relationship of his would last forever and remain blissful and passionate for a long time to come. At that time, he happily moved out of the student dorms in the academy to live with his sweetheart, Wenna.

As he was not favored by many of the Silver ranked instructors of the academy for being appointed a swordsmanship instructor when here was merely at the Iron rank, he had been staying in the student dorms rather than the instructor dorms to avoid any unnecessary conflict.

When did their relationship start to change? Was it because of his stunted battleforce training? Or was it from that one time when he called her a show-off when she wanted him to design two exclusive night gowns for her to wear to a party? Since then, she had moved to a luxuriously furnished residence located behind the boutique which she used as the headquarters of Windsor Trading Company. From that day onward, she would continue to live and host many parties there, causing it to become a rather famed gathering place for the rich and powerful of Morante City.

On the day before she moved, she lied lazily in his embrace and expressed the expectations that she had for him. She hoped that Lorist would quickly break through to the Silver rank and become a proper knight of the Windsor house so that he could be sent to support the resistance back in the old dominion.

Nowadays the resistance had already taken firm root in the dominion and it was causing the new lords tons of trouble with the costs of fixing the damage highly exceeding the amount of tax and revenue collected. Having no choice but to further squeeze the common folk for more funds, rebel groups formed by the oppressed mushroomed and further exacerbated the already dire situation.

A report from Knight Somm had stated that the resistance had decided to take direct action against the dominion lords and were preparing to attack the households of these lords in an attempt to deal some lasting damage on the rulers' hold on the dominion.

Miss Wenna had hoped that Lorist would break through to the Silver rank soon and aid in the reclamation of the Windsor dominion as a Windsor knight so that he could more firmly establish his position as the benefactor of the family and she would not have to bear the embarrassment of being married to a petty Iron Swordsman. Following that, she can let Lorist manage the affairs of the dominion in place of her brother who had yet to inherit the family head title while she would be in charge of the boutique and the trading company to further increase the income of the Windsor house. She believed that the Windsor house would be more prosperous than ever.

Lorist really wanted to promise the beauty in his arms that he would do what she requested. But deep inside his heart, his pride and stubbornness made him refrain from it.. An apparition of a strong nobleman holding a two handed greatsword seemed to have materialized in his mind and declared proudly that Lorist would not pledge allegiance towards anyone other than the Krissen Emperor and the Norton house.

The stubborn insistence and noble pride carved deep into his soul was a vestige of the body's original owner. Lorist understood that to become a Windsor knight was to shoulder the burden of defending the Windsor house for the rest of his life and to submit to the insignia of the mermaid.

Seeing her lover's hesitant expression, she gently stroked his face and softly said, "Locke, won't you do this for the sake of both of us? When your battleforce finally breaks through to the Silver rank, nobody can stop us from being together..."

That's right, there's still the issue with my battleforce, thought Lorist to himself cynically. He couldn't bear to tell his lover that he had been training in the Aquametal Technique which he inherited from his past life up to the peak of the Bright Stage. This was something that he would never tell anyone, including this girl that he treasured so much. Possibly as a side effect of training in it, his hexagram circulation path was no longer able to hold a shred of battleforce in it and he would possibly never be able to break through the Iron rank in the future.

He could tell Wenna that he was a dual Gold ranked instructor in the academy, or that he could easily defeat all the Silver ranked instructors and easily complete missions even peak Silver ranked instructors couldn't accomplish, but would it be of any use? She did not understand the implications of any of those feats and only knew of the traditions and customs of the nobles. Only when one was a Silver Swordsman could one be entrusted with the hopes and responsibility of fighting for the family's glory.

With the exception of certain special cases, most noble families would not let descendants who weren't able to awaken their battleforce or reach a minimum level of power in their battleforce training inherit the title of the family head. Wenna thought that Lorist was one who distinguished himself not by his battleforce training but rather his wits and intellect. That's why she would rather Lorist not have awakened his battleforce at all so that he doesn't have to wear that ugly, black Iron ranked badge all over the place. Whenever Lorist was not at the academy or the mercenary guild, she would insist that he not wear his battleforce badge so that she would be spared the embarrassment.

Hoping that she would understand him, Lorist had tried to convince her to ignore such things about face and public appearance and told her that it would be alright as long as they had each other to no avail. From her viewpoint, the reputation of the family was paramount and nothing should be allowed to undermine it. She could not endure having her family's reputation tarnished even one bit. Wenna wanted to be able to show herself in front of her peers with Lorist without him being ridiculed for his rank of an Iron Swordsman.

A similar thing also happened two years prior, after Madam Windsor gave birth to the child whose father was unknown. Immediately after the delivery, Wenna sent for someone to give to child away to a local farmer in an attempt to cover up the embarrassing affair. Having not even looked at her newborn child even once, Madam Windsor eventually became depressed and was driven to the brink of her sanity. It was not until when Lorist arranged for a meeting between the mother and child out of pity that Madam Windsor's state of mind returned to normal.

Lightly shaking his head, Lorist told Wenna that he would be willing to do anything for her. He even considered going to the dominion to provide support to Knight Somm and Knight Hurd in the resistance against the dominion lords. But with him having trained in his family's hereditary battleforce technique, he was unable to use any other technique to break through to the Silver rank.

Also, he also mentioned that he could not accept to serve as a knight under the Windsor house as he still had to heed the summons from his family should a time like that arise even though he was an exile. Though, that was more of an excuse for Lorist. Being the dimensional traveler he was, he naturally treasured unrestricted freedom and couldn't afford to accept binding oaths of service like that of a knight's. Just like Charade once said, it was Lorist's dream to simply spend the rest of his life blissfully in Morante City after settling down there with Wenna.

Having heard Lorist's reply, the girl stood up without a word, dressed herself and headed for the door. Before leaving, she said, "Lorist, you know very well that you don't actually love me. You're just like other men who talk about how much they cherish me but in fact, you only care about yourself..."

Laying on the bed, stunned, Lorist questioned himself whether he really felt true love for Wenna. *Of course I do, you're the only one I have ever loved in my current and past life.* Having been forced into marriage by his father in his previous life, he didn't truly feel any shred of true longing for his wife. While he did treasure the son he had with her, they merely spent their days in tepidity. It was not until he had crossed over that he discovered that the love and romance he had so often read about in novels were real after all, having experienced the burning passion and willingness to devote himself to Wenna. Feeling the intense connection of the heart, the heart-shaking whisper of his lover as well as her mesmerizing gaze, he came to understand that to love someone was to hold the other in the most important place in one's heart and only have eyes for one's other half.

Since when has his relationship become single-sided with only him giving it his all for both of their futures? Has his initial goals and determination changed as a result of that? Wasn't love about mutual tolerance and acceptance? Was Lorist the selfish one for having his own reservations about devoting himself to the Windsor house? Or was it Wenna who had changed over the course of time? *Sigh, I won't get an answer no matter how much I think about this. It's best to wait for us both to calm down before we talk it out with each other.*

What Lorist didn't expect was ever since that night, Lorist wasn't able to meet Wenna in person anymore; even the collection of the designs for the dresses was handled by Suzy most of the time. Whenever he went to the head office of the trading company, he was given the cold shoulder by Wenna who often cited her occupation with her work as an excuse. Initially, Lorist thought that Wenna was only throwing a childish tantrum, until he saw her together with a middle-aged nobleman in the garden of the trading company, happily chatting and flirting away.

It was also on that night when she formally asked Lorist to break up with her. The pain and agony he had felt following the breakup had tore through his heart, greatly imprinting the suffering that could not be put into words into the depths of his soul.

The only thing that was on Lorist's mind at that time was the cold, smiling expression on her pale white face as she hid behind that nobleman. The noble gentleman spread

his arms to shield her and asked warily, "Mister, what's going on?"

Looking at the girl who hid behind him and turning back to Lorist, the man's expression turned grim as he said, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Without a word, Lorist only pointed a finger towards Wenna.

Her expression fluctuated briefly before she stopped hiding behind that man, and spoke. "Locke, I'm so disappointed in you. I know you have your own goals and you have never intended to sacrifice them for my sake. While you have indeed been a major help for me and my family, after much consideration, I still think that we're not suited for each other. For the future of the Windsor house, I have no choice but to part with you. I know you're a good person and hope we can still remain friends."

Was this how it felt like to be betrayed? thought Lorist with his heart already in shambles.

Never would he expect to be friendzoned in his first romantic relationship in another world. That suffocating feeling made him want to sprawl on the ground to recover his breath. But, his pride prevented him from doing so and he turned around and left, staggering.

All that happened after that was a blur. He did not even know how he made it back to the house. He only remembered seeing Lina's shocked expression after witnessing his pathetic, messed up state.

He woke up drowsily on bed the day after, following which Lina informed him that he had a visitor. It was that nobleman who was together with Wenna yesterday.

He spoke in a gentle and calm tone and informed Lorist that he had heard all about his situation. While he expressed his sympathy for Lorist's plight, he said that he would not give up on Wenna as he truly loved her and deeply apologized. Now that he had already broken up with Wenna, Lorist made no to objection to the man's courting of Wenna but neither did he offer them his blessings. The man also mentioned that it was quite unappropriate for Lorist to continue living at Wenna's house and asked if he could do anything to reimburse Lorist for having to ask him to move away.

Lorist took note of the gold badge that depicted a fiery bird which signified the man's prowess as a Gold ranked combatant with a fire attribute battleforce. He did not expect that polite, gentlemanly man to be an expert, given his demeanor.

Shaking his head and refusing the man's offer, Lorist thanked him and also mentioned that he would move away even if nobody told him to. The nobleman left after he exchanged another round of pleasantries with Lorist.

Casually packing away some clothes, he left the place that he lived in for the past three years for good. In there was countless memories of her smile, the oaths they shared, the laughter and happiness they experienced, the arguments they had as well as her cold, icy betrayal.

He went back to the Red Grace Inn and got a room there before asking his good friend Els to get a background check on that middle-aged nobleman. Els brought him the report rather quickly. That man was called Lorf Fustat, a 38-year-old One Star Gold ranked expert who was a marquis of the Jigda Kingdom that was greatly valued by the royal family. He came from a long line of distinguished military commanders with his father being the captain of the kingdom's royal guard as well as the cousin brother of the Jigda king.

Having been sent to Morante City on a mission to exchange the Jigda Kingdom's gold and silver reserves for the currency of the Forde Trade Union, Marquis Lorf got to know the mistress of the Windsor house on a shopping trip with his wife. Being of the same kingdom, they had a lot of common and got along pretty well. He had already been fervently courting Wenna for half a year following the completion of his mission.

"Does his current wife not know about it?" asked Lorist.

"Of course she does," said Els, "She also seems rather supportive of it too. Apparently she is also a great friend of Miss Wenna who can share all their secrets together."

Good Sol, that woman really has some issues.

Shaking his head, Els said, "Forget it, brother. I've witnessed tons of stuff like that. When the man's feelings change, the woman suffers, but there is still a chance for them to get back together. But when a woman's heart is swayed, there is almost no way for their relationship to ever work out again. Additionally, how would you be able to rival someone of the likes of him? From his family background to his wealth and strength, he beats you in almost every aspect. Having many powerful contacts and being a One Star Gold expert at the age of 38, it's almost a given that his future would be bright. It's no wonder your lover had her heart stolen by him.

"Let me tell you something you might not want to hear. That man is not like your average lustful greedy young noble that would ambush or challenge you to a duel after finding out that you were the young mistress's ex. To him, you're just a small-fry who's not even worth his attention. Even if you were to challenge him, he would only cream you without breaking a sweat given the difference in battleforce strength," warned Els solemnly.

Lorist only kept quiet at Els's warning. Three days later, he joined the academy's expedition to the Relic Islands in hopes that half a year later, things over here might change. Though, in the end it still remained the same.

Chapter 21
A Fleeting Moonlit Dream (7)

With the candlelight put out, the silvery moonlight creeped onto the surface of the dusty table.

Sitting by the table quietly under its illumination, Lorist thought that the moon was really bright tonight.

Sounds of a horse cart could be heard approaching from a distance. Quickly, the sound stopped nearby and a high-pitched neigh of the horse followed by the sound of an opening door rang out. Lorist listened to the familiar sound of a set of footsteps thumping up the building at stopping outside the door.

The door slammed open and candlelight filled the room, dispelling the subtle, mystical illusion of peace created by the moonlight.

Miss Windsor stood by the door wearing a sleeveless white dress. *This must be one of the dresses I've designed, but with a little more golden thread embroidery than I had drawn.* The pure white dress somehow looked seductive and tempting when she wore it. Probably due to her rushing back from a party somewhere, she appeared to be breathing heavily.

Both of them understood that if they missed each other today, they would probably never be able to meet again.

With a calm voice, Lorist said, "Could you blow the candle out? I think I prefer the soft glow of the silver moon tonight."

Blowing the candle out and placing it in a corner, the young mistress of the Windsor house silently walked into the moon's gentle embrace and stopped still in her tracks, silent like a quiet moonlit night.

Neither of them made a sound. Lorist felt a thousand emotions as he looked at the girl before him who used to be the most important person in the world to him that had left him for another man. When he initially heard about the affair, he rushed to her

side with a frantic heart. But now, while it still pained him to remember their past, he no longer felt any desire to be with her.

"Should I address you as Lady Marchioness?", said Lorist, disrupting the silence in the room.

"You already know?" said the girl as she raised her head.

"When I was at the Relic Islands three months ago, I met a group of mercenaries from the Jigda Kingdom who said that the marquis of the Lorf house was going to host a banquet by the end of the year at the capital to celebrate the marriage between him and his second wife. They were on the islands on behalf of the Lorfs to obtain some precious materials for the banquet. During their free time, when they were guessing the identity of the second wife, I already knew it was you."

Breaking into a light smile, Lorist said, "You did pretty well to keep the news hidden. I believe that no one else in the city knows that you've accepted the marquis's proposal three months ago, including even your handmaidens. Lina even told me to not break up with you just now, hehe..."

"I don't have a choice, Locke. I know you hate me for leaving you for power. It's what I had to do for my family," said the girl as she sat down on the floor, tears flowing down her face. "Ever since you left, he used his family's influence to force the other four lords to return the dominion to the Windsor house. But the dominion was still under relentless attack from the lords and greatly wounding Knight Hurd in the process as well as throwing Knight Somm into disarray. They sent their forces masquerading as bandits and burnt our farmlands as well as sold the people they captured to the slave traders. There's no way the dominion can flourish with all this going on.

"It was at this time when he offered me a suggestion. If I were to agree to marry him, he will mobilize the family troops to help the Windsor house out on behalf of familial ties. I have agreed to his proposal and the moment we complete the ceremony back in the Jigda capital, the Lorf family will declare war against the other four dominion lords. At that time, his armies would surround the dominions of the other four lords and wipe out the four family's influence, giving the Windsor dominion time to recuperate and rebuild."

The girl continued to chatter rapidly, seemingly in a hurry to finish what she had to say, "Only Suzy knew about my agreement to marry him, everyone else, even Lina, was

kept in the dark so that the four dominion lords won't know about the marriage alliance that is to be formed. He told me that it would only succeed if the marriage came as a surprise, and that once the marriage is announced, the Jigda nobles wouldn't have time to react to the sudden attack. Once the four dominion lords have been defeated, we will get the official sanction from the royal family to rule over the dominions so that no other nobles can have a say in it. With the Lorf family as a backer, tragedies like the one that happened to my father would no longer occur to the Windsor house."

Lorist struggled to hide his amazement at the delicate planning a setting up of the whole plan. His initial plan was to use the rebels to slowly bleed out the forces of the other four dominion lords and eventually overwhelm them with the full force of the resistance army when the time was right and send a representative from the Windsor house to hold peace negotiations with the other lords. After that, the Windsor house only had to maintain an elite military force to defend themselves from other invasions or attacks as their dominion spent time redeveloping.

But an intervention from the marquis had disrupted the whole operation and forced the four dominion lords to return the ruling rights to the Windsors and effectively got them to owe the Lorf house a favor. Following that, the Windsor house would then add the rebel soldiers to their military ranks to bolster the dominion's defense. The four other families of the previous dominion lords would naturally be pissed at the affair and the damage done to their forces and would naturally cause as much trouble as they can to mess things up.

The situation at the dominion suddenly underwent a huge change: the resistance army had become the official dominion's garrison force while the forces of the previous lords had become the rebel forces. Unable to cope to the sudden change, the Windsor family could only endure the situation. Suddenly, the marquis of the Lorf family would then descend like a messiah and propose a marriage alliance to the Windsor mistress and promise to mobilize their armies to defeat the enemies of the Windsor house and wipe the four families out, following which they will return the lordless dominions to the royal family and divide the remaining land between the Lorf and Windsor houses, gaining the Lorf house both a righteous name as well as making a loyal ally out of the Windsor family.

Was he going to kill five or even six birds with one stone? Lorist only let out a long sigh in his heart. As an outsider, he felt that the Lorf family may have been plotting this ever since the WIndsor house started the operations of the resistance. They had

unnoticingly went with the flow and slipped themselves into the heat of the action and effectively took over the entire operation. It was clearly apparent that the Lorf family had the most to gain out of the whole affair. There was much more to the character of the marquis of the Lorf family than meets the eye.

Seeing the girl who earnestly thought that the intervention of the Lorf family was beneficial to the Windsors, Lorist suddenly felt disillusioned. Was this truly the girl that he had loved so much in the past? Was this the angel he held so dearly deep in his heart? Vain and clueless, she was still unaware that she had been used as a pawn in someone else's plan. *Poor young mistress, what are you good for other than your beauty?*

Don't act like you're sacrificing your own happiness to enter this marriage alliance with the Lorf family. Isn't this what you wanted in the first place? As the marchioness, you will be hanging around the likes of the royal family day in and out and stand high above so many others in a position worthy of much admiration and envy. Wasn't this the life you had always desired? Oh naive little young mistress... this would not solidify your family's power at all, nor will the parties you attend glorify your family's reputation either. Fully relying on the Lorf family is akin to being unknowingly used by someone else and finding nothing wrong with it. There is no better ally than yourself. When will you understand that simple fact, young mistress?

Sigh, this has nothing to do with me anyway, thought Lorist as he shook his head lazily. He suddenly thought that the whole thing about breaking up with her was rather laughable. Now that he had finally let go, he felt much relief and catharsis, as if he had managed to set aside a great burden.

"What's wrong, Locke?" asked the girl curiously after seeing Lorist shake his head.

"It's nothing, I'm just feeling a little nauseous after a spending a month or two on sea. I'm still not too used to being on land yet," said Lorist, excusing himself. "Oh, is that man good to you?"

"Yes, he is," said the girl, nodding. "I feel like I'm being lovingly caressed by him in his warm embrace the whole time. He settles everything perfectly for me, unlike you, who always want me to figure out every little thing by myself. Seriously speaking, Locke, being with you is really tiring. I'm always doing so much work while you look like you have so much time on your hands. You always solve any problem that's thrown to you like it's no big deal. I was so envious of you for that."

"Hehe, that's because you're just silly," joked Lorist as he let out a soft laughter. "I'm really curious why his wife supports his proposal to you."

"Oh, you're talking about sister Fina? Having had a miscarriage from horse-riding sometime in the past, she can no longer bear any children. And she doesn't like to attend parties to entertain the other nobles. That's why she hopes that I can attend the parties in her stead and one day bear the descendants of the Lorf family," said the girl with a blushing face.

Ah, I see. The first wife is planning to use you as a tool for child-making and entertaining guests. After delivering your first child, I bet she will offer to help you raise the child since you're so busy entertaining the other nobles at parties and you will even thank her for it until one day when your children don't even want to acknowledge you as their mother, thought Lorist cynically.

"Why have you stopped the businesses in Morante City and sold off the boutique and your mansion?" asked Lorist.

"The devastation done to the dominion is too great and according to Knight Somm, there isn't one building there that isn't damaged in some way. To rebuild the economy of the dominion would cost mountains of gold, approximately 10000 gold coins. Additionally, I will need to prepare some kind of dowry for the marriage so I am currently rather short on cash. That's why that man encouraged me to sell all of it and begin my boutique anew in the capital. He said that the capital was his turf and that he would take care of everything for me," she said with a satisfied expression.

Lorist almost couldn't resist applauding in admiration at the marquis's plan. Not only is he going to return to the kingdom with a beauty in his arms, he has also acquired the gold-laying hen that she had for himself. Once the business gets set up in the capital, the young lady would effectively be demoted from being the business owner to the position of a highly-paid worker, after which all the profits of the boutique would go straight into the marquis's pockets. Lorist only hoped that the marquis wouldn't eat everything up and at least leave something for the young mistress.

"So, why have you come today? Surely not to meet me for one last time? I'm going to move my stuff away tomorrow since you're already going to sell the place. There's nothing else here anymore but our memories together." Lorist realized that he was being too spiteful to the girl. Even if he told her what he thought, she probably wouldn't listen anyway and think that he was just being jealous and trying to cause

discord between her and the marquis. *Forget it, people have their own fates. My encounter with her was merely like two shooting stars passing by each other, leaving behind nothing but a distinct trail of memories together.*

"So what if I wanted to meet you one last time? I *have* been in love with you for over four years after all. While you have made me disappointed, I will never forget you. You're always like this, unwavering and merciless once you've made your decision. Don't you still feel anything for me? Aren't you going to say anything to stop me from leaving? Ever since the breakup, it's like you lost all interest in me all of a sudden. I know you hate me and cannot forgive me because this was all my own doing. But I still wanted to see you just in case we would never meet again..." said the girl as she raised her voice, angered at what Lorist had just said.

If there's anything she's good at, it's her unrelenting, open expression of how she felt.

"Sigh..." Standing up, Lorist continued, "Wouldn't it have been better to only remember our good times? There really isn't a point to meet up just to end up arguing..."

"There is. I want to see you, to hug you and to kiss you before I leave. I know I have wronged you and I appreciate all you have done for my family without asking for much in return. I know giving you money would just be an insult to you, so I got you a few battleforce manuals instead. I hope they will be able to help you break through," said the girl as she opened the table's drawer and took out five high-ranked battleforce manuals. She then turned back and hugged Lorist, burying her head in his chest.

"Can you hug and kiss me one last time?" asked the girl with her eyes closed.

Lorist only smiled bitterly. That girl didn't know that those manuals wouldn't be of help to him at all. Money would be much more useful for him in this case.

"Don't forget that you're the wife of the marquis now," Lorist reminded her.

"The marriage is not officiated yet, so I'm still a free person," she replied.

Seriously? What's wrong with her...

"No way, I don't want to make a habit out of kissing other people's lovers," said Lorist firmly.

"Locke, come on... Let me spend the night with you, okay? For old times' sake..." said

the girl as she tugged tightly on Lorist's waist, refusing to let go...

"Do you think that Marquis who's standing right outside the building can wait all night? I wouldn't mind leaving one last memory with you tonight, but he seems to be rather impatient," said Lorist as he looked at the horse cart parked at the entrance of the building and the Lord Marquis was circling the horse cart as he looked towards the third floor window from time to time instead of coming into the reception hall to wait for Wenna.

"Pffft!" the girl instantly broke into laughter and swiftly stole a kiss from Lorist's lips. Loosening her arms around him, she said, "Alright, we've met, hugged and even kissed. I'm already satisfied. Farewell, Locke."

Her rapid footsteps rang out as she went down the stairs, and shortly after that, the sound of the horse cart leaving slowly faded away.

Sitting back on the chair, Lorist waited for a good while before saying, "Els, how much longer do you plan on hiding there?"

Chapter 22
Locke and Els (1)

The curtains in the corner parted as a tall and slender silhouette slipped soundlessly out from the gap between the window and the bookshelf.

"Tsktsktsk, even the seduction of the alluring marchioness couldn't budge you. You definitely have a resolve of steel. It's not like there's a rule that says that you can't keep fooling around in bed even after a breakup... You're such a disappointment, and I thought I would get to enjoy a nice show later tonight... Sigh..."

The silhouette shook his head as if he thought that Lorist just lost a once in a lifetime chance, walked a few steps forward before stopping and slapping his forehead as he said, "Wait, you couldn't have known that I was there. Were you just bluffing? Maybe you wouldn't have discovered me if I had stayed put..."

"Hehe," laughed Lorist lightly. Before, Lorist indeed wouldn't have noticed his presence. But ever since he broke into the Dark stage, his senses have become so sharpened that he could easily detect the presence of any living being that was even as small as a rat, not to say much about a human, within a radius of one or two meters. The shadow who had stood still and quieted his breaths was totally unaware that his beating heart and the circulation of his blood was like a bright light shining in the dark night that easily caught Lorist's attention.

"I noticed you slipping inside the moment the young mistress put the candle away and sat down on the floor. You later sneaked around in the shadows before hiding behind the curtains. Was I right, Els?" Lorist described each and every action the shadow took when he slipped into the room.

"Huh? That can't be... Weren't you looking at your little lover just now? I even tried to avoid your line of sight," said the shadow as he went towards the table and looked at the five high-ranked battleforce manuals that were placed there, and continued, "Not bad, these battleforce manuals are pretty rare on the market and it doesn't look like they were copied recently too.The beast skin parchment used in the book looks at least a hundred years old. That ex-lover of yours really tried hard for your sake... She must have spent as much as three to four thousand gold to purchase these original copies

from certain noble families."

That shadow in the room was Lorist's good friend, Brennan Evanport, or as most of his friends called him, Els. He was the nephew of the owner of the Red Grace Inn, Brennan Charlando. Having the prowess of a Two Star Silver combatant, he was also a syndicate boss who managed the affairs of the three districts around the area.

The circumstances in which Lorist got to know Els was rather comical. At that time, when Lorist was only 19, he frequently accepted missions from the mercenary guild to earn some extra cash. On one of the gathering missions he took with Charade, the two of them were fortunate enough to encounter a Black-horned Antelope, which was a low-ranked magical beast living in the mountains whose fur and horn fetched a rather high price. They spent several days of effort on tracking and hunting down that beast and brought their catch back to a nearby city with much haste.

Needing to take care of something back at the academy, Charade had Lorist go back to the house they rented to start tidying it up and wait for his return before they sell the catch away. The house they rented wasn't really large and they only used it to store the tools that they might need so that they don't have to go back to the academy that often and rest up whenever they needed to.

Lorist entered the house, threw the stuff in a corner and went straight into the washroom for a bath without remembering to lock up the entrance of the house. Having spent days out in the wilderness, he couldn't resist jumping into the water right away. As he was washing away happily, he heard the door open and close. Thinking that it was Charade, he called out to him a few times but nobody answered. Feeling suspicious, he went out to take a look.

The moment he emerged from the bathroom, he saw a young brunette woman who was breathing ragged breaths. Upon seeing Lorist, the woman almost let out a large scream before she had her mouth muffled up by Lorist as she stared at Lorist's privates.

Embarrassed and awkward, Lorist moved a few chairs in front of him to shield his bottom and put on his clothes swiftly. Before he even finished buttoning up, the woman crawled over to Lorist, hugged both of his legs and begged in a low voice, "Mister, please help me out... Save me, please?"

Having just come out of the bath and wearing nothing but a pair of undergarments

covering his groin, given that the woman's face was so close to his wang, it would only take the slightest rub to trigger the male physiological reaction as Lorist was at the prime of his youth. Understanding his predicament, he hastily tried to get the woman to stand up and asked her what was going on.

The woman refused to stand up and continued to sob as she told Lorist what had happened, all while having her arms wrapped around Lorist's legs. According to her, right after she got married to her husband, she caught the attention of a syndicate boss who lusted after her body. She said the boss set her husband up so that he would incur a huge gambling debt which could only be paid off by selling him to the slavers and sending her to work at the brothel. Having no other place to hide, she came into a random house out of desperation to evade her pursuers.

That young woman, clearly noticing the change that was happening at Lorist's lower body, said that she would do anything for Lorist if he would help her out and even licked her tongue flirtatiously.

It was at this moment when someone knocked on the door outside. Lorist helped the woman up, guided her to somewhere she could hide, and assured her that nobody would be able to take her away with him protecting her. Then, he took his sword out and went outside.

This was Lorist's first meeting with Els. Baring his upper body and showing his lean, slender stature, Els had a shirt slung over one shoulder and a chicken drumstick in his hand. He stood there biting away as a distinct smell of alcohol emanated from his mouth; it was as if he had rushed out on short notice as he was feasting away. By his side were a few dejected men who were being scolded harshly by him.

Seeing Lorist come out, Els straight up demanded for Lorist to hand the young woman over. "Don't play the fool on me. I swear I saw her go into your house just now. If you're interested in her body, I don't mind renting her to you for an afternoon for only one large silver. Come on, I know you don't want any trouble too."

Lorist instantly retorted, "Stinking thug, don't think that I'm like the likes of you, always lusting after all women like you've never had one before. Get out of my sight or face the consequences." Within but a few exchanges, the two screamed at each other and started to break into a fight. Much to Lorist's surprise, Els was a rather upright syndicate boss who didn't order all his henchmen to surround him at once but rather just picked one of them who was at the Iron battleforce rank to take care of him. Maybe

he had seen Lorist's battleforce badge and didn't want to be accused of bullying Lorist.

Naturally, Iron ranks were far from enough to take care of Lorist, and all of Els henchmen lost one after another. Not willing to believe the scene transpiring in front of him, Els himself went up against Lorist, thinking that Lorist would surrender right away given his One Star Silver battleforce rank. He then subsequently lost to Lorist.

Thinking that he probably lost due to bad luck or silly carelessness, he tried time and again and ended up losing even on the fifth time. In the end, he made the excuse that his footing was unstable due to being under the influence of alcohol. Lorist merely laughed at his relentlessness and his reluctance to accept his loss even though Els himself was the one who begged Lorist to stop thrashing him. Lightly kicking Els a few times, Lorist merely asked that he get out of his sight, but Els still refused to leave and even said that his reinforcements are coming while holding Lorist's legs tightly. He said that if Lorist could defeat his reinforcements, he would leave that woman alone and no longer cause her any trouble.

Hearing that, Lorist could only stay there, given that his legs were being tugged by Els. He couldn't bear to end Els's life with one sword either. Since he wasn't willing to let go, Lorist got back at him by stepping on him as he willed. Els didn't mind it either and even chatted with some passers-by once in a while under Lorist's heel.

Lorist felt that he was really unfortunate to have met someone like this and was embarrassed to have been seen with him by the people around them. However, he noticed that the old couple living nearby did not fear that syndicate boss at all and even teased him for being stepped on by someone else. Els merely made the excuse that he drank too much and wasn't in his best shape today.

It was around this time when his uncle, Charlando, came over. Seeing Els being stepped on by Lorist, he was filled with rage and pulled his sword out without a single word. Lorist kicked Els aside and drew his own sword to face that One Star Gold combatant.

Lorist, initially thinking that Els's reinforcement would only be Silver ranks at best, was rather unlucky to be facing a Gold rank expert. At that time, Lorist hasn't reached the peak of the Iron rank yet and only trained in his family's Blazing Battleforce and not the Aquametal Technique. It did not take Charlando more than eight moves to knock Lorist's sword away and utterly defeat him.

Els stood up with a face full of bruises and gave Lorist's stomach two forceful punches. "Aha, just now you were pummeling me so gleefully. Now it's your turn!"

Taking the blows with much unwillingness, Lorist broke into a barrage of insults towards Els for attempting to force a poor woman into prostitution. Els returned the insults and said that Lorist didn't know what was good for him and bullied people with his strength. Charlando, hearing the contents of the insults, felt that something was wrong, and forced those two to stop and explain the situation to him. After both of them told Charlando their version of events, they looked at each other with much bafflement as the things they had just described were totally different.

Els said with much agitation, "What do you mean I'm blinded by lust and set her husband up and made him incur a gambling debt? That woman's husband was a sailor and is only home once in three to four months! She is also pretty disloyal to her husband and frequently spends nights with many other men. Additionally, she is also a gambling addict! Just last night, she attempted to cheat some money from my casino and was found out by my subordinate! She had already owed three gold coins by that time and wasn't able to repay it. Seeing that she still looked young enough, I was sent her to the brothel to earn some money to pay the debt back. Who knew that this afternoon, she stole the money bag of one of the visitors to the brothel and made a run for it! That was why I was chasing her! With all those women willingly selling their bodies away, why would I go out of my way to force one woman into prostitution!? Just go ask the old couple living next door. They know the sailor, Sur, personally."

Seeing the old couple nodding gingerly to what Els had said, Lorist really wanted to dig a hole and jump inside it to hide his embarrassment until Charlando reminded him to check if that woman was still hiding in the house.

Lorist tried to open the door only to find that it had been locked from the inside and even felt that it might've been barricaded by some furniture. She didn't answer him when he called either. Having run out of options, Lorist circulated his battleforce and knocked the door open only to discover an empty room. The woman was gone along with his money and valuables in the room. Even the fur and the black horn of the catch he had just brought back was missing.

Upon further investigation, they discovered that the woman had escaped from the window at the back of the house. But, how had she carried all the things she stole?

After another few hours, one of Els's subordinates brought a horse cart driver over

who said that the woman that came to him said that she had been locked inside the house by her husband who wouldn't let her go visit her sick mother. She said that was why she had to leave the house with her dowry from the back window as the front door had been locked by her husband. When questioned about the weapons that she had brought along with her, she said that her husband used to be a mercenary who now only lays around at home and refuses to go take up some missions and that her husband had used her dowry to purchase these weapons. To prevent her husband from losing it through his gambling addiction, she said that she had to bring those things away and only hand it back to him if her husband would one day regret his ways.

The crowd merely sighed in admiration of her dauntless behavior of taking all those stuff with her and leaving through the back alley when the fellows were out there fighting. The alley was only ten or so meters away from the house and she could have been easily discovered should she make the slightest mistake.

Lorist wanted to cry his lungs out but couldn't let out any tears. His attempt of saving a 'helpless' woman had cost him over 10 gold coins. Looks like he would have to starve himself quite often in the near future.

Didn't the books always say that good people end up being rewarded for doing good deeds? Lorist had to admit that he was a little swayed by the woman as she looked rather good and also had a pretty nice figure. Given that Lorist still hadn't slept with a woman at that time since he came over to Grindia, he reacted rather easily to that woman's hug. He even thought that he might have been able to take the woman as his personal maidservant after he chased the thugs away. *The stories in the books were lies... Not only did I not get the damsel, I lost all my possessions to her too,* thought Lorist as he sulked on the ground with much regret.

The cart driver said that the reason he got here so quickly was because the woman had already got off the cart by the river two districts away. But, nobody had any thoughts of going after her as that river was a pretty well-known port in the area. Once she got on a boat, she would probably end up sailing to one of the many lake cities of the Falik Plains and would never be easily found again.

Els pat Lorist on the shoulder a few times as he felt a mix of anger and amusement, and said, "Alright, the merchants have a saying that goes, 'losing money is better than losing one's life', which is usually uttered after an encounter with bandits. I wish the same to you since you are in such a predicament. I won't hold today's grudge against

you since you've probably suffered enough. Alright guys, let's go back."

This marked the end of Lorist's first meeting with Els. Both of them lost something during this encounter; Els lost the battle while Lorist lost his money and valuables.

Chapter 23
Locke and Els (2)

The second time he encountered Lorist, Els was naked and seemed like he was running away from something. Lorist could not find any words to describe a person who was covered in plaster and running around without any clothes on.

It has already been a month since the incident where Lorist attempted to save that thieving woman from Els. Charade had only just recently stopped bringing the whole matter up over and over again, much to Lorist's relief. Additionally, he was fortunate enough to find himself be employed by a nobleman to train his son in the ways of the sword with a salary of three gold Fordes a month. Originally, that noble had wanted Instructor Claude to be the tutor but as Claude didn't have any extra time, he recommended Lorist to the noble instead.

One night after he finished tutoring the nobleman's child, Lorist was in the mood of getting some food on his way to the academy.

I recall that there's a stall just around the corner that sells salted beef kebabs. Charade bought them for me once before and they tasted pretty good. Alright, let's get some of those along with a barrel of ale before heading back to the academy to have it with that fatty. The moment he finished his thought, a naked person covered in a layer of white appeared to be rushing towards him.

Sol, I think I've just seen a lunatic. Lorist hurriedly took a few steps back and prepared to evade that crazy fellow.

Who knew that the moment that man passed by Lorist, he looked him in the eye and instantly stopped before saying, "Hey, it's you, my brother! Thank goodness, help me out a little and lend me your jacket."

Lorist was just about to shake that man off when he felt that he had heard that voice before. *Huh? Isn't this Els?* Els, who was taking deep breaths beside him, was covered in white plaster from head to toe and looked like a piece of abstract artwork.

"What are you up to now?" asked Lorist with a hint of surprise in his voice. Since when

had any syndicate boss ever shown any dedication or interest to street art?

"Don't even talk about it. You just have to know that I lost a bet with someone. Now, quickly lend me your jacket for a while," said Els with much urgency.

Oh well, since it doesn't look like it'll be raining tonight, I don't see any harm in lending it to him, thought Lorist as he removed the jacket and handed it to Els before he immediately broke into a run and gave Lorist a warning, "You better make a run for it too, otherwise it'll be too late."

Why would I have to run? I'm not crazy like you, thought Lorist as he turned the other way only to find a group of people holding fire irons and metal buckets marching in his way. *What are they planning to do? Are they going to help clean the streets at this time of the night?*

Before Lorist even understood the situation, some people around him pointed to him and said, "He's with that man!"

"He lent his jacket to that asshole!"

"Stop him! Don't let him escape!"

"Beat him up!"

Utterly confused by the situation, Lorist was surrounded by the group of people who started to hit him with whatever they had in their hands. Shielding his head with his arms, he said, "Hey, stop! What's going on?"

The crowd erupted into a cacophony of noise and not one of them could be heard clearly. Lorist wanted to retaliate but he hesitated as the people hitting him were only normal folk who did not have an ounce of battleforce. He thought it would be better to hold back lest he accidentally commits manslaughter. Grudgingly, he could only circulate his battleforce to absorb the hits from the crowd.

One old woman walked towards him with a bucket in hand and demanded that he disperse his battleforce.

"Huh?" Lorist didn't understand why she would say that.

"I asked you to stop using your battleforce!" cried the old woman.

"Why should I?"

"If you don't, how can I teach you a lesson? Otherwise, given my age, I would only tire myself out by continuously hitting you like this!" said the old woman with a tone that she used to lecture her grandchildren.

The surrounding people were also tired out and stopped the beating. The people beside the crowd continue to struggle to squeeze in to try to get a look at what was happening in there.

"Where's that prick?"

"Have you got him?"

"Bring him out here!"

As the chatter around him quieted down, Lorist let out a breath of relief, dispersed his battleforce, and said to the old woman, "Alright, why don't you tell me what's going..."

Before he finished his sentence, he could only see the bucket slowly enlarging before his face and land squarely on it, causing him to see nothing but stars. He let out a groan of pain and could faintly hear the old woman say something along the lines of "That's what you get..."

Bam! Another noise rang out from the impact. "Who asked you to peek at the women's bath..."

Badonk! "...while pretending to be a stone statue..."

Just as he was going to activate his battleforce again to protect himself, he suddenly came to a realization at hearing what the old woman had said and understood why Els had been running around nude covered in plaster just now. *Good Sol, Els... You better not let me find you...*

"It wasn't me! Sto-- cough..." Lorist let out an agonizing voice.

Having landed on the ground from the swing of the bucket, he desperately tried to crawl out from the crowd as myriads of blows hammered down on his body. In the end, he managed to escape with his clothes in tatters.

Right as he was about to sit down at a corner to catch his breath, a stranger who thought that he was a beggar tossed him a copper coin out of kindness given his pitiful appearance.

Lorist held the coin in his hand and gnawed his teeth as he mused to himself, "Els... You really have done it this time... Just you wait..."

But where was he to find Els? Lorist recalled that Charade had said that Els seldom stayed in a fixed location and was almost impossible to find. While he held the position of a syndicate boss and had three districts under his jurisdiction, the affairs of the districts were usually handled by his subordinates. However, Els greatly feared that uncle of his, who happened to be the owner of the Red Grace Inn.

I know, I'll just head to his uncle's place. Given his upright demeanor, if he knew that Els was fooling around and peeking in the women's bathroom by posing as a stone statue, I'm sure he would teach Els a lesson he would never forget.

Lorist spent quite a little effort to call for a horse cart as most of them thought that he was just a beggar and were unwilling to stop for him. When he finally got on one, he asked the driver to send him to the Red Grace Inn. The moment he got off the cart, the driver reminded him kindly, "Mister, while I'm sure there's a reason why you're dressed like that, you better change before going in or you'll probably be chased outside. I wish you a good night, sir."

Fortunately, Lorist wasn't thrown out of the inn as Charlando recognized him from that time he beat up his nephew. The only question that lingered within that man's heart was how did a person with Lorist's abilities get roughed up to that point? While he wasn't bleeding out from any wounds, his face had been covered in bluish-black bruises.

"How did you end up like that?" asked Charlando.

"Hi, mister. Have you seen Els? This was all his fault!"

Lorist subsequently explained the events that transpired to Charlando and expressed his regret from having offered Els his help and wished that he had just left him for dead.

With a grim expression, Charlando instructed the serving girl, Louise, to get Lorist a cup of blackcurrant ale before going out to look for Els

It didn't take long for him to return to the inn with Els in hand. He was still dressed in his pajamas that had several boot marks on it; it was evident that he had been kicked out of bed and dragged over here by his uncle.

"So you've been peeking in the women's bath while posing as a statue, huh? Instead of spending your time on something worthwhile, you're going around peeping at the ladies?"

Els retorted and said, "That wasn't peeking. I was only practicing my stealth abilities! Who's interested at looking at a bunch of old women bathing..."

Pushing Els in front of Lorist, the old man said, "Speak, what happened just now?"

Els was shocked to see Lorist in such a state. "Oh my, what happened to you? Weren't you looking fine just now?"

Struggling to resist the urge of smashing the cup against Els's face, Lorist said, "What did you think happened? Why was the mob chasing after you? You still dare to ask what happened to me!?"

Els instantly understood. "Oh, so you were caught by them. Didn't I warn you to run away as well? Do you regret not listening to me?"

"Good... Good Sol! It wasn't me who went to peep in the bath!" screamed Lorist, enraged.

"Don't get so angry, bro. Fine, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. How about this, I'll treat you to a drink tonight. Order as much as you like," said Els graciously as he pat Lorist on the shoulder.

Sol... He thinks that I'll be placated by a few cups of ale? Lorist suddenly felt more rage than ever before. Having seen Els's character during the last time, he should've never bothered to come look for him here in the first place.

Stepping out of his bounds, Els instructed the serving girls to treat all the guests at the inn to a cup of ale and bathed in their praises, totally ignoring the grim expression of his uncle.

Giving him a heavy slap, Charlando said, "Where have you got the money to treat these people? You better settle this issue tonight or I'll break both of your legs myself lest

you go embarrass me even further!"

Finally entering a serious mood, Els admitted that he had sneaked into the bath as a result of losing a bet with someone. He told the people present of his dream to study the ways of a rogue from the magic era. The rogues of ancient times were not like the common thieves of this age but were people who specialized in stealth, lockpicking, tracking, investigation, traps and even assassination. There were also legends of powerful rogue guilds that struck fear deep into the hearts of many.

Els continued to say that given the dark attribute battleforce passed down through his family, he believed that his ancestors might have been one of the enigmatic rogues during the era of the magic civilization and said that he aspired to train hard and one day rediscover the lost arts of the mysterious rogues.

One day during a drinking session with a friend, he bragged about how he was the descendant of the mystical rogues that once roamed the world. His friend said that if the skills of the rogue were that potent, it would definitely have been passed down throughout the generations. "Do you remember the book you showed me that told of a tale of a hero of the magic civilization?" asked his friend. "It was said that a rogue had sneaked into the bathroom of a princess from an enemy kingdom and overheard her discussing the plans to take down the hero with her lover. While I won't ask you to sneak into a royal bath, you should at least be able to enter that bath house at that street over there. If you can stay there until the bath house closes without being discovered, I'll believe that the ancient rogues were truly as powerful as you have claimed."

Els accepted the dare only to discover that sneaking in was the easy part. The bath was a really wide room that had no corners for him to hide in and only had a number of bathtubs cluttered around in the middle. There was no blind spot at all.

Later, Els discovered a statue that had been discarded at a corner of the bath which looked more or less like a standing man in deep thought. So in the following night, Els creeped into the bath again, broke the statue into pieces and moved it out of the bath. On the second night, he covered himself in white powder and stood in the very same corner that statue was at.

Els was confident that he would not be discovered by the unsuspecting customers as long as he did not move about too much given the relatively low light in the bath house and the steam that further aided in blurring one's vision.

While everything seemed perfect on paper, there was no way to account for unexpected situations. Coincidentally on that night, two young women walked over towards Els and stopped beside him to share some secrets.

The curvaceous girl told the story of the pleasurable night she had with her lover the night before while the other girl listened with much awe and envy. As the girl told her story, she accidentally knocked the towel that Els had wrapped around his genitals away.

He was startled to find the curvaceous girl pointing at his member as she said to the other girl, "Here, take a look. Men's cocks usually look like that. While it's small and harmless right now, you only have to give it a light rub to get it hard and long. It'll enlarge even more quickly if you use your mouth."

As she explained away, she used her hands to demonstrate it on Els's junk. "Come on, try it out yourself like how I'm doing it. I guarantee that most men would get hard in no time."

The girl merely stood beside the statue with her mouth agape as the well-endowed one continued on, "Pay attention. It's done like this. It's already turning hard. If you go at it longer, it will start to let out some secretions..."

She continued to stroke so hard as she chatted away until the male organ sprayed out a thick, white liquid.

"That was too fast! And this is even smaller than my boyfriend's, how useless and disappointing..." commented the girl.

Els really couldn't take it anymore, especially after the girl made that final comment, which greatly wounded his pride.

Pushing the two girls away, Els leaped towards the exit with a wounded heart as her comment reverberated in his mind.

"The statue's alive..."

"Lady goddess, what in the world is going on?"

"No, wait. That's a man!"

"There's a naked man in the bath! Catch him!"

The curvaceous girl suddenly came to a realization and blushed heavily before saying, "Catch that asshole! I swear I will kill him!" as the whole bath house erupted into chaos.

The stocky women standing guard at the bath house entrance saw Els run past them without a single article of clothing on him and were totally dumbfounded. "Freeze! Stop, you pathetic peeping jerk!"

The rest of the people on the street soon joined the chase.

Having just came out of the bath house without anything to wear, he could only continue running until he saw Lorist nearby.

Their second encounter also ended with injuries to both sides: Lorist suffered physical blows while Els suffered mental ones to his pride and even sulked about the matter for quite some time.

Chapter 24
Locke and Els (3)

The skies looked crystal clear with the sun emitting its radiance high up in the sky as if it was foretelling the pleasant weather of the rest of the day.

It was the vacation season for the academy and Charade took up a private request which required Lorist to go all over the place for three whole days to finally obtain the things that they needed for the mission. These items were special trapping cages that were commonly used against small magical beasts. At the moment, Lorist and Yuriy were piling the cages up on a large four-wheeled horse cart.

Yuriy was a student of the Dawn Academy and was also an assistant instructor for their horsemanship course with a battleforce rank of Two Star Iron. Like Lorist, he worked and studied part time and frequently joined up with other mercenaries to accept low-ranked missions for some extra money.

After loading all 14 cages onto the cart and fastening them on with a long rope, Lorist went over everything they had to bring with them once more to ensure that he didn't miss anything out. Having finished all the checking, he took out a waterskin and drunk a few gulps and patiently waited for Charade to come over.

Private requests were different from normal mercenary missions as the requests were often not processed by the mercenary guilds and were negotiated personally between the requestor and the accepting party. While this allowed one to avoid paying the referral fee to the mercenary guild, it wasn't without its risks. It wasn't uncommon for occurrences like sudden mission cancellations, payment refusals or even threats of violence to avoid payment to happen. But the fee collected by mercenary guilds were often rather high, sometimes even up to 40% of the wages. If the rewards were favorable, certain mercenaries would opt to negotiate the request privately instead of having a guild act as a middleman.

"Hey, Locke my brother, what are you up to?" asked Els as he walked over, wearing a large overcoat and giving the cages on the cart and the carriage a curious look. "Oh, you're going on a mission again, aren't you?"

Lorist felt a headache welling up with Els's arrival as the other two times when he met him had caused him much suffering. During the first time they met, he had lost quite a bit of money. While Lorist admitted that he was partly at fault for that, he believed that had Els not clung to him for so long, he would've been able to return to his room earlier and might've been able to catch the thieving woman red-handed and stop her in time. Their second encounter, however, ended badly even though all Lorist did was lend Els his coat. The part that most infuriated him was the fact that he had been pummeled by normal, non-combatant civilians without being able to resist in fear that he would critically injure them by accident.

Those two encounters left a deep impression of Els being a bringer of bad luck in Lorist's heart. Lorist made a mental note to be on guard lest he get wrapped up in any more troublesome business.

Els was oblivious to how Lorist felt about him and even believed that they had already become close friends judging by the way he intimately referred to Lorist as his 'brother'. Seeing the preparations Lorist was making, he thought that he would offer some advice as his 'senior'.

"Hey, I say, Lorist, there's no point going after small magical beasts like those. As a mercenary, you should set your sights further! Haven't you thought about venturing to places like the Magical Beast Forest at the Sunset Mountains, the Doomsday Coast of the Jigda Kingdom or even the Urubaha Subterranean Caverns? While these places are much more dangerous without question, you'll get much more benefits from those places. Didn't you hear about the Unicorn Mercenary Corps who made it back from an expedition to the Magical Beast Forest? They really made a killing from that trip; all of the members earned up to 100 gold Fordes each," babbled Els, occasionally letting out drops of saliva from his mouth as he spoke.

Lorist rolled his eyes as he heard Els name one dangerous place after another, as he thought, *you want an Iron ranked mercenary like me to become the dinner of those savage magical beasts!? And I bet you didn't hear the full story of the Unicorn Corps either. Of the 125 Silver-ranked people in their troupe who went into the Magical Beast Forest, only 43 returned alive a month later! The captain and vice-captain, who were Gold ranked experts, even broke down in tears at the hall of the mercenary guild like little children after making their mission report!*

"How do you even have the free time to walk around like this with your position as a syndicate boss? What would you know about the matters of us mercenaries?" rebuked

Lorist without holding back in the slightest.

"Heh, I bet your attitude would be different if you knew that I was in fact a mercenary myself, a Silver ranked one at that," said Els as he casually took out a Silver ranked mercenary badge and pinned it on his chest.

"Eh? Why would a syndicate boss like you need a Silver ranked mercenary badge? It's not like you would be using it," questioned Lorist.

"He got his Iron ranked badge back when he was still in the academy taking up missions from time to time. He got a Silver ranked one from the mercenary guild after he became a syndicate boss," answered Charade.

Turning his head towards Charade's direction, Lorist saw that he had returned with Terman and two horses.

Terman was a member of the Enforcement Division with a One Star Silver rank and was also one of Lorist's good friends in the academy.

Pointing at Els and turning his head towards Terman and Yuriy, Charade said, "Guys, this is Brennan Evanport. He's an alumnus of the Dawn Academy and is also your senior. He used to be my classmate in the past but he graduated early to take up the position of a syndicate boss."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Yuwen Ridest. Just call me Yuriy."

"Good day, I'm Waprey Terman."

Els nodded to the both of them and asked curiously, "Fatty, where are you guys going on this mission?"

"We're going to the Calisto Hills to exterminate some Metal-eater Rats."

Metal-eater Rats were, as their name suggested, rats whose main diet consisted of metals. With their size rivaling that of most dogs, they were classified as small magical beasts that lived in swarms in the lower levels of mines. Despite their small size, Metal-eater Rats were notorious for attacking relentlessly until their last breath once agitated. Upon encountering one of them, one should calm down and look as threatening as possible and slowly retreat to a safe distance. However, any person with a battleforce rank of One Star Bronze could easily dispatch a lone Metal-eater Rat.

However, most of the time the rats often appeared in groups and relied on their numbers to swarm their enemies.

Having taken the magical beast biology course offered by his academy, Lorist understood that lone Metal-eater Rats were far and few and would only wander off from their group during mating season. Legend says that the very first magical beast that the first human, who miraculously reawakened the long lost dormant battleforce within his blood, had taken down was a lone Metal-eater Rat. Had he encountered a whole swarm of those critters, he would have perished undoubtedly and who knew how many more years the humans had to suffer during the dark times.

Given that the Metal-eater Rat was fed upon by many other dangerous magical beasts, they had to be eradicated immediately upon discovery because if the numbers of the rats increase, it would attract the presence of even more fearsome predators to the mines that preyed on the rats and bring further disaster to the mining operations there. One way to get rid of them was to hunt down all the Metal-eater Rat Queens so that the rest of the swarm would leave the area.

One of the more famous mining incidents that had been documented happened in one of the gold mines of the Romon Empire. As a result of not adequately managing the Metal-eater Rat crisis, two gigantic Single-horned Rock Pythons made the mines their home and caused more than 3000 deaths. In the end, the empire's government had to dispatch a team of more than 60 Gold-ranked experts who were led by a Sword Saint to handle the situation, but it was not without a price: the members of the team had suffered quite a number of casualties as well. The aftermath was that more than 40 noble houses that had been placed in charge of the mines had been severely punished and relinquished of their ranks. Following that incident, the mining operations over the whole continent was always highly alert against potential Metal-eater Rat infestations and made sure to get rid of the problem before it becomes exacerbated.

"Why aren't Steve and the others here?" asked Lorist.

"Sigh, do you know about the the nature drawing trip the second year art course students are organizing? Steve brought the Kell brothers along to serve as their guard. That's right, he thinks that going on the trip to protect some beauties is more important than going to clear an infestation out with us," said Charade with a tone of frustration. He had made so much effort to prepare the necessary equipment they would need for the mission but he had forgotten to invite enough people to join them.

Els's eyes instantly lit up. "Hey, fatty, why not I go along with you guys?"

Surprised, Charade said, "Why would you want to come along? Aren't you fine and dandy being a syndicate boss and all? There's no need for you to go venturing with us. Additionally, this is a private request, so the risk involved is much higher."

Lorist instantly objected, "Don't joke around, Charade. Mr Syndicate Boss there only wants to go to places like the Magical Beast Forest and the Doomsday Coast, there's no way he would want to exterminate some petty rats with us in some mines! He's just kidding around."

Els instantly responded in a serious tone, "I'm not joking, dude. To be honest, Charade there knows that I didn't accept the position of the syndicate boss because I wanted to. It was my boys who forced me to take up that post, I really couldn't help it. Since they're handling all the work for me, I've been rather bored recently with nothing much to do. So, I thought that it would be a great idea for me to join you guys on this expedition! How I miss the days when I ventured along my fellow schoolmates. Charade, you've known me for years, so you should be able to tell what kind of person I am. Just let me come along, I'll gladly make up for your lack of manpower! I'm sure I can protect myself well enough given my abilities."

"This..." mumbled Charade hesitantly.

"No way," said Lorist adamantly. *If we let this disaster magnet join us, we might as well go laze around at home instead of having to bear the consequences!*

"Fatty, you know the type of battleforce I train in and my unique skills. I will be nothing but help for you guys at the mines," persuaded Els.

Huh? What kind of skills is he talking about? Lorist's curiosity was roused.

"Locke, why do you object to his joining us?" asked Charade.

"I..." It wasn't like Lorist could say that Els brought bad luck just because of one or two encounters. "We haven't been on missions with him before, so I'm worried about our compatibility."

Relived that he thought up a convincing excuse, Lorist wiped the sweat of his face.

"I'll definitely follow all orders," said Els.

"You promise?" Charade asked.

"Promise."

"Alright, welcome to the gang. I, Charade, will be the leader of this party. Go make your preparations and come back here within half an hour. This trip to the Calisto Hills will take about twenty days, you're okay with that, right?" announced Charade.

"No problem. Um, fatt-- I mean, leader, I think it would be better for us to meet up at the Red Grace Inn before we leave. We often get customers who make their private requests there and maybe I could ask my uncle to check whether your client has a credible background before we set out. Maybe we might even be able to accept certain requests that can be fulfilled on our way to the mines. Just tell my uncle that I sent you there, he'll know about it the moment he sees Locke," said Els who already offered the party a substantial amount of help the moment he joined.

Charade was instantly moved. He wasn't aware that the Red Grace Inn secretly handled private requests such as these right under the noses of the mercenary guilds. Then again, it was a rather good operation to mercenaries, as accepting missions from the inn usually had much less risks since the owners wouldn't vouch for people they didn't know well enough.

"Alright then, we'll gather at the Red Grace Inn."

Even before Charade opened his mouth, the moment the owner of the inn saw Lorist and heard that they were going on a trip, he brought out a notebook that recorded the requests of many other clients and searched for some that Lorist's party could complete along the way.

Having seen the contents of the notebook, Charade noticed that most of the requests were merely simple errands and 'want-to-buys'. If these were submitted to the mercenary guilds, they would usually be taken up by Bronze or Iron ranked mercenaries. Given the fees of the guilds, there weren't that profitable and so not many mercenaries would go out of their way to work on those missions. If these requests were made at the inn, however, people would be more willing to take them up as they would earn quite a sum without paying any extra fees.

After discussing with his team, Charade decided to take up 17 side missions that would earn each of them an extra gold Forde of income. Charlando also mentioned

that while the payment wasn't that high, they were quite abundant in number and he often found it hard to get trusted mercenaries who would be willing to carry them out. If the party was able to complete these without a hitch, he said that they would be welcome to come for more missions in the future.

Els later came over wearing a brand new Fire Salamander leather armor. The skin of the Fire Salamander had the peculiar quality of keeping one's body warm as well as driving insects away and was particularly suited for underground excursions. However, the price of the material was rather high and was not something that most adventurers and mercenaries could afford. On the leather armor was a badge of a Silver ranked mercenary.

Els loudly introduced his new party members to the customers of the inn as if he was afraid that they wouldn't notice that he was about to go on a mission. Lorist felt that it was weird that Els's uncle didn't mind the fact that his nephew was about to join their party and even treated all the party members to a cup of blackcurrant ale whilst wishing them luck on their mission.

Finally leaving from the city gates, Charade approached the cart on horseback and asked Els, who was in the middle of a conversation with Lorist, something, "Why does your uncle trust Locke so easily? He instantly brought the request notebook out the moment Locke showed his face."

Lorist found this part weird too as he had only met Charlando twice, with their first meeting even ending up in them fighting. Why did that old guy treat him so well?

Giving Lorist a lazy glance, Els said unenthusiastically, "That old guy says that Locke was a person of good character, given how he foolishly protected that thieving woman that one time due to his sense of justice. He also didn't resist the pummeling of the crowd of common folk the other time and would rather endure their blows than risk accidentally injuring them. My uncle said that people like that were rare and even asked me to learn from his behavior. What he didn't take note of was how I, a Silver ranked combatant, would rather run away from that mob than simply beating them down in the first place. I believe that on that front, I was behaving way more graciously than Locke was."

"Tsk..." Lorist clicked his mouth and said, "Don't forget that you were running for your life stark-naked at that time."

The gang instantly erupted in laughter.

Chapter 25
Locke and Els (4)

The Calisto Hills was situated at the borders of the Falik Plains and was connected to the Tedanini Mountains. It was also in the area between the Dwarven Kingdom and the Forde Trade Union. According to the old legends, the remaining magi at the end times of the magic civilization opened a dimensional portal and sent the other sentient beings on the Grindia Continent to different worlds to ensure that the humans would survive the oncoming tribulations and wouldn't have to compete with the other races. For some reason, however, they missed out the dwarves who had been living around the Tedanini Mountains and slowly, with the passing of two thousand or so years, they had built up their very own kingdom.

Currently, this was the only other sentient being on the Grindia Continent apart from the humans. Given the tendency for the dwarves to reside within mountain ranges, however, they rarely had any conflict with the humans and was even on trading terms.

While the Calisto Mountains was technically in the territory of the Forde Trade Union, the union didn't hold much governing power in the area. Given the nature of the battle-crazed mountain folk, the trade union treaded carefully and was careful not to offend them in the slightest, lest a large scale conflict erupts. At the moment, the council was considering splitting the Calisto Mountains into several districts in the future and letting those who had contributed to the union govern it.

After three days and two nights of travel, Lorist and gang finally arrived at their destination, Baca Village. The middle-aged village chief who was also the requestor and the owner of the mines, Bam, welcomed them.

Bam was also one of Lorist's senior students in the academy. With his father having enlisted in the trade union army to fend off the Krissen Empire's invasion, he retired to the village due to his injuries and resolved himself to make the village prosper after seeing all the progress that is being made at the outside world and barely managed to send Bam to the Dawn Academy. Bam took up two additional professional courses, namely, resource foraging and mine management. However, given that those courses were rather unpopular and the quality of the lecturers were subpar, he only managed

to learn those things in theory and never got any practical experience. The academy subsequently discontinued those courses.

After returning to the village, Bam spent five to six years cultivating the skills he had learned and managed to discover several veins of silver and tin ore at a hill near the village. While the excavation amount wasn't humongous, it was enough to support the livelihood of six other villages around it. The discovery of the mines wiped out poverty and famine from the surrounding villages. Additionally, Bam also used a part of the profit from the ore mines to fund several talented youngsters to go to Morante City for further studies.

The whole gang felt that Senior Bam was pretty impressive for his willingness to forsake the possibility of a grand lifestyle in Morante City for the sake of developing his village and community. Yuriy and Lorist were most impressed with how he used the extra money to sponsor the village youths as they understood that the costs of studying at Morante City wasn't cheap.

Very frankly, Bam told them about how he first encountered traces of Metal-eater Rats within the vicinity of the mines. Being an Iron ranked swordsman, he formed a group to go take care of the pests. It was not until a while later that they discovered that the infestation wasn't as simple as they had thought and over the past year, they had killed more than ten of those rats on multiple occasions already. Just two months ago, an attack by a swarm of Metal-eater Rats had killed three and injured five of the miners. That was when he finally decided to end it once and for all and summoned all the villagers who had battleforce to go on an extermination mission down the mines; including Bam, there were three Iron ranked fighters and eleven Bronze ranked fighters in total.

However, the extermination did not succeed as the swarm of rats numbered more than a hundred and the party of 14 were hard-pressed and not one of them escaped unscathed. Even though they managed to wipe out 30 or so rats, they had struggled to retreat under the relentless attacks of the rat swarm and nine of them ended up with rather severe injuries.

Since that failed attempt, Bam understood the magnitude of the problem and had no choice but to seek aid from mercenaries. After treating all of those who had been injured, the village was only left with less than 30 gold coins and their dire financial straits was further exacerbated by the temporary closing of the mines. Being only able to offer ten or so gold coins as a mission reward, and given the referral fee of five gold

coins charged by the mercenary guild, most mercenaries were hesitant on taking the mission up.

Recalling that the students of the Dawn Academy often went on mercenary missions, he reached out to the villagers who were studying there and managed to get in contact with Charade.

Having listened to Bam's description of the situation, the party was convinced that this mission had relatively low risk asBam was a rather credible person. Charade went on to brief the rest of them about the situation: there was an estimated amount of two to three hundred Metal-eater Rats. With their forces of three Silver ranks and two Iron ranks, even if they couldn't wipe out all of the rats, it shouldn't be a problem for them to take out the rat queen and cause the rats to leave the mines.

While a reward of 18 gold coins for the rat extermination was a little lacking, it was already rather favorable for Charade's party as Bam would also be bringing along two other Bronze Swordsmen to guide them in the mines as well as manage their equipment for no extra charge. The most lucrative point of the mission was that any loot or gains obtained during it belonged solely to the party. There might be a possibility of finding gold nuggets and other rare metals in the rat nests which could be sold for quite a sum. The party decided to rest up for the day before setting out tomorrow.

"While the meat of the Metal-eater Rat is a little sour, it is undoubtedly safe to consume and would taste even better if they were made into jerky. The organs and blood of the rat, however, had to be removed completely as high concentrations of toxic minerals resided within them. The rats' most threatening feature are their front teeth which are really durable and can be sold for one small silver each on the market. Their pelt however was worthless as it had a distinct foul smell that attracted insects which couldn't be removed no matter how it was treated, so they are normally discarded."

Within the mines, Els was assigned the role of the scout and vanguard while Charade, Yuriy and Terman were positioned in the middle and Lorist, Bam and the other two swordsmen constituted the rearguard. At the moment, Lorist was telling Bam what he had learned about the rats from the magical beast biology lessons.

"The Metal-eater Rats hate the smell of pine trees, especially that of their roots. The concoction we sprayed around the entrance was to limit the range of activity of the rats and prevent them from running all over the place.

"This was the result of the research that was completed last year by Professor Snade Borg of our magical beast biology department. He was even rewarded 20000 gold Fordes for this. As long as you apply this pesticide on a regular basis at the mine entrance, you would be free from Metal-eater Rat infestations.

"To top that off, it's not that expensive at all. A large bucket of it only costs about 3 gold Fordes and can last for as long as a month. After using this for a year or two, a natural pine smell will form around the mines and you won't have to use it any longer. Senior Bam, please consider this quickly as we have a limited supply. You can only get these from academy insiders so please feel free to make your order with us."

Lorist was really enthusiastic about promoting the pesticide as he stood to gain one gold Forde for every bucket sold. If he managed to sell 12 buckets per year, that would mean an extra 12 gold Fordes of income for him annually without breaking a sweat.

As they descended further into the mines, they wiped out two waves of rats along the way, which numbered up to more or less 200 of them. The performance and efficacy of the team greatly impressed Bam and the Bronze Swordsmen that followed along.

With Charade, Els and Terman standing at three points around him with him in the middle, Yuriy proved to be quite capable at supporting the team and allowed the rest to slaughter the rats without worry. Lorist himself was even more amazing; he moved separately from the rest of them and easily took care of as many rats as those in the formation himself without getting even a single bloodstain on him.

Senior Bam and his attendants were embarrassed at the fact that nine out of their group of fourteen had incurred severe injuries on their previous extermination attempt after seeing how Lorist's group killed the rats easily and effortlessly, as if it were just a common training exercise.

After killing off the remaining rats in the second wave, the party decided to rest for a while as they removed the valuable parts of the rat that could be sold for money. Yuriy took out a large plier and used it to pluck the front teeth of all the rats. Having been told by Lorist that the meat of the rats was edible, Bam requested the group to give the meat to them to help alleviate the food shortage problem in their village.

Having rested up and eaten some dry rations, Charade instructed the group to split up and led Terman and Yuriy into the left cavern while Lorist and Els headed for the right one. Given that most of the rats had been exterminated, all that was left was to take

care of the rat queen.

Slinging the bag filled with rat teeth on his back, Lorist casually smeared some of the pesticide on the walls of the cavern as he walked along the path.

"What are you up to?" Els asked.

Lorist responded by telling Els about the effects of the pesticide half-heartedly given that Els would not be interested in purchasing any of it from him anyway. Els doubted the efficacy of the pesticide however and they broke into an argument.

Having walked for quite some time and reaching the end of the road, they didn't discover anymore rats. Els said, "Let's go back. There's no point in remaining here."

Just as he finished his words, the rock wall in front of him suddenly jolted and cracked open with a loud sound. A head of a large beast emerged from the hole in the wall, sniffed the air around it and leaped in Lorist and Els's direction.

"What is that!?" exclaimed Lorist in shock as he dropped the torch in his hand. "Isn't this fellow a little too big? The head itself has a diameter of two meters!"

"Better run!" said Els loudly as he grabbed Lorist's arm and turned to run the other direction.

"Sol, I knew that bringing you along was a bad call! The last two times were bad enough. For the whole of this mission, I've been worried that something terrible would happen. I can finally stop guessing, now that this critter has shown up in the middle of the rat extermination mission..." called Lorist as he ran behind Els.

"You haven't even thanked me for saving you yet! If I were a little bit late, you would've been swallowed whole by now! You even dropped our torch!" replied Els.

"I was suddenly reminded of the Single-horned Rock Python that was said to live in the mines. That thing back there definitely had a long body and a really large head! If that isn't the python, I don't know what is!" said Lorist, slightly embarrassed at the fact that he had indeed been saved by Els's quick thinking.

Els turned his head to the back before saying, "It doesn't look like a Single-horned Rock Python to me. It has a round head and doesn't seem to have any scales or eyes. Its speed isn't that fast either."

"How can you see in this darkness? Do I look like a child that would fall for your lies? And hey, don't run so quickly! What if we run straight into a wall!?" shouted Lorist.

"Haha," Els laughed lightly. "You know that I train in a darkness attribute battleforce, right? I bet you didn't know that people who trained in that type of battleforce had night vision. I can see just as good in the darkness as I do in broad daylight! That's my special ability! How is it? Are you envious? I can still see so well even without the torch you dropped."

"Good Sol, I have enough money to buy all the torches I need. I don't need that stinking ability!" Feeling rather envious, Lorist thought, *This guy's ability of being able to see in the dark is not at all inferior to my own dynamic vision... And it's extremely helpful in poorly-lit environments...*

"Then I bet you were enjoying the sights in the bath on that day. Even though the lighting is pretty bad in there, I bet you could see all of them with perfect clarity given your ability," said Lorist as he panted heavily.

"Can you please not bring that up again? I was facing the wall at that time and couldn't see even one of them..." Just as Lorist reminded him of that incident, Els recalled the cruel and demeaning remark by that girl that deeply wounded his pride and tripped on a piece of rock as he lost focus.

Lorist swiftly helped Els to his feet. "Eh? Locke, are you hurt? Why're your clothes wet?"

Stunned, Lorist felt his body up and said, "Oh, that's not blood. The waterskin holding the pesticide burst and released all of its contents on my body. That fall didn't hurt you badly, right? We better hurry, I'm starting to hear that thing closing in."

"I'm fine. Let's go."

In a short while, they went back to their previous resting place where Charade and the rest were waiting. Seeing Lorist and Els's haggard looks, they broke into a stream of laughter until they heard the rumbling coming from the tunnel behind them and started running towards the cavern exit for their lives.

Despite having a stocky build, Charade was the fastest of them all and escaped the caverns and was followed by Yuriy, Terman, Bam and one of the Bronze Swordsmen with Lorist and Els trailing along at the end. The other Bronze ranked helper who was

packing the rat carcasses onto the cart outside the mines looked at their panicked expressions with wonder. What had happened in the mines while he was away?

Charade screamed, "Get out of the way! A magical beast is coming out from the entrance!"

That instantly set the rest of the group into panic. Fortunately, the beast retreated into the mines as if it was afraid of the strong sunlight.

Letting out a relieved breath, Charade asked Lorist and Els what happened. "What was that? How did you end up encountering it? And, what's that smell on you, Locke? Did your bladder go loose?"

Lorist explained, "No, the pesticide got splashed all over my body. It's the one developed by professor Snade Borg. I brought some over cause I heard that we would be eradicating Metal-eater Rats."

"Good Sol! Let me take a look at that pesticide! I think I know what that monster back there is!" said Charade as he walked towards Lorist angrily, seemingly wanting to give him a punch or two.

"Wait, what's wrong? Wasn't it a good idea to bring along the pesticide for the Metal-eater Rats?" asked Lorist as he dodged the fatty's punches.

"Good idea my ass! While that concoction can indeed repel Metal-eater Rats, it would also attract Ground Wyrms! That thing back there was a Ground Wyrm that had been lured over by the smell of that pesticide!

"Do you even know how serious that was? Ground Wyrms are magically mutated versions of common earthworms and they are attracted to the smell of pine tree roots! If you don't believe me, try digging out the roots of a pine tree and see if you find a nest of earthworms there! There are even people in the academy who are using that 'pesticide' of yours as Ground Wyrm lure!

"That professor even lost the 20000 gold Fordes that had been awarded to him after they found out about the unintended effect and caused lots of leftover pesticide to be stocked up at the academy, didn't you know? Sol, only an idiot like you would fall for his schemes!" screamed Charade with all his breath.

Good Sol, no wonder that professor said that he would give me one gold coin for every

bucket sold! So, it was a defective product! Holding his head and curling up on the ground, Lorist merely said, "All of you guys, please hit me to your hearts' content. I deserve this."

But nobody went over to beat him up and merely calmed down to figure out how they would solve the problem at hand. Relative to other magical beasts, the Ground Wyrm wasn't too hard to take care of. They decided to lure it out with a large hook and rope after some discussion.

The Ground Wyrm was essentially an oversized earthworm; it was aversive to sunlight and water and was considered relatively harmless to most other magical beasts. It didn't pose that much of a threat to small, agile targets given its large, imposing body and slow speed. Charade and his party spent six whole days with the cooperation of the Baca villagers to put together a hundred meter long rope with a large hook at its end and sent Lorist down the mine with the hook to atone for his grave mistake.

Before he left, Els walked over from the crowd. Lorist asked, "Are you gonna do it for me?"

"I'm going to accompany you down there. If Yuriy and Terman wasn't assigned to hold the rope by Charade, they would've accompanied you as well. After all, we're friends, aren't we?"

It was at that moment when Lorist was moved to tears.

They put the hook down after walking a certain distance into the mines and wrapped it with a bundle of cloth that was soaked in the 'pesticide'. Without much delay, a rumbling sound could be heard from the depths of the caverns and the both of them ran out of it at full speed.

On their way to the exit, the rope snapped upward tightly. Lorist said cheerfully, "It got hooked!"

Outside the mines, Charade was directing the villagers to pull on the rope with all their force. Even after busting their backs for the whole afternoon, the Ground Wyrm simply refused to come out. After a final heave, the people present witnessed blood splatter out of the entrance of the mines as the internals of the Ground Wyrm were pulled out of its carcass.

Looking at the scene with a hint of satisfaction, Charade said, "Not bad, given how its

internals were pulled out, that Ground Wyrm's dead for sure. We'll go harvest its skin tomorrow."

Given the amazing regenerative capabilities of Ground Wyrms, the only viable method of getting rid of it was to use a hook to pull the internals out. While the rest of the beast wasn't worth much, its skin could be boiled to extract a strong adhesive which could be mixed with sand to form sturdy building material.

To further make up for Lorist's error, Charade gave the skin to Bam, much to his delight, as he would be able to make new houses for his villagers with the skin of the Ground Wyrm.

After spending another three days clearing out the mines of any remaining Metal-eater Rats, the party put one of the small cages they brought around the entrance of the mines and with a rat corpse inside it. The decaying corpse would serve as an effective repellant for other Metal-eater Rats and keep them away from the mines.

Having wrapped up the whole affair, the gang bade farewell to Senior Bam and started their journey back to the city.

Chapter 26
Els's Request

It was only after that incident with the Ground Wyrm when Lorist changed his impression of Els. Following that, they went on more missions together and eventually their friendship developed to a point where they could talk about almost anything.

The passage of time was indeed fast. He was only 19 at that time whereas in the present, he was 24. That span of five years was enough for Lorist to mature from a greenhorn mercenary to a veteran one.

Lorist wondered to himself why he recalled the events of the past all of a sudden for no reason. Was it the due to suddenly cutting ties with Wenna just moments before? After all, the relationship *did* last for four whole years and it wasn't something he could forget quickly even if he wished to. Only the passage of time could slowly lift the layers of yearning he had for her. He only hoped that he would able to leave this all behind and start fresh when the sun rose on the next day.

"Why have you come to the room? To watch me sulk?" said Lorist as he felt his face for any tears. *Good thing there wasn't any, otherwise he would be laughing his ass off by now.*

"Well, when I heard about the breakup from Uncle Girald, I thought I would be able to watch a funny scene right out of a melodrama, probably something along the lines of rekindled love and a rush of passion and lust that will end up in an affair between you and that little lady. Who would expect for you to act so cold and for her to be so casual about it and just part with you like that. How disappointing," Els said, spewing a bunch of crap as usual.

"Hehe, I'm sorry I let you down then," laughed Lorist lightly.

"Don't be. I've always known that you're no acting material and wouldn't put up a good show. Oh, and, what's with the duel notices that were put up all over the place? I was just planning to go to the academy and ask Charade what was going on," said Els.

"Well, it's nothing big. That old bastard Levins made a bet with the other academy

heads that I could defeat every Silver ranked instructor from the other academies in a duel. He exploited that opportunity to take a registration fee for the duels earn some extra cash as well as to raise the reputation of the academy. That's why he had Charade going all over the place to put up those notices," explained Lorist.

Els did not show any sympathy for his friend's plight and only mused to himself with an excited expression on how he could use this opportunity to make some profit too. Lorist merely said, "There's no way you would be able to make anything in the academy sector. That old fox probably has everything covered and wouldn't let any chance to earn money slip by under his nose. Who knows if he already plans to do something city-wide? Well, the only place where you might be able to set up your operations would be at the inns. Though, it probably would be at a much smaller scale than you had hoped."

"The inns are more than enough. There are 48 districts in Morante City with 3 other new districts with a total of 27 syndicate bosses managing them. I only need to set up one betting operation in an inn across all the districts. As long as I'm willing to offer a cut to the other bosses, they would be more than happy to allow me to run it. Even if that old fox were to try to pull something similar off, without the connections I have, there's no way that he can match the payout that I can provide. We'll see which betting operation will attract more people," said Els with much excitement, impatiently waiting for the days to come.

Sighing in his heart, Lorist thought back at the Els he knew from five years ago who didn't care for any of his responsibilities and only wanted to go adventure to build a name for himself as a legendary mercenary. Right now, however, he had the air of a real syndicate boss who let no opportunity to profit slip by his eyes. It seems that these five years have not only changed Lorist but his friend as well.

"Now that you mention it, your plan seems like it would work out after all. But you didn't even consider whether I was willing to go to duel them or not. Well, not like I have any choice in that matter. What if I were to lose for some reason, though?"

"Hehe, you think I don't know you after all these years? If you were to truly lose, then it would really be the joke of the century. While my darkness attribute battleforce is harder to train in and Charade has already overtaken me to reach the Three Star Silver rank, I believe that no other Silver Swordsman in the whole city can take either of us on. But against you, however, both Charade and I hasn't even won a single match. Even that one time when we fought you two-on-one, we could only hold on for up to 100

moves before losing to you. I wouldn't believe that you would lose to a Silver rank even if you beat me into submission," Els told Lorist with much confidence.

Lorist could only roll his eyes.

"Alright brother, I won't let you walk away with nothing. How about this, I'll let you take a 10% cut? No? Then 15%! Still won't do? Alright then, 20% is the most I can give you. I'll have to use the rest to feed my men, you know," said Els.

"Alright, deal," said Lorist as he stretched his hand out lazily. "Go look for that fatty tomorrow and ask him about the dueling schedule and get an info sheet on the challengers. That will help you organize the betting better. Oh, and don't forget that he'll pester you for a share of the profit as well."

"I know, he's getting 10% at most. After giving the rest of the syndicate bosses and inn owners their cuts, I'll be left with roughly 30-40%, which is still a rather good haul," Els said as he slapped Lorist's extended palm away. Already imagining the bag of gold coins in his hands, Els started to feel even more pumped.

"Oh, Locke, I almost forgot another thing. That's... Ah, I got you a disciple," Els wrinkled his forehead in thought and said.

"What? A disciple? Are you kidding me?" said Lorist, astonished. *Come on, I'm not old enough to be someone's master, am I?*

"This..." Els hesitated a bit before grabbing his head in frustration and saying, "Well, it's not anything that formal. You just have to let him follow you around and teach him some moves whenever you can. Treat him as your personal attendant if you'd like. He'll be perfect for the job since he's pretty well built and has rather good stamina."

Hearing Els describe that person, Lorist started to get interested. "Just tell me what this is about."

"Alright, Locke. You know that thing about my subordinates..."

Lorist understood how Els came to become a syndicate boss. Twenty years ago, both his parents were Gold ranked combatants and were a rather famous couple who lead a mercenary group. However, twenty years ago, Els's parents joined the Battle of Whitestag Town. In that battle, the Krissen Empire lost their only Sword Saint, but the trade union's forces did not emerge unscathed from that battle either. Most of the

mercenaries hired to join that battle had perished, among which included Els's mother. His father incurred heavy injuries and died of illness several years later. The only one left in their mercenary group was Els's uncle, Charlando and several other Silver ranked mercenaries. Charlando was hurt in his leg and became a limp who was unable to progress from the Two Star Gold rank any further.

With their ace fighters gone, the mercenary group could only disband. Having considered the worst scenario, Els's parents had previously made some arrangements for the remaining members of the group prior to their deaths: they provided the relatives of all members with housing in the same district. Even after the mercenary group had disbanded, the relatives of the members looked out for each other and they were also taken care of by the Morante City administration for the contributions of their family members who were in the mercenary group.

Having started an inn to be able to better educate and look out for the offspring of the members of the mercenary group, Charlando placed his hopes on the children and hoped that they would one day take up the banner of their group once again. Els was the unofficial leader of the group of children as he was the eldest and was also the strongest among them. He also cared for them a lot as if they were his blood-related siblings from a young age.

Seeing the kids grow and mature and given that Els was going to graduate from the Dawn Academy soon, Charlando was elated and predicted that the glorious days of the mercenary group will once again come. What caught him off guard was the event that made Els take up the position of a syndicate boss.

The Forde Trade Union had a unique governing system which handed the administration rights of the various districts to several syndicate bosses who had their own underlings and groups. While that legitimized the syndicates and greatly decreased the crime rate, bosses who operated beyond the law wasn't unheard of. One such person was the syndicate boss in charge of the districts Els and his buddies lived in.

While the syndicate bosses have the right to impose taxes on the citizens on the district, this one was even worse in that he even collected taxes for clothes-drying, land-occupation and even for road repairs, and incited the rage of the citizens in the district and almost let a violent conflict erupt. Els's gang even resisted and sent the tax collectors to the medical centers given their youthful recklessness.

However, the syndicate boss wasn't pleased to hear that and believed that Els represented a bad example to the rest of the citizens of the district and was the main culprit of the resistance he was facing. Intending to forever remove the pain in his ass, the boss started to think of ways to handle him. It was at this moment when one of his subordinates brought him news that angered him greatly. It seemed that the whole district was planning to protest in an effort to force the city council to remove the syndicate boss from his position.

Having already paid a management fee to the city council that he hasn't earned back from the taxes he collected, the syndicate boss racked his brains and came out with an idea: he planned to kill Els and make an example out of him to deter future protesters.

But his gang alone didn't have the power to take Els down as he had a Gold ranked Swordsman standing behind him. Unwilling to hire professional killers for a large sum, the syndicate boss resorted to setting Els's house on fire and hoped that he would perish in the burning embers.

Unfortunately, just when his subordinates arrived, they were discovered by Els and his gang and were beaten up to the point when they confessed their boss's intentions. This incited the citizens and prompted them to surround the mansion of the syndicate boss to remove him once and for all. Unable to escape, the boss was captured by Els and had been clobbered to death by the raging citizens before Els could react.

With the position of the syndicate boss now vacant, the elders of the district discussed with one another and picked Els to succeed the position. Els, not wanting to disappoint the people, could only take it without complaint.

Given that he didn't accept the position willingly, Els slacked off on the responsibilities of the syndicate boss. Luckily, he had many trustworthy subordinates who handled everything without problem and didn't cause him any worry. In the years to come, Els only found out that the other two districts had also fell under his jurisdiction without him knowing. That was how Charlando's ideal mercenary group morphed into one of the most active and developmental district syndicates of Morante City instead.

Back when the mercenary group disbanded, a Silver ranked member who was a good pal of Charlando prepared to return to his homeland in the Romon Empire. Before he left, he expressed his hope that the descendants of his comrades would one day take up the banner of the mercenary group again. Just three months prior, Charlando met a beggar from the Romon Empire who revealed that he was the son of that comrade

from the Romon Empire.

Upon further questioning, Charlando got to know about the death of his comrade just the year before. After returning to his rural village, that Silver Swordsman joined the garrison there and settled down two years later and birthed a son that was the beggar in front of Charlando. Just two years ago, an epidemic broke out in the village and his mother passed away, followed by his father who held on for half a year. At his deathbed, he instructed his son to go to find Charlando in Morante City to join the mercenary group.

While it would only take less than half a month to go to Morante City from his village by way of a carriage, the son wasn't aware of it and traveled for half a year on foot all the way and begged when he ran out of money for food and slept outdoors in the wilderness for the whole of the journey. It was already quite a feat that he wasn't captured by slave traders for the whole time.

Having heard the arduous journey that the child of his comrade had experienced, Charlando let out a stream of tears and treated him with utmost care and even told Els to regard him as his own brother. After learning that the mercenary group would no longer be formed, however, the beggar flipped out and refused to join Els's group. Troubled, Charlando could only send that child to school only to receive a notice that he had been expelled as a result of beating up all his classmates.

"This is already the third elementary academy that he has been expelled from. To think that we've hoped that he would be able to apply for a place at Dawn Academy after a year of the elementary course... It looks like that won't be happening anytime soon. The old man asked him what he would like to study. He only said that he wanted to learn the ways of the sword and become a mercenary one day to venture about on the continent. The question wasn't on whether he had the will to learn, but rather one of his talent..."

Els continued his rant, "That kid lived all his life in the rural village and played around in the forest a lot. Coupled with his carefree parents, he developed a stubborn and wild personality and will not stop after he set his mind on something. I believe that a stick would be more threatening in his hands than a sword at this point. He's already a Two Star Bronze fighter at the age of sixteen and has a really large build that made him look almost twenty. Given his innate strength, you'd think that he would be a talent worth cultivating. But in actuality, he's pretty slow and will forget a move he was taught within ten minutes. The way he swings his sword around like a crazed

barbarian really irks me.

"Even the old man can't do anything about it. That's when I thought: if there's anyone who can teach him the sword, that would be you," Els declared.

Letting out a loud laugh, Lorist said, "Even a Gold Swordsman like old Char wasn't able to teach him swordsmanship. What could an Iron rank like me do?"

"Locke, I know you're different. Your swordsmanship skill definitely exceeds that of my uncle. Just do me a favor and give him a chance, if he's really not swordsman material, you can send him back to me then," begged Els.

Lorist thought deeply for a bit before nodding and saying, "Alright, I'll give him a chance."

Author's note: Most high ranked academies in Morante City like the Dawn Academy doesn't simply allow one to apply as a student. An applicant must be able to pass an entrance test that determines their level of intellect and cultural knowledge. That's why there are many elementary academies in the city that specializes in preparing the students for the tests, much like the tuition classes that prepare students for university entrance tests in Lorist's previous world.

Chapter 27
Final Preparations

"Thanks brother. Just let him work as your personal assistant and teach him some swordsmanship whenever you're free. While that kid is wild and stubborn, he's not that bad and gives it his best when he works. I'll feel more assured if he's by your side and not causing me any more worry," said Els with a face filled with gratitude.

Lorist waved his hand and said, "Hehe, no worries. It's not like we're strangers. Not to mention, I have just moved into the Gold ranked instructor residential area recently. Given the size of my new home, I could really use some extra help. It's thanks to you I won't have to hire anyone else."

"Oh, I feel like I'm forgetting something else..." Having thanked Lorist for agreeing to take that kid in, Els seemed like he was trying hard to recall something else.

"Hmm... When I was walking past here with Jindoz, Uncle Girald told me that you've returned. That's when I decided to come over. What did Jindoz say when he heard about your coming back? I think it was about brother Laude... The next district... Representative Wombart... Could it be about that perverted old freak!? Ah! I finally remember!" exclaimed Els.

"Hehe, my dear brother Locke, did you bring the goods I asked for back from your Relic Islands expedition?" said Els with a wide grin as he stretched out both his hands.

"Oh, you mean the Terrence-donkey Whip? I went through great lengths to get that for you... But that uncle of yours confiscated it. He said that you often neglect your training and play with women all day long and was quite pissed that you even dared to attempt to consume aphrodisiac... That's why he took that with him and asked you to go get it from him yourself," said Lorist as he repeated what Charlando had said to him.

"What? My uncle has the goods?" said Els as he started in shock. "Nonsense! My sexual prowess is still robust and well! That meddling old man... Causing trouble for me all the time... I actually got that for that lewd old man Representative Wombart! Now that the other two districts' boss, Isidor, is retiring, I have negotiated with him to take over the management of the districts. I only need to satisfy the council representatives'

regulations to get things going."

Seeing Els freak out like that, Lorist laughed for a while and continued, "Sigh, Els... Didn't the city management set a rule that one syndicate cannot be in charge of more than three districts? You already have three under your wing, now you're thinking of taking up another two? Why would the city council agree to that?"

"This was all Jindoz's idea. He suggested that we have brother Laude take action and have half of our crew and Isidor's crew to form another syndicate to manage the extra districts. On the surface, it will be managed by two different syndicates. However, it will actually operate as one," explained Els all in one go. "That Wombart fellow is really hard to handle... Even though I've given him a hundred gold coins, he still won't promise me anything and only said that he'll give it a try. Later, after I heard about the miraculous effects of the Terrence-dokey Whip from one of my subordinates, I asked you to bring one back from the Relic Islands. I had really hoped that after consuming that medicine, Wombart would die after playing around with more women than he can handle."

While Els casually cursed Wombart to death, he naturally didn't mean it literally. If that were to happen, it would only cause more trouble to him and force him to bribe some other council representative instead.

Lorist thought for a bit and came up with an idea. When he purchased the Terrence-donkey Whip from the Relic Islands, he had heard that only a small, thin piece was enough for a man to get it up throughout the whole night. The amount he brought back was enough for 200 such slices. Lorist planned to cut them up into pieces, pack ten or so slices inside nice glass jars and pickle them with some other medicinal wines to make it a premium and expensive looking novelty that would also serve as an excellent as a gift. The most important part was only putting enough of the donkey whip in each jar, unlike Els, who had planned to give the whole thing to Wombart. The whole thing was enough to last a person for three whole years! It would be extremely hard to ask favors from Wombart anymore if his expectations rise from that extravagant gift.

"Wow, why didn't I think of that? I didn't know that you're quite the schemer yourself," said Els happily. Lorist's suggestion opened up a whole window of opportunity for him. He instantly came up with an even grander plan, "Maybe we can start a whole business out of this... Next time, we'll send people to the Relic Islands to buy up all of these Terrence-donkey Whips, even if they're at three times market price, slice them up, and package them nicely before selling it out! It would definitely be a money-

making business. Only, procuring glass jars would be a little troublesome."

Lorist nodded at Els's concern. Only two kinds of glass could be found on the Grindia Continent. The first type was green glass: it was a murky green-colored glass that doesn't have good transparency and was commonly used for making windows due to its low price point. The other type, oil glass, was far clearer and transparent and was usually picked to make glassware such as wine glasses and bowls. Though, the price of that material was far more expensive in comparison.

These two types of glass were products produced only by the Forde Trade Union's southern neighbor, the Teribo Kingdom, because the material required to make the glass could only be found at the largest quartz mountain within the kingdom. The production method of either glass was a national secret and was tightly guarded to prevent leakage. According to the legends, back in the magic civilization, the magi used their mystical powers to produce glass which far exceeds glass today in terms of quality. It was a shame that the techniques used in the past had vanished in the end days of the civilization.

One magus, however, had managed to devise a method to produce green glass and oil glass without magical formations and passed the secrets of its creation to his descendants. When the Teribo Kingdom was formed, the descendants of the magus gave the production method to the king and had their family status elevated to that of a duke's. The Teribo Kingdom had been exporting their glass products to the rest of the continent ever since.

After inspecting the two types of glass, Lorist thought that the reason green glass had such a high opacity was due to the impurities that were not removed during the production process. Why then, had the glass production techniques of green glass not improved over the years to get rid of that problem? The fact that the quality of green glass had remained unchanging all these years was an intriguing mystery.

As for oil glass, it was something that Lorist had never seen before even in his past life. It looked a lot like the common, clear glass in his previous world, but it had a 'slippery' quality that caused nothing to be able to stick on it. It was said that the 'slipperiness' of the glass made it the ideal material to make laboratory apparatus for the magi given that it was easy to wash and clean. The see through quality of the glass also made it easy for the magi to observe the changes going on within the apparatus.

In one of the experiments Lorist did, he tried to coat an oil glass test tube with a strong

adhesive. After it dried up, he picked the test tube up and gave it a light shake or two. It only took a while before the dried adhesive fell off the test tube like crumpled old paper.

This peculiar quality also caused Lorist quite a headache when he was deliberating between the two types of glass to use for the windows of the boutique. Green glass couldn't display their clothes with their full glory while oil glass couldn't be easily made into flat sheets. Lorist only managed to solve the problem by asking a few craftsmen to carve up a piece of large crystal into a flat sheet to be used as the window and used the crystal shards as decorations for the chandeliers inside the shop, spending more than ten gold coins in the process.

"Currently, oil glass test tubes usually cost around one large silver each while oil glass tea sets can go up to one gold coin per set. Maybe you can go ask someone to make a jar prototype and ask for a price quotation from the producers in the Teribo Kingdom? As long as it's lower than 1 gold coin each, it will be fine. You can just consider that part of the production cost. In marketing, the most important part is the packaging. As long as it looks expensive, people will be willing to pay a high price for it," said Lorist.

"Hm, now that you said it, it does seem like it will sell well. Alright, I'll be heading straight to the inn just in case that old guy uses up that medicine!" Els said impatiently and prepared to rush over to the inn to demand that item from Charlando.

Lorist laughed as he called out, "Come on, Charlando won't need something like that! While he may be quite harsh on you at times, he's actually looking out for you in his own way. Oh, and don't forget to hand 18 gold coins over to him when you take it. I'll get it from him later."

"Oh, there's one thing that you might have not heard about yet. Last month, that old uncle of mine actually proposed to Louise, and she agreed! In another two months, she'll be the female owner of the Red Grace Inn. To think that 60 year old man would decide to settle down, the fact that Louise agreed despite their age difference was surprising too. That's why I was so worried about leaving the aphrodisiac with him!" exposed Els.

"Is that true?" Lorist instantly sat straight.

"Of course. Everyone already knows since a month ago. Maybe they just forgot to bring

it up while you were there," said Els.

Lorist sincerely felt happy for Louise when he heard that she was going to settle down. While Charlando was already rather old, he was a pretty good man who was still in decent physical shape given his abilities as a Gold ranked swordsman. Maybe Els would have another younger cousin brother or sister in the years to come.

"It seems that I'll have to go look for a congratulatory gift for the two of them," muttered Lorist.

"There's no rush, the ceremony's in another two months. Help me pick one out for them too. I'm too busy to be bothered with stuff like that," Els said. "I'm going to the inn now. Will you be tagging along?"

"Nope, I'll spend one last night in this room. Do send 2 coachmen here tomorrow to help me move my stuff back to the academy and get that kid who wants to learn swordsmanship to come along too."

"Alright, I'll take my leave now then." Els slipped into the shadows silently and the room returned to its former tranquility, as if no one else other than Lorist had been here all along.

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The sky slowly brightened as the city dwellers woke from their slumber one by one. The streets slowly filled with people and horses as Morante City started the day with renewed vigor.

Lorist slept on the table throughout the night. He let out a smile after seeing the moonlight recede from the room as the twin moons disappeared in the sky whilst the bright morning rays shone through the horizon.

It was a new day for a fresh start.

The voice of servants talking could be heard downstairs. After a while, a knock resounded on Lorist's door.

Lina came in with another female servant. The two of them served Lorist a large helping of breakfast just like they did for the past three years.

Lina seemed like she cried for the whole night given her puffy eyes.

The other servant exited the room and left Lina and Lorist in the room together.

Lorist looked at those puffy eyes and resisted the urge to laugh. "Why didn't you rub your eyes with some eggs? It helps with the puffiness."

"I'm alright. I was just too busy that I forgot," said Lina as she turned away, not wanting Lorist to look at her face.

"Sigh..." Lorist stood up, went to his bookshelf and took out a thick book that was wrapped in a dust jacket. The book was titled 'The Fantastical Adventures of Knight Mingorak'. It seemed to be a fictional adventure tale.

Placing the book on the table in front of Lina, Lorist said, "Here, it's for you."

Seeing Lina's confused expression, Lorist explained as he laughed, "I know that you don't like to read novels like these just like your mistress. Just open the book up and you'll be surprised."

Carefully prying the book open, Lina clasped her mouth in surprise. Within it was pages and pages filled with designs for women's clothing.

"All of these were drawn by me during the past year. The mistress wanted to put all of these to production, but she was stopped by me. That's because if all of them were to be released to the market at once, it would cause lots of confusion and we'll lose the ability to control the fashion trends, which will ultimately lead to a decrease in profit. That's why for the past few years, I only allowed a little over than a hundred designs to be released, some of which that had undergone the creative changes that you lot have made. Within this book is 300 or so designs which haven't seen the light of day yet. I'm giving them to you, Lina."

"Does... does the mistress know about this?" said Lina as she hugged the book in her chest as if she was afraid that it would be taken from her.

"She knows, but she'll never expect that I've drawn so many. Do you see the mess in the room? That was all created by the mistress when she tried to search for the designs while I was away. Little did she know that they were hidden on the bookshelf, right under her nose. She didn't ask me for them last night though... Maybe she thinks that I still hate her," said Lorist with a hint of bitter pain as he let out a light laugh.

"What I will tell you later should not be made known to anyone aside from your father. Do you understand?" said Lorist as he looked deeply into Lina's eyes.

"I... I swear..." said Lina as she stuttered.

"Tell your father, Knight Somm, that I think that depending on the Lorf house is not a wise move. The mistress was willing to marry into the house because she thought they would be able to protect the Windsor house. If the Lorf house's intention is to take advantage of the Windsor house, however, then there will be nothing else for the Windsor house to rely on. This was especially the case given how your mistress sold away the businesses she had in Morante City. At this point, we can only hope that the Lorf Marquis truly loves her and doesn't have any hidden agendas.

"Your mistress told me yesterday that the marquis had a method of taking over the dominions of the four houses that were the enemies of the Windsors and would give the them half of the dominion that they have obtained. If that succeeds, then you might even become a noble yourself one day. Tell your father that he can agree to cooperate with the Lorf house on everything but these two factors.

"First, never let the 11-year-old Windsor young master accept knight education and training from the Lorf house just in case they plan to harm him under the pretense of an accident. Always let the young master be by your father's side and send him to Morante City for his studies when he matures. Second, when the young master grows up, the Lorf house might suggest a political marriage between the two families. To prevent that from happening, tell your father to prepare a suitable partner for the young master early on so that the Lorf house can't take advantage of that.

"The last thing is about you, Lina. Don't let anyone know that I've given you those designs, not even Suzy or the young mistress. This time, the young mistress plans to restart her business in the Jigda Kingdom with the aid of the Lorf house. I'm worried that they are targeting the young mistress's apparel business as well. Should that happen one day, these designs will help you and her start over from scratch. I'm afraid that you'll be in danger if word about you having the designs get out. That's why, don't tell anyone else, alright?"

Lina nodded fervently with her face flushed red as tears welled up in her eyes.

"If the Lorf house truly doesn't have any bad intentions towards the Windsors, then you can give the young mistress one or two designs once a month and tell her that you

drew them yourself. It's okay. I've seen how talented you can be when you made the creative alterations here and there. When designing something, the most important thing is to have originality and individuality. As long as you can make your name as a talented fashion designer, it wouldn't be suspicious for you to release more of the designs gradually in the future."

Looking outside the window, Lorist said, "Oh, the horse carts are already here. It's time I bid you goodbye. Did you understand what I said just now?"

"Yes, I have, master Locke. I will do as you say."

Chapter 28
Selling Books And Requesting Help

The three horse carts quickly arrived at the Dawn Academy Gold ranked instructor residential area. Lorist stood waiting at the gate of house no. 35. *It seems that Kelly has awoken and already started cleaning the place up. I better not give her any extra trouble.* Lorist instructed the three coachmen to move the books and some other stuff to the stables in the yard.

Giving each coachman three small silvers and thanking them before they left, Lorist looked at the two stables stacked full with books and laughed. It seemed that he would have to spend quite some time to organize all that. Lorist has been using a lot of the money he earned from mercenary missions to purchase books. Before he noticed, his collection had already numbered more than a thousand and was enough for him to start his own mini library.

However, these books were unlike those that were published on a large scale in his previous life. There was no such thing as paper in Grindia and any kind of reading material was made with sheepskin or some other kind of beast skin while the contents were almost always copied by hand. That's why the prices of books were rather rare in the market and often quite expensive. For example, each of the volumes of "The War of the Gods" trilogy that he had collected weighed more than 2.5 kg. He had spent his hard-earned 3 gold coins to purchase them as he really wanted to understand more about the magic civilization.

There was a small study on the second floor of his new house, but the room wasn't as big as the one at Wenna's place. Lorist sorted his book into several categories: history, geography, culture, and general knowledge, which he would later move into the room. The remaining ones about legends, fiction and poems would be placed at the two big bookshelves in the lounge. He made a mental note to pay more attention to the books he would buy in the future. It wasn't uncommon for merchants to give the same book a new title and cover and resell it as another book. Lorist himself had fallen for this trick before a number of times in the past and only found out when he read the book at home.

Having greeted Kelly, who was busy cleaning up the furniture, he carried the books up to the second floor. Just as he was about to enter the study, he saw the door to his bedroom ajar with a fatty laying on his bed fast asleep.

Sol, that fatty had already beaten me to my new bed… Having been given a kick by Lorist, Charade drowsily got up and said, "What's wrong with you, Locke? Why would you kick me awake?"

Lorist said, "You should know best. What are you doing sleeping in my room during the day? Don't you have more important matters to handle at the Enforcement Division?"

Charade only just noticed that he had been sleeping on Lorist's brand new bed and chuckled. "Even I would be worn out, you know? These days affairs of the academy has left me so busy that I just couldn't resist trying out your new bed here. Little did I know I would fall asleep just like that."

"What business do you have with me?" asked Lorist.

"Sigh, what else could it be but the matter about the Swordsmanship Society? Brother, you really have to help me out here. The Enforcement Division has been so busy that two of its members even fell asleep in the middle of patrolling the academy yesterday! At first, we thought it was some kind of enemy attack until we noticed that they were only asleep… Surely from that you can see how tired I am, can't you?"

"What about the society? How can I help with that?"

"Siiigh…" Charade took out a deep breath and said, "Brother, don't tell me you forgot about the plan that you have devised yourself. Just before you left for the Relic Islands, I gave it my all and finally convinced the higher-ups of the academy to permit the formation of the Swordsmanship Society, and that the Enforcement Division would be allowed to use the elites in the society as backup members in case we need more help. I'm super short on staff right now, so why haven't you settled the matters of the society and quickly send someone over to help?"

Oh, I did say something like that. Scratching his head apologetically, Lorist recalled the scene when he drank with Charade when he complained about how the stingy academy higher-ups were, unwilling to assign more staff to the Enforcement Division that only numbered a measly number of 80 and was in charge of managing the

discipline of the student body as well as patrol the academy grounds.

Citing the number of students in the academy to be more than 5000 people, Charade said that his division didn't even have one-fiftieth the number of people of the student body and stressed that if he did not have enough members in a time of urgency, then all hell would break lose.

Lorist had rebuked Charade for not being aware of the happenings in the academy. He mentioned that there was a group of students who wanted to form a society that researched sword techniques, but the formation of the society was rejected out of consideration that a training venue, club funds as well as support for unexpected situations would need to be provided. The students stirred up quite some trouble and it was rumored that they were gathering quite a lot of support. There was a policy in the academy that stated if there was a demand for a society to be formed from more than one-tenth of the student body, the academy administration must agree to give their cooperation.

Lorist suggested Charade to go negotiate with the academy. Since the society was going to be formed either way given the growth of the numbers of prospective members, why don't the academy administration strike first and make the Swordsmanship Society a subordinate organization of the Enforcement Division? This way, it would solve the problem of the lack of staff members for the Enforcement Division.

Charade was elated and praised Lorist for his wit for thinking up such a scheme in almost no time and started working on that plan just as Lorist left for the Relic Islands.

However, Lorist could never have expected that Charade would really get the administration's approval with the plan that he himself had thought up on a whim. To appease the administration, Charade had to change something — the selection of the society chairman was entirely at the academy's discretion — which essentially handed the management of the society to the administration. Nonetheless, the chairman also had to be someone with the necessary skills to be recognized and accepted by the members of the society itself. Charade brought the train of thought to its logical conclusion and nominated Lorist to be the chairman.

Wait, I am the chairman?! Lorist just recalled Academy Head Levins saying something about drafting out the regulations of the Swordsmanship Society at the meeting yesterday. *Sol, are they trying to work me to death…*

Lorist waved his hands and said, “Fatty, it isn’t that I don’t want to help you. It’s that I have just recently got back from the trip and had to move my stuff over here from the young mistress’s house. That’s why I didn’t have any time for the matters of the society. Additionally, I would need another few days to settle in and finish moving and focus on the dueling that is to come within the near future! I hardly have any free time! Why don’t you just delay that for a bit…”

Charade was almost at the point of tears, “Locke, you can’t do this to me… You’re essentially burning me on a stake here! In a few days, I would look so barely human that you might mistake me for a zombie… That is especially with the case after we posted the duel notices all over the place. The incidents in the academy has risen so much and further added to my burden. The members of the Enforcement Division are already slaving away like dogs. You can’t just ignore us and let us be!”

“You reap what you sow. Who asked you to push the position of the chairman onto me? Also, weren’t you the one who was so enthusiastically putting up those notices all over the place? You really deserve nothing short of a death from overworking.”

Having heard that, Charade came to a realization that he himself was the one who was responsible for Lorist’s troubles and tried to butter him up. “Oh, okay… It’s all my fault. I didn’t think that you would be overwhelmed like this. But you still have to understand my woes. If you don’t become the chairman, then there’s no way the administration will allow the society to be formed! The students wouldn’t be satisfied with anyone else as the chairman either! Only you can help our Enforcement Division solve our staffing crisis! As for the notices, you really can’t blame me for that. It’s all that old fox’s fault. If he were serious, he could easily grasp my weaknesses and make me suffer for them! As much as I’d like to spare you trouble, it really is beyond me…”

Lorist said, “Don’t give me that crying look. Sigh, let me think…”

Charade’s expression instantly changed. “Okay. Take your time to think up something that’ll get me out of this mess.” As he said that, he took out a book and used it to fan Lorist. “Tell me if you ever need anything. If you need someone to help, I’ll send some over to you. If you need money… Even I can’t help you with that.”

Lorist mulled for a while before saying, “How about this, let’s get Terman to help out. He’s a loyal and helpful friend who has a clear head. I shall appoint him as the vice-chairman of the society and assign the management tasks to him. Note this down. Let Terman form a committee for the Swordsmanship Society and get Yuriy and Steve to

join it, followed by another three committee members of your choice. And isn't there seven student leaders among the student body? Get them to join the committee as well and ask them to pick another 3 members. Including Terman and I, we would have a total of 17 committee members.

"Tell them that I will be the one to pick the committee members for this term and say that they will be allowed to nominate their own candidates three years later and let 12 with the most votes ones take over the positions at the committee. The Enforcement Division also gets to pick three people for the position of a committee member who will manage the events and activities of the society as well as the patrols and other tasks. After notifying the members I've appointed, get them to come up with a set of standards and regulations the society will operate by and don't let them out of the discussion room until they have this settled.

"Other than that, tell Terman that he only has to oversee the proceedings and don't have to engage in the discussion. Let the other 15 committee members discuss among themselves. You can make your demands known to your nominees so that they can fight for them in your interests. When they come up with a draft, tell them that each of the members have to suggest five elite students and fifty of them will be selected to become the reserve members of the Enforcement Division.

"Also, since the Swordsmanship Society's authority is technically in the hands of the academy administration, the academy has the obligation to provide funds, helpers, as well as allowance to make up for the members' time and effort. The chairman, vice-chairman as well as the 15 committee members should each get a remuneration of 3 gold coins for their service. The main office for the society would also need twelve people manning it. Pick the staff from the members of the Swordsmanship Society and give them a monthly salary of one gold coin each. It would probably cost around 10 gold coins to run the society per month, and get the vice-chairman to be the person in charge. Don't forget to pay the reserve members of the Enforcement Division one gold coin per month as well for their services. The rest of the bonuses will be given according to individual contribution and performance.

"Additionally, every probationary member of the Swordsmanship Society have to pay a small silver for the membership fee every month while full-fledged members have to pay one large silver. The elite members don't have to pay any fee. Probationary members will be allowed to spar when swordsmanship lessons are in session as well as participate in other affiliated activities. Official members can join the parties lead by elite members to participate in mercenary missions and other adventurer activity

and half of the reward must be handed to the society. These funds will be used to run the society and its events as well as award outstanding members every year.

"Well, that's basically it. Let me reiterate, first get some people to join the committee and have them discuss the regulations of the society. Don't forget to ask them to bring up the suggestions I mentioned earlier and let me see the draft for the regulations before submitting it. I'm sure you'll have 50 reserve members by the time you finish all that within the day," concluded Lorist.

"Tsktsk," Charade clicked his tongue as he looked at the notes he had taken on the sheepskin in his hand. "Locke, you really are quite something to be able to think up such a complete plan within such a short time. I didn't even know where to start after brainstorming for three days. I'll do all that according to your instructions."

Lorist asked, "What's the schedule for my duels like?"

"It's not finalized yet. Currently, it is suggested for one dueling day to be held every two days and have each academy send twenty Silver ranked instructors during those days from the next month. We'll let them decide which academy gets to challenge first. If there are some Silver ranked instructors that weren't picked to represent the academy, they may come to challenge you on the non-dueling days, which is when we will open the challenge to any Silver ranked combatant. We're still waiting for the academies' reply," explained Charade.

"Sol, that means I won't have any rest days at all! Do you take me to be a machine?!" complained Lorist.

"About that… Haha, Brother Locke, this house is great, isn't it? The scenery is so beautiful around here. I'm so envious, Gold ranked instructors are really treated pretty well," said Charade.

"You're envious? Work that fat off your body and train hard for two years and break through to the Gold rank. Then, you will get your very own house like this one," reprimanded Lorist.

The fatty merely kept quiet and thought to himself, *so much talk even though you're just an Iron rank… It doesn't make sense!*

As the two of them went downstairs, Lorist said, "Els might pay you a visit in a day or two."

“What business does he have with me?”

“He wants to make a haul off the duels and said that you’ll get a 10% cut off the earnings.” Lorist subsequently explained the details of the plan Els suggested.

“That’s great! I’m definitely up for it. I’ve already had enough of letting that old bastard profit from all our hard work. Needless to say, I will make sure Els’s operation will run without any issues.” Charade’s eyes instantly brightened when it came to earning money.

Just when they were about to leave the house, Charade suddenly said, “It’s okay, Brother Locke. You don’t have to escort me out, I’ll take my leave myself..”

Lorist retorted, “Who’s escorting you out? I’m going outside to move the books that are still in the stable!”

Charade’s interest was roused and he followed Lorist to the wooden shed. Seeing the mountain of books on the ground, he said, “Locke, why did you spend so much money on all these books? Why don’t you start a book-renting service in the academy? I’m sure you’ll earn quite a bit of cash from that.”

Lorist shook his head and said, “I won’t be renting out my books out just to have them ruined when they’re returned to me. These books are part of my precious collection.”

Charade looked downcast and said, “That’s such a shame… All these books… Why don’t you lend some of them to me?”

“I’m not lending them out either, especially to people who don’t return things they borrow,” said Lorist.

“Then surely you can sell me a couple, right?” Charade was quite pissed as Lorist wasn’t even willing to give him some face over a few books.

“Do you have the time to read them?” Lorist looked at Charade with a suspicious gaze.

Charade’s face reddened with frustration. “Can’t I at least use them as pillows even if I don’t read them?”

“Alright, just pick any you like from that pile.”

Lorist pointed at the pile of books that were extra copies he had mistakenly purchased.

Having taken his time to pick out several books, Charade finally selected seven of them and said, “How much for these?”

“Why do I feel like you’re not buying them to read but for some other purpose?” questioned Lorist.

“Well, the bookshelf in my office is pretty empty, so it helps to have a few books up there to show how much of a cultured and learned person I am.” Charade revealed his true intentions frankly without a shred of embarrassment.

Shaking his head in abandon, Lorist looked at those books and came up with a fair price. “It’ll be three gold coins and eight large silvers, no negotiation. I’m already selling these at a loss.”

Charade understood that the price was indeed pretty reasonable, as it would normally cost seven gold coins in the market for the books he had picked. “Alright, that price will do.”

Stretching his hand into his pouch for quite some time, Charade placed eight large silvers in Lorist’s hand. “Alright, I’ve already paid you eight coins out of eleven. I’m sure you won’t be so desperate to ask me to pay the remaining three. See you, brother.”

Charade quickly ran off with the stack of books in his arms.

Lorist only stared with a dumbfounded face…

Chapter 29
Settling Bills at The Inn

It was dawn and Lorist was training with his upper body bared at the yard. At the moment, he was practicing one of the core foundational teachings of the Aquametal Technique, the 18 Stances of the Savage Tiger. While the name sounded pretty traditional and awkward, it was a set of highly fatal unarmed fighting moves. While learning the basics was easy, actually training in the moves were hard. The style attempted to condense the essence of a tiger's movements into 18 stances, such as when a tiger descends from the mountains, stalks its prey, engages in combat and goes in for the kill.

Aside from that, the Aquaheart School's other two core basics were the 18 Stances of the Aquametal Sword and the 18 Moves of Wave-walking. The former was a set of 18 foundational sword movements while the latter was a set of movement techniques that enhanced one's footwork that emphasized on the coordination of one's perception, mind and body.

According to his grandfather in his past life, the Aquametal School originated from the Five Phases School of the dynasty of the Southern Song. One of their ancestors had found the teachings of the school to be overly complicated and had created a new set of simplified techniques with its main inspiration from the water and metal phases, thus forming the new Aquametal School. The principle behind the teachings of the Aquametal School was for the practitioner to be sharp as a metal blade, have unbeatable force, as well as be unstoppable and incessant as the flow of water. It remained that way until the post-revolutionary era in China during the 1910s, when firearms and cannons were starting to gain popularity in the country, when the elders of the Aquametal School decided to invert those principles and made the style an art that was as sturdy as a mountain that even lightning couldn't faze and strike explosively like the force of the waterfall.

Engrossed in his training, Lorist repeatedly executed the 18 forms in sequence for three times to the point when his body was almost letting out steam before he returned to a neutral position to wipe off his sweat. Training in the martial art really served as a great warm up activity in the morning; his skin was flushed red with the

improved circulation while his bones clacked and loosened as he prepared to go wash himself up.

A sound rang out from the backyard door. Lorist turned to look and saw Els clapping away as he walked closer.

“Why have you come?” Lorist asked while he looked around to see if anyone else came along with him.

Els knew why he had turned his head around to look like that and said grumpily, “That damned kid didn’t want to come along. After hearing that you were only an Iron rank, he said that he wasn’t willing to learn swordsmanship from you. He even bragged that he would be able to beat you down when he gets to the Iron rank himself within two years. That little rascal really doesn’t what’s good for him…”

“Hehe,” laughed Lorist. He, on the other hand, didn’t care about how the others saw him. He had only accepted Els’s request to take on a disciple because he owed Els a favor. In actuality, he was delighted that the other party had saved him quite some trouble.

“This new place of yours is pretty nice, if only a little too quiet. Why don’t I send two serving girls here to attend to you? They can take care of the house during the day and warm your bed during the night. I’ll definitely make sure they serve you however you want! Don’t worry, they’ll definitely be beauties, I assure you,” said Els as he walked around the lounge, checking out Lorist’s new home.

“Call it off. I need it to be quiet and calm whenever I train in the sword. I can’t afford to have two women yapping away at me when I’m preparing for the duels. Don’t blame me for losing during the duels when the time comes,” said Lorist as he refused Els’s offer.

“Then we’ll leave this for another day. The duels are your priority now. Oh, what were you training in just now in the yard? I think I saw a magical beast before my eyes for a moment there,” asked Els, intrigued.

“Oh, that was a body training method of my family. My ancestors analyzed the ways in which magical beasts fought and came up with a set of movements that mimicked their forms to raise the body’s coordination and reaction ability, further increasing the practitioner’s skills in unarmed combat.”

“Oh,” Els stopped asking as he understood that training methods like these were usually hereditary family secrets that could not simply be told to others.

“Do you have anything to do here at the academy this early in the morning?” asked Lorist.

“Sigh, let’s not talk about that already… How is it still early? Yesterday, I brought some ale and meat to see the fatty but he put my ale away and brought a barrel of fruit wine that he said he had just brewed. That wine really tasted really strong and thick… With him recommending it to me so enthusiastically, I couldn’t exactly let him down and not drink any either, so I downed several cups before I got myself drunk. I woke up this morning with a serious hangover and only managed to properly get rid of the drowsiness after drinking tons of water. Even now I still feel worn out… Charade had already gone out first thing in the morning and left me a memo that asked us to go to the Red Grace Inn later tonight to talk about the betting operation,” recalled Els with a hint of frustration.

Lorist tried his best to hold back his laughter as he had heard Charade say that he had discovered a number of berry plants at a corner of the newly-acquired Yellow Ribbon Academy that tasted strong and sour, they were left alone from the preying hands of the students of the academy. However, he was like a man who came upon a treasure chest and picked all of them to try to brew them into alcohol. It’s a shame that his brewing skills were poor and the liquor he had produced tasted rather poor; Lorist instantly spat it out upon taking a sip. Who would’ve expected Els to manage to drink a few cups of it… Lorist really respected him for his gut.

“Well, I originally wanted to invite you to come have a drink with us, but Charade said that you have been quite busy moving your stuff around these two days and wanted to let you rest…” complained Els.

Sol, the reason he didn’t invite me was because he was afraid that I’d go collect the rest of the gold coins he owes me! For the past two days, in fear of being asked to pay the rest of the money for the books, Charade had strived to avoid meeting Lorist face to face and had somebody else inform Lorist on certain matters in his place. Lorist decided to go to Charade’s office and reclaim the books the day after.

“Oh, and Louise asked me yesterday if you would still want to have the room at the inn reserved for you. And, you better go collect the reward money for the requests you have completed during your expedition to the Relic Islands. She has also collected

your clothes from the laundry and has packed them away from you and also asked me to tell you to not forget your promise to her," reminded Els as he recalled his visit to the inn the day before.

Lorist thought for a bit but still couldn't remember what he promised Louise. Turning around, he asked, "A promise? Why don't I remember anything like that? Do you know what it's about?"

"How would I know? You just have to go there to find out. I really can't think of anything else right now, the headache is killing me. Locke, let me sleep on your couch for a bit…" Unable to hold on, Els collapsed on the couch and instantly fell into the embrace of sleep.

……

At night, the Red Grace Inn was filled with a merry atmosphere thanks to all the customers who were gathered there to enjoy a good time and savor delicious meals.

With a large cup of blackcurrant ale in his hand, Lorist sat at the counter and chatted along with old man Charlando.

"Nineteen requests fulfilled with the total reward going up to 139 gold Fordes, 13 large silvers and 4 small silvers. The inn will be collecting a 5% fee of 7 gold Fordes as well as 5 large silvers and 3 small silvers for your expenses and the room rent, which leaves you with 132 gold Fordes, 8 large silvers and 1 small silver. Oh, and, I almost forgot about the 18 gold coins Els owes you for the Terrence Donkey-whip. Will you leave it here on your tab or do you want to collect it right now?"

"I'll just leave it with you for now. Seeing them drinking away so merrily, I might have to pay for their rooms if they're too drunk to go back. Just count the expenses for the night on my tab, lest Els causes more trouble for you by skipping out on the payment," Lorist said as he pointed towards three tables at the corner of the inn where Els and the others from the academy were seated. Charade drank away with abandon after hearing that he wouldn't have to pay a single coin for the night.

"Well, that's okay by me. How's the operation going?" asked Charlando.

"For now, it has been decided that I will be getting a 20% cut with another 10% going to Charade and the others from the academy. Deducting the costs and bribes for the other inn owners and syndicate bosses, Els would gain about 30% of the profit as well.

I really hope that I will be able to make quite a bit this time so that I can buy myself some property in the city just in case. Honestly, old Char, you know that I don't have any lofty ambitions or anything. However, I really have no say in this matter as it was all the fault of that old bastard academy head. Who knows how else he would exploit me in the future… I better start saving up and plan to leave the academy. After all, I've already graduated from there long ago. At least, I can make a decent living by collecting rent if I own some real estate in the city…" Lorist sounded like he was a little drunk, given how he had casually talked about the hidden desire in his heart.

"If you really think that staying at the academy is a pain, you might as well get out of there. Locke, given your abilities, you're much better off as a full time mercenary, living freely without being subjected to the whims of others. Just look at the earnings you've got from the trip to the Relic Islands. That alone should amount to more than 60 gold Fordes after deducting your costs. As long as you do something like that once a year, that'll be more than enough. Or, you could always get a few close friends and form a mercenary troupe." Charlando was of the same opinion that the academy was going a little too far by having Lorist fight all those duels without first discussing it with him.

Lorist laughed heartily at how Charlando was still hung up on the notion of reforming his band of mercenaries and unconsciously pushed his hopes onto him. "Hehe, old man, things aren't as simple as they seem. While being a mercenary certainly allowed one to live freely, it wouldn't be an easy life either, having to camp out in the wilds and what not. Plus, it's much riskier to go on such expeditions compared to those that are organized by the academy. Additionally, do you know that I'm a dual Gold ranked instructor at the academy? I get paid 30 gold Fordes a month there while Instructor Klaude, whose salary is the second highest in the academy, only gets 20. I can only force myself to go along with that old bastard's plans given the benefits that I enjoy by being an instructor of the academy. Do you think that I will be so willing to part with a 30-gold-coin monthly salary?"

"The heck! Your annual earnings exceed the yearly profit of my inn! The academy really is spoiling you! It makes me want to get a position at the academy as well," said Charlando as he swore. Before, he was under the impression that 60 gold Fordes was quite a big haul for Lorist. But after hearing about how he could earn that kind of money within two months, it seemed that he wouldn't be so willing to resign from his position at the academy and become a full time mercenary.

"Oh, that's right, I heard that you've proposed to Louise while I was away? I haven't congratulated the two of you yet. I'll definitely get a nice gift for you during the

ceremony. Then again, why did you want to settle down all of the sudden? I thought you had resolved to live out the rest of your life single," said Lorist to Charlando.

"Well, it's nothing big. I just suddenly felt that it would be very lonely living out my older years alone. Also, Louise has already been working at the inn for more than ten years… To think that the 18-year-old lass from that time had already turned 28… Given that her parents had already passed away and how she isn't willing to go back to live with her brother's family, she plans to continue working at the inn. It was then when I decided that we might as well get married, so I proposed to her and she accepted right away. Oh, I remember that she said that she said that she had some business with you and is waiting for you at the room you rented upstairs. Go on, it's definitely gonna be something good," said Charlando as he winked at Lorist a few times with a weird expression.

"What the heck is with the look on your face?" Lorist finished the rest of his ale and headed for the stairs.

Then again, old Char doesn't know that this trip to the Relic Islands didn't cost me much either. The beast skins that I brought back wasn't purchased from someone else but was something I had hunted and collected myself. I bet he doesn't know that I can easily handle those high-ranked magical beasts… Hmm, which room was it again? What did Louise need to see me for? I really can't remember… Lorist mulled about these thoughts as he climbed up the stairs and examined the hallway.

It's this one, Lorist thought as he rubbed his face awake before knocking on the door.

Upon entering the room, he discovered that there was another voluptuous young woman in the room apart from Louise.

Seeing Lorist come in, Louise exclaimed joyfully, "Locke, she's the girl from my village that I told you about the other day. Molly here is going to be a serving girl for the inn from today onwards. It's actually her first time so go easy on her, alright?"

Lorist was suddenly struck with realization as he recalled the conversation he had with Louise the other day. It seemed that he didn't reject the offer outright and Louise had taken the silence as a yes. Almost fainting, Lorist thought that it couldn't be helped now that they were this far into it. Otherwise Louise would berate him for being stingy about paying two measly gold coins.

“Um, nice to meet you…” greeted Lorist to the girl with a slighty blushing face. The girl checked Lorist out from top to bottom boldly before smiling and nodding timidly, obviously satisfied at the man who was going to be her first.

Louise clapped her hands and said, “Alright, I won’t be bothering you lot now. The bath water is already prepared. Molly, make sure you give Locke a good time and don’t forget what you have learned at the shrine. Use all the techniques to please him and he’ll reward you for it.”

After Louise left, the round-faced Molly graciously invited Lorist to go into the tub as she stripped every article of clothing off him. Just as Lorist was about to enter the bath, she suddenly remembered something and took out a vial from her clothes that contained a mysterious red liquid and drank all of it up.

“What did you just drink?” asked Lorist, curious.

“It’s the Elixir of Mishla,” replied Molly.

“Oh,” answered Lorist, already knowing what that liquid was for.

Mishla, the Goddess of Desire and Pleasure, was the youngest daughter of the Solar War God Singwa and the Bloodmoon Goddess Sufanna who was infamous for her capricious temperament. Legend says that she resided in a haven that was filled with handsome men and beautiful women that lived their lives to the fullest there without any worry or care. It was believed that those who prayed to Mishla would enter that very paradise and gain an eternal life of bliss upon their deaths.

To allow the believers of Mishla to revel in their carnal desires without worry, the goddess herself created an elixir that allowed a woman to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh without getting pregnant. Should a person who has used the elixir wish to give birth once again, a different potion could be purchased from the shrine to restore fertility to one’s body three months after consuming it.

However, the Elixir of Mishla didn’t have any effect on those who have already given birth before. This potion has helped Mishla gain a large following of believers and profited the goddess’s shrine immensely to the point where it became one of the richest shrines on the continent of Grindia.

“Why have you decided to become a serving girl?” asked Lorist, lying on the bed with both his hands supporting his head on the pillow, looking at the girl take the his

hardness into the midst of her own soft being.

“Ouch, it hurts…” The girl let out a soft cry as she sat there, stiffened. She started to move after resting for a few moments.

“I…. I want to earn… 20 gold coins to… buy ten acres of farmland… in my village… That will, b-be my dowry…” replied the girl, stammering as she struggled to move. The pain slowly faded and the pleasure soon took over, causing her to let out involuntary cries of gratification.

Lorist also gradually lost himself in the pleasure as he had not touched any other woman ever since the last time he had spent a night with the young mistress approximately one year ago. Having been aroused by the young woman’s movements, he got up to push her down and engaged in rough, passionate intercouse…

The morning of the next day, Lorist woke up refreshed and energized and went downstairs to order a hearty serving of breakfast. Having spent much of the night doing that vigorous activity, he was prepared to eat up and recover his stamina. It was then when Charlando brought him yesterday’s bil…

Sol… Els, you better watch out… Lorist thought as he grinded his teeth.

After hearing that Lorist would be paying the night before, the gang stopped drinking blackcurrant ale and instead ordered two bottles of fruit wine each!

Sheesh, that fatty really is going too far…

Charade even took a barrel of ale as well as two bottles of fruit wine home with him after breakfast…

It can’t be… I’m sure Terman isn’t that kind of person…

Lorist couldn’t imagine a person like Terman asking to spend a night with two girls after he got a little drunk.

That’s it. I’m not covering anybody else’s bills anymore…

Chapter 30
Battle Force Awakening Course

Lorist took out the Morante Daily News and the Falik Merchant Times from his post box and discovered that there was another letter within in. It was sent to him by the academy to notify him that the yearly Battle Force awakening course was going to begin soon and that he was appointed the head instructor of the course. It also contained the details of the venue and the time the class is held.

Head instructor? What kind of position is that? It's not like I get paid extra for it… I guess it's gonna be roughly the same as the last time when they sent a few other instructors to help me out. Lorist shook his head and didn't take the notice to heart. He went back to his room and looked at the calendar. The next month was coming in several days and the duels were his priority now. Although he was confident in remaining victorious, he couldn't slack off either as he had to make sure his body was in peak condition for the duels.

Tomorrow's the 15th of the 2nd month and there's still twenty days to the 3rd month. I should do my best to tell the other assistant instructors what to do within the next ten days and rest up after that to prepare for the duels, thought Lorist as he looked at the ornate bronze calendar he had on the wall.

When he had just arrived at Grindia, Lorist was quite unaccustomed to the date system of this world. Just like Earth, Grindia had 12 months within a year and every day was 24 hours. The difference was, each year was 423 days long and this had caused Lorist to mess up the dates very often when he was taking his accounting course at the academy, often resulting in him being screamed angrily at by his accounting professor. "Where has the other five days gone? Huh? Were they eaten by your dog?"

The most frustrating part of the date system in Grindia for Lorist was the existence of two different calendars.The first one was said to be used by the fairies tens of thousands of years ago which had 35 days in each month, with a total of 420 days and the other three were festival days that did not have a date. The first festival day was the day between the 35th day of the 12th month and the 1st day of the 1st month and was called the Day of Rest, or, more colloquially known as the 36th day of the 12th

month. The second festival day was on the 36th of the 5th month and it was called the Day of Bathing. Everyone on Grindia was obligated to take a bath during that day. The third festival day was the 36th day of the 9th month, the Day of Harvest. These three days were holidays on every part of Grindia.

The elegant and refined fairies naturally didn't use numbers and instead named each month after a flower. In the order from the 1st month to the 12th, they were called respectively the Redbud Month, Camellia Month, Crabapple Month, Lotus Month, Peony Month, Magnolia Month, Jasmine Month, Osmanthus Month, Yucca Month, Hibiscus Month, Chrysanthemum Month, and Plum-Blossom Month.

The idealistic fairies really caused Lorist a lot of pain and suffering; on top of the misaligned number of days, there was the name of all those months to remember! Lorist was particularly vexed with the fact until he came to a realization one day: if the Earth took 365 days to orbit the Sun, then it wouldn't be that weird if Grindia orbited its Sun at 423 days because it had a larger orbital path. From that day onwards, Lorist never got the dates of Grindia wrong again.

The second calendar was the Magi Calendar and it was used by the Magi who regarded accuracy as paragon. All the dates described with the Magi Calendar were cold, hard numbers; that was the case with the months as well. However, it was even more troublesome as each month had a different number of days. For example, the 1st month had 34 days, the 2nd had the fewest: 31 days, the 3rd had 36 days and the month with most days was the 9th month at a count of 39 days.

The humans on Grindia didn't appreciate the romantic ideals of the fairies nor were they as meticulous as the now extinct Magi, therefore it had become convention to fuse the two different systems into one which had twelve numbered months with 35 days each and adding the festival days without a date onto the month it directly came after, making a 36th day for the 5th, 9th and 12th months.

From the memories of the original owner of the body, the day he was exiled from the northern lands was the 21st day of the 6th month. He had arrived at Morante City on the 8th day of the 8th month and enrolled in the academy that day. That whole journey took more than 50 days; his hometown really was quite far from Morante City. On another note, that meant that Lorist had left his hometown for more than ten years and it has been seven years since they last contacted him. *I wonder how it is like there nowadays… Maybe I should go there during this holiday season? I think the Blackmud Marsh was near that area and a rare magical beast, the Ironspine Crocodile, lives around*

there. Its leather fetches a rather good price on the market. Should I form a team of mercenaries under an alias to go there for a visit?

A sudden strong desire to return to his homeland suddenly gripped his heart. *Sigh, let's think about that after the 8th day of the 8th month.* Having taken over the body, Lorist had inherited the remnant feelings and sentiments left behind by the original owner as well. *Oh well, since it has already been ten years, I might as well take a leave from the academy before the holiday season to go back to the north. There should be enough time that way.*

Lorist stood in front of the calendar and touched the box that had the date of the 8th day of the 8th month with his finger as he made his decision.

……

"Morning, Instructor Anfya. It's a pleasure to work with you once again. I'm sure that with your help it'll be much easier for me to organize this year's awakening course." The day after, Lorist went to the instructor's office that was situated behind the great hall of the now defunct Yellow Ribbon Academy, which was used as a teaching venue for the Battle Force awakening course, ten minutes early. Upon entering the room. he saw Anfya, who was also known as the academy's most beautiful instructor, correcting a large stack of documents at her table.

Instructor Anfya, aged 37, looked like a person who was only in her mid-twenties because of how well she took care of her body and was heralded to be the goddess of the academy by many of the male students there. Her husband was Instructor Claude, a Gold ranked instructor. Last year, Instructor Anfya had helped Lorist quite a lot as the vice head instructor of the Battle Force awakening course.

"Hey, Locke you twerp… Has your eyes been glued to the beauty over there? You didn't even notice me standing over here."

Lorist raised his head and said with surprise, "Brother Marlin, why are you here?"

Standing in front of Lorist was a large and burly man who lived at house no. 34 of the Gold ranked instructor residential area, Instructor Marlin. Lorist had gone to greet him once before on the day he moved in.

"I'm here too, Instructor Locke. It's a pleasure to meet again," a deep and low voice interjected.

Lorist turned his head to look and hastily returned the greeting, “Good to see you, Senior Hughes. Why have you come here?”

Hughes Pottermick, a Two Star Gold ranked combatant, has already been teaching in the academy for more than 30 years. Being a righteous and open-minded fellow, he was well received by most of the students at the academy.

Instructor Hughes nodded and said, “Instructor Locke, Marlin and I have been assigned by the administration to be the vice instructors of the course this year to assist you. Please don’t hesitate to inform me should you require anything done. Instructor Anfya will be the vice head instructor for the course as well.”

Lorist suddenly felt something was amiss. Turning back to look at Anfya, he asked, “Can you tell me how many people have enrolled for the course this time around?”

Instructor Anfya let out a bitter smile and pointed at the door, “Over there is a small doorway that’s connected to the platform of the great hall. Instructor Locke, feel free to go take a look.”

Sol, I’ve been taken advantage of by the academy head again… Didn’t he mention that the applicants have only risen by a small number? This is no small class… It is already a damned assembly!

Seeing the large hall packed full of students who were standing so close to each other because of the lack of space, Lorist understood that the Gold ranked instructors had been sent by the academy to accommodate for the greatly increased number of students.

Lorist rushed back to the office with a face full of sweat before asking with a troubled expression, “How many in total are there?!”

Instructor Anfya held out a stack of documents in her hand and said, “There are 879 people in total. Here’s the name list.”

Waving around the stack that was the name list, Lorist looked at Hughes and Marlin with a bitter smile. “Isn’t the academy going a little too far? In a normal Battle Force awakening course, there would be 40 students at maximum. 879 people can easily be fit into 22 of those classes! If one class required two instructors, we would need at least 44 of them! Even with you guys on board, there’s no way that we would be able to handle all the workload ourselves! The academy really is going too far. I think I

better just resign."

Marlin and Anfya were both dumbfounded at Lorist's declaration that he would resign. If he really did so and left the Battle Force awakening course to fare for itself, then the reputation of the academy would definitely be ruined. Just as the both of them wanted to try to convince him otherwise, Instructor Hughes took out a document unhurriedly and said, "Instructor Locke, this is what the academy head wanted me to pass to you. It is the contract that you have signed yourself half a year ago. It states that should you cause the academy to incur any loss as a result of going against orders, you will have to reimburse the academy two times the amount. If you retire, you'll have to pay back two times the amount of the money the students here paid, roughly tens of thousands of gold coins…"

Sol, I didn't know that the agreement I signed before going to the Relic Islands would tie me down here! Lorist was infuriated, but Instructor Hughes actually handed the contract to Lorist and said, "The academy head said that the contract that time was just a joke. Here, you can have it back."

Marlin and Anfya were anxious again. What if Lorist ran off with the contract?

Lorist was stunned to receive the agreement. *What is the old bastard's intention in handing this to me? Is he going to let me off that easily?*

Instructor Hughes took out another sheepskin parchment and said, "This is the name list of all the Silver and Iron ranked instructors. The academy head said that you can select 24 of them to join the instructor team for this Battle Force awakening course. You will be responsible for assigning tasks to them and anyone who does not obey will be sacked by the academy. Also, given that the amount of instructors available in the academy itself is insufficient, you have the authority to choose 24 outstanding students to serve as assistant instructors."

Instructors Marlin and Anfya both secretly clicked their tongues upon hearing that Lorist had been given so much authority. It cannot be understated how much the students want a position as one of the 24 assistant instructors. Even though the payment was only one gold coin a month, it was enough for one to live quite a lavish life. If they perform well and get appointed as official instructors, they will be able to earn three gold coins per month. That was a stable and high paying position for anyone to have.

Given the benefits of being an instructor, it could be said Lorist now held quite an amount of power and the students of the academy who would do anything for the positions would do anything he says.

It seems that the academy head really trusts Instructor Locke, thought Instructor Anfya.

Does the academy head have some sort of family relation with Instructor Locke? Or is he actually the academy head's illegitimate… That was Instructor Marlin's wild guess.

"Now that's much better…" said Lorist, having turned that frown on his face into a bright smile. Taking the name list, he started scribbling and marking it.

"Additionally…" Hughes handed another document over. "Due to the unexpected amount of applicants that has caused you quite some trouble, to make up for it, the academy head has allocated a budget of 150 gold coins for you to distribute to the instructor team as an added bonus. You only have to sign here."

"Hehe…" It was apparent that Lorist was in a rather good mood as he signed the document gleefully. However, he still let out a long sigh, "It really is pretty rare for the academy to be so generous…"

Instructor Anfya whispered, "I know the reason for their generosity. Ever since news got out about Instructor Locke's Battle Force awakening course boasting a 100% success rate several times in a row, the applicants this time around specified that they wanted to enter Locke's class. The academy head said that those who wanted to pick their instructor had to pay double the usual fee. All those students you see in the hall had paid two times the normal fee so that they can get a 100% assurance to awaken their Battle Force."

Ugh… Lorist was really speechless. It's no wonder that the academy head was so generous with the funding given the double fee the students paid. He even let Lorist manage the funding and staffing of the course to make sure he gives it his best to make sure everyone passes! The normal price for this course was 5 gold coins. With 879 students paying 10 gold coins each, the academy had already received an extra 4395 gold coins! With a monthly bonus of 150 gold coins, it would only amount to 900 gold coins after six months when the course ends. The academy would still earn well over 3000 gold coins. *Sol, this old bastard really has it all thought out…*

Lorist handed the name list back to Instructor Hughes and said, "I've already picked 9

instructors out of the 24. I'll let the three of you pick five as well. As for the assistant instructors, leave 9 slots for me to pick and you guys can choose the rest. Instructor Anfya, please try to select as many female instructors and student instructors as possible for this course as there is a lot of female students this time around. It would be better if we let female instructors be in charge of them.

"As for the bonus, Instructor Marlin, Instructor Hughes and I will each be receiving 5 gold coins, Instructor Anfya and the other managing instructors will be receiving 3, the rest of the academy instructors will get 2 gold coins and the student assistant instructors will get 1 each. The remainder of the bonus will be distributed among everyone after the course ends."

Hughes, Marlin and Anfya were all moved as they did not expect Lorist to relinquish his authority so willingly. Hughes even whispered, "The academy head was right. Instructor Locke really is someone who doesn't have much greed or ambition."

Lorist clapped his hands and continued, "Later, I will go greet the students at the hall and Instructor Anfya will explain the rules and regulations of the course to them. Just like last year, the course will officially start in another 3 days and the students will have to follow a strict diet and sleeping schedule that will be set by us. Those who aren't willing to do so should go to the administration for a refund or they will not be entertained after the course starts.

"For the next two days, Instructor Marlin, please help Instructor Anfya inspect and prepare the training grounds as well as the dorms these students will be living in. Instructor Hughes, I'll let you handle the other members of the instructor team. When the class starts in three days, we will have to inspect the conditions of every one of the students before assigning them to different classes with different regimens. That's it for now. I'll be heading on the stage."

Chapter 31
Pulse Reading (1)

“Group 1.”

“Group 3.”

“Group 4.” Lorist looked at a very well dressed noble youth before shaking his head in resignation. That youth’s eyes contained no trace of energy and his face looked pale as a ghost. *Another spoiled brat… Due to engaging in lustful coital activities, although his body looked youthful and strong, the internal energy of the body had been damaged. Without proper rest and recuperation, there’s no way he would be able to awaken his Battle Force. It’s no wonder he failed his first Battle Force awakening course.*

“Go finish up the procedure. Your body has been greatly damaged, I’m sure you yourself constantly feel a pressing feeling in your chest and sweat lots as well as tire easily when you exert strength. You’ll also tire out quickly with only a little exercise and don’t have much appetite to eat, right? Do you have nightmares often too?”

“Ah? How did you know?” asked the noble youth with a face full of astonishment. It really was too wondrous. He did not think that the rumors about Instructor Locke being able to understand his body condition by using only three fingers to read his pulse on his wrist! He even knew about the nightmares he was having — something that he had kept even from his own family!

That youth stood up, looked at Lorist with a moved expression and left after respectfully bowing.

“Next.”

“Group 1.”

“Group 1.”

“Group 2.”

……

Within the vast hall, there were four tables lined up next to each other in the left corner. Lorist sat at the first table and small pillows could be seen on top of the table. Instructing each student to put their hands on a pillow with their wrist up, Lorist read their pulse one by one. If he put on a white coat, there's no doubt he would look like a doctor giving a diagnosis.

At the three tables beside sat Instructors Anfya, Marlin and Hughes. Lorist often had them reread the pulses of the students whose pulses had been read by him. The three of them tried to mimic the way Lorist did it. Among them, Instructor Anfya looked like she knew what she was doing, Instructor Hughes seemed like he was getting an idea and Instructor Marlin could only scratch his head in confusion.

Behind the four of them were ten or so Silver and Iron ranked instructors. One of the female Iron ranked instructors wrote the names of the students according to their respective groups as decided by Lorist while the others around her looked at the pulse reading instructors with interest and started chatting away. Another ten or so instructors were distributing uniforms and other necessities at the right side of the hall to the students. The 24 other newly-appointed assistant instructors were the busiest. Not only did they have to maintain the order in the hall, they also had to guide the students to their respective dorms according to their groups, often having to respond politely to any questions they have on the way.

The school bell rang and signaled the time for recess. Lorist stood up and stretched himself before saying to the rest of the students, "Alright, that's it for the morning session. We'll start again at 2 in the afternoon. Remember your numbers and don't be late."

The students who were already in queue could only leave with frustration. Some of them even voiced it out, obviously disappointed at having to wait even longer even though their turn was so close.

"How many more are there left, Instructor Grisha?" Lorist asked the female Iron rank instructor who helped register the student names.

"Another 106," she replied.

"Gah, we're finally finishing up. I'm so tired… The schedule later will be a little tighter,

we'll have to assign the instructors to manage the different groups as well as decide on the regimens for each group of students." Lorist turned his head and asked Anfya, Marlin and Hughes, "What about you three? Have you learned anything today?"

"I really can't tell. I don't feel anything when I touch their wrist," said Instructor Marlin.

"That noble youth's pulse from just now was quite weak and didn't feel stable enough. The other students who were assigned to Group 1's pulses were much stronger in comparison and could be clearly felt. Even though that noble youth looked quite well built and healthy, his pulse was hard to feel and I even had to press harder to only detect the slightest pulse," described Instructor Anfya clearly. It seemed that Lorist wasn't wrong about how Anfya was the most adept at pulse reading.

"You are correct. That kid has been fooling around with women since a young age and that has harmed the harmony of his internal energy, causing a disparity between his outer healthy state and his inner weak constitution, which was reflected in the feeling you got from feeling his pulse. The thirty or so students just now were mostly children of noble families and usually had quite a number of problems with their internal state. Many of them have engaged in carnal activities and have detrimental living habits, causing them to have a weak pulse and circulation which will cause them to have a low chance at awakening their Battle Force. That's why, their meals and living habits will have to be strictly planned and monitored," said Lorist as he praised Anfya's appraisal.

"Instructor Locke, I can already feel the minute differences of the students' pulses, but I can't distinguish the small details like Anfya can," said Instructor Hughes.

"Actually, Instructor Hughes, for you to be able to feel that within only three days is already quite an impressive feat. The reason Anfya is so good at it is because I've started teaching her this since the last course. As long as you train hard and feel the pulse with a calm mind, you'll naturally be able to do it better with more experience. This time, the amount of students are rather high so you should try to take the pulses of 100 students each day to try to feel the differences of each one. You can even compare theirs to your own. By the time the course ends, you might even be able to surpass Instructor Anfya in this," said Lorist with a smile.

"As for you guys, try it out if you're interested and ask me if you have any questions. As long as you master pulse reading, then you will be able to easily tell the conditions of the students' bodies and understand when the circulation of the blood is the

strongest in each one. Only then can one successfully awaken their Battle Force with a hundred percent. This is the secret to how I managed to successfully help every one of my students awaken their Battle Force," said Lorist towards the Silver and Iron ranked instructors standing nearby.

A few of them were really enthusiastic in trying it out while some others hesitated and didn't bother trying. The failure of Marlin, a Gold ranked instructor, to grasp pulse reading only showed that it wasn't as easy as it seemed.

That year when Lorist was put in charge of his first Battle Force awakening course, there were only 17 students from commoner families. Due to the theory that Battle Force had a higher chance of being awakened if one's magical beast factors in the blood was higher, it was believed that the descendants of nobles, and by extension, the descendants of Sword Saints, had a much higher chance to awaken their Battle Force.

Lorist didn't agree to that theory in the slightest. From his experience in training in the Blazing Battle Force, he understood that its key lay in the circulation of the blood and felt that Battle Force awakening definitely had something to do with it as well. As long as every one tried to awaken their Battle Force at the time when their circulation was at its peak, the chances of succeeding would undoubtedly rise. And, the key to good circulation was a good diet and healthy living habits.

The reason why more noble descendants manage to awaken their Battle Force was probably related to their better living conditions. Given that they had more access to food than other commoners, they naturally had taken in more nutrition than the others, hence boosting the chances of their success. From his observations, Lorist discovered that the reason those noble students who didn't manage to awaken their Battle Force was not the low amount of magical beast factors in their blood but their tendency to live an unhealthy life of debauchery as every one of them were either sex maniacs or alcoholics. This was the main reason Lorist rejected the common theory about Battle Force awakening.

As for the reason why commoner students tended to fail in Battle Force awakening, that was because they had to live frugally and cannot afford to eat sufficient nutritious food on a daily basis, causing their circulation to weaken in the long run. Lorist at that time made a bold hypothesis and used the 17 students in his class as the guinea pigs to test his theories on.

But how would he be able to ascertain the status of the students' circulations? Having

been born into a family with a long line of traditional Chinese healers, even though Lorist did not personally receive instruction from his healer grandfather, he still knew about the basic principles of pulse reading. While he couldn't diagnose individual diseases in the body, he could still use it to identify the strength of a person's circulation and he employed this technique on his students.

Just like Lorist predicted, all of the students in his class were malnourished. Lorist thought back to his days at the army. The new recruits he had trained for three months had all transformed from sickly baby-faced fellows into healthy, able-bodied men. However, there was a small problem. How would he be able to provide these students with appropriate nutrition, given that they didn't have sufficient money to buy good food in the first place?

It was then when he decided to let the students work part time to earn the money they needed. While they hadn't awakened their Battle Force, there would be no problem for them to handle simple jobs like sweeping trash, watering flowers, washing clothes etc. Reaching out to the manager of the janitors at the academy, he had the students work under him and collected the money they earned and used it to prepare nutritious meals for them.

The equivalent profession to doctors in Grindia were herbalists, who were highly-skilled in creating herbal recipe combinations to heal various diseases. While most medicines could be created with herbs alone, quite a number required ingredients from magical beasts as well. Even though he was forced to remember all those Chinese herbal recipes in his previous life, he couldn't find those ingredients on Grindia at all. Lorist could only rely on the knowledge he gained from the herbalism and magical beast biology courses he had attended to come up with the appropriate menu for his students.

After three months of arduous physical training and eating well, all 17 commoner students managed to awaken their Battle Force successfully, much to the shock and surprise of the academy. That resulted in Lorist being selected to be the instructor for a Battle Force awakening course once again the next year with a class of 31 students of different ages and family backgrounds who had not been picked by the other instructors. Once again using his pulse reading skills, he tailor made a regimen for each of his students and had all of them successfully awaken their Battle Force within a semester as well.

This time the academy administration was really astonished. They even suspected

whether Lorist held some kind of secret technique that could help with Battle Force awakening. That was why on the third year, Lorist's class had up to 59 students with 10 of them being nobles who specifically nominated him, 3 of which had failed once before in Battle Force awakening. The administration had also sent Instructor Anfya to be Lorist's aide and hoped that she would be able to figure out how Lorist was able to be so successful.

The conditions of these 59 students were even worse than those of Lorist's class in the previous year, especially those of noble descent. Half of them had weak constitutions. The three who had failed previously were even worse; they already couldn't take it after running around the school field for two laps. Lorist was quite impressed that they even dared to try to awaken their Battle Force.

Adequate nutrition wasn't enough to heal the bodies of the noble students as the damage was quite severe. Given that the nobles would naturally have quite an amount of money, he collected a fee from each of them and worked together with the herbalist researchers in the academy to put together a concoction made with several types of magical beast blood and some expensive herbs to boost their circulation. The noble students had to consume the concoction on a regular basis along with adequate physical training. Coupled with pulse reading, Lorist had every one of them successfully awaken their Battle Force when their circulation was in peak condition.

Throughout the whole process, Lorist made no attempt to hide the secrets of pulse reading and even generously demonstrated it to Instructor Anfya and enthusiastically explained every single detail of the method to her.

Lorist wasn't expecting Anfya to be able to pick up the art that swiftly either because while pulse reading may look easy, he wouldn't have been able to comprehend it had he not spent several years in his past life helping out and looking at his grandfather perform the technique himself. Even those university students who learned the art in theory or those foreign researchers who had studied the theories couldn't actually put it into practice without actual guidance from a proper master.

Having grown up by the side of his grandfather in his previous life, Lorist only managed to learn but a small part of the complicated technique by observing his grandfather work. He himself didn't dare to claim that he had a good understanding of pulse reading. The following things happened just as he had predicted. The other four instructors, including his good friend Instructor Yuriy who had recently been promoted to a horsemanship instructor for attaining the Silver rank, gave up learning

rather quickly.

As for Anfya, she persevered and believed Lorist's words and gradually came to be able to distinguish the more obvious differences in the pulses of the students. It was rumored that she even practiced it on her husband and children so often to the point where they ran away the moment she entered their sights.

Naturally, all the students in Lorist's third Battle Force awakening course had passed as well, resulting in him being awarded the Gold ranked instructor medal for Battle Force awakening. Along with his Gold swordsmanship medal, he became the academy's famed dual Gold ranked instructor.

Having gone to the Relic Islands for the expedition last year, Lorist wasn't able to hold a class at that time. Presently, it was his fourth time as the head Battle Force awakening instructor and his students numbered up to a staggering 879 people, all of whom had specified Lorist to be their instructor for his fame as a Gold ranked Battle Force instructor and were even willing to pay two times the price.

Chapter 32
Pulse Reading (2)

"Phew……" Lorist let out a long sigh and raised his head to look towards the large sandglass hanging from the roof of the hall. This intricate and complicated contraption is the staple product of the Teribo Kingdom and it is said that not more than 100 units are produced each year with each one selling for up to 1000 gold Fordes. The sandglass operates quite niftily by exploiting gravity and magnetism with the it automatically tipping over when all the sand on the upper compartment has completely flowed to the lower compartment.

Beside the sandglass were two glass tubes of unequal sizes with the larger one filled with a distinct red liquid and having twelve markings on the outside. Every time the sandglass tips over, the liquid fills up in the larger tube by 1 marking's worth to indicate the passing of an hour and resets once the sandglass tips over when the liquid indicator is at the 12-hour mark. The smaller glass tube has 6 segments with each one representing 10 minutes.

The sandglass hanging high up in the hall was originally a present from all the students and staff of the Yellow Ribbon Academy to their academy head for his 60th birthday. Having been installed in the great hall, it has now been bought over by the Dawn Academy along with the rest of the school's property.

Lorist secretly laughed in his heart every time he saw the timekeeping sandglass that was given to the academy head at his 60th birthday. In Chinese culture, it is considered a taboo to give a timekeeping device of any kind to an elderly person as it could represent sending a person off to his or her afterlife. Coincidentally, the academy head who had received this sandglass had passed away half a year after receiving that gift. *Maybe I should give Academy Head Levins something similar for his birthday as well?*

The female Iron ranked instructor by Lorist's side placed a name list on the table and said, "We're finally done assigning the students to their respective groups."

Lorist stopped daydreaming and nodded, "It's already four in the afternoon. Everyone should take a short break and regroup half an hour later for a meeting to discuss the

regimens and activities for the students. Instructor Anfya, arrange and organize the student name lists and give one to each student of every group. Just like the last time, leave some space after their names for remarks."

Anfya nodded and instructed two other female instructors to start copying the name lists by hand.

"Hey, Yuriy, get me something to drink. I really don't feel like getting up…" Lorist had asked his good friend Yuriy to help him out for this year's Battle Force awakening course as well.

Just as Lorist was filling up his cup and preparing to have a chat with his friend, a middle-aged man who was dressed quite extravagantly entered the hall and approached Lorist before politely asking, "Is this the instructor team of the Battle Force awakening course?"

Instructor Hughes replied, "Yes, is there anything you need?"

The middle-aged went outside the hall and shouted, "Master, it is indeed this place. You can come off the carriage now."

What's going on? Lorist and the other instructors looked towards the door and saw the middle-aged man walk back, followed behind by a fat, stocky fellow. That fellow wasn't just big-boned, he was truly filled with fat all over his body; his arm itself was as thick as Lorist's upper thigh. The stocky man walked so slowly and breathed heavily every few steps, making Lorist sincerely fear for his condition as he looked like he was about to collapse at any moment.

That middle-aged man returned to Instructor Hughes and took out a student identification document before saying, "Excuse me, my young master here is a new student for the Battle Force awakening course. As it is a little convenient for him given his body, he has arrived a little late. I hope you will understand."

Wait, what? Isn't the total amount of students for the awakening course only 879 people? Why has another one appeared out of nowhere? How did he even pass the academy entrance test with a figure like that?

Instructor Hughes looked at the documents and gave Lorist a bitter smile. Lorist took the documents over and thought, *Sol, this really is a genuine identification document and it even came with a letter addressed to me.* The letter forthrightly stated that the

fat youth was called Dorsedaus and he was the sole heir of one of the highest authorities in the Forde Trade Union, the Peterson family. Aged 18 this year, his father was also an alumnus of the Dawn Academy. The Peterson house was one of the academy's largest sponsors who contributed up to 10000 gold Fordes every year.

Given that Dorsedaus was the eldest son of the President of the Peterson Merchant Group, he had been spoiled by his parents and ended up in the state he was today. Having felt that being in that condition wouldn't be good for his son in the long run, President Peterson started worrying about how his son would be able to inherit the family business one day.

However, he started worrying too late. When he decided that his son should start cutting down his weight and instructed his family butler to only give him 3 meals a day as opposed to 5 meals he normally had as well as decrease the serving of each meal by half, within but a day, his son threw a huge tantrum and caused the president's several wives to complain to him and added a few more dishes to his son's meals.

Not knowing what to do, he hired a Blademaster and hoped that he would help his son awaken his Battle Force. President Peterson thought that if his son managed to awaken his Battle Force, he would be able to slim down naturally as he continued training in it. While the plan itself was rather sound, within but a month, the Blademaster he hired had come up to him and told him that it was quite impossible for his son to be able to awaken his Battle Force given his physique. He spoke quite candidly and even said that what flowed in his son's veins wasn't blood but pure fat and oil! In the end, he warned the president that his son would not have more than 3 years left to live should he continue to eat away with abandon and refuse to slim down.

The president was frantic and started racking his brains for a solution for his son's problem. It was at that time when he heard about Lorist's reputation as a Gold ranked Battle Force instructor as well as the success he had with his Battle Force awakening courses. The president was convinced that this would be the method to help his son slim down. Elated, he hurriedly got into contact with the academy head and got his son signed up for the course right away.

In the letter, Academy Head Levins described the condition Dorsedaus was in and requested Lorist to help the president out with this issue. For his son, the president was even willing to add 5000 gold Fordes to the yearly sponsorship he has been providing to the academy! The academy head stressed that no matter what, Lorist had to find a way to help the president out. He even promised that as long as President

Peterson's request was fulfilled, he would even award the instructor team as much as 1000 gold Fordes.

Sol, this old bastard is giving me even more trouble… Sheesh, this is a Battle Force awakening course, not a weight loss class! Without first shedding all his fat, how would that fatty even be able to awaken his Battle Force? Sigh, I guess I can't be too harsh on that old bastard since the Peterson family is indeed a large benefactor of the academy and it would be quite difficult for him to turn down their earnest request.

Lorist kept the letter and said to the middle-aged man, "Let him come over here and place his hand on the pillow. I'll examine his body condition."

The fatty approached and curled up his sleeve as instructed and placed his hand on the pillow with his wrist facing upwards. *Whoa, this is no hand! It's a pig's feet! Look at it, it's even glistening with a layer of oil on top!* Lorist sighed and stretched out his hand with three fingers extended and started reading the fatty's pulse.

Huh? Where is his artery? Lorist lightly pressed downward but he couldn't feel a thing. Does he have too much fat? Lorist furrowed his brows and pressed down even harder and finally felt a very slight and weak pulse.

After a moment, Lorist retracted his hand and gave a long sigh as he shook his head. The middle-aged man asked anxiously, "Mister Instructor, how's the condition of my young master's body?"

Lorist mulled about with a gloomy expression before asking, "Are you the family butler?"

"Ah, yes. I am the second butler of the Peterson house who's in charge of all the young master's personal needs," replied the man.

"I believe you are not the right person to make this decision. It's better if you ask the president to come over himself. Your young master first needs to lose all that fat before he can attempt to awaken his Battle Force. His body's condition is already bad enough. If he doesn't start losing weight, he'll only have a few years to live at most," Lorist said as he looked at the fatty. However, that fat kid was practically unfazed by Lorist's conclusion and thought that Lorist was purposely exaggerating his condition and trying to scare him.

The middle-aged man however was genuinely shocked as Lorist wasn't the first to

have said something like that. While the Blademaster they hired had come to the same verdict, it was a confidential matter and hadn't been leaked anywhere outside the house. The fact that Lorist came to the same conclusion signified how serious the matter was. "The head of the house is presently having some tea, I'll go invite him over immediately."

The middle-aged man quickly ran out of the hall and left in the carriage.

Without much delay, President Peterson was brought there and he looked at Lorist with an eagle-like expression. "So, you are Norton Lorist, the famed dual Gold ranked instructor of the academy, Instructor Locke?"

Lorist took a deep breath as he didn't expect President Peterson, one of the most influential people in the Forde Trade Union, was a Gold ranked expert. Even though he dressed simply and had a pleasant face and looked no different from the usual kind old man and didn't wear a Battle Force badge, Lorist could feel a faint pressuring aura emanating from that man's body. Lorist had only felt this aura from another Gold ranked instructor, Instructor Claude before.

Looking at President Peterson, Lorist calmly said, "Good afternoon, President Peterson. I'm indeed Instructor Locke. I have invited you over to discuss the matter of your son. He has to start losing fat no matter what, not because he has to do that in order to awaken his Battle Force, but also for the sake of his life and it doesn't look like he has much time to do it. I'd like to know your opinion on this matter. Are you going to have him lose weight before having him enroll here, or do you want him to join the class straight away and do that before he awakens his Battle Force?"

President Peterson was surprised at what Lorist had just said and asked agitatedly, "Do you have a way for my son to lose weight and awaken his Battle Force?"

"Well, I do, but the young master will have to suffer quite a bit for a long time, at least half a year," nodded Lorist.

"Ah……" President Peterson thought to himself whether Lorist was lying to him. *Last time, I brought my son to the most famous herbalist in Morante City and he said that it would take at least three years for my son to slim down… Half a year sounds rather short in comparison.*

"What do you mean by suffering? Will he have any danger to his life?" asked the

President.

“To others, things like restricting caloric intake and doing physical training might be normal. But for the young master, it will be nothing short of torture. And, to ensure that the young master completes the training regimen set for him every day, I might have to resort to some rather unpleasant, maybe even humiliating measures and some minor injuries or wounds will be inflicted. But I can assure you that there is absolutely no risk to his life whatsoever,” explained Lorist.

“If President Peterson can trust us with it, I’ll need you to sign an agreement that states that the family members of the young master would not be allowed to interfere with the training process at all. While you can have someone oversee the whole thing, you are not allowed to have any objections or opinions to how we treat the young master. Once the agreement is breached, please take full responsibility for your son as we will no longer continue with his training program and send him back to you,” Lorist stressed.

“This…” President Peterson started hesitating. After all, that was his flesh and blood that he had so meticulously spoiled ever since his birth who had not weathered any sort of hardship. He felt that the moment he agreed to Lorist’s conditions, his son would form some kind of enmity towards him.

“I see that you love your son a lot. Maybe you should have him lose weight before letting him enroll in the Battle Force awakening course,” said Lorist relaxedly. This was the most convenient solution as the instructor team did not have to be troubled with Dorsedaus’s matters.

“No, I’ll put him in your care. I hope you don’t disappoint me,” President Peterson said, having made his decision.

“Um, are you sure you don’t want to think this over?” Lorist asked, dejected.

“There’s no need. Let’s handle it your way,” said the president resolutely as he waved his hand.

“Well, alright. Please come over to sign the agreement as well as settle some other matters relating to the young master’s enrollment. Given his unique condition, we might have to ask for additional fees,” Lorist said. It looks like the following days will be troubling.

“I only have to sign the agreement, right? Have him arrange everything else. He will make sure you have what you need,” said the president as he pointed to the middle-aged butler and beckoned him to come over. “Bill, from this day onward, you will be stationed here and help Instructor Locke here with anything he needs. Also, you are only allowed to monitor the young master and cannot interact with him whatsoever without first consulting the instructor, understood?”

“Yes, master,” replied the man respectfully.

Having signed the agreement, the president let out a breath of relief. “Instructor Locke, my precious son has never left his home before nor experienced any sort of hardship. Now, I’m handing him to you. I hope you can try to ease him into the process and not be too harsh on him right away……”

Lorist paused for a while before saying, “Sometimes, the love of the parents can be harmful to the child……”

After a while, President Peterson finally said, “Since I’ve agreed to let you decide whatever’s best for him, I guess I shouldn’t worry too much. If you really can help him awaken his Battle Force within a year, I will personally reward you with 1000 gold Fordes.”

The instructors watching by the side all gasped.

Lorist merely shook his head and said, “I can’t guarantee anything at the moment. That will come after we have him slim down.”

“Two thousand!”

The breathing of the instructors nearby intensified.

“President Peterson, please trust our work ethic. Since we’ve accepted the task of training your son, we will definitely do the best in our power…”

“As long as his Battle Force gets awakened, I will give all of you 3000 gold Fordes!” interrupted the president, unwilling to back down until he hears some kind of promise.

Lorist could feel all the instructors behind shaking in their feet, including even Instructors Hughes and Anfya. Only Instructor Marlin still retained his calm.

“Alright, I’ll do my best. Please rest assured,” said Lorist, finally nodding his head.

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Currently, all the instructors were having a meeting.

“Group 1 has a total of 352 students and their conditions are mostly fine. Most of them are healthy and have great circulation. With the usual training method and some boosts from herbal medicines, they will definitely be able to awaken their Battle Force within a month. Instructor Marlin, I’m sure you’re more familiar with large scale group training sessions like this given your experience in training new recruits in the city garrison. I’ll be handing the group to you. Pick four instructors to help you out as well, is that okay?”

“No problem Instructor Locke,” replied Marlin with a smile.

“Group 2 has 175 students who don’t have any problems with their bodies either, but they are still undergoing puberty, so their circulation won’t be at their best for the moment. Monitor these students for the time being and make sure they receive sufficient nutrition and training to boost their condition. I need someone patient to handle this class for the next three to four months to come before they attempt to awaken their Battle Force. Everyone, who do you think is the most suited for this group?” Lorist said.

Quickly, a Silver ranked instructor called Thorheim was nominated by the rest of the instructors and he picked two other instructors as well as two assistant instructors to be in charge of Group 2.

Lorist looked at the name list again and said, “Group 3 has 236 commoner students whose main problem is their lack of nutrition. Instructor Yuriy, you’ve done the same thing before the last time so I believe you know how to handle this class. I’ll be assigning this group to you.”

Yuriy nodded and picked two instructors and assistant instructors respectively to manage the group.

“Group 4 has 116 noble students. Apart from 5 who have incurred injuries that have harmed their condition, the rest of them have experienced intercourse while they were still too young and has harmed their internal energy greatly and will require a long time to train and nourish their bodies to heal the damage. This group will be

handled by Instructor Hughes with Instructor Anfya assisting him, is that alright?" Lorist looked towards the two instructors who nodded their heads in agreement.

"Instructor Anfya, I'll leave the collaboration effort with the herbalists to you. Make sure each student consumes the internal energy recovery medicine every day without fail," Lorist instructed.

"I understand, Instructor Locke. I'll make sure to chase them to the ends of hell if that's what I need to do," promised Instructor Anfya.

"The last class only consists of one student who has absolutely no problems with nutrition given his excessive eating. Before awakening his Battle Force, he has to lose at least two-thirds of his body weight. This student will be handled by me and the rest of the instructors and assistants. That's all. We'll be starting tomorrow so feel free to discuss among yourselves about your student groups."

Lorist then waved towards the middle-aged man who was sitting in a corner. "Butler Bill, please come over here. I'm afraid i have to trouble you with something……"

Chapter 33
Journal Entries and The Duels

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 19th day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

Just this afternoon, I have sent the young master to enroll into the academy. Instructor Locke had said that the young master wouldn't have more than a couple of years to live if he doesn't start losing weight and continues his old eating habits, just like the Blademaster the master has hired just two months ago. I have brought the master to the academy and he has decided to let Instructor Locke conduct his fat loss course and even signed an agreement. The master has tasked me to remain at the academy and assist Instructor Locke wherever possible, but I am not allowed to interfere with the training course nor interact with the young master in any way and can only observe the situation from afar. Even though I agreed to comply, I can't help but feel that things won't go that well for the young master in the times to come.

As expected, after Instructor Locke finished briefing the other instructors, he asked me to go get a cart full of lettuce, carrots as well as celery. After that, he brought the young master away. When I returned with the things I bought, Instructor Locke brought me to a small building made out of bluestone and had me place the vegetables on the floor. The small room felt like a sword training room to me. Just as that impression entered my head, I saw the young master crouching in a corner crying. I couldn't ask him personally what had happened nor could I talk to him, so I asked the instructor what was going on.

Instructor Locke gave a savage smile before replying, and said that this would be the place that the young master will be living at from this day onward. Good lord, that room doesn't have a bed nor a furnace. How will the young master be able to sleep like that?

But Instructor Locke didn't seem to think that was a problem and said that the straw mat and a woolen blanket would be sufficient. "If the young master feels cold at night," he said, "then he should get up to exercise and warm himself up." He also mentioned that the main feature of this room was that it was soundproof and no matter how the

young master screamed, nobody would be able to hear a thing.

I then asked him what the young master would be having for dinner. He merely pointed towards the vegetables I have brought and said that the young master would be feeding on only those vegetables for the coming three days. I was greatly surprised; was he treating the young master like a pet rabbit? I tried to subtly tell him that the young master didn't like to eat vegetables, especially raw ones. He merely laughed it off and tapped on my shoulders before saying that there wasn't anything to worry about. He said that when humans were hungry, they would even eat the rotting corpse of another if they had to, not to say much about vegetables.

Instructor Locke is really disgusting, cold-blooded and iron-hearted. It is not an overstatement to say that he is the incarnation of evil himself. The young master really is unfortunate to have fallen into his hands. I have to record all of this down and report it to the master so that he doesn't get away with this.

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 20th day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

Yesterday, the young master threw a huge racket and cried for the whole night, but nobody gave him any heed. I wanted to go there to calm him down, but the assistant instructors who were on night guard wouldn't let me and warned me that I couldn't go near the room without permission. I could only listen to the cries of the young master from afar and couldn't do anything about it.

After the cries had subsided, I heard a crunchy sound of vegetables being chewed that originated from within the room. The young master bawled and cried as he bit down on the vegetables until finally, he fell asleep just before dawn.

In the afternoon, Instructor Locke came over with a few others to help clean up the room, help the young master bathe and gave him a set of garments made out of rough hemp. The instructor then took hold of the young master's wrist and said that he was helping him read his pulse. The young master cursed and cried at Instructor Locke throughout the whole process but the instructor didn't give it any heed and even said that he intends to have a cane made that wouldn't be able to hurt one's bones but still manage to inflict a lot of pain! Oh lord! Is he treating the young master like a slave now?

After that, he asked me to go over and gave me a drawing parchment which had some building designs on it. He said that he wanted a vast bathroom built in the academy that would be part of the necessary facilities the young master would have to use during his weight loss training. I heavily suspected that he was just trying to weasel additional benefit for the academy as I have never ever seen a bathroom that had a room within that was built entirely out of wood, which he called a 'sauna'. Who does he think he's tricking?!

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 21st day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

The young master had another vegetable-only meal yesterday, but he didn't make as much of a racket like he did yesterday.

Instructor Locke came over again today afternoon. As usual, he had somebody bathe the young master before taking his pulse and cleaned up the room like he did yesterday. He also instructed me to go buy more vegetables this time around, during which I secretly sneaked in a few tomatoes inside the pile. I believe the master would be happy with that.

The bathroom design that Instructor Locke brought to me yesterday is estimated to cost more than 100 gold coins to be built. After I showed it to the master at the mansion, he instantly approved of it and sent people to the academy to work on it right away.

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 22nd day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

The young master had eaten nothing but carrots yesterday. It seems that I have bought a little too much of that last time around.

After bathing the young master and taking his pulse, Instructor Locke gave me a list of medicines that he wanted me to purchase for the young master.

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 23rd day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Cloudy

The young master only had celery to eat yesterday night as the carrots had already run out.

Instructor Locke had a few other assistants hold on to the young master and forced him to drink a medicinal liquid from a test tube. It must have been really bitter as the young master looked like he was about to cry.

It didn't take long for the young master to start experiencing diarrhea.

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Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 31st day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

The young master had slept rather soundly without snoring or sleep talking throughout the whole night.

For the past few days, the young master has been fed a laxative medicine. Though, the frequency at which the young master had to go to the lavatory had decreased gradually. He also looked far more energetic than before, unlike the past few days when his face was pale from releasing all that waste from his body.

In the afternoon, the young master had his body weighed and the result was he had lost up to 8.5 kilograms within only just a few days! It seems that the young master really did have some hope losing weight after all. However, Instructor Locke remarked that the young master would have to lose at least 85 more kilograms to be at normal body weight. Will that really be possible? It's really hard to imagine the young master having the same body weight as me at about 80 kilograms approximately.

This time, the instructor gave me another list of medicines to be purchased while mentioning that the young master no longer had to take the laxatives. Now that the young master had expelled all the waste he could from his body, Instructor Locke said that he could start doing physical training from tomorrow onwards and take a whole new type of medicine as a supplement.

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 32nd day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

The young master had a good night's sleep the night before.

Instructor Locke came over early in the morning and had the young master run three laps around the field. Initially, the young master refused. But the instructor took out two buns about the size of fists and said that if the young master would run the laps, he would be allowed to eat the buns. Having eaten nothing but raw vegetables for the past few days, the young master instantly lost it and leaped towards the instructor in an attempt to take the buns for himself but was struck down to the floor as a result. Instructor Locke then said that he would toss the buns into the lavatory if the young master didn't run and let him eat vegetables for another week.

For this crudely baked black bread, the young master ran around the field three times and collapsed in the middle of the last lap and had to climb the rest of the way to the finish line. Instructor Locke had a few assistants hold the young master up and walk half a round on the field for him to catch his breath before allowing him to come back to us. I was literally at the brink of tears when I saw the scene of the young master stuffing the bread into his mouth.

From today onwards, the young master's menu had changed. In the morning, he was fed a bowl of porridge with two pieces of bread. For lunch and dinner, he only had raw vegetables. Additionally, the young master started working out every day. During the morning and the night, he had to run around the field for three laps as usual while he did other exercises in the afternoon. After every training session, the young master had to drink a large bowl of salt water to replenish the salt content in his body. Every night before sleep, he will have to consume another serving of a special medicine.

During today afternoon, the young master refused to exercise because the instructor had wanted him to jump like a rabbit and push up from the ground. Without hesitation, Instructor Locke took out a cane and sent a lash towards the young master. A loud sound rang out as the cane stroke the young master's back, leaving behind a red mark on his skin. The young master had never been beaten all his life! I wanted to go stop him, only to be severely warned by the assistant instructors beside me that this would be indirect violation of the agreement the master had signed. I didn't dare to bear the responsibility for voiding agreement and could only witness the young master suffer the lashings until the training was completed.

Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 33rd day of the 2nd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

Having been caned all day the day before, the young master groaned for the whole night as he tried to sleep. Even though Instructor Locke had someone apply some medicine onto his wounds, he didn't sleep well and was even dragged out of bed for training today.

The good news, on the other hand, was that the bath has just been completed not long ago. After having his daily dose of medicine, the young master was brought into the sauna and I was allowed to follow them inside.

The sauna was a small wooden hut with a cauldron of cobblestones that were heated up and then sprinkled with water for the steam to evaporate. The room quickly filled with steam the moment the water was splashed onto the hot cobblestones and I found it a little difficult to breathe due to the sudden influx of hot air. Everyone had to strip naked before entering the sauna. Instructor Locke had a magnificent physique while nothing but fatty meat could be seen on the young master's body. Having been put in charge of putting the heated cobblestones into the cauldron and sprinkling water over it, I was sweating all over. The young master on the other hand sat at a corner unmoving as glistening oily sweat oozed out of the pores of his skin. After about 20 minutes, the young master lost consciousness. Instructor Locke said that it wasn't anything to worry about and that he would slowly wake up upon being brought to somewhere with normal air circulation. The young master woke up after being sprinkled with some cold water. He was bathed and put to sleep soon after.

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Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 1st day of the 3rd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

Yesterday, the young master had yet another night of sound slumber. These few days, he has been training under the threat of the cane from Instructor Locke the whole time whenever he tries to slack off. Before going to sleep, he goes to the sauna every night. These days the young master seems much more revigorated than before: his strength has increased and he no longer starts gasping for breath after walking a few steps. When I was at the sauna with him just now at night, the young master suddenly grabbed on my hand and to my surprise, it hurt. The young master said that he wanted to eat meat so much that he's going to go crazy over it and wanted me to sneak some smoked meat for him.

But I don't dare do such a thing as Instructor Locke, who was standing behind the young master unnoticed by him, was glaring at me with a savage gaze in an attempt to warn me.

Instructor Locke wasn't present this afternoon for the training as he had to prepare for the duels tomorrow. I really don't understand what kind of person would attempt this kind of crazy feat and take on all the Silver ranked instructors from 27 different academies. I've heard that they number up to 1600 or more people and I don't believe that a sole Iron ranked instructor like Locke can defeat all of them without losing. A tavern near the academy called 'Sword and Beauty' has a betting pool for the duels that are to come. I shall go bet 1 gold coin on Instructor Locke's loss as I've heard that the payout for 1 small silver is 1 gold coin. If I win, I'll instantly gain 100 gold Fordes! I really hope that Instructor Locke would lose tomorrow.

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The 2nd day of the 3rd month finally arrived and the weather on that day was clear and bright. Lorist walked casually in the academy as if he didn't mind the oncoming duels one bit.

He has already received the list of challengers a day before for the inter-academy duels. The open matches would start on the 3rd day of the 3rd month, which was tomorrow. However, he did not have a list of competitors for that as Charade had forgotten to give him one, or maybe he didn't, as he believed that Lorist would defeat all of the challengers without exception anyway. On the other hand, Charade has provided Els with the list of all the challengers, both the instructors and non-instructors, with excruciating detail so that Els would spread rumors about the challengers' abilities to easily defeat Lorist.

"It can't be helped, if we don't do that, we won't be able to attract any customers for the betting pool. We must give the betters information as detailed as possible to make them think that the challengers have a chance against Lorist," said Charade as he shrugged his shoulders.

Lorist didn't really want to bother with the name lists anyway. The instructors today were from the Hoary Stock Academy that was ranked at the 21st place and didn't have any famous Silver ranked instructors among their ranks, resulting in Lorist feeling no enthusiasm whatsoever for the duels to come.

The members of the Enforcement Division as well as the elites of the Swordsmanship Society could be seen receiving instructions from the fatty nearby. Seeing Lorist, who was looking around aimlessly, Charade said, “Don’t walk away just yet, there’s a good show that you should see.”

Without much delay, the ‘show’ that Charade had predicted was slowly unraveling. A group of people dressed in black entered from the academy entrance with the Silver ranked instructors who were wearing the instructor badge of the Hoary Stock Academy leading the other non-challengers from other academies who were here to witness the duels into the premises.

Academy Head Levins who was holding his walking stick was standing by the training hall which had just been completed recently after a month of rushed renovations. With a wide smile, he received the academy heads and brought them to the dueling hall, but he didn’t let the other people following behind enter.

“Rotten old man, what is the meaning of this?” asked the head of the Saint Marceau Academy with a grim expression.

Academy Head Levins was struck by a rather serious disease that had left his legs only partly functional for the rest of his life.

Smiling, Levins said calmly, “Old bastard, the Hoary Stock Academy is here to participate in the duels. Given that you academy heads have come to witness the spectacle, it’s only natural for me to receive you. The rest who were left outside can enter from the other door if they want to.”

As he said that, Levins pointed towards the other direction where a large sign could be seen hanging with the words ‘Ticket Counter’ on it. It seemed that the audience had to pay a fee to be able to view the oncoming duels.

“The price isn’t expensive, only one small silver per person,” said the academy head.

“Rotten old man, you’ve really been blinded by money to the point where you wouldn’t even let some small change like this go uncollected. Can’t you be more generous in your ways? I’ll pay for the tickets of the audience today, just tell me how much I need to pay in total,” said the Weston Academy Head magnanimously as he took out an intricate pouch and tossed it towards a Silver ranked instructor from the Saint Marceau Academy.

“The Weston Academy Head is so generous…” “Thank you, academy head…” Such cries and cheers could be heard coming from the audience.

Pretending not to see the Weston Academy Head’s gleeful expression, he stretched out his hands and motioned towards the inside of the halls and said, “Over here, my fellow guests.”

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The newly-renovated training hall had changed a lot after the process. In the center of the hall was a 7m x 5m elevated platform with up to eight terraces of audience seats surrounding it which could seat up to 2000 people.

Lazily standing on the dueling platform, Lorist looked casually at the uniform-clad Dawn Academy schoolgirls who were walking around the audience seats and saying in a clear voice, “Get your betting tickets here! Is there anyone who wants to make a bet? The payout for Instructor Locke’s victory is 1 small silver for every large silver and the payout for his loss is 1 large silver for every small silver!”

The Weston Academy and the Hoary Stock Academy heads were infuriated at the scene on the seats. “Rotten old man, what’s the meaning of this?”

Academy Head Levins merely said, “What’s so weird about a few girls working so hard to run a betting pool to earn some cash for a living? Maybe they’re just very confident in Instructor Locke’s abilities and set the betting payouts to be so skewed. If you two are unhappy with that, why not buy some tickets for your victory and teach them a lesson?”

Only an idiot would believe that you wasn’t involved in it! The two academy heads glared at Levins furiously. The Weston Academy head said, “I have more than 10 gold Fordes in this pouch and I bet on the victory of the Hoary Stock Academy! I’ll make sure you go bankrupt from the payout!”

The Hoary Stock Academy head also said to the instructors and students of his academy, “Everyone, put some money in the pool and bet on our victory. It isn’t like that Iron ranked kid on the platform there has three heads or six arms, I doubt that not even one out of the twenty Silver ranked instructors can take care of him! With enough people, no matter how strong he is, he’ll definitely tire out near the end!”

The female students accepted the bets without hesitation even though almost nobody

bet for Lorist's victory aside from a few other Dawn Academy students.

The Hoary Stock Academy head held a handful of betting tickets and whispered to the Weston Academy head, "Even though Instructor Worbas is only a Two Star Silver, his swordsmanship is not something to be underestimated. I'm sending him out first to test out that kid Locke's abilities. Even if his swordsmanship is superb, there's no doubt that he'd fall after several tiring matches. Look, Instructor Worbas is already on the platform. With his rich experience and 17 wins out of all 18 duels he has had… Huh?"

Charade quickly walked up the dueling platform and announced after examining Worbas, who was lying flat on the ground, "The challenger was knocked out from blunt force trauma to the chin and is unable to continue battling. Next one."

Within half an hour, all twenty of the Hoary Stock Academy instructors had been wholly defeated by Lorist, who still had the 'energy' to yawn lazily on the stage.

The beauties who were running the betting pool as well as the patrolling Enforcement Division members, who held their swords up high, let out cheers of joy and chanted, "Instructor Locke, Silver Undefeated!" over and over again.

The Weston Academy head was stunned speechless and ruthlessly tore up all the betting tickets that he had bought. Without even saying his farewells to Academy Head Levins, he turned towards the exit and left right away. The people from the other academies who came to cheer for the Hoary Stock instructors left disappointed as well.

The Hoary Stock Academy head's expression was dark as the dirt on the ground. He didn't even notice the tickets falling out from his grip. *How could it be… The instructors from my academy were mostly defeated within one exchange… Even the best only lasted three bouts…*

Lorist called Charade over and said, "How many challengers are there for tomorrow?"

"Twenty, just like today," replied Charade.

Lorist said, "That's way too less. Next time, increase the amount to 50 a day. It's better if I can settle this sooner."

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Bill's journal:

Year 1767, 2nd day of the 3rd month, Trade Union Calendar Weather: Sunny

I lost a gold coin in the betting pool today. Who would've expected that all the 20 Silver ranked instructors sent by the Hoary Stock Academy to be so useless and got defeated by Instructor Locke… However, I believe it will be different tomorrow, as the duels are open to all the famous combatants who are not representing any academy. They should be too much for an instructor who always spends his time in the academy teaching without much combat experience. It's fortunate that the payout for the betting pool still stayed the same. It seems that I still have a chance to get the gold coin that I lost back.

The young master was in pretty good shape today as well. He bathed and went to sleep after training as usual.

Chapter 34
Dueling Period

Seeing the Silver ranked mercenary rush at him with a sword, Lorist instantly visualized more than ten ways to defeat the opponent, but he wasn't allowed to use any one those. That was because Charade said this to him the day before, "Oh Lord Locke, why don't you just let me call you that? You should always give them a fighting chance! Don't just take them out in an instant, alright?! At least pretend to fend away a few of their strikes and maybe even try for a close victory and make people think that you were just on the edge of losing and merely lucked out. This way, people will continue to bet against you! Otherwise, everyone will no longer bet on your loss and the betting operation Els is running would no longer earn as much, surely you understand that much?"

Fine, I'll just dance around and act out the fight the whole time. Though, I can't say I'm pretty good at it... This Silver ranked mercenary may be pretty ferocious, but he has lots of openings to strike at, thought Lorist as he tried to match the opponent's ragged movements and try to dodge in a manner that seemed difficult for him. *This... this really is too hard...*

The seven years he served in the military in his previous life had left too deep an impression on Lorist. He had been enlisted as an assault trooper and not a support troop, so he had witnessed all kinds of blood, violence and death that was not too uncommon on the battlefield. While the world as a whole was relatively peaceful during those seven years in his life, shootouts were still a common occurrence during anti-terrorism or drug busting operations. In those bloody fights, a single bullet would equal death to the soldiers and taking the least effort to eliminate the enemy was the most efficient and best way to protect oneself and one's comrades on the battlefield. They even had to make sure their enemies were not playing dead by shooting the corpse of the enemy in the head. That was why Lorist was finding it so hard to purposely not take the finishing move and end the duel there and then.

However, to the audience witnessing the battle from the seats, it seemed like the Silver ranked mercenary was slowly pushing Lorist into a corner as Lorist flailed around desperately trying to parry blow after blow. It really was rather rare for an opponent

to not be instantly taken out by Lorist. *Perhaps Instructor Locke is weak against rapid attackers,* thought some of the people in the audience as they quickly made a mental note of this perceived weakness and determined to verify this fact in the future duels.

At that moment, the mercenary had exposed his chin and Lorist really couldn't resist it anymore. He planted his right foot firmly on the ground in front of him as his left foot instantly kept up and made a big step forward in a swift and agile manner, much like that of a fish swimming in water. Within but a moment, Lorist appeared before the mercenary and swung the sword in his right arm and lightly grazed the chin of the opponent. The Silver ranked mercenary reacted as if he had been struck by lightning and took a few unstable steps forward before falling flat on his face entirely.

Charade rushed up to the platform and checked the condition of the defeated mercenary before announcing, "The contestant has passed out from an injury to his chin. The next contender, please prepare for your turn on the stage."

After signalling for the medical team to take the mercenary away, Charade said to Lorist in a low voice, "That was great, just keep this up for the rest of the battles and let the audience think that the challengers have some hope in winning. However, please pay attention to not always hit their chins to end the duel so that they won't discover that you're holding back."

With 20 challengers in a day and each taking up about five minutes, it all totals up to 1 hour and 40 minutes. Add in another rough 20 minutes for things like announcements and medical checks, the duels would take around 2 hours per day. That should be enough for the audience to feel fulfilled from paying the ticket price of one small silver. Sigh... It seemed that Lorist still had to continue putting up an act for quite a while.

When the first dueling day with the Hoary Stock Academy ended, Lorist had asked Charade to increase the number of challengers per day from 20 to 50 so that he would be able to settle the duels within half the amount of time. However, it was rejected as the revenue generated from the tickets and other miscellaneous sales during each open dueling day easily reached 40 gold Fordes and more. That prompted the finances department of the academy to make sure that duels during those days were dragged on for as long as possible and shoot down Lorist's request without even considering it.

As expected, the next few challengers all employed the same tactic of attacking rapidly. However, with his dynamic vision ability, the sword strikes which seemed swift as the

wind, clustered as rain and powerful as lightning could all clearly be identified by Lorist down to every single detail. If the duels were life-and-death battles, Lorist could break the momentum of the enemy with only one stroke and pierce their hearts instantly. Though, he had no choice but to hold back during these duels.

Many of the challengers attempted to use their superiority as Silver ranks to try to trump Lorist, who was only an Iron ranked fighter, and attempted to break Lorist's sword with the blade glows emanating from their weapons to render Lorist helpless. No matter how tough Lorist's sword was, with his Battle Force at the Iron rank, he wasn't able to manifest a blade glow to counteract that of the challengers' and his sword would break within a few exchanges.

But Lorist wasn't going to go along with their intentions either. Every time he crossed weapons with his opponent, Lorist aimed for the crossguards of the swords and cleverly put his blade out of the way of the blade glows, much to his opponents' annoyance.

The audience started gasping in anxiety as they witnessed Lorist win by a hair's breadth against one opponent after another. Most of those victories seemed to have been a result of Lorist taking advantage of the challengers' mistakes. Had they been more careful and lucky, it would be hard to say who would take the victory for each match. The audience seemed convinced that Lorist's weakness was indeed a crazed flurry of attacks.

That was until a One Star Silver mercenary started taking Lorist on with the standard rapid attack tactic. *Sheesh, your Battle Force is of the earth attribute which makes you more suited for using a sword and a shield in battle, as a semi aggressive guardian. How in the world did you think you would win with rapid attacks while hiding behind your shield? Can you even see where I'm standing at?*

Lorist merely took a few steps forward, sidestepped, and gave a low sweep to his opponent with his leg, tripping the whole guy over. Lorist then proceeded to step on the fellow and tapped his shoulder with his sword twice. Hearing the laughter coming from the audience, the Silver ranked mercenary's face reddened as he picked up his equipment and dashed for the exit.

Clang, clang... Clang! Sharp resounding sounds of metal clashing rang out from within the hall.

It was currently the final duel scheduled for today and the opponent was a Three Star Silver mercenary who looked in his forties. The main difference between him and the rest of Lorist's previous challengers was how he didn't bother to rain attacks on Lorist and instead took on a defensive stance while awaiting Lorist's move.

This was the most impressive challenger up to date as he had managed to perfectly hold his defenses against three of Lorist's aggressive assaults. With his curiosity piqued, Lorist circled around the defending challenger and started to observe him carefully.

The middle-aged man had an unfazed expression and calm and cool breathing. With one leg in front and the other behind, he seemed pretty relaxed and unconcerned. Every time Lorist made a dash to his side, he merely swiped his front leg to point it in Lorist's direction, not once exposing his back to him.

This person was a real expert who had the potential to break through to the Gold rank in the near future and must have experienced his own fair share of life-and-death battles given his calm and reactive disposition and the solid swordplay that he has displayed. During the last three bouts of savage attacks by Lorist, there were quite a number of strikes that would've been lethal to that mercenary but all of them were successfully deflected by him by relying on his great reflexes. It was as Lorist had said before, this person has mastered all the eight basic moves of swordsmanship to the point when every move was as natural as breathing which allowed him to emerged unscathed from the flurry of strikes.

Standing there, Lorist said respectfully to that middle-aged mercenary, "Nice to meet you, I'm Norton Lorist. It is an honor to be able to face you in this duel."

It was the first time Lorist had introduced himself on the stage as this middle-aged mercenary was definitely worth this respect. No matter who it was, as long as one managed to practice the eight basic swordsmanship moves to this level, one would deserve this kind of respect.

The middle-aged man was slightly surprised as a warm light flashed past his eyes. He slightly nodded his head and replied, "My name is Grei Potterfang. It's my pleasure to be able to fight you as well."

Lorist waved the sword in his hand and said, "Please watch out, I'm about to attack."

This time, Lorist didn't simply unleash all his force like he did the past three times but rather approached Potterfang gradually and planned to use a steady and firm approach against him. From his dynamic vision, he could see that almost all of the middle-aged man's moves had a small window of opportunity that he could exploit. As long as he suddenly changed his move mid-trajectory, there was a chance that the middle-aged man wouldn't be able to respond in time and create the decisive opening for Lorist's victory.

The experienced mercenary Grei Potterfang was retreating step by step and neutralized Lorist's blows one after another without leaving much of an opening. It was then when Lorist's move suddenly changed from a round of quick attacks to a leap towards him in an attempt to launch a close quarters move.

Potterfang's expression changed instantly as he let out a low groan, expanded the blade glow from his sword and quickly slashed downwards. Lorist's forward movement didn't slow down at all as the sword in his right hand came up and parried the downward moving sword. The middle-aged man quickly tried to move a few steps back only to hear a sound of a blade unsheathing. A light flashed out before his eyes and a short blade could be seen dangerously pressed on the side of his neck. It appeared that Lorist had pulled his sidearm; an action that was far beyond the mercenary's expectations.

Potterfang's body froze as he placed the longsword in his hand down before saying, "It's my loss. I've forgotten about that other blade you were carrying on your hip..."

Lorist kept the short blade and said, "You're pretty skilled. Nobody else has managed to force me to draw my other blade until now."

"Nevertheless, a loss is still a loss, I have no excuses," replied Potterfang with a bitter laugh. "Thank you for showing mercy. I have indeed learned much from this duel. I'll be taking my leave now."

Potterfang turned around and left the dueling platform right away as the audience let out jeers and sighs and tore their betting tickets to pieces. This has been a common sight for the whole of the month.

In actuality, had Lorist utilized the explosive power of the Inch Stage of the Aquametal Technique, he could have easily broken through the middle-aged mercenary's defenses but it would be difficult for him to control the amount of power he used and

might end up injure the mercenary badly. Given that he had already reached the Dark Stage, that kind of power was easily way beyond what a Silver rank could handle. If he could, Lorist didn't want to hurt his opponent too badly and just try to knock the opponent out. That was why he liked to go for his opponents' necks.

Charade looked at Lorist's thoughtful expression asked, "What's going on? Are you thinking of something?"

Lorist replied, "That middle-aged mercenary just now was a true expert. If it were you or Els instead of me fighting here, I'm sure it wouldn't turn out good. He's far stronger than many of the Silver ranked instructors of our academy.

Charade repled, "You didn't have to tell me that. I could feel the tension when I was watching from the seats and was truly concerned about whether you have finally met the one who would defeat you. This match was really exciting. It's the first time I've seen someone who managed to hold out in so many moves against you."

"Well, I still think that I wouldn't lose either way, that much I'm confident in. I just dragged it on to make it seem more tense for the audience. The 20 duels today have really worn me out. I really shouldn't have listened to what you guys said about faking the duels," complained Lorist.

"Come on, just shrug it off. It's all for the golden bright future[1] that awaits us. Please bear with it for our sakes, would you? Oh, today's the academy payday. You haven't collected your salary from the finance department yet, right? We're having a party at the Red Grace Inn tonight," said Charade.

Thinking back at the day he covered for their bills, Lorist said in an annoyed tone, "Don't think that I'll pay for the bills this time. You even took so much food with you back home... You're really shameless you know!"

Chapter 35
President Peterson's Thanks

Lorist held a small, heavy pouch filled with 30 gold Fordes within it after returning from the finances department. He still has to go to the Swordsmanship Society next as the acting vice chairman Terman has been pandering Lorist to sign the document to finally be able to distribute the bonuses for the members. The situation was the same with the instructor team of the Battle Force awakening course as well.

Lorist had 3 gold Fordes incoming as allowance for running the Swordsmanship Society and another 5 gold Fordes for running the Battle Force awakening course. In total, his income for the month was 38 gold coins. He was very much satisfied with his current lifestyle, as he had made an interesting estimation of the price for the property and living cost in Morante City. If 1 copper coin was equal to 1 Chinese Yuan in his previous life, a small silver would be worth 20 Yuan, a large silver would be worth 100 and a gold Forde was equal to 2000. The salary he got for the month would consequently amount to about 76000 Yuan in his previous life! Including the extra cash he earned from mercenary missions, his annual income would be worth no less than a million Chinese Yuan. *I'm kinda loaded now, ain't I,* thought Lorist as he thought about the fact that he was living the life of a millionaire.

Lorist was the highest-paid employee of the Dawn Academy mainly due to his status as a dual Gold ranked instructor. It's no wonder Charlando cursed when he had heard about Lorist's salary given the annual income of the inn only amounting to 200 gold coins including the referral fee he collected from the private requests handled by the inn. Lorist, on the other hand, easily earned up to 360 gold coins a year.

The assistant instructors in the academy only earned 1 gold coin per month and could be appointed as a probationary official instructor for 3 months if they showed good performance, elevating their salary up to 2 gold coins. After the probationary period, Iron ranked instructors earned a salary of 3 gold coins. If an instructor had Silver ranked Battle Force, he would have to serve as an Iron ranked instructor for one semester before he can officially take on the position of a Silver ranked instructor with 5 gold Fordes as his salary.

There were several different pay grades among Silver ranked instructors as well. For the first 3 years of service, it was 5 gold coins. The next 3 years after that was 6 gold coins per month. When that period is over, the salary would rise to 7 gold coins for another three years. For any Silver ranked instructor that has served for more than 10 years, their salary would be fixed at 8 gold coins per month.

The Gold ranked instructors on the other hand had their salaries decided based on their star rank. One Star Gold ranked instructors earned 10 gold coins a month, Two Star Gold ranked instructors earned 15 gold coins whereas Three Star Gold ranked instructors like Instructor Claude got 20 gold coins every month. If Instructor Claude manages to break through to the Blademaster level, his salary would be no less than 50 gold coins each month.

When Lorist first obtained the Incador Medal, he was eligible to receive the same treatment as Gold ranked instructors do. However, the finances department of the academy was very divided on the matter of the salary. Some said that he deserved to be paid as much as the One Star Gold ranked instructors while some others questioned whether he should receive his salary as an Iron ranked instructor on top of the benefits of having the Incador Medal. In the end, the decision was passed on to Academy Head Levins and he decided that Lorist would be paid the salary equivalent to a Two Star Gold instructors without any other benefits. It was at that moment when Lorist's income became 15 gold coins a month. After acquiring the Gold Battle Force Instructor Badge, his salary doubled yet again.

This was the main reason why Charade and Lorist's other friends loved to take advantage of him as they were quite envious of the large salary he got. Every month after payday, they would find some sort of excuse to make him treat them to something. Charade had even said something like this before, "I have toiled so hard upon entering the Enforcement Division as a normal member to finally become the head of it for almost ten years now and my monthly salary is only a measly 12 gold coins, not even half of yours! If I don't at least get something at your expense, I would find it hard to sleep at night!"

Exiting the Swordsmanship Society building, Lorist came to the office of the instructor team of the Battle Force awakening course. As the one put in charge to manage the distribution of the bonus allowance for the instruction team, Lorist was approached by Instructor Anfya to sign the relevant documents. After signing the distribution authorization documents, he signed under his own name in the list as well and collected his 5 gold coins. As he was just about to leave, he was called out to by

Instructor Marlin.

Instructor Marlin stretched his hand out and said, "Lend me some money, I'll return it tomorrow."

"Alright, how much do you need?"

"As much as possible, all of it if you don't mind. I'll definitely return it tomorrow," replied Instructor Marlin.

"Huh?" Lorist threw the whole pouch to Marlin and asked curiously, "Brother Marlin, what do you need the money for? And you say you're returning it tomorrow? Is there anything that urgent?"

Instructor Anfya who was standing nearby them overheard and tried hard to suppress her laughter. "He also asked some of us to lend him money and said that he would return it tomorrow. Every time he collects his salary, he has to pass it all to his wife and he wouldn't be left with any to go get drinks. That's why he just came out with a way to save some personal cash for himself so that he won't have to worry about drinking anymore."

"How would he make that kind of money in just a day? Can he really get enough to let him drink away without any worries? Even loan interests wouldn't get you that much!" exclaimed Lorist, still unable to figure out what Instructor Marlin was planning.

"Actually, that method has something to do with you," replied Anfya, smiling.

"Huh? How so?"

"Aren't you gonna go fight against the instructors of the 17th ranked Clearwater Academy tomorrow? Marlin plans to gather 100 gold coins to bet on your victory. Even though the payout rate is 1 small silver for 1 large silver, with 100 gold coins, he can easily get 20 more if he wins the bet. That would be enough for Marlin to drink as he wants for years," explained Instructor Anfya.

Lorist looked at Instructor Marlin with a complicated expression. *That's the best idea you've managed to come up with? I believe that the academy head would go completely nuts over this.* "Brother Marlin, you're really pushing your luck here. Have you ever considered what would happen if I were to lose somehow? If you really want to drink, why don't I just treat you to some tonight at the Red Grace Inn?"

Instructor Marlin laughed and replied, "If you lose, then I only have myself to blame. I'd rather take that risk and enjoy all the alcohol I can buy myself. Additionally, if you were treating once or twice, I wouldn't mind. But even I wouldn't have the face to ask you to treat me to drinks every single day."

"What about the academy head? You're practically making the academy betting pool incur a huge loss at this rate."

"I'll do it nevertheless for the booze! Even so, a few other instructors and I can still say that we're supporting you as fellow instructors from the Battle Force awakening course by placing a large bet on your victory. The academy can't do anything to us if that's the case."

"Alright, since you've already decided on it, I wouldn't convince you otherwise. You guys better not sleep tonight to pray for my victory instead," said Lorist as he headed out of the door, before suddenly stopping again when he remembered something. "Um, Brother Marlin, I seem to remember that you were unfazed at President Peterson's offer of the 3000-gold-Forde reward. Can you tell me why?"

"Oh, that was because I've seen things like this many times when I still served in the city garrison. Every time a certain group of soldiers was about to be sent out as cannon fodder, the commander would always shout that the first one ahead would get 100 gold coins to raise their morale. In time, I got used to it and no large sum of money can ever move me," explained Instructor Marlin nonchalantly.

"Ugh..." Lorist was truly speechless at that.

Lorist then went over to see how the young master of the Peterson family's training was going. The young master, training hard under the threat of the cane for more than 50 days, has successfully lost more than 35 kilograms of his body weight, but he still weighed around 150 kilograms. After giving the fatty's pulse a read, Lorist received the report from the cane-wielding instructor who said that the young master's training was progressing really successfully, apart from the fact that he desperately craved for meat to the point where he actually tried to bite some off from the instructor's hand himself. Had it not been for his quick Battle Force activation, he would have lost at least half a kilogram of muscle from his arm. After that, he gave the young master a stern beating and finally snapped him out of his crazed trance.

No wonder the young master's so obedient when I tried to read his pulse... It's because he just got punished heavily, thought Lorist as he decided to once again revise the young master's meals. "How about this, from tomorrow onwards, his breakfast will stay the same, add about half a kilogram of steamed chicken for him during lunch and some steamed fish for dinner. These new dishes should not contain a trace of oil in it. Just season it with some salt. However, double the intensity of his training from now on as well. He'll have enough energy for that given his increased servings."

Seeing the young master doing sit-ups beside him like a flopping dead fish, Lorist felt that it was about time for him to leave for the great hall. Today was the day when the first 152 students in Group 1 of the Battle Force awakening course awakened their Battle Force. As the head instructor, he was obligated to attend the event.

He arrived at the great hall just in time. The 152 students were already gathered there and formed neat rows of people. Instructor Marlin invited Lorist to go on the podium to give a final debriefing to the students present.

Standing on the stage, Lorist pointed towards the gigantic pentagram diagram and said, "All this time you have been taught to memorize this diagram firmly in your heart. This is the basic major circulation path that you will have to master. When you enter the meditation room later, relax your bodies, focus your attention and imagine the blood flowing through the circulation points listed in the diagram in your own bodies. Sooner or later, you'll start to feel some kind of energy manifesting in your bodies. That is the sign of a successful Battle Force awakening. Right now, just relax and don't feel anxious. None of you here will fail as you have all reached the peak condition in terms of your essence, vitality and consciousness,[1] and I know that because I have personally read your pulses during the past two days and I feel really confident in all of you. That's why, relax, have more confidence and face your awakening with a tranquil smile."

Lorist's speech incited a round of light laughter from the students. After that, one by one the students were guided to the nearby meditation room by the assistant instructors where they will reside for one to two hours before emerging with their Battle Force awakened.

Actually, the awakening process of Battle Force itself wasn't that complicated apart from the fact that person with a body in bad condition couldn't feel the flow of internal energy no matter how much meditation is undertaken. After awakening their Battle Force, the students will be trained and familiarized with how to use it as the body

adapts to the new circulation of energy in it until they reach the benchmark required of the One Star Bronze rank. After that, they will train individually like any other normal person and try to break through further ranks.

Having checked out on the other groups as well, Lorist prepared to head home himself until he was stopped by Bill the Butler who was running towards him hurriedly to inform him that President Peterson was at the academy and would like to meet up with him.

Lorist was led by the butler who took a roundabout route and only answered his questions grumpily. He couldn't help but feel that something was off. *What is going on? I know that Butler Bill has something against my methods in training the young master, which should look like pointless torturing to him, but he was still a loyal man who responsibility carried out anything he was tasked with and probably wouldn't let his personal feelings get in the way of his job.*

Little did Lorist know that Bill had lost more than 20 gold coins from betting against him. Had he not decided to stop betting altogether, he could've easily lost another 10. Having to meet the person that had caused him to lose more than 20 gold coins, it was no wonder that the butler behaved a little cold towards him. It was already quite an achievement for him to not lash out at Lorist there and then.

Having been led into the small tree-filled area beside the school field, Lorist discovered that President Peterson was hiding behind a tree and spying on his fat son who was exercising under the threat of the cane. Every time the cane snapped, the president would flinch for a bit as if he himself had been hit by it.

Lorist had a complicated expression on his face as he thought, *President, I can understand why you don't want your son seeing you here, but why have you dragged me, his instructor, here to spy on him as well? It really feels like we're up to something no good here...*

It appeared that President Peterson was pretty satisfied with his son's weight loss progress, which was quite evident to anyone who had observed the young master before he started. Seeing his son running and jumping around with so much vigor, the president couldn't be more delighted. When his son was at home, he was primarily known for his sloth as he would rather sit or lie around rather than stand up and walk. Every step he took seemed so tiring for him to the point he would start panting after walking a short distance. Even though the president wanted to be stricter on his son,

his wife and mistresses couldn't bear to see the young master tire himself out and stopped him from doing so.

This time, even though he wasn't too pleased to see his son being caned by the instructor in charge, it was still better than having him lying about at home not doing anything at all. Naturally, the president also brought up some opinions about how the cane was too thick or how it was used all too often.

Lorist merely smiled and explained that the cane was made so that it wouldn't leave any lasting injuries on the young master's body and while it definitely hurt to be hit by it, it would only leave a slight bruise that would disappear after medicine has been applied after the training session. As for the caning frequency, that was entirely due to the fact that the young master would slack off whenever he could if he was not observed. If he was not supervised and punished the whole time, the training would never take effect at that rate. That's why the instructors can do nothing but steel their hearts and continue the caning.

Lorist let out a long sigh and said, "It would be better for him to suffer now than later. We're not only helping the young master to lose weight. In fact, we're also instilling within him the proper outlook on life. When the young master returns home with his Battle Force awakened, he will not return to his life of debauchery and lazing around anymore."

President Peterson gave those word some thought before saying, "Actually, I have another matter when I decided to come visit you today. It's about that sauna of yours that Bill told me about. I've been wanting to try it out since Bill said it was a rather refreshing and revigorating experience and I've come over to do just that as well as check out on my son. Having seen his progress, I really have to thank you for your efforts. I believe that you will successfully complete this task I have left to you."

Lorist nodded in agreement as well. The duel 'performances' throughout the morning had left him sweating all over and itching for a bath. Having spoken a little rudely when commenting on the methods he used on the young master, he quickly offered, "Why don't you come experience the sauna for yourself right now? Do I have the pleasure to invite you to come with me?"

President Peterson laughed out and said, "Of course you do."

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"Ah, this is truly pleasant," said the president as he sat on the wooden seats with his whole body filled with sweat and a small towel covering his lower body.

As Lorist sprinkled even more water on the red-hot cobblestones in the cauldron, a rush of steam instantly arose and made the surrounding air a little difficult to breathe in.

"After sweating it out in the sauna, go wash yourself once before entering again. Repeat this for three times and you'll instantly feel more refreshed. The sauna really has many benefits to one's health and skin, but one shouldn't stay in it for too long a time. Ten minutes each time would be ideal," explained Lorist as his voice slightly echoed off from the walls of the compact sauna room.

"I think I'll have one built back at my home too. It would be a pretty good idea to host sauna parties once in a while where everyone will engage in naked communion, hehe," said the president as he came out with a rather fancy idea.

"That wouldn't be wise as you'll never know if any of your guests have any kind of contagious disease. It's best if the family sauna is not be open to anyone else. If you really want to have sauna parties, it's better if you start a high class sauna facility where you can also provide services like massages or other sorts of body care. It should be a pretty good business," said Lorist.

"That's actually a revolutionary concept! Why didn't I think of it myself?" said the president as he stood up in excitement with his eyes gleaming.

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Before he boarded his carriage, President Peterson took out three palm-sized pieces of parchment and put them into Lorist's hand and said, "The first one is to thank you for coming out with a few great ideas for several businesses. I'll feel bad if I capitalize on those without somehow reimbursing you, so this represents my sincere thanks for you. The second one is my appreciation for the whole of the instructor team. The third one is for you personally for taking care of my son's training. I'll be leaving him entirely up to you."

The three pieces of parchment were gold coin tickets which was valued at 100 gold coins each. As long as it was brought to the shrine of the Goddess of Wealth, Zejin, Lorist would be able to exchange them for 300 gold Fordes. As expected of the man in

charge of the Peterson Group, one of the largest merchant groups in the trade union. He was indeed generous with his rewards.

Lorist bowed down his head to say his thanks. "Thank you, president. Please rest assured, we'll definitely handle the matter of your son perfectly."

Chapter 36
Attendant and Carriage

It was nighttime and the Red Grace Inn was merry as usual. Instructor Marlin, having drunk a little too much, was telling Charade all about the plan for him to make tons of gold coins. The fatty's eyes instantly gleamed as he gave Marlin another jug of ale to shut him up, after which he dragged Yuriy and Terman to a corner and started whispering away.

Just as Lorist pushed open the door and greeted Charlando, who was manning the counter, he sat beside Instructor Marlin. Having spent the afternoon with President Peterson in the sauna, he felt a little worn out and decided to take a nap in his room, only to wake up when the sky was already dark and rushed over right away.

Instructor Marlin looked at Lorist with his drunken eyes and said, "Brother Locke… Yo-you're late… Here, have a cup of booze…"

"Brother Marlin, how much did you drink? You're totally wasted!"

It's over… I'll definitely be nagged at by his wife when I send him back… Lorist tried to dismiss that thought and called the serving girl Molly over to take his order as he had yet to have dinner. As she took his order, Molly also complained to Lorist about how he hasn't been coming over to the inn to spend the night with her and asked if he would want to do just that tonight.

Lorist was definitely moved after seeing Molly's splendid figure. It has been almost a month since he last had any nighttime action as he really has been too busy in the recent days. He wouldn't have come over to the inn either if it wasn't payday. He also recalled that Charlando and Louise would be getting married within a month and he still hasn't prepared a gift for them yet.

However, looking at how wasted Instructor Marlin was, Lorist turned down Molly's offer. "I'm sorry, Molly. I've really been too busy recently. I have to send this guy over here back to his home later so I wouldn't be able to stay the night. Maybe in another few days…"

Molly humphed with a tone of dissatisfaction. “Just you wait,” said Molly coldly, before she turned and left.

Even so, Molly didn’t forget her place as a serving girl and quickly sent the food Lorist had ordered to him. After getting a few bites, Charade sat in front of Lorist and swiped a piece of roast goose from his plate and started chewing away.

“Sol, did you wash your hands? Don’t dirty my food like that,” scolded Lorist.

“If you’re not going to finish it, let me help,” said Yuriy as he came over. He was even worse and took the whole plate of roast goose away from Lorist.

“I bet you guys are just here to make me pay for you again. I’m telling you beforehand that all of you aside from Marlin will have to settle your own bills.”

“That’s no issue,” said the fatty as he spit out the bones of the goose before waving at the serving girls and pointing at Instructor Marlin, who was lying flat on the table. “Brother Marlin here still wants… one, two, three… six, six more cups of blackcurrant fruit wine and another two barrels of blackcurrant ale. Oh, and let chef McDuffin make him a few more delicious dishes to go with all the alcohol.”

Upon hearing his name mentioned, Instructor Marlin who was lying flat on the table raised his cup and said, “Alright, let’s drink…” before falling flat onto the surface once again.

“Sol, I never knew that would work… It’s your win, fatty…” said Lorist with his mouth agape with the half-chewed food nearly falling out.

“Yeah!” Having successfully taking advantage of Lorist once again, Charade, Yuriy and gang clapped their hands in celebration.

In the midst of all the merrymaking, a person suddenly rushed over in front of Lorist and kneeled down. Very much stunned at this sight, Lorist asked, “What’s going on?”

That person said loudly, “I want to be your disciple! Please let me learn the way of the sword from you!”

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Charade and gang were totally flabbergasted. What was this situation about?

“Having seen all your battles within the past month, I really want to learn swordsmanship from you. Before, it was totally my fault for saying that you didn’t qualify to teach me for just being an Iron rank. I am deeply sorry for that!”

“Brother Locke, that is the kid I was talking about. He’s regretting his decision terribly right now,” said Els, who suddenly appeared beside Lorist and swiped a bottle of fruit wine from one of the serving girls’ trays. “Get us another bottle.”

“I’m not paying for that, alright?” clarified Lorist. It was troublesome enough for Charade to have managed to order six more bottles of fruit wine which cost one large silver each under the name of Marlin.

“He’s just joking. Put the bill on his tab,” said Els to the serving girl before patting Lorist on the shoulder as he pointed at the kneeling youth. “Sit down, old friend. Let’s first talk about whether you will accept him as your student.”

Sigh, I really can’t do anything about the bills, Lorist thought, before turning his attention to the youth on the ground. *Hmmm, Els was right about him having a rather nice physique. He’s only 16 and yet he looks so well-built and tall. I would have thought that he was 20 if I wasn’t told of his age beforehand… Blonde hair, straight nose and clear eyes, he actually looks pretty decent.* At this moment, the youth on the ground had a perplexed expression as he clenched his lips and awaited Lorist’s decision.

“What’s your name?” asked Lorist.

“I… I’m called Reidy Gezeizidorf,” said the youth nervously.

“Hmm, then I’ll call you Reidy. Reidy, having watched my battles, then you should know that I’m both a swordsmanship and Battle Force instructor at the Dawn Academy. As long as you enroll over there, I’ll naturally be able to teach you swordsmanship without you having to kneel here like that. Also, I’m only eight years older than you, you know. I don’t plan on accepting a personal disciple just yet. I think it’s better if you and attend an elementary academy before applying to the Dawn Academy the next year,” said Lorist.

Reidy was disappointed at the response, but he remained kneeling. “No, I don’t want to attend school. All the people there laugh at me for being a country bumpkin and look down on me. I only want to learn swordsmanship from you…”

Having had vast economical development over the last twenty years of peace, Morante

City has become one of the most advanced merchant cities on the Grindia Continent. Gradually, its citizens began to develop arrogance and pride for being born in the city. Just like how people in Lorist's past life would look down on foreign laborers, many citizens of Morante City would berate outsiders for being country bumpkins and assume that all of them fit under the stereotype of thieves and robbers. It could be seen that the attitude of the trade union's people has become intolerant and materialistic.

This kind of discrimination wasn't too uncommon at the Dawn Academy either and it was usually the main cause for disputes between local and non-local students in the academy. Lorist was surprised at how Reidy has already experienced such a thing at an elementary academy. It's no wonder Els said he had beaten up all the students in the whole class in one of the academies he had attended before.

"Brother Locke, just take him it. He's just that stubborn and wouldn't get up if you don't accept him as a disciple. Well, it's not like you have to actually teach him. Just treat him as your personal attendant and give him pointers from time to time. Since you're still a person with a noble status, nobody would say anything if you had a retainer or two following you around," encouraged Els as he sipped the wine from the bottle in his hand.

"This…" Lorist sometimes actually forgot that he came from a noble family. Even though he had been exiled from the family, he still bore the family name and had the right to use the Norton family insignia as proof of his noble status. If he were to mingle in high society, he would receive the treatment and service of a nobleman. It's just that Lorist had never paid much attention to matters such as these.

"Oh," Els sounded like he just remembered something. "Didn't you just move into a new place? I've been thinking quite hard about what to give you as a housewarming gift. It so happens that a guy who owed me money went bankrupt and is auctioning his possessions away to pay back the debt. Jindoz already went and collected his horses and carriage as collateral. Since you don't have a carriage yourself, I thought that I'd give that to you since I won't be using it anyway. That's why I think you should accept Reidy as he can help you take care of the carriage and the Zeno Horses."

Lorist gave a bitter laugh. Since Els is going out of his way just to make him take Reidy in, he said to the youth kneeling in front of him, "Reidy, I'm sure you've heard what Els had just said. Would you be willing to be my attendant for now? If not, you had better get up as I won't be taking in a disciple in the near future."

Reidy instantly got up and said, “Of course I’m willing. I’ll make sure the horses and carriage receive the best of my care! I’ll be bringing my stuff over now.”

Seeing Reidy run off to pack his belongings, Els nodded and said, “This fellow will make a good attendant given his hardworking attitude and abundant energy. He’s also a pretty good coachman as well. I’ll be leaving him in your care, Brother Locke.”

Charade looked at them with an expression of envy. “Els, why did you gift Lorist a horse carriage but nothing to me? I was even your classmate at that time! Was our relationship that shallow?”

“Hey, Brother Locke has given me a couple of great ideas for businesses that’s worth thousands of gold coins. Jindoz said that if I didn’t give him anything, I would lose all my face. As for you, what have you done for me other than taking advantage of me? You still dare to demand gifts? Dream on,” said Els.

Still not convinced, Charade said, “I refuse to believe that Locke can come up with any ideas for a business that’s worth that much.”

Els told the whole thing about repackaging and selling the Terrence-donkey whip to the group since it wasn’t that much of a secret to begin with and managed to convince Charade.

Yuriy nodded and said, “This business really is quite profitable.”

When Els had heard about the idea from Lorist, he had someone sent to purchase all the Terrence-donkey whips available from the Relic Islands right away. The shipment will be arriving in another month and the medicinal wine and glass bottles were all prepared. Without the power and connections Els’s syndicate has, no normal businessman would be able to prepare all that within a short period of time.

Charade said bitterly, “This bastard really has a brain that’s much more wtty than most…”

Seeing Lorist about to finish his meal, Els placed the wine bottle back on the table and said, “Come, Brother Locke. Let’s go check the carriage out. I’ve parked it in the back alley.”

The group then went as a group to go see the horse cart. Its design wasn’t like that of the normal coaches that one could rent on the streets. It was a four-wheeled cart that

boasted a complete dark brown-colored carriage which was suited for long distance travel with four green glass windows that helped the interior of the carriage to gain some illumination during the day. The roof and back of the carriage was fitted with bronze racks on which luggage could be placed. At the front of it was a seat that could fit two coachmen.

Els kicked on the cartwheel for a bit before he gleefully said, “This wheel, axle and bearing were all made in the dwarven kingdom from fairy steel and are incomparably tough and long-lasting. The metal bracket that’s securing the carriage is also fitted with a large shock absorber that will minimize the shakiness of the ride. With this carriage, you will no longer have to worry about transportation or shelter when you go on mercenary missions in the future.”

“Sol, who would use this kind of carriage to mercenary missions? Only nobles use carriages like this,” Charade interjected.

Ignoring Charade’s comment, Els said to Lorist, “Come, let’s check the interior out too.”

The carriage itself was fitted with two grey leather seats on the front and the back which faced each other. The back seat can also be folded downwards into a makeshift bed. Below the seats were four small drawers that could be used to store small items. The walls of the carriage were fitted with a light purple velvet cloth with two lamps on either side to help light up the interior at night.

Els knocked on the walls and said,” There’s a thin steel plate within these walls and over here…”

Els pointed towards the roof and continued, “Above are six pieces of light metal plates that are fastened by a velvet string that can be released to cover the parts where there are windows and provide some temporary defense towards any potential threat from the outside. There is also a trapdoor which is hidden under the carpet. You can use it for an emergency escape if the situation is dire.”

Terman was full of praise for the carriage. “The designer of the carriage has clearly considered most of the scenarios that one would encounter during long distance travel and has outfitted it adequately with certain necessary precautions. It must have been a pretty expensive one.”

Charade looked at it full of envy. “It should cost no less than 100 gold coins. Including

the price of those two Zeno Horses, I believe the actual price is even higher."

Zeno Horses were the most famous kind of mount on the Grindia Continent which were quite well known for their endurance, making them suited for long distance traveling even though their maximum speed was slightly slower than other kinds of horses.

Yuriy asked sheepishly, "Els, how much did you say that bankrupt merchant owe you?"

Els scratched his head in thought and said, "Should be about 30 gold coins, if not 40."

"Ugh…" Everybody was speechless.

Lorist didn't really mind whether the horses and carriage were taken by force since that was what the syndicates usually did anyway given their forceful management approach. Patting on the horse cart, he said satisfiedly, "Thanks, Els. I'll take care of it well."

Seeing Reidy carrying a rucksack on his back as he came over, Lorist called out to him and said, "Reidy, put the stuff into the carriage and prepare the horses. Fatty, come with me to get Instructor Marlin. I need to send him back."

Charade asked, "Will you be coming back to drink?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "Nope, I won't be. I still have to duel tomorrow and it's getting rather late. Oh, and, are you leaving as well?"

Charade said, "No, we'll be staying here for a bit more. The food still isn't served yet."

Lorist just remembered something and said, "Oh, I better go settle the bills lest you put your orders under my tab."

"Sol, you're so stingy, Locke. Didn't Els just gift you a horse cart worth 100 gold coins? Surely you wouldn't mind treating us something to commemorate that!"

"No way," replied Lorist.

Chapter 37
Ambush on the Streets

The cartwheel which was layered with wood and resin rattled as the carriage traveled along the street...

Within the carriage, instructor Marlin lay upon the front seat and snored softly. Lorist felt incredibly satisfied with this carriage that he had just been gifted with as the build quality was impeccable and the ride was stable and comfy. The horses were well-trained and behaved as well. As for the Reidy, Lorist really didn't expect for his driving skills to be this good. It seemed that taking Reidy in to be his attendant was a good choice after all as Els had said.

Oh, there's a small handle here. The window can be opened after all! Ah, the feeling of the night breeze sure is refreshing, thought Lorist as he opened the window curiously as the scene of the nighttime streets passed by his view.

Huh? "Stop the carriage!" exclaimed Lorist.

"Easy, horsey..." commanded Reidy as he pulled on the reins. The carriage moved forward for another seven to eight meters before stopping completely as the Zeno Horses snorted in dissatisfaction.

"What's wrong, master?" asked Reidy.

Having been accepted as Lorist's servant, Reidy has changed the way he referred to him. In Grindia, calling someone 'master' wasn't a sign of being owned as per the relationship of a master and a slave but rather the sign of trust for the person who would make decisions for oneself to follow.[1]

"Turn back a little bit. Stop at the light pole beside the small plaza over there," instructed Lorist.

"Okay." Reidy pulled on the reins to turn the Zeno Horses in the opposite direction and steered the carriage towards the streetlights by the plaza.

Lorist got off from the carriage and walked towards the bench beside a flower patch in the plaza.

Sitting on top of the bench was an adult and two children who were huddled tightly together. At that moment, the adult moved a little upon hearing the footsteps of Lorist approaching and opened his half awake eyes. Seeing Lorist walking towards him, he couldn't help but exclaim in surprise. "It's you..."

"Hi. Are those two your children?" asked Lorist, looking like he suddenly understood something.

This middle-aged man was the last person that had challenged Lorist today who had left quite a deep impression given his skills relative to the other challengers. "Yes, this is my son Howard, he's 12 this year. Here's my daughter Alisa, she's 7," introduced Potterfang.

"Are you going to spend the night here with them?" Lorist didn't expect that a peak Silver ranked swordsman would be living homelessly like a wandering beggar. Had Potterfang not impressed him during the duel, he might not have even remembered his face let alone asked Reidy to stop the carriage.

Potterfang's face showed a pained smile as he said, "I have just come over here from the Krissen Empire, so I didn't bring much luggage with me. Also, I was too greedy and believed that I would definitely win against you in the challenge and get the reward money, so I bet the rest of my savings for the registration fee. Before arriving here, I relied on selling my belongings to survive. Up until today, I was quite confident in my abilities. I would never have expected to lose to your hands and disappoint my children. Having lost a large sum of money by betting on me and because of the overdue rent, the landlord kicked me out and left me homeless. Right now, I have nowhere to return to nor any identification documents, so I can only spend the night in this public space."

Lorist understood that had he been a normal Iron rank, he would definitely not be Potterfang's match. However, no one knew that he did not train mainly in Battle Force but rather in the Aquametal Technique from his previous life.

"Couldn't you just accept a mercenary mission?" Lorist asked. It was not rare for skilled mercenaries like Potterfang to be in high demand for various jobs from guarding a residence to helping out in a mercenary group. Many large mercenary

groups would even accept an expert like Potterfang without asking him to pay the membership fee.

"I tried doing just that, but it still didn't work out," said Potterfang as he shook his head. "I'm already regretting my decision to travel to Morante City. I didn't expect the 'freedom and equality' I sought so much in Morante City was nothing but a mirage as the local citizens are extremely abhorrent and discriminatory towards us outsiders. I've witnessed several non local mercenaries having trouble finding requests in this city's mercenary guilds and are sometimes forced to accept difficult missions for an unfair price. That was especially the case for a citizen of the Krissen Empire like me, who is even more despised by the city folk among the other outsiders. Even though the war had ended over 20 years ago and the empire is already no more, the people of this city still treat us as enemies. I also have to consider the future of my children so I can't accept missions that are too risky... If I had won earlier today, I would've used the reward money to leave this place and go to another kingdom or nation. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to receive the freedom and fairness that I had sought so much in futility in this city."

Potterfang explained his experiences in a tone that was both depressing and slightly laced with hatred and regret. If he had not been overconfident in his abilities and not caved in to the landlord's encouragement or be blinded by the luxurious prize money, he wouldn't have bet all his savings on the registration fee. Those 10 gold coins would have been enough for him to bring his children to leave this cold and materialistic city and settle down in another small village where he would be able to afford several acres of farmland and a small hut, which would be more than enough for his children to lead a stable life.

Sigh, I can only blame myself for being blinded by greed and losing my ability to think clearly, thought Potterfang as he lowered his head in frustration. No Iron ranked instructor in the right mind would challenge all the SIlver ranked instructors without a certain degree of confidence. Even Potterfang himself didn't dare to claim that he was the strongest among those of the same rank as him. He only understood that fact after he lost the battle, but it was already too late.

"Which part of the Krissen Empire did you come from?" asked Lorist.

"I am from the northern lands," replied Potterfang.

"Wow, that's a coincidence. My birthplace is also in the Krissen Empire. I'm sure they

announced my name during the duels in the morning. I'm called Norton Lorist. Have you heard of the Norton family?" Lorist was delighted to have encountered someone from his homeland.

"Norton? The Roaring Bear of the Far Desolate North? I've definitely heard of them, the Nortons are famous nobles who were known for their military contributions. Many commoners joined the army in hopes of distinguishing themselves and gaining a noble title like the Norton family founder and be granted a dominion. But, how many among all those soldiers had managed to achieve that dream? Then again, why is someone like you at the Morante City and accepting challenges from Silver ranked combatants?" asked Potterfang, intrigued.

Lorist smiled and said, "Well, that is kind of a long story. To summarize, I have left my home to pursue my studies here in Morante City ten years ago. Ever since the internal disputes in the empire six or seven years ago, I have lost all contact with my family. You're a northerner too, right? Do you know something about my family?"

Potterfang seemed relieved but shook his head a little after a pause. "Sorry, I have also been away from home for more than 20 years. The northlands are vast. I come from Mond Town, which is quite far from your family's dominion. It would take approximately 3-4 days on horseback to even get there. When I was 21, I left my home to enlist for the army and worked my way up from a common soldier to a military officer and continued living my life in service. Given that I had no other relatives, I got married and settled down in the capital city. Never would I have expected internal strife to consume our empire. During the six years the three princes fought for the throne, the capital was totally decimated. After the chaos calmed down, I went back to the capital only to discover that almost everything I had was lost. With my wife dead, my two children had to rely on scraps and leftovers and somehow managed to survive. Had it not been for the care of certain neighbors, I might have lost even them. After that, I packed whatever I had and made my way to this city in hopes of being able to start a new life here..."

Oh, so he had a military background and is already accustomed to seeing the death and despair on the battlefield. No wonder he was so calm and firm throughout the whole battle. Given his strength as a peak Silver rank expert, he could've easily robbed the common folk and made a decent living for himself, but instead, he would rather live a harsh life with his children in the streets. It isn't easy to find a person that's as upright as him.

At that moment, Reidy came over to Lorist's side and gave Potterfang and his children a look before whispering, "Master, what's going on?"

Lorist looked at Potterfang and made his invitation, "Given that we already had crossed swords as fellow swordsmen, and the fact that we share the same homeland, Brother Potterfang, do I have the pleasure to invite you to come with us as guests? After all, I still have much to ask about the situation back at the empire and we can't be talking here all night long."

"This..." Potterfang seemed hesitant. He understood that Lorist made the offer with good intentions, however his pride wouldn't easily allow him to accept that gesture of kindness given the pathetic state he was in.

A cold breeze blew and the two children sleeping in his embrace sneezed loudly.

Lorist stepped forward and shielded them from the breeze. "Brother, I know that you have your pride as a soldier and isn't willing to accept people's kindness for nothing, but you have to consider the welfare of your children. Even though it's only spring, the nighttime air is rather chilly and your kids will easily get a cold that would cause you even more trouble given your predicament. Also, as a fellow northerner, I can't rest easy if I'm not able to help you in any way. You should know that northerners like us have a warm custom of providing our guests with top notch hospitality. What more is there to think about? Let's go."

"Alright then, please pardon my intrusion," said Potterfang resolutely as he accepted Lorist's invitation.

As Potterfang was about to wake his son with his daughter in his arms, Lorist placed his finger at his lips and shushed before saying, "Don't wake him. Let me carry him."

"I think you can leave that to me, master," Reidy said as he walked towards the child and lifted him up.

Hmm, a 16-year-old like him can carry a 12-year-old boy as if he weighed nothing more than a feather. Els really wasn't exaggerating when he mentioned Reidy's strength and vigor.

Potterfang bent down again to pick up his longsword and his small pouch. As it was his personal belongings, Lorist felt hesitant to help him take it.

"Let's get on the carriage first. My drunk colleague's in there though as I still have to send him home. I hope you wouldn't mind squeezing for a bit," said Lorist while pointing at the carriage.

"Mister Norton, you don't have to be so polite. I am already thankful for your kind generosity," thanked Potterfang.

Lorist turned and walked towards the carriage. "Just call me Locke. I'm not too comfortable with being referred to so formally. It's better if you just call me by name. Can I call you Pot..."

"Watch out! To your left!" Potterfang shouted urgently.

Lorist prepared to dodge as four 30 centimeter blades of light flew into his line of sight.

No, I can't evade these attacks. Otherwise, they would hit Potterfang who's carrying his daughter and Reidy who's holding the son. From the corner of his eyes, Lorist could see Potterfang already turning to his back and preparing to shield his daughter from the light blades. It was apparent that he expected Lorist to dodge and has braced himself to take the damage. Reidy on the other hand was completely stunned from suddenly being placed in a dangerous situation.

Sol, the attackers are Gold ranked combatants. Where's my sword? Lorist reached out for his longsword only to notice that he had left it on the seat in the carriage. It was fortunate that he still wore his short sword on his hip.

Shiiiing! The short sword made a sound as it was drawn out of the scabbard. Clang, clang, clang, clang! Within but a flash, the short sword danced mid-air and struck down the four blades of light. Judging by the strength and velocity of the blades, Lorist estimated that the blades were unleashed by a One Star Gold Swordsman. While an enemy of such caliber wasn't an inherent threat to him, he only had his sidearm with him and wasn't able to react well to the sudden attack.

"Bring the kids to the carriage. Reidy, drive back to the inn and let me handle this, quick!" exclaimed Lorist.

"Huh, you managed to parry my blades of light. I see that you're pretty resilient for a mere Iron rank." Two silhouettes emerged from the dark alley by the plaza and slowly walked towards Lorist's party.

"Relax, we're not here for your life. We did however receive a request from someone to take one of your arms. No worries, I'll make it quick so it'll be over in a second, hehe," said one of the approaching figures with his cynical, confident voice.

"You better be ready to put your life on the line if you want to try," Lorist replied coldly.

"Hehehe, we don't even fear Silver rank fighters. Killing you would be easier than slaying a chicken! At least a chicken would be able to hide somewhere tight. Where would you be able to hide?"

"Apprentice brother, let's not waste too much words on him. Who's attacking first? The sooner we settle this the faster we can return to the girls who are still waiting in our rooms," said the other in a rather frustrated tone.

Upon leaving his daughter in the carriage, Potterfang grabbed Lorist's sword and passed it to him quickly.

"They're here for me, you're not involved in this," said Lorist as he accepted the sword. Seeing Reidy leaving with the carriage, Lorist felt more relieved.

"The light blade just now also came towards my beloved Alisa," said Potterfang angrily as he drew the sword in his hand with a crisp sound. Had Lorist not struck down the attacks, Alisa would've been seriously wounded. Even though the assailants came for Lorist, they didn't care much for Potterfang and his daughter and had no issue with placing them in harm's way. There was no way that Potterfang would let them off with this.

"You better watch out, they're Gold ranks," reminded Lorist.

"Hmph, it's not like I haven't fought Gold ranks before. I've even killed a couple of them on the battlefield," said Potterfang.

"Hehe, you have a big mouth, don't you? I'll see how well you fare fighting against a Gold rank like me. Junior apprentice brother, there's one for each of us. I'll let you handle the Iron rank. Leave killing this Silver rank to me."

"Noted."

Having finished their discussion, the two assailants rushed towards Lorist and Potterfang with killing intent.

Chapter 38
Counter Kill

A sword glow flashed as brightly as the stars in the darkness and approached at blinding speed. From Lorist's point of view, the hastily created blades of light seemed to form a large net that sealed off all his surroundings.

The figure that rushed towards Lorist was the annoyed junior assailant. His strikes were lethal and aimed to take his life, despite what the senior assailant said to only take his arm.

Lorist let out a cold snort and drew his sword without backing down. The moment Lorist's sword struck out, the countless light blade attacks that flew towards Lorist dissipated without a trace.

"Wha…" The opponent was caught off guard by Lorist's successful attempt at deflecting the light blades. Not only that, Lorist instantly took the initiative and lashed out at the assailant without sparing a single moment. In but an instant, the assailant took a defensive stance as he struggled to block Lorist's flurry of attacks.

The opponent tried to use brute force and take advantage of the disparity in power between a Gold rank and an Iron rank to break Lorist's stance. However, Lorist's swordsmanship was too unpredictable and managed to suppress the enemy's move before it was even able to be unleashed and followed up with a flurry of incessant attacks like a rush of floodwater which forces its way through any gap, however small. The constant flow of strikes forced the opponent into a situation where he could only defend without being able to counterattack. Lorist's swings also changed trajectory often before it landed and aimed for the attacker's openings, forcing the attacker to gradually move backwards.

The enemy was already sweating all over. Had it not been for Lorist's constant pressuring that didn't allow him to catch any breath, he would've already called for help from his senior apprentice brother long ago. Not even while dreaming could he ever imagine fighting against someone with swordsmanship as fearsome as this that rendered the difference in raw power between a Gold rank and an Iron rank nonexistent. At this moment, Lorist's performance wasn't like that of an Iron rank's at

all. The assailant has only felt pressured like this when he sparred against his other Blademaster senior apprentice brother.

Behind Lorist, loud constant sounds of swords clashing rang out and stopped. Only Potterfang's ragged breathing and the other assailant's cry of despair could be heard.

"Ugh… Agh! It hurts… You madman! Ugh… It hurts as hell… Junior, how are you holding up? Quickly settle that bastard and come help me out! This Silver rank is a total madman I tell you! Ugh…" The senior assailant actually got a large cut and groaned away in agony.

Potterfang laughed softly before saying, "Come on. This was how I took care of Gold ranks on the battlefield. I take two of your strikes to deal one back. Three for one if I have to. Let's see who can take more attacks before collapsing…"

That senior assailant no longer dared to attack Potterfang head on and only gritted his teeth as he circled around Potterfang while unleashing ranged light blade attacks as he called out for his junior to help out. He even berated his junior nonstop for taking so long to kill a mere Iron rank.

Little did the senior assailant know about the junior's woes. Hearing that Potterfang got injured, Lorist increased the ferocity of his attacks and didn't give too much heed to technique and forcefully struck towards the opponent's chest. The junior assailant hastily took a few steps back while deflecting several waves of attacks with much fear in his eyes. Initially, he was happy that Lorist took the offensive against him and thought that he would be able to break Lorist's longsword with his higher ranked Battle Force. Even if the sword didn't break, he would still manage to make Lorist suffer a huge lost based on the pure difference in power.

Before, the assailant found it hard to parry Lorist's swift and careful strikes. Currently, Lorist no longer cared much for finesse and technique and attacked with brute force. The junior assailant gladly brought his sword to meet Lorist's only to discover that what he had expected to transpire didn't happen and instead, he felt a strong wave of force passing through his own sword that caused him to loosen his grip on his weapon. The longsword was knocked out of the junior assailant's hands and he instantly scrambled backwards in fear and somehow still managed to escape certain death.

Lorist was incredibly frustrated. Before, he had thought his opponent would take quite an effort on his part to defeat given how much he had boasted before. But now, all the

assailant did was defend and dodge all over the place without any intention of counterattacking. No matter how formidable Lorist's swordsmanship was, it wouldn't be of much use against an opponent who didn't dare to take a single one of his strikes.

This won't do, thought Lorist as the junior assailant flocked around the place after picking his sword up like a frightened little bird. *It seems that I must come up with some other way to take care of him.*

Slowly advancing towards his enemy, Lorist swung his sword in an elegant manner like a peacock dancing under the lights of the lamps around him to attract the opponent's attention. Without any giveaway, he slowly raised his left arm. Twang! A soft sound of a spring decompressing could be heard as a thin projectile flew out from Lorist's left sleeve without a noise towards its target.

The junior assailant let out cold sweat when Lorist's attacks intensified. The cries and curses of his senior apprentice brother from afar only served to increase his anxiety. As he prepared to take on the attacks from the approaching Lorist, he felt an urge to scream out loud in frustration. It was like the roles of a Gold rank and an Iron rank had reversed between them!

Lorist instantly leaped towards the junior assailant with his sword letting out a loud swishing sound as the light of the lamps reflected off its cold metal edge. Preparing to evade the flurry of attacks with no intention of parrying any whatsover, the junior assailant suddenly felt a blinding pain coming from his left foot. He quickly lowered his head to look at his leg only to discover that a thin, long black dart had buried itself into his foot and nailed him to the ground.

Terrified beyond his wits as he looked at Lorist's approaching form, the junior assailant quickly begged for mercy to no avail. Lorist's longsword hit his target and broke through the Gold ranked Battle Force aura's defense with little to no resistance and with the sound of flesh being cut, the longsword dug itself deep into the assailant's body.

"You… Ugh… Sh-shameless bastard…" groaned the junior assailant with all the energy left within his body while rolling both his eyes.

Not ashamed at all for using the hidden dart, Lorist said sincerely, "Thanks for the compliment."

As Lorist pulled out his longsword, the body of his dying opponent slumped down to the ground like a sandbag that was leaking sand. Lorist turned to his back and moved towards the grumbling and shouting senior assailant as fresh blood slowly dripped all over the floor from the tip of his sword, creating a trail of crimson in the wake of Lorist's passage.

The senior assailant had taken a slash to his inner thigh. While it wasn't a lethal strike in itself, it sent waves of pain to the senior assailant and effectively decreased his mobility. That strike caused the senior assailant to stop taking Potterfang head on and circle around him instead while he waited for his junior apprentice brother to come back him up. This only served to worsen the wound as every step he took sent torrents of pain down his nerves. It wasn't surprising that he would be grumbling and cursing from all that suffering.

However, Potterfang didn't look like he held up well either as his left shoulder blade and right lower abdomen looked rather bloody. However, the former injury wasn't as bad as it seemed as the cut wasn't that deep. It was a different story for his right lower abdomen however as the injury was created from a piercing attack rather than a slash. It would be bad if that strike had pierced any of his internal organs. The senior assailant also sent one light blade attack after another which caused Potterfang to parry each of them; an action that further intensified the bleeding from his right abdomen.

The senior assailant stopped moving around and launched a few more ranged attacks before looking down to the injury on his thigh. He had already wrapped it with a makeshift bandage made from the cloth from his garments. Blood still leaked out from the bandage nevertheless. The assailant pulled on the bandage lightly and grimaced in pain.

As Lorist slowly approached him, the senior assailant was under the impression that his younger apprentice brother had come. With his head looking downwards, he complained, "What the hell is wrong with you for taking so long to take care of a mere Iron rank? Gosh! This fucking hurts! That Silver rank is a total madman. Watch out when you attack him as he'll take your attacks with his body to land a hit on you! Don't fall for– Ah! Ah! AHHH!!!!"

Upon raising his head, the senior assailant discovered that the figure approaching him was Lorist instead and his face paled in an instant. After stammering unintelligibly for quite a while, he finally exclaimed, "Why! Why is it you?! W-w-w-where's my junior

apprentice brother?!"

Lorist pointed to the back with his sword and said, "He's lying on the ground over there. He really did end up paying his life for attempting to take my arm. Well, he failed at it anyway. It's your turn now."

The footsteps continued without stopping.

"You… Don't come any closer…" said the senior assailant as he pointed his sword towards Lorist and scrambled backwards in fear. Having heard of the death of his junior, his mind was already in a chaotic state. Lorist's form slowly morphed into that of a demon king in his vision.

The senior assailant retreated to the flower patch behind him before stopping and looking around. He threw his sword towards Lorist and circulated his Battle Force before stomping down to the ground and leaped, enduring the excruciating pain as he made his escape.

A sharp sound reverberated through the plaza as a longsword flew through the air like a javelin and penetrated the senior assailant's back and reemerged from his front chest. The assailant let out a deafening cry as he crashed towards the flower patch in mid-jump before struggling to get up and finally exhaling his final breath. The longsword was actually Potterfang's. When he saw that the senior assailant intended to escape, he flung his longsword without thinking and collapsed on the ground afterwards.

Lorist knocked the senior assailant's airborne sword away and thought that that the assailant had successfully escaped. He was surprised to discover that Potterfang had thrown his own sword and taken the senior assailant's life.

"That sword was very well launched. It was really impressive," praised Lorist as he made his way towards Potterfang quickly.

Potterfang let out an unenergetic laugh as he said, "It's nothing special. I learned back when I was in the military. Even so, I still couldn't match up to you. Even though we both fought against Gold ranks, you actually emerged unscathed and helped me fend off my enemy whereas I got a few injuries myself and only got the kill when the enemy was frightened into escaping by you."

Lorist helped Potterfang up and carefully placed him on the bench before inspecting

his injuries. The slash on the left shoulder blade wasn't that detrimental, however seriousness of the jab to his right lower abdomen couldn't really be determined under the poor lighting of the street lamps.

Seeing Lorist so worried about his injuries, Potterfang felt moved and said weakly, "It's okay. I've already taken that into consideration when the sword came at me. It shouldn't have injured any of my internals and will recover after resting for a month or two. I've been hurt worse when I was in the military and still managed to survive to this day."

Lorist removed his linen undershirt and used it to wrap up Potterfang's injuries before going to check on the corpses of the assailants. He returned with two bags of money, two swords and two Gold ranked Battle Force badges.

"Weird, these swords are rather common but the badges have a different design compared to the ones issued by the trade union… They're pretty rare around here," said Lorist.

Potterfang also nodded his head helplessly, unable to recognize where the badges were from.

The two pouches of money contained more than 20 gold Fordes and 30 plus large silvers. Lorist put the gold coins and large silver coins into two different pouches and handed the one with the gold Fordes in it to Potterfang. "Brother Potterfang, let's split the two pouches of coins among us. I won't hold back and will be taking the one with more coins in it."

As Lorist stuffed the bag with the gold Fordes into Potterfang's shirt pocket, Potterfang was totally stunned as he wore an expression of immense gratitude. "Mister Norton… You…"

Lorist interjected and said, "Just call me Locke. The moment you fought alongside me as a comrade, you've already become my friend. And friends don't speak so formally among one another."

"Okay…" Potterfang's face revealed a smile. "Alright, Locke. you can call me Pog. That's what my comrades in the army used to call me."

"Alright, Pog," replied Lorist.

Sounds of horses galloping on the road could be heard. It turned out to be Reidy who drove the carriage with many people within it as well as several others holding on to the luggage racks on the roof and the back. Seven or eight people loudly rushed over with Els and Charade running at the front. They all let out a breath of relief when they saw Lorist unharmed.

“Where’s the enemy? Did they run away?” asked Charade as he breathed raggedly.

“No they didn’t. Look, they are lying down dead within the plaza,” said Lorist as he pointed towards the dead bodies. “Do you have any medicine?”

“Yes, yes…” said Charade as he scrambled to take the medicines out from his pockets. Els waved for Terman and the others to go inspect the corpses.

“Daddy, daddy!” A boy and a girl rushed over and held Potterfang’s hand tightly while letting out streams of tears from their faces. This was Howard and Alisa, Potterfang’s beloved children. They had been jolted awake during the carriage ride and saw that their father was no longer around. Had it not been for Charade who told them they were on their way to rescue their father, who knew how much harder they would’ve cried? Nevertheless, they still burst into tears upon seeing their father’s injured state.

“Don’t cry, Howard. You’re a boy. You must learn to be strong and protect your sister in the future. Boys can’t simply let out tears like that. Daddy’s fine. It’s only a couple of flesh wounds that aren’t really anything to worry about,” said Potterfang as he stroke both his children’s heads.

Charlando limped over with a cane in his hands and said, “I know these two. Just this evening, they were the first to arrive at the inn and sat at a corner by themselves and drunk without talking to each other. I’ve been eyeing them for quite sometime but I stopped thinking too much about them since they didn’t bother the other guests. They started to leave the moment Lorist came back in after checking the carriage out and even paid the money to Louise!”

Charade said, “Did they leave the inn early to ambush Lorist on the way? Lorist, do you have any leads from their corpses?”

“Other than the money pouches they carried, there were two of these badges and nothing else. Oh, the swords they used were pretty common too,” said Lorist as he tossed the two Battle Force badges over to Charade.

Flipping the badges around, Charade said, “The design is indeed different from the normal ones, but I can’t remember where these badges came from…”

As he passed the badges to Els, Charade grumbled, “Hey, this is your territory you know. Thank goodness Locke is fine. Otherwise, let’s see how you will be able to make up for it to the rest of us. Quick, bring these two bastards’ corpses away and try to see if we have any clues on where they’re from.”

Els took the badges and said, “Wow, they’re indeed One Star Gold ranks. I was rather skeptical when Reidy said that two Gold ranks ambushed Lorist… What’s more surprising is that both of them ended up dead! Sol, Locke. You’re truly a monster!”

“Hey, Brother Pog here is injured you know. Had it not been for his help, I wouldn’t have fared this well either. Help me bring him to the carriage first and send his children and him back to my house. By the way, where’s Instructor Marlin?” asked Lorist.

Charade replied, “He’s still sleeping very soundly within the carriage…”

Chapter 39
Aftermath

Escorted by Charade and Els, Lorist, Marlin, Reidy, Potterfang and his children all returned to the Dawn Academy Gold ranked instructor residence. After returning Instructor Marlin to his home and asking Charade to call the academy herbalist over to look at Potterfang's wounds, Lorist let out a breath of relief.

Pulling on the rope that was connected to a bell in the management office, Lorist called Kelly over and instructed her to look after Potterfang and his children for the next three months. He let Potterfang and his children use the guest room on the first floor while Reidy took his luggage to the servant's room on the ground floor and went to look after the Zeno Horses afterwards.

After everything was settled, an hour had already passed. Lorist also asked Kelly for supper to be prepared for the group before sitting down on the couch in the lounge. Bringing over the a bottle of unopened macks extract, Yuriy put an iron pot into the fireplace in the lounge and started making the drink and added milk and honey crystals into the pot nonstop. After a while, a thick, fragrant smell spread throughout the whole house and even lured the two children and their father upstairs to come down.

Pouring the children one cup of macks each and telling them to go check out what Kelly was cooking for supper in the kitchen, Lorist started describing the whole encounter with the assailants to the group, including the fact that one of the assailants said that their junior apprentice brother wanted them to take only one of Lorist's arms. However, Lorist had no clue about anyone he had a grudge with.

"No one has has a grudge against you?" Charade said derisively before coldly laughing. "This isn't about vengeance or anything you know. You might not have realized it, but you've already become a huge pain in the neck for many people, especially so with the case of the duels. Your relationship with most of the Silver ranked instructors of the academy was already bad enough, and right now, it's not an overstatement to say that you're an existence like that of a nightmare for the other Silver ranked instructors in the whole Academy Sector. After only dueling for a month, you have already defeated

all the Silver ranked instructors from 13 academies. It's quite possible that the ones whose turns are next wish to cripple you to end this whole dueling event prematurely.

"As for the challengers that don't represent the academy, do you know how many people have lost fortunes for betting against you? During the last month itself we managed to get a profit of 18000 gold Fordes from the betting pool! I bet many of them are hoping that you will lose so that they can earn some of their money back. For that, they won't hold back at all and will throw everything they can at you. From today onwards, you must be really careful for your safety. The Enforcement Division will have a group of people following you at all times to ensure that nothing bad happens to you. Terman, send some elites from the Swordsmanship Society to accompany Locke as well. With that many people following him around, I doubt that many will dare to cause any sort of trouble.

"Alright," replied Terman.

"Don't do that, it's horribly inconvenient for me to have so many people following me in and out all the time! It'll be fine as long as I don't leave the academy right? I'm pretty sure that I can keep myself safe here at least," said Lorist quickly. *I can't have a horde of people by my side all the time! Imagine how it would feel when I need to go to the washroom!*

"While it is indeed safer in the academy, it is still not completely foolproof. Don't worry Locke, I'll just have the people follow you around in secret without crowding around you. If we don't do at least that, the old bastard will really give us a harsh scolding by the time we report the incident to him tomorrow. Who asked you to be such a precious money-maker for the academy? The old bastard is quite fond of you, you know." The group laughed out loud when Charade said that.

"You don't really have to let him know about it, right? Can't you not spread it at all?" asked Lorist.

"We must definitely let the news get out as best as we can! That way, we can let the others who are plotting against you to rethink their plans. If we were to keep this hidden, it'll only let them think that you're afraid of future attacks and they'll try even harder to hurt you!" said Charade. "Also, Els, make sure you get rid of the corpses of the assailants and spread the word that they ran away after seeing reinforcements come for Locke, but still managed to injure him quite badly. Put a bounty of the two if you have to. Make sure nobody knows that they were killed by Locke."

“Huh?” Els didn’t understand why Charade wanted that done.

On the other hand, Lorist already had an inkling on Charade’s plan. “Sol, the fatty’s going to rip people off again…”

As expected, Charade said, “If word gets out that Lorist managed to kill 2 Gold ranked fighters, then who would continue to bet on his loss?! Think about it, who would bet on a Silver rank’s victory against someone who has killed two Gold Swordsmen?!”

“Oh, I see,” said Els as he slapped his head in understanding. He then asked, “Fatty, would anyone believe that Locke survived the attack unhurt as he is?”

Charade suddenly had an idea and turned to look at Lorist, then to Yuriy before saying, “Yuriy, get me a chicken tomorrow morning. We’re going to help Lorist with his ‘injuries’. Brother Locke, I’m afraid that you will have to play along with us in this.”

Lorist furrowed his brows and said, “Hey, you guys are really too much!”

“”It’s fine, we’ll just say that you got injured during the assault and wrap you up in some bandages and sprinkle some chicken blood on it. Oh, and Terman, notify the herbalist to not tell anyone about Lorist’s condition unless they pay up. And in the event that they do, make sure the herbalist says that Locke got the injuries Potterfang currently has. Locke, try harder to show that you’re hurt in the duels during the morning and make them think that you’ll be unable to keep up. Hehe… Think of all that money that’ll fall into our pockets!” Charade and Els’s eyes radiated a golden light.

Even though this method was rather shady, Lorist didn’t oppose to it since he would be getting a cut of the profit anyway. As for the ones who would lose their money to the betting pool, he couldn’t care less about them and even believed that they deserve it for not having the eyes to discern his true abilities.

Charade poured another cup of macks and continued while sipping his drink. “I have two suspects in my mind who could have plotted the attack just now. One of them is the Saint Marceau Academy. The academy challenging Locke tomorrow, the Clearwater Academy, shouldn’t be much of a threat to him. However, the 15th academy that has accepted the challenge, the Saint Marceau Academy is our academy’s number one rival. That’s why they are my prime suspect. Then again, if they were involved in this, I doubt that they’d send those two losers to deal with it. It doesn’t fit the academy’s modus operandi.”

Lorist raised a voice of objection. “Hey, those two were One Star Gold ranks you know.”

“Even so, they are still losers for having been defeated by you. If I were there, maybe I would even manage to kill one of them myself,” boasted Charade.

“Ugh…” Based on the junior assailant’s performance, Lorist had to admit that Charade did make some sense and that he would probably win if he fought against the junior one. Apart from being very good at dodging, the junior assailant didn’t leave any other impression on Lorist.

“There is another person I suspect,” said Charade. “Do you remember Sandoz?”

“Who’s that?” asked Lorist while shaking his head.

“Oh, you…” Charade was totally frustrated. “Didn’t I tell you that once before? It’s that assistant instructor that riled up the dual elite course students to surround and attack you whom you later beat up, remember? After recovering, he got accepted by the Kalia Kingdom’s Sword Saint as a disciple and he’s now at the peak of the Silver rank. This time, he’s back at the academy to duel you for revenge! Sheesh, I even reminded you about him once before you know.”

“Oh, his name was Higuita or something, right?” said Lorist.

“It’s Sandoz Hirda, not Higuita,” said the fatty as he fervently shook his head. “You even got the name wrong… It seems that you really don’t hold him in any regard at all…”

Lorist’s face reddened in embarrassment. Due to being dragged along by a friend to watch a soccer match in his past life, the goalkeeper Higuita left quite a deep impression on him. Now, they very sound of Hirda’s name makes him think of that goalkeeper.

“It can be seen that this fellow is exceedingly ruthless in his methods from how he gathered all those people to beat you up three years ago. Even though he should be quite confident in defeating you during the duel, given his background as a noble, he should be quite adept at using some other underhanded plot to make his victory doubly certain. I wouldn’t be surprised if he dares to try something sinister. The next open match will be the 12th one and he’s on the challenger list of your 14th open match. He would probably be trying something within the next few days to weaken you before the match. The only thing that I still can’t figure out is the origin of those two Gold ranked Battle Force badges. It doesn’t seem like they were issued from the

Kalia Kingdom either…"

"Oh well, let's stop worrying our minds over something like this. With my capabilities, no matter what kind of trick this fellow pulls, it'll be useless just like what happened with the assailants just now. It's getting late, so we should all be getting some rest."

"Sol, you're only an Iron rank yet you dare to claim that you're capable? For your safety, I will be staying over at your place tonight just in case. You do have an extra bed, right?" asked Charade. Now that Lorist was an important piece for his money-making scheme, Charade had to make sure that he would not come to any harm.

"Nope, the other servant room is already occupied by Kelly. You can either use the couch or sleep on the floor," replied Lorist.

The next morning, Brad, the Clearwater Academy Head, heard about how Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated, had been ambushed on the way home the night before by two One Star Gold Swordsmen. Even though help ended up coming for him and forced the two assailants away, Lorist didn't fare that well either and had incurred some injuries.

This was music to the academy head's ears. His only complaint was that they didn't manage to take his life too. Should that have happened, the Clearwater Academy's awkward problem would instantly vanish! What a shame! Academy Head Brad gave a long sigh and sent people to the Dawn Academy to check if the duels will still be held today or not, with the actual aim being to find out the extent of injuries incurred by Lorist.

Academy Head Brad decided that if Lorist really was hurt badly, he will not agree to postponing the duel to another day and insist that Lorist would lose by default for not showing up. If he didn't do something like this in Lorist's moment of weakness, there was no saying whether the Clearwater Academy would become laughing stocks like the other 13 academies before them. Given that Lorist had defeated all 260 of the Silver ranked instructors from the previous academies, Academy Head Brad was quite certain that his instructors wouldn't fare much better either. He was rather pleased by the timely attack that had put Lorist at a disadvantage. *It's better if he doesn't show up at all and concede his victory. Well, even if he plans to fight, I'll have to make sure to encourage the 20 instructors representing my academy to do their best,* thought the academy head.

If the 20 Silver ranked instructors couldn't even defeated an injured Iron rank, then

the logical conclusion would be that the instructors of the Clearwater Academy were useless weaklings. Academy Head Brad wallowed in frustration once again and decided that he would sack these Silver ranked instructors should they all lose to Lorist.

Without much delay, the people he sent came back with the news that Iron Locke would not be postponing the date of the duel despite the Dawn Academy's advice to do so. He was quoted saying that he was only going to fight against Silver ranked instructors and not Gold ranked instructors so there was no need to move the duel to another day even though he was injured.

This news worried the Academy Head Brad as he wondered if it was intentionally leaked by that old bastard of the Dawn Academy. However, the people he sent to the herbalist paid 1 gold coin for information that stated he was indeed hurt. The herbalist even described the injuries Lorist had incurred: there was a slash wound on his left shoulder and a stab wound around his right upper torso. He even stressed that while those wounds posed no threat to his life, it would affect Lorist's mobility quite visibly, especially the one on his right torso, which has made it hard for Lorist to even lift his arm and would require at least two months to recover completely.

Academy Head Brad excitedly brought the instructors of his academy to the Dawn Academy for the duels only to return in the afternoon filled with anger and frustration. Even though the battles were all pretty close and the Silver ranked instructors of his academy had gave the best of their efforts and performed far better than they would usually have, for some reason, all of them lost by a hair's breath. For some reason, Iron Locke's luck was just that good and he managed to gain victory by the narrowest margin despite his impaired mobility.

In the case of the last battle, he even managed to win by using the scabbard he had cast on the ground before the duel started. Who would've expected that with his longsword knocked away, he would be able to pick up his scabbard and sheath his opponent's sword in it when the attack came and swing his shortsword to his opponent's neck? Nobody would be satisfied with a victory like that! It was merely a stroke of luck!

Aside from Academy Head Brad, the other academy heads also wore unpleasant expressions when Levins received a report from the finance department of the Dawn Academy.

The report stated that a group of instructors lead by Instructor Marlin had purchased 100 gold coins worth of betting tickets while the members of the Swordsmanship Society had bought 300 gold coins worth as well with the Enforcement Division also chipping in 500 gold coins into the betting pool. The reason was that they wanted to show support for Instructor Locke who has so adamantly decided that he would continue dueling despite having been injured the night before.

After the duels in the morning ended, the finance department of the academy had to pay out 180 gold Fordes of reward for the 900-gold-Forde bet whereas the money earned for the audience tickets and the ones who bet on Lorist's loss only amounted to 63 gold coins, 1 large silver and 3 small silvers. That meant that the academy had incurred a loss of over 116 gold Fordes for the day.

In the afternoon, the Dawn Academy Head issued a new notice that stated that the finance department would no longer be accepting bets for Instructor Locke's victory. That meant that people could only bet on his loss in the future.

"Tsk, who would be so dumb to hand their money over to the academy like that?" said Charade as he threw the notice into the trash.

Chapter 40
The Duels Continue

To the audience who were spectating the duels, Lorist who was fighting on the dueling platform looked ragged to the extreme. The bandage wrapped around his left shoulder was stained red with blood while the bandage around the right torso had blood dripping out from it. Lorist was covered in sweat all over and his face looked so pale that it seemed that a single strike would manage to knock him to the ground with his sword cast away, resulting in an automatic loss.

However, Lorist still stood straight up like a mountain with an unwavering expression. Due to his injury on his right torso, his right arm hung limply from his shoulder and could only exert force occasionally when he gripped his sword with both his arms. On the other hand (pun unintended), his left arm had almost no problems in executing all the basic sword moves in a natural, practiced manner that wasn't at all inferior to that of his right arm in its uninjured state.

Facing the ferocious flurry of attacks from his opponent, Lorist stood straight like a pine tree in a storm, not once lowering its head to the ferocious winds. His stance was also stable as an unmoving boulder near the coast that doesn't budge at all no matter how forceful the wave.

The opponent was also panting rather heavily as the continuous attacks from Lorist pushed him into a corner. The opponent wielded a two-handed sword which was suitable for attacking but quite lacking when it came to defense. Lorist's rapid, suppressive attacks for the last ten minutes had frightened him quite visibly. Despite his experience sparring against his colleagues in his academy or otherwise, no one has ever held up against him for that long a time, notwithstanding the fact that Lorist was only an Iron Swordsman.

"What are you doing, idiot! Don't let him catch his breath! Circle around him and continue attacking! Go for his back! He's already bleeding and he won't be able to hold up for long! Don't stop and heighten the intensity of your attacks! Go!"

The Saint Marceau Academy Head's voice rang out loudly from the audience seat. The academy head was already panicking to the point where he couldn't sit still and acted

in a way that was not befitting of his status in front of all those people.

It was the 15th academy dueling day and the challengers were from the main rival of the Dawn Academy, the Saint Marceau Academy. It's no wonder that Academy Head Weston totally lost his bearing and behaved like that as the current ongoing duel was the 20th and the last one of the day. The Silver ranked instructor on the dueling platform was the only remaining challenger for the day whereas all the others had already lost. To Academy Head Weston, his hopes on saving the Saint Marceau Academy's face from losing the bet against the Dawn Academy were all laid on that instructor, whose opponent, Lorist, was still standing despite his haggard appearance.

The Silver ranked instructor heard his academy head's bellows and started circling around Lorist and waited for an opportunity to attack. Lorist merely turned his left leg around with his right as the pivot to keep the opponent from facing his back.

"Attack! What are you still waiting for? That bastard is already out of energy! Quick, attack! We're almost going to win!" cried Academy Head Weston as he stomped his feet on the ground.

"Gaarrgh!" cried the Silver ranked instructor as he leaped to attack.

"Hmph!" Lorist merely humphed coldly without taking a step back and pointed his sword toward the opening in his opponent's move.

The Silver ranked instructor suddenly changed his maneuver from a stab to a sweep. Lorist's longsword merely slanted and parried the move.

Clang, clang clang! The two swords let out clear, crisp sounds of ringing metal as they crossed. After ten-odd exchanges, the Silver Swordsman retreated to catch his breath while Lorist's expression looked even more pained as his body swayed about unstably.

"Haha, attack! Quick, continue! He's going to collapse! Haha!" Academy Head Weston was extremely pleased to see Lorist in such a state as he waved both his hands in the air with his face reddened with excitement!

The Silver ranked instructor pounced again using his two-handed sword to execute a wide horizontal slash.

Lorist's defenses still held up without a flaw. However, each parry from his left arm grew weaker and weaker.

The Silver ranked instructor was elated and he put more energy into his strikes. Clang! Lorist's longsword had already been knocked away and his chest was exposed.

The two-handed sword quickly slashed downwards with Lorist already unable to recover his stance to parry.

"It's my win…!" screamed the Silver ranked instructor as he let out a breath of relief.

"He's going to win!" Academy Head Weston gripped both his hands tightly.

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Lorist took a slight step back…

This was the last duel with an instructor from the Saint Marceau Academy and it had already lasted for about 15 minutes. During the course of the duel, Lorist endured the Silver ranked instructor's forceful rain of attacks without retaliating and defended without moving much from his spot. Everyone present was so focused on the flurry of attacks that they forgot that Lorist wasn't glued to the ground, including his Silver ranked opponent.

With but a simple step back and the two-handed sword barely scraping his clothes and landing on the ground, his left hand that held the longsword which had been knocked out of the way drew a beautiful arc in the air and lightly tapped on the Silver ranked instructor's neck.

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"Instructor Locke wins!" exclaimed Charade on the dueling platform.

Rattle! The Silver ranked instructor let his sword fall to the ground and gripped his face with both his hands in despair as he instantly broke into tears.

Disappointed jeers and words of praise initially sounded from the audience until gradually a round of applause slowly drowned the whole training hall. This was the audience's show of respect towards Lorist who had managed to fight till the end without losing despite his injuries.

Academy Head Weston balled both his fists and stared at the dueling platform, stunned. From high spirits to despair, from the heavens to the earth. The sudden

change in the outcome of the duel had left him unable to accept the reality of the situation. With both his eyes bloodshot and the veins on his forehead popping, he grumbled to himself, “How could this be… Why did you step back… How could you…”

The other Saint Marceau Academy instructors and assistant instructors wanted to calm their academy head down, but they were unsure of how he would react and only stare at him idly.

The Silver ranked instructor on the platform started to feel embarrassed for crying out loud in front of everyone and wiped his face before he left the venue without even picking up his sword. Little did he know that after he stepped down from the platform, chaos erupted behind him. Lorist could no longer hold on and instantly collapsed on the ground unconscious. A few of the Dawn Academy students rushed up to support him and called out in urgency before hurriedly sending him to the medical center.

This scene really shocked the Silver ranked challenger. Had he not listened to the academy head’s beckoning and continued to stall for time, he would have been the winner. His emotions started to spiral out of control again as he started bawling nonstop.

Academy Head Weston was also flabbergasted at seeing Lorist hauled to the medical center like that. *It was so close, so close! If he didn’t attack, he would’ve won!* The academy head only felt regret to the utmost and couldn’t catch his breath for a moment. In a fit of rage, he suddenly picked his chair up and swung it at the other chairs around him, causing the people around him to back away in fear.

Terman instructed the Enforcement Division members to not let anyone else into the the medical center before going to check on Lorist. As expected, the scene within was nothing short of chaos. Lorist was pulling at the blood-soaked bandage while screaming at Charade for putting a bag of chicken blood mixed with pig urine within his bandage in an attempt to make his ‘injuries’ look real. Initially, Lorist wasn’t that opposed to that idea and agreed to it himself.

While it did have its intended effect, the clotting chicken blood started to make his body feel itchy and uncomfortable to the point where he almost couldn’t hold his urges to scratch himself to relieve the itch. What the audience perceived as a pale, pained expression from Lorist was actually him resisting the excruciating itch caused by the clotted blood.

Lorist heaved a sigh of relief after giving his itch a good scratch when the bandage was finally undone. “It’s freaking itchy… I never knew that it was that frustrating… I almost wanted to let my opponent slash the itchy part when I was dueling just now.”

Terman brought over a basin with warm water and a linen cloth, twisted and scrubbed the clotting blood off Lorist’s body as he said, “That’s because the bandage was tied too tightly around your body so the blood clot turned into fine powder when it rubbed against your skin. It’s amazing you managed to hold on for so long throughout the duels.

“Then again, your performance during the last one was very convincing. Had I not known that you were actually not injured, I would really have thought that you wouldn’t be able to hold on. How did you think of taking a step back at a moment like that? Nobody expected you to suddenly turn the tables by simply retreating like that.”

“Hehe,” snickered Lorist. “During the last match, I managed to make the audience and my opponent think that I wasn’t able to move around by standing still in the same spot and defending for a long time as if I would collapse the moment I moved away. No matter how ferocious the attacks were, I stood there without moving intentionally for a period of time. That created the misconception that I wasn’t able to move away which also allowed me to find an opening in my opponent’s moves. In sword matches, it’s not just one’s swordsmanship that’s put to the test. The mind is also very important. The more crucial a moment is, the more important it is to have a clear head.”

Terman absorbed the words for a while and understood that Lorist was giving him some pointers. He sincerely said, “Thanks.”

When Charade came into the medical center, everyone else had their own cup of macks which was a gift from Academy Head Levins to Lorist for defeating the Saint Marceau Academy which took a huge load off the academy head’s back. However, the macks was ‘confiscated’ by Terman and the others who intended to get a piece of Lorist’s harvest while letting him do all the work.

“Good news, good news!” said Charade excitedly.

“What good news? Let’s hear it,” said Terman.

“Didn’t Lorist pretend to faint after being declared the winner? That shocked the Saint

Marceau Academy Head greatly and cause the last Silver ranked instructor to crumble and cry on the dueling platform like a little child. Academy Head Weston flipped out and started flinging his chair around crazily and ended up collapsing after coughing out a mouthful of blood and his condition only managed to stabilize after receiving some emergency treatment. Academy Head Levins then consoled Academy Head Weston for his loss when he was in his carriage and even said that he would send the invoice for the chairs ruined from his outbreak to the Saint Marceau Academy, which once again caused Weston to spit out another mouthful of blood and lose consciousness. I heard that he would take at least half a year to recover from the shock, isn't that great?"

"Tsk, it's good news to that old fox but what does it have to do with us?" said Terman, annoyed.

Lorist finished his cup of macks and said to Charade, "I've already been here for almost an hour. It's about time you sent me back."

The group then strapped Lorist to the stretcher and hauled him back to his house in the Gold ranked instructor residential area.

Charade said, "Academy Head Levins decided that he would call the open duels tomorrow off to let the others believe that you are truly hurt and send some people to discuss with the other academies whether they are willing to postpone the duels to a later time. Even though the academies would surely deny that proposal, the old bastard said that we'd have to do that anyway to make your injuries more convincing."

Lorist closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being hauled back to his home while cursing, "Gosh, both of you are really damned foxes who absolutely relish in scheming…"

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"Injury to the back of the head, Instructor Locke wins. The next challenger, please prepare for your turn," announced Charade on the dueling platform.

For some reason, that particular challenger had his attention focused solely on Lorist's longsword and aimed all of his strikes to it as if he wanted to break the weapon into half. Lorist intentionally exposed several of his openings to bait the opponent but the result was still the same. Lorist then threw his sword upwards and the challenger

stupidly turned his head to look up a the sword and Lorist gave the back of his head a palm slap.

This guy really lost too hilariously, thought Charade as he struggled to stifle his laughter while he instructed the Enforcement Division members to carry the person down from the dueling platform. In a low voice, he said to Lorist, "The next challenger is the disciple of the Kalia Kingdom's Sword Saint, Sandoz Hirda. Be careful, the several challengers before him had received orders to keep attacking you nonstop to drain you of your energy. He is also pretty quick with his sword…"

The young noble youth held a longsword sheathed in an ornate scabbard and got up the dueling platform. Standing in front of Lorist, he executed an elegant bow and said, "My dear Instructor Locke, I really didn't expect that you would be able to continue fighting through all those duels and give this student of yours a chance to face you. It really is a shame that the injuries that you have incurred would not allow you to show the full extent of your abilities in our duel."

Lorist merely waved the longsword in his hand as a gesture for him to stop talking and start the duel quickly.

However, the noble youth kept on standing there and continued. "Instructor Locke, the lesson you have imparted in me three years ago has left a really deep impression in my heart. During all these years, every timeI remembered the lesson you taught me, it has caused me to be unable to get a good night's sleep. To repay you for the gracious lesson you have taught me, I have been training without rest, only to think that…"

"Cough, cough, cough…" Lorist really couldn't bear it anymore and kept clearing his throat to stop that youth from continuing his long speech."Um, your name was… Hir-whatchamacallit? Oh, Higuita, are you planning to keep on going until I can't bear it anymore and surrender?"

"Sol, for the umpteenth time, his name is Sandoz Hirda. Seriously, can't you even get his name right?" scolded Charade from beneath the dueling platform.

The noble youth named Sandoz Hirda's face instantly reddened. *Instructor Locke never once considered me a rival and even got my name wrong… And to think that I thought that I would be able to give him some pressure and ended up embarrassing myself instead…*

Shing! Hirda drew his sword and said, ” Since it is going to be like this, then your student won’t hold back.”

The moment he stopped talking the sword flash came over fast as lightning.

Lorist focused his gaze and lashed out the longsword in his left hand. Clang, clang! Sounds of metal colliding rang out nonstop and within but a short moment, their swords had crossed more than 10 times.

The speed of Hirda’s sword was indeed fast, however he only used thrusts and flicks and didn’t really use any slashing or sweeping moves. While this way of fighting was certainly fast, it resulted in rigid swordplay. From Lorist’s dynamic vision, no matter how fast the sword could move, he could discern each and every strike without fail and parried all of them one after another.

Hirda gave it his all and the sword flashes surrounded Lorist’s silhouette like clusters of stars in the night sky.

To the audience spectating the duel, Lorist seemed like he was on a boat sailing amidst savage waves and one small mistake could easily topple it over and result in his demise.

However, to Hirda, Lorist still had lots of moves to pull as his own lightning fast attacks did not seem to pose much of a threat to Lorist. Every time his strike was about to land, Lorist would move ever so slightly and dodge his move by a hair’s breadth.

Hirda’s emotional state sunk lower and lower. Initially, he believed that his painstaking three years of training would allow him to easily cream Lorist, however Lorist’s abilities far surpassed what he could ever imagine. His expression turned colder as he thought, *it seems it’s time to use that move*. He stared at Lorist with a deathly gaze…

Hirda’s move suddenly changed from a thrust to a slash. Lorist moved his hand to parry the strike and waited for Hirda’s next attack in anticipation.

The challenger gave his wrist a flick and knocked the spine of his sword against Lorist’s blade. With a clear ring of metal breaking, Hirda’s longsword broke off from the hilt.

Lorist was stunned and thought, *why did his sword suddenly pop off?* Despite being

without a blade, Hirda held the sword hilt up high and leaped towards Lorist.

What's he planning to do now that his blade is gone? While Lorist was still struggling to comprehend that bizarre action, a 'whoosh' could be heard as a small bluish blade shot out from the hilt towards him…

Nobody could believe what was happening even though it transpired right before their eyes. The fact that Hirda's sword hilt had a hidden poisoned blade within was completely unexpected.

Lorist instantly backed away. He could see the poison blade slowly approaching with his dynamic vision. Taking in a deep breath, Lorist tried his best to move his head as the blade flashed past an inch away from his face, letting out a pungent smell into his nostrils.

Bam! Consumed by anger, Lorist propped himself up and gave Hirda, who was elated at the thought of killing Lorist with the poison blade, a savage kick in the chest which sent him flying down from the dueling platform knocked out with blood flowing out of his mouth and nose. He then called Charade to remove the poison blade which was stuck firm onto the ground of the dueling platform.

Charade said, "Brother, that kick of yours was far too ruthless. Hirda's sternum is completely shattered and even if he recovered, he would be a cripple who can no longer train his Battle Force."

Lorist's expression remained cold as ever. "Where's the next challenger? Send him up quickly."

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Chapter 41
Counting Earnings and Beggars

“How boring…” said Lorist.

Cups and plates could be seen all over the table. Lorist was leaning on the wall stretching and sighing after enjoying a nice, filling meal.

“Sol, you’ve already a become super rich man yet you’re complaining over something as small as this… How frustrating,” said Charade as he chewed on a toothpick and looked at Lorist with contempt.

“Hehe, fatty… Am I bothering you? Don’t forget that I treated you to breakfast today you know. Other people would be courteous after receiving a treat from someone, yet you start giving me that angry look after you’ve been treated.” Given that Lorist had nothing better to do, he started arguing with Charade.

“I’m not angry at you… I’m just despicably envious and jealous! Back then, you would join me to go on missions all over the place for a couple of gold coins. But now, you’ve already managed to purchase your own building that costs 5000 and more gold coins without batting an eye! With more than 40 rooms in it, you could easily collect up to 8 gold coins of rent per month! How am I supposed to stay calm about that?! Terman, Yuriy, Steve, don’t you all think so too?” said Charade as he attempted to drag the others to his side.

The others nodded and agreed at what Charade had just said.

Yuriy asked curiously, “Locke, how much money did you earn within this month?”

Lorist gave it some thought and shook his head. “I haven’t counted it yet, but there should be seven to eight thousand gold coins. I only noticed that I had so much saved up when Els asked me if I was interested in that building. Since I had nothing better to spend it on, I bought it right away.”

“I think you should leave the counting to me.” Charade was instantly piqued upon the mention of money. “Within the 3rd and 4th months, you’ve defeated all 27 academies

in the Academy Sector and that old bastard promised you 100 gold coins per academy right? That should already amount to 2700 gold coins, correct?"

"Sol, how did you know about that?" Lorist gritted his teeth. *The old bastard was afraid that the reward would cause other people to be green-eyed with jealousy so that's why he only notified me personally… How did that fatty know about it?*

"You don't need to know how I got the news. That did happen, correct?" said Charade full of smiles as he held his nose high like he knew everything, making Lorist have an urge on giving his face a good punch.

Lorist nodded hesitantly.

"That's only part of the story. You should have earned a decent sum from the challengers that don't represent any academy as well. The number of challengers each month starting from the third is 240, 360, 680, 700 and within the last month itself, which is the 7th month, you had 520 challengers which totals up to 2500 people. By the end of each month, the finance department would give you a commission of 3 gold coins per challenger. Based only on that, you've got another 7500 gold coins down your pocket. So that's already more than 10000 gold coins. It's no wonder that you didn't even blink when taking out all that money for that building," recalled Charade with great detail.

Lorist suddenly remembered that Charade's Enforcement Department also got a 10% cut for each challenger. That's why he was so clear about the details.

"Also, within this month, there has been 18 open challenge days for those not affiliated with academies. Even though there are still tons who want to register, the academy has decided to end this dueling event when the challenger count reaches 3000. After the day after tomorrow which is an open challenge day, you should already have 380 challengers for this month. After defeating another 120 of them, you'll hit your 3000th victory. That's why, you still have another 1500 gold coins that you haven't claimed from the finance department."

Terman seemed to have remembered something as he asked, "I heard that if Locke manages to get a 3000 win streak, the academy would spend another 1000 plus gold coins to craft a life-sized bronze statue of him in the academy to commemorate that. I wonder if it's true…"

“So what if it is? It’s not like the 1000 gold coins will go into Locke’s pocket, so it’s pointless. If it were me, I’d give him the 1000 gold coins and have him stand there all day in place of a statue.” Charade absolutely couldn’t bear the fact that the reward wouldn’t increase the money that they would get. That was the main reason why he was so opposed to the construction of the statue.

“Buzz off, I don’t have the time to stand around the academy pretending to be a statue. I’m not Els, you know,” barked Lorist. Upon hearing that, everyone recalled the incident when Els impersonated a plaster statue in the female bath house and broke into laughter.

Charade continued to count Lorist’s haul, “Locke’s largest earnings come from the betting pool Els set up. Though, he hasn’t got it yet, and lesser and lesser people are betting on Lorist’s loss. He can only collect the earnings by the time the dueling event ends. However, last time when I checked with Els, Locke has a share of an estimated 20000 gold coins at least! Good Sol! I really can’t stand the thought of Lorist swimming in a sea of gold coins… I’ll never make that much no matter how hard I work in my life!” Charade really felt that he was slowly going nuts.

“Hey, don’t say that like you deserve it. I am the one doing all the work up there on the dueling platform you know. Don’t forget that you’ve got quite a sum yourself without doing much to begin with, at least 10000 gold coins. Now that you mention it, each of you here already have made at least a few thousand gold coins yourselves. Even if you can’t purchase a building, surely you can afford a nice mansion, right? Fatty, if you want to swim in a sea of gold coins, why don’t you take my place on the dueling platform?”

“Sol, if I had the ability to do so I wouldn’t have let you take the spot in the first place,” said Charade bitterly.

“Then you better keep your mouth shut. Rather than grumbling about how much Locke is earning, you should be training your Battle Force and try to break through into the Gold rank. Brother Locke relied on his own skills to earn that money. You don’t know how much risk he has had to take by dueling all those people within the recent months. Do you lot think that any of you can last even one day up there? The people of Morante City don’t call him Iron Locke the Silver Undefeated for nothing you know,” a voice interjected and heavily rebuked Charade.

“Sol, Els… Since when has it been your job to nag at me?” said Charade as he jumped in anger.

The one who just arrived was Els. He stared at Charade with an annoyed expression and said, “What? You’re not content? Why don’t we go out and settle it with our fists?”

“Good Sol…” said Charade as he lifted his cup of ale and drank a few gulps in anger. “Your brother here is a civilized person and wouldn’t take what a ruffian like you say seriously.”

Two months prior, Els’s dark attribute Battle Force had finally reached the Three Star Silver rank which prompted him to go seek out Lorist for a duel, only to end up losing flat on the ground as usual. Given that Charade was talking down on him during his duel with Els, he got challenged by him right after that.

Having reached that rank a year before Els and seeing Lorist defeat him without breaking a sweat, Charade believed that he wouldn’t have much trouble defeating a newbie like him. Nobody would have expected Els’s dark attribute Battle Force to be far superior to normal ones. Coupled with the various rogue skills Els claimed to train in, Charade was totally creamed three out of three times. Not satisfied with his loss, Charade challenged Els for seven more times privately within the coming month. Even though Charade wanted Els to keep the results of the duels a secret, Els didn’t bother either.

“Here, it’s settled,” said Els as he handed Lorist a leather pouch. It contained a deed for the building along with a receipt for the management fees as well as taxes with a few gold coins and some gold coin notes left over.

Picking up a bottle of blackcurrant ale and removing its cork, Els drank directly from the bottle before saying, “The building is already registered under your name. The management fee is 0.5% of the price while the tax is about 10%. There will no longer be any other fees in the future and the change is all in the pouch. Give it a count to make sure it’s correct.”

Lorist picked up his wine cup and said, “Thanks, Els.”

“It’s no big deal, brother.”

This was the first piece of property that Lorist had purchased in Morante City and it was located at Rose Street which is near the Business Sector. It was a building with Gothic-like architecture that had four floors with 12 rooms on each floor. Originally, it belonged to a count from the Mobia Duchy who decided to sell it in a rush due to some

personal circumstances.

When Els heard about that news, he recalled that Lorist had once mentioned that he wanted to buy some property in the city and invited him to go check that building out. Satisfied with the building, he had Els help him out with the purchase. Even though Els managed to seal the deal at only 5400 gold coins instead of the original 7000, the taxes and management fee still didn't make Lorist feel any better. On the bright side, after paying off those fees, the building would truly belong to Lorist and he wouldn't have to pay any other fees for the rest of his life.

"What are you planning to do with the building?" asked Els.

"I'll leave that to Jindoz. Wasn't he going to set up an organization that provides labor services? I'll let him use the building and collect half of the rent from him every month," said Lorist.

"That's a good idea. I'll get Jindoz to prepare the contract for you within the next two days," said Els as he nodded.

"Uncle Locke, I want another large drumstick," said Alisa as she ran over and tugged on Lorist's arm. Before that, she was playing around with her brother Howard in the backyard of the Red Grace Inn.

Lorist's friend from the same homeland, the peak Silver ranked mercenary Potterfang, had recovered after two months of rest. The two of them didn't talk much, but their implicit mutual understanding made them intimate friends. As for Potterfang's two children, Lorist spoiled and took great care of them. Howard was a studious and hardworking child. When Potterfang saw Lorist giving Reidy some pointers in swordsmanship, he told Lorist that he would like Howard to also become Lorist's disciple when he awakens his Battle Force in a few years.

Originally, Potterfang only intended to mention it casually but Lorist reconfirmed it with him in a serious tone. Potterfang only nodded and Lorist instantly got Howard to bow down to him 3 times and had Reidy perform the same ceremony as well. That was how Howard officially became Lorist's second disciple with his senior apprentice brother being Reidy.

As for Potterfang's daughter, Alisa, Lorist cared for her very much and was often reminded of his own daughter back in his past life. That resulted in him granting every

request of hers to the point where he had a craftsman hired to renovate the attic into a proper bedroom for the siblings, much to their excitement and joy. Potterfang was even a little jealous that his children were closer to their beloved Uncle Locke than him.

When Potterfang fully recovered and was about to leave with his children, he was stopped by Lorist with tons of excuses. Some of the main ones were the fact that the children absolutely loved it here and the city would be a better environment for the children to grow up as opposed to having them wander around with Potterfang. And, given that Howard is already Lorist's disciple, there was no way that he would leave before he was taught anything right? The other reason was that since Potterfang didn't really have a set destination to go to, he shouldn't let his children suffer along the journey with him. The final reason was the most convincing, that is, Potterfang would be allowed to leave whenever he manages to defeat Lorist.

Seeing his two children so attached to Lorist, he could only reluctantly agree to stay for a little longer until he can decide where he will settle down in the future.

Lorist offered to recommend Potterfang as a Silver ranked instructor for the Dawn Academy, but that proposition was rejected by him as he did not intend to permanently settle down in Morante City. Lorist knew that there wasn't a point in forcing it so he brought him to the Red Grace Inn and introduced him to Charlando so that he may accept private requests there in the future.

It was already the 8th month of the year and most of the courses in the academy had halted for the semester break, except for the Battle Force awakening course that Lorist was in charge of. There were tens of students in the last batch who would awaken their Battle Force by the end of the month, among which included President Peterson's son who had lost more than half of his body weight from 180 plus kilograms to 90 kilograms. While that was still slightly overweight, it was no longer an obstacle in awakening his Battle Force.

Last month when President Peterson came over to check on his son, he shed tears of joy from seeing his son's current physique and instantly took out a couple of gold bank notes as a sign of his gratitude. Had Lorist not stopped him before, he might have already got the 3000 gold Forde reward that the president had promised long ago. On that day itself, the president had forcefully stuffed nine such notes into Lorist's pocket, which was worth about 900 gold coins.

The academic season on the Grindia Continent was rather peculiar and lax. Every year, there were two academic semesters with one longer than the other. The longer one starts at the 3rd month and ends around the middle of the 8th month. On the 9th month, the citizens of the continent celebrate the harvest festival so no activities in the academy would be carried out then. After that, school resumed on the 15th day of the 10th month and ends around the 15th day of the 12th month and the vacation period would start again until the 3rd month of the following year. Lorist figured that the long winter break was due to the culture of Grindians to stay cooped up in their homes during the winter.

Additionally, while the Dawn Academy boasted to have over 5000 students, it was already quite a good number if at least 2000 plus of them showed up for studies during a semester. Most others were usually registered students who worked part time in the academy or took some time off from school to earn some money to pay their fees. Some others were like Charade who took advantage of the cheap housing rent in the academy and even brought their families along to stay there with them, as evidenced by one survey Charade conducted some time ago which revealed some students who had already been there for 5-6 years and were unwilling to graduate because they wanted to live in the student dorms. The lax regulation of the students of the academy made Lorist feel that it was more of a commune than an educational institution.

As Els had mentioned before, Lorist had already become one of Morante City's most well-known personalities with his moniker being Iron Locke the Silver Undefeated, a proud dual Gold ranked instructor with an Iron ranked Battle Force. Some rumors even said that during the year end academy assessments, the Dawn Academy's rank would rise by one place, setting it ahead of the Saint Marceau Academy. The main contributor to that rise in rank was probably Lorist's victories over the Silver ranked instructors from the 27 different academies of the Academy Sector.

After the 7th month, the number of Silver Swordsmen who came to challenge Lorist had decreased quite substantially despite the fact that Academy Head Levins raised the reward prize to 500 gold Fordes. Charlando, the owner of Red Grace Inn even said, "While 500 gold coins certainly seems appealing, most people knew that they wouldn't be able to obtain it without enough skill. Rather than chasing after a pipe dream, people would probably grasp the 10 gold coins that would be required for the registration fee tightly within their hands instead."

That caused Lorist to feel rather bored as he had already been accustomed to dueling people for the past few months. Now that the number of opponents had suddenly

lessened, he felt like he had nothing else to do. Even though he wanted to go adventuring with his other mercenary buddies, he was unable to do so as he still had things to settle within the academy. That was why he brought the two kids and Reidy and invited his other friends from the academy to the Red Grace Inn for a feast once again.

Intimately scrubbing the nose of the little girl who was tugging at his arm, Lorist said, "Alright, alright. I'll get my little princess her favorite chicken drumstick."

Looking towards the counter, Lorist shouted, "Louise, ask McDuffin to make me another plate of fried chicken drumsticks."

Standing behind the counter was the new female owner of the inn, Louise, who had just got married to Charlando three months ago. After purchasing another elixir from the Mishla Shrine to recover her fertility, she got pregnant pretty quickly despite not having been married for long. That caused many to praise Charlando for still having 'it' in him despite being of relatively old age. Though, Els privately told Lorist that the old man ordered quite a few jars of Terrence-donkey whip from him. "If that didn't help him recover his sexual ability, then he would only have himself to blame," said Els at that time.

The golden-brown chicken drumstick was quickly served on the table and Alisa took two of them and said that she would give her brother one and ran off. However, a little bit later, Alisa came back and took two more.

"Huh? Alisa, why are you eating that fast? I've only managed to get two bites out of my own during this short time. Could your mouth actually be bigger than mine?" said Els as he teased that cute girl.

"It isn't! Alisa's mouth is small unlike yours. Just now, I gave the chicken to a beggar who looked really pitiful," said the little girl, dissatisfied at having been said to have a big mouth.

Lorist gave the girl another two drumsticks and said, "Now, don't go giving these to the beggar again, okay? If he really needs it, you can ask your brother to give him two copper coins."

The girl took the chicken and replied innocently, "But my brother has already given him his money. He said that he was from the Northlands who had come to Morante

City to look for someone called Norton Lorite whom he referred to as his young master. Big Sis Louise said that she hasn't heard that name before and gave him a bowl of porridge. Alisa only gave him her chicken because he didn't have anything else to go with the porridge."

Chapter 42
Arrival of the People from the Family

Lorist was totally stunned. *What did Alisa just say? That beggar said he was searching for a person called Norton Lorite? It should be Norton Lorist, right? That's the name of the original owner of this body. Given that everyone calls me by my nickname Locke, it wouldn't be weird if they didn't remember that my original name, Norton Lorist and that I am the second young master of the Norton Family of the Northlands…*

"What's going on? I think I heard Alisa mention your name just now," said Els. Els was aware of Lorist's full name as he had helped him handle the ownership documents when the building was purchased.

Lorist regained his composure and saw that Alisa had already hopped back to the backyard cheerfully. He stood up and said, "I think the beggar Alisa mentioned just now is looking for me. I'll go take a look, they might actually be from my family."

"Oh?" said Els curiously. He bit into the drumstick in his hand as he said, "I'll go with you."

The two of them reached the backyard and saw the beggar that Alisa had mentioned. Dressed in rags, he sat on a bluestone pavement at the backyard and was consuming a bowl of oat porridge. The chicken drumsticks Alisa had given him were wrapped in a piece of grey cloth. It seemed that he planned to take the chicken away with him.

Alisa chewed on the chicken in her hands as she asked, "Why aren't you eating the chicken? Isn't it a little bland to have the porridge without it? Chicken drumsticks are delicious you know…"

The beggar nodded towards Alisa and smiled. "Pretty little princess, thank you for giving me these delicious chicken drumsticks. However, I have another person accompanying me so I intend to share it with him later…"

After that, the beggar looked towards Lorist and froze up entirely. He put the bowl in his hand down and rubbed his eyes before inspecting clearly once again, as if he couldn't believe that the one standing in front of him was indeed Lorist.

“Second young master… Sniff… I finally found you… Ueeerrrghhh….” That beggar desperately crawled towards Lorist and even ignored the bowl of porridge that he had knocked over and hugged Lorist’s leg tightly as he cried nonstop.

“Ugh…” Lorist wanted to pull his leg back but the beggar had a rather firm grip on it. “Um, please get up first. You are…”

“Young master, don’t you recognize me? I’m Shadekampf!” exclaimed the beggar with a face full of snot and tears.

“Shadekampf?” Lorist mulled deeply and a scene of a young, honest young servant who shouted as he ran towards him… *Young master… Wait for me!* At that time, the young Lorist was rather haughty and bossed around that young servant quite a lot…

No wonder he recognized me almost instantly… Shadekampf was actually Lorist’s personal attendant from a long time ago.

“Shadekampf… It’s been too long… Has it been ten years already? First things first, stop crying and stand up properly,” said Lorist as he smiled.

However, Shadekampf ended up crying even harder. “Young master… You must return to the Northlands quickly. The old master is gone… the first young master is dead… and the third young master as well… The Norton Family only has you now… Everyone’s waiting for you.. for you to go succeed the position as the lord of the dominion… Wuueerrghh…”

Lorist’s body suddenly shivered. Even though his consciousness was not of this world, he was unable to ignore the blood of the Nortons that flowed in his current body and the throbbing emotion from the depths of his being shook even the core of his soul.

Els walked forward and held Lorist up and said to Shadekampf, “Stop crying and say things clearly. What is going on?”

“Last year, the old master lead a group of people to fight against the barbarian pillagers but got ambushed and was badly injured. Ever since then, he was bedridden and finally passed away at the start of this year after instructing us to come here to look for the second young master to inherit the dominion. We know that the second young master had went to Morante City for his education but we were unaware of which academy he was studying at. And, given that 10 years had already passed, we weren’t sure if the second young master would still be here and could only try our luck. After

we finally arrived at Morante City, we went to every academy to ask about the young master but nobody bothered to entertain us because we were from the Northlands. Patt mentioned that the heroes of legend usually gathered information in taverns, so we did just that. And finally, here at the Red Grace Inn, we finally found you, young master," explained Shadekampf. The conclusion of his arduous journey that he had with Patt had caused him to shed tears uncontrollably.

Lorist managed to stand up properly again and said, "Shadekampf, why did you say that my father and two brothers are dead? And, who's Patt? He sounds rather familiar. Also, doesn't my third uncle know where I study at? What happened to him?"

"The first young master had died from battle three years ago after he was drafted into the army of Duke Loggins who was serving under the Second Prince of the former empire. When that news reached the old master, he fell sick and became bedridden. The matters of the dominion were handed to the third young master after that. But three years ago, when the third young master was on patrol, his mount got startled by a magical beast and he fell from horseback and incurred serious injuries and passed away despite three days of emergency treatment. The old master's sickness got a turn for the worse, but he recovered a bit during spring last year. Even so, he had to go to the battlefield once again as the barbarian pillagers started causing trouble again. In the end… sigh. Second young master, don't you remember Patt? He is the eldest grandson of the old butler Gleis who had played with you quite often when you were small. He's quite an impressive youth and is already an Iron Swordsman. The old butler sent us to come look for you because we were the only ones who knew how you looked like."

Having said that, Shadekampf started to hesitate. "Second young master, your third uncle Lodesieg died seven years ago after the family's merchant convoy was attacked by bandits. There were no survivors. The news stunned the whole of the Northlands at that time and there were even rumors that the soldiers of the First Prince were masquerading as bandits to gather military funds and resources. That's why the first young master pledged his allegiance to the Second Prince rather than the First Prince."

The bad news that came one after another caused Lorist to be unable to think clearly. The fact that the once proud and strong Norton Family that was entitled by the Krissen Royal Family themselves was actually embroiled in so much conflict and misfortune to the point where they had to summon the second young master that had been exiled from his homeland for more than ten years was rather depressing.

After calming down, Lorist asked, “Then, where’s Patt? Isn’t he with you?”

Shadekampf said in an embarrassed tone, “Patt… Um… He’s working as a baggage carrier at the pier…”

“Baggage carrier?”

“Yes. Given that we had spent all our own money during the journey, Patt went to the pier and started working as a baggage carrier to earn enough for our living costs here,” said Shadekampf stammeringly.

Lorist called out in the direction of the inn. “Reidy!”

Reidy quickly appeared before him.

“Go ready the carriage and fetch Shadekampf to the pier to seek out his friend and bring them to the public bath. Let them wash up and give them some clean clothes before bringing them back to me,” instructed Lorist as he put two gold coins in the hands of Reidy.

“That won’t do, young master. We have our own money, we can’t use yours,” said Shadekampf quickly as he took out a black, dirty pouch. “Young master, I still have 20 imperial gold coins here.”

“Oh? Didn’t you say you ran out of money just now?” asked Lorist curiously.

“Young master, these are the funds for your return trip to the North. Now that we’ve found you, we don’t have to worry about using it anymore,” said Shadekampf as he entrusted the bag of coins to Lorist.

Lorist was somewhat touched at how they wouldn’t spend the 20 imperial gold coins they had and would rather have one work as a laborer and the other in charge of begging for food. Were they just stubborn or really that loyal to the family?

Lorist then handed two gold Fordes to Reidy and said, “Have them change into clean clothing.”

Reidy then brought Shadekampf along and went to seek out Patt.

Lorist returned to his table in the inn with a distraught mood and opened the black

money pouch and emptied its contents on the table. 20 golden coins could be seen: these coins were slightly smaller than regular gold Fordes and had a picture of a crowned old man's head on one surface.

Upon seeing the gold coins, Charade's interest was instantly piqued. He took one up and inspected it before saying, "An old head of the former Krissen Empire… It's no longer worth much… 1 gold Forde can be exchanged for 3 of these. Currently, the three kingdoms and seven duchies in the northern part of the continent have started to use the currency of the Forde Trade Union and started recalling these imperial currency to be exchanged for trade union currency instead. Where did you get these, Locke?"

"Some people from Locke's family came here and summoned him to return to his homeland to inherit the dominion. These old heads are the money they prepared for Locke to use to travel back to his homeland," explained Els.

"What? Locke, you're going back to become a lord?" Suddenly, every one of Lorist's acquaintances gathered around the table.

"What are you guys so surprised about? I haven't decided if I would go back yet," said Lorist as he furrowed his brow in frustration. Right now, he had already made quite a name for himself in Morante City and already considers himself a Moranite after ten years of living there. The sudden summons from his family was far too shocking for him. Even though the Northlands were technically Lorist's hometown, he wasn't too familiar nor attached to it given that he had left it at a very young age.

"What is there to hesitate about? Of course you should go back and inherit the land. In Morante City, you're only an academy instructor but back at your homeland, you're a mighty and respectable lord! In your dominion, you are the law!" The one who said that was Terman, whose homland was a place called Rigol, which was also well-known for their mercenary knights. Craving battles and adventures were second nature to most Rigolians.

"However, Locke's life here is pretty good now and he even has his own property here in the city. Additionally, he's a famous dual Gold ranked instructor of our academy. There really isn't a point of going back to the desolate Northlands as life here in Morante City is definitely way better," said Steve. Being a local of Morante City, he was rather proud of the city and being one of its local inhabitants.

"Maybe Locke can go back once, inherit the dominion and then come back. He can

leave the managing of the dominion to his subordinates and live his life in Morante City as usual," suggested Yuriy, thinking that it was the perfect solution for both spectrums of the issue.

Lorist gave a bitter laugh and thought, *it's not as simple as you think, Yuriy… The dominion in the Northlands is easily over thousands of kilometers away from here and traveling to and back on quick horseback would take 3 months at least.* After all, Lorist wasn't like the nobles who had their dominions on the Falik Plains or the neighboring kingdoms who could return to their dominions within a few short days from Morante City.

Charade asked, "Where are the people sent by your family?"

"Reidy brought him to go find his partner. Both of them split up to look for me in Morante City," replied Lorist.

"Find you? But you're so famous. Doesn't your family know that you are an instructor at the Dawn Academy?" asked Charade in a surprised tone.

"I have already lost contact with my family for almost 7 years you know. The people who do know about me studying at Morante City had already perished from bandit attacks, including my third uncle, who was the one who sent me here in the first place. The rest of my family members know that I'm studying in Morante City, but not which academy I've enrolled in. After that, the 6-year-war made it even harder for us to communicate. Only with the recent turn of events in my family did they decide to send someone to come for me. However, none of them know of my reputation as Iron Locke here. They have asked people at many different academies but no one knew who Norton Lorist was. After that, they decided to gather information from different inns before they met Alisa, who then came over to tell me about them," explained Lorist.

"I see… No wonder they had a hard time looking for you. While many people know you as the famous Iron Locke, those who know your full name don't even number more than ten. So, what are you going to do?" asked Charade.

"I still don't know…" Lorist shook his head and said, "I'm really confused right now and I don't really know which is the right course of action. I'll decide after I talk to them when they come back."

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A moment later, Reidy brought Shadekampf and Patt who were dressed in clean new clothes back to Lorist. At that time, he was hugging Alisa as he sat looking at Howard having his hair cut by old man Luke across the back alley of the Red Grace Inn. Alisa looked at Lorist and asked, "Uncle Locke, you said that that beggar just now was looking for you? Are they sent here by your family?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Yes, I really have to thank you, Alisa, for treating him to the chicken drumsticks. Alisa really is a good girl."

Alisa furrowed her brows and thought for a bit before showing an enlightened expression. "I know, Uncle Locke's family are people who beg for food! They're beggars!"

Pffft! Els spit out a mouthful of ale at Charade who was sitting opposite to him. Ignoring Charade's complaints and clutching his belly while laughing, Els said, "A… Alisa… What you said was… too funny! Locke's family members… are beggars… hahahahahaha!"

Lorist showed a troubled expression and said, "Alisa, Uncle Locke's family members do not work as beggars. Look, he's in front of you right now. Does he look like one to you?"

Shadekampf who stood before them had a face that was as red as a baboon's rear. He really felt like finding a small hole and diving into it. Patt, who was standing beside him wore a swordsman garb and looked rather valiant.

Lorist placed Alisa down and walked towards Patt. After comparing their heights, he sighed and said, "Patt, long time no see. Both of us have already grown up to be so different from the rowdy brats we used to be."

Patt sighed as well and said, "That's true, young master. We've really grown up haven't we…"

In Lorist's memories, Patt was his rival from the days of his childhood. When the both of them met, they always broke into a fight and one of them always went home crying. If they meet on the next day, the whole cycle would begin all over again. Now that the both of them had met after such a long time, a feeling of intimacy and nostalgia sparked between them instead.

Patting Patt's shoulder (TL: pun unintended. Please don't kill me XP), Lorist laughed and said, "That's great. You're even taller than me now. I really don't know what you ate to grow so tall. This journey must have been tough on you. Let's fill our bellies first before we talk about the rest. I've already got the cook to start preparing the food in the kitchen. Sister Louise, you can start serving the dishes now," shouted Lorist towards the inn counter.

After that, he turned to old Luke and said, "Luke, after cutting Howard's hair, take care of Reidy's too, followed by Shadekampf's and Patt's. I'll pay you two large silvers in total."

"Thanks for your patronage. I'll make sure that they will looked refreshed like never before," said old Luke, elated.

Lorist noticed Shadekampf's and Patt's uncomfortable expressions for having their master pay for their expenses and said, "This is my turf, so you better leave things to me. I'm your young master to begin with, so just let me handle the things my way. I'll bring you back to my house after we have a nice meal. We can start having a serious talk after that."

Chapter 43
Troubles Within the Family

The carriage stopped in front of the entrance of Lorist's house. Reidy turned to Patt, who was sitting beside him in the coachman's seat, and said, "We're here. This is master's house."

After that, he got off the carriage and opened the door. Lorist came down with Alisa hugged in his arms with Howard, Els and Shadekampf following behind him.

Charade, Terman, Yuriy and Steve rented another coach that arrived a little later, after which they all got off one by one and entered Lorist's home. Patt didn't follow the group into the lounge and instead helped Reidy with bringing the Zeno Horses back into the stable.

Reidy asked curiously, "What's wrong? Why aren't you following them inside?"

Patt thought for a bit and said, "I have come here to look for the young master because it was my grandfather's wish. He instructed me that even if the young master refuses to go back to the dominion, I was to stay here by his side and watch out for him because he is the sole heir of the Norton Family from the main line of descent. No matter what, no harm can come to the young master."

Reidy laughed out loud before saying. "Brother Patt, it's not that I'm looking down on you, but given the situation, it should be you who gets protected by the master instead of the other way around. Given your ability as an Iron rank, it's already pretty commendable if you can take care of yourself and not become a burden for master."

Patt rolled his eyes and talked in an snappy tone, "In the Northlands, we have a saying that goes like this, 'even the most alert magical beast has a moment of weakness; even the strongest of horses have times when they slip'. I already know the young master's reputation as Iron Locke, Silver Undefeated. However, no matter how strong he is, he's still only one person. As long as I'm with him, it's enough if I can serve as a silent shield for him. Even if I'm only an Iron rank now, I believe that I'll be able to help the young master out much more when I reach the Silver rank."

"Well said, Patt." Suddenly, Lorist showed up beside them and said, "Did Butler Gleis really ask you to stay by my side and serve me?"

Patt nodded honestly and said, "If you are going to return to the dominion and inherit the place, then I will serve as your personal attendant. Even if you don't, I'll still stay by your side and offer whatever protection I can to you."

Patt laughed at what he said himself with a hint of derision before continuing, "Then again, after seeing you again for myself, you have changed way more than I could ever imagine. It's not only your skills... Even your personality has become totally different. You no longer need a person like me to protect you anymore. When the family lost communications with you, my grandfather Gleis and the rest of the elders thought that you might have been in a rather tight spot. It seems that they were wrong."

Feeling a little touched, Lorist nodded and said, "It's been ten years. The moment when I left the household has already passed for so long and I have been unable to contact the family for the past seven years as well. I had to adapt to survive. For me to have turned out like this today wasn't without its hardships. Alright, Patt, let's go in and have a chat about the family's situation."

It appeared that Shadekampf was more informed about the situation back in the Northlands that Patt. After the series of tragedies, the Norton Family's military might decreased by a whole lot. Even though Lorist's father was unable to advance from the One Star Gold rank due to an injury he had incurred from hunting magical beasts in his youth, he was still the main pillar of support for the family and his death had greatly destabilized the family's rule. Lorist's elder brother's death was an even heavier blow to the family. Being a Gold ranked knight, he had been struck with a poison arrow when he was leading a charge on the battlefield and had passed away soon after. As for the third young master, due to contracting a rather serious illness as a result of being pushed into the well at a young age, he was unable to awaken his Battle Force and had lost his life from falling off his horse which was startled by a magical beast.

Lorist truly felt rather unsettled at hearing all that. He understood that half the cause behind the third young master's death was due to the fact that he had fallen sick and wasn't able to train in Battle Force from an early age, which was chiefly the fault of the original owner of Lorist's body who had pushed his little brother down the well out of jealousy. Now that the current Lorist had inherited the body, he had also took up the fault and guilt for being half responsible for his little brother's death.

According to Shadekampf. when the third young master encountered the magical beast, the sole Three Star Silver Knight which was part of the young master's personal guard was present. While he had successfully slain the magical beast, he incurred heavy injuries and had to rest and recuperate for a period of time. Currently, the family only had one other One Star Silver female knight. Her name is Andrea Pesha and she is the daughter of Knight Andrea, who had served the family before his death, and was also the childhood friend of the first young master. While she was engaged to the first young master due to a the decision of the old master, she was never formally married to him as the first young master had perished in battle before that could happen. Shadekampf asked Lorist if he still remembered the face of that red-haired girl who always followed behind the first young master.

Lorist nodded. Within the memories he had inherited, there was indeed a red-haired girl who was as rowdy as most boys of her age. Lorist remembered the painful episode of her heavily pummeling him because he pulled on her ponytail once out of mischief.

Shadekampf continued and said that aside from Pesha, the rest of the main force of the family were a few Iron Swordsmen in the garrison squad as well as several other Iron ranked old men who lived in the castle. Currently, Pesha was in charge of managing the affairs in the dominion as Butler Gleis had stepped out of the limelight due to his age. That's why the family desired Lorist to return to succeed the position of the dominion lord as soon as possible.

Patt, who had been part of the personal guard of the late Baron Norton, described the events that led to Lorist's father's death. According to him, when the Lord Baron had heard about the attack from the barbarians, he quickly summoned the armored cavalry that was stationed within the castle which numbered only 18 people. This was all that remained of the main force of the family's military. Including the Lord Baron and Patt, they were a force of 20 mounted soldiers. As the barbarian pillagers had come with a force of about 50 people, the Lord Baron requested help from the garrison and was prepared to take out the invading barbarians.

As Patt and the Lord Baron had arrived at the enemy's base early, they discovered that the barbarians were not yet prepared for battle. As the agreed time for the joint attack with the garrison was nearing, the Lord Baron decided to launch the assault first and believed that the garrison would later arrive from the other side of the battlefield and join them in launching a pincer attack to wipe out the invading barbarians.

Patt said that he had tried to warn the baron to wait for the arrival of the garrison

troops before launching the attack, but his warning was ignored and the baron initiated the assault immediately. At first, the surprise attack seemed to work and the barbarians weren't able to react in time. However, as they noticed the troops of the baron were far fewer than their own, their morale rose and they gathered for a counterattack. Had the garrison troops arrived at that moment, the barbarians would be completely defeated without a doubt. But no matter how long they waited, not a single garrison soldier could be seen on the battlefield. Seeing his troops starting to falter, the Lord Baron himself joined the fray even though he still hasn't completely recovered from his sickness. It was at that moment when the barbarians started cheering as their reinforcements of 50 more people joined the battle. The baron's troops quickly crumbled and Patt and the baron were the only ones who emerged alive from the carnage.

When Patt returned from battle, he got wind that the garrison troops were never dispatched in the first place. In a fit of rage, he went over to the main camp of the garrison and injured Malte, the commander of the garrison troops, which prompted the rest of the garrison members to go on a strike at the Norton Family castle and demand for Patt to be sent out for them to punish. The matter was only settled when Butler Gleis and Pesha tried very hard to calm them down on account of the relationship the family had with the garrison over the past hundreds of years. That was also the other reason why Butler Gleis had Patt leave with Shadekampf to look for Lorist so that he doesn't get into trouble with the garrison troops again.

Based on Shadekampf and Patt's explanation, it could be said that the Norton Family was in a rather tight spot at the moment. The first one was that every winter, a wave of migrating magical beasts would move to the dominion from the wilderness to look for a food source. If the magical beasts that come to the dominion were only herbivores like those magical bulls and goats, then it wouldn't be much of an issue. At most, the farmlands and orchards would sustain some amount of damage. However, what usually followed behind those beasts were carnivorous magical beasts like snow wolf packs or leopards which attacked even the towns and bastides.[1]

The second problem were the barbarians. The Norton Family dominion is located in the far desolate north. Further north was the limitless Blackmud Marsh and to its west was the Bladedge Mountains which separated the dominion from the sea. To procure salt, the Northlanders had to cross the Bladedge Mountains to boil seawater, which was needless to say, an arduous task. That was also why the price of salt in the Northlands have always been relatively high. To the south of the dominion was the Black Forests and the desolate hills, where the sole passageway out of the Northlands

from the dominion was located. To the east was the Magical Dragon Mountains which was nothing but dense, primal forests and tall domineering peaks where the barbarians mainly resided.

It was said that the barbarians were the descendants of humans who had went into the mountains to lay in hiding for survival after the fall of the magical civilization during the dark ages. Having lost all contact with the outside world, their culture and customs deteriorated into a more primal form, among which included worshipping ancient totems, eating their food raw and not having any rules but the law of the jungle where the strong oppressed the weak. Even though in recent times they have started coming into contact with people outside of the mountains, they retained their old barbaric ways and made no effort for communication.

The barbarians had already started causing trouble when the first generation family founder of the Nortons was enfeoffed the dominion by plundering and pillaging. They were even harder to handle than the waves of magical beasts in the area. The family founder had once tried to set up 10-odd outpost villages to develop the dominion but had to abandon the plan as the attacks of the barbarians caused much loss of lives and property. The main reason for Lorist's father, the late Baron Norton in launching the attack against the barbarians was also because they had plundered the only livestock ranch of the Nortons and took almost all their cows and sheep.

The third main problem the Nortons had was the garrison squad in the dominion. Out of the 5000 citizens the Norton Family has in their dominion, almost 3000 of them lived in Wildnorth Town, the only town within the lands of the Nortons. The citizens there were mostly relatives of the garrison squad who occupied two-thirds of the safe farming areas within the dominion and only paid a tax of ten percent of their harvest and nothing else.

Back in the day, due to a low population in the Norton Family's dominion, the founding family leader invited vagabonds as well as purchased slaves and granted them freedom in his dominion so that he would have a workforce to develop the land. Those who joined the dominion garrison were also granted preferential treatment and privileges despite their meager salary, such as an exemption from all other taxes apart from 10% of the harvest they get and unconditional ownership over their farmland.

Other than that, as a dominion lord entitled by the Krissen Royal Family, the Norton Family had the responsibility of sending military support if the royal family requested it and also had to pay a yearly tribute of 10% of the harvests of their farmland to the

imperial government. At that time, most other noble families levied a taxation rate of about 50% of the harvests of the citizens under their jurisdiction along with other taxes like per capita tax, trading tax, fishing tax, firewood tax, etc. It was already rather benevolent for the nobles to let the citizens of their dominion have enough to feed themselves.

The treatment that the garrison squad members received was as if the Norton Family didn't collect any taxes from them at all apart from the 10% that was required to be submitted to the empire. Initially, not many wanted to enlist as a garrison member, as that represented risking their lives to drive off the magical beast wave every winter season. However, as the safe zones in the dominion expanded and stabilized, a rising number of people could see the great treatment they would receive as members of the garrison and the garrison troop numbers rose quickly, much to the Norton Family's delight, until much later when they discovered a flaw with the system.

Normally, on the Grindia Continent, when a family's descendants became adults, they would leave their parents and start independent families of their own. However, these garrison members refused to leave their homes and lived together even though many of them had already married and started their own families. The main reason for that was so that the other family members get to enjoy the preferential treatment granted to their parents, who were members of the garrison. Some garrison members even demanded for their siblings who were not enlisted into the garrison to be granted farmland.

It wasn't until then that the Norton Family started regretting enacting a policy like that. However, at that time, due to the tremendous contribution the garrison had, instead of scrapping the policy altogether, the family only enforced a limit of roughly 6000 square meters of land per person, which can only barely sustain a family of three from the yearly harvest and believed that would limit the garrison family members from exploiting the policy. Little did the Norton Family know that the garrison family members were after the tax exemptions rather than the farmland and heavily fished and engaged in salt smuggling to the point where their lives were even more lavish than that of the Nortons.

Over the course of a hundred-odd years, the garrison members grew in number and many other families sprouted in Wildnorth Town with the smaller ones having at least 20 people and the larger ones having around 40, making them a force to be reckoned with in the dominion.

While the Nortons had wanted to wipe out the garrison troops at one point, they had to give up as the entanglement of the Nortons and the families of Wildnorth Town was too deep: many of the servants and soldiers of the family's main army had relatives living in Wildnorth Town. If there were any military movements, the garrison would quickly get the news about it. If the Nortons really wanted to use brute force to wipe the garrison out, the result would only be disastrous for both sides and the Nortons would become the laughing stock in the noble circles.

On the other hand, as long as the Norton Family doesn't touch the preferential treatment the garrison family members have, the garrison would still heed their orders. When the first young master was still alive, the garrison still remained loyal to him and were willing to participate in skirmishes here and there. But after the first young master's death and the old master becoming bedridden from an illness, the third young master took over and the garrison started to show signs of disobedience. For example, when magical beasts attacked the third young master's group, the garrison members fled immediately and allowed the beasts to startle the young master's horse, causing him to fall to his death.

That was also the case one year back when the old master launched the attacks against the barbarians. Due to the garrison not showing up for the battle, the old master incurred serious injuries. They even dared to surround the family's castle and demand for Patt to be handed over. In one way or another, that behavior could already be considered treason to the ruling family nobles. However, due to the Norton Family's deteriorated military force, they had to try to negotiate for peace with the garrison. Thus, the problem of the garrison is an undertaking that the next family head will have to solve.

The other issue was territorial disputes with the neighboring noble families, especially with Viscount Kenmays whose dominion was located south of the Norton Family's dominion. Given that the Northlands were mostly barren, disputes over territory rarely occurred. However, the Morgan Hills where the Norton Family's mines were located had drawn the Kenmays' attention. As the mines were the main source of the income for the Nortons, they engaged in several martial conflicts with the Kenmays, causing them to incur a huge loss.

In actuality, Viscount Kenmays had no jurisdiction whatsoever over that region as it was originally part of the Norton Family's territory as per the enfeoffment of the founding Krissen emperor himself. On the other hand, the Kenmays' territory was only recently granted to them by the Second Prince almost five years ago, which also

included the Morgan Hills. Whether the mistake was intentional or not was debatable. Even so, the Kenmays should have conceded the territory and asked the Second Prince to redraw the borders as the land originally belonged to the Nortons. However, the Second Prince couldn't be bothered to settle the dispute and asked the two families to handle it themselves, which ultimately resulted in armed conflict with the Nortons emerging victorious.

However, now that the Norton Family's influence was declining, the Kenmays tried to claim the Morgan Hills for themselves once again. And this time, due to the cousin sister of Viscount Kenmays becoming the mistress of Duke Loggins of the Northlands, the Kenmays became even more bold and started another mine at another spot of the Morgan Hills and started taking the resources that rightly belonged to the Nortons, who could only swallow their anger and endure.

If Viscount Kenmays knew of the true predicament the Nortons were in, it wasn't hard to imagine him launching another attack at the Morgan Hills right away and take the mines of the Norton Family for himself. Should that come to happen, the Nortons would lose their main source of income and soon go bankrupt. This was the fifth issue the Norton Family had, an economical crisis.

Just ten years prior, while the Norton Family didn't levy heavy taxes on their dominion folk unlike most other nobles of the time, they relied on their own armed forces to hunt magical beasts for their furs traded them along with some other local products of the Northlands at Morante City through the family's own merchant convoy. Back then, the yearly income was rather great and the family had easily over 200 fully mounted and equipped soldiers in their famous armored cavalry.

But the good times came to an end when the whole merchant convoy led by Lorist's third uncle fell under the attacks of bandits, causing the family to lose its main source of income. After the first young master led the armored cavalry to war under the Second Prince's banner as well as the battle which the old master had fought with his barbarians, only tens of the original 200 soldiers of the cavalry remained with almost half of them crippled. The pension the family had to pay to the relatives of the dead soldiers cost the family another great fortune.

The Second Prince's order for the Norton Family to become the subordinate of Duke Loggins instead of the Krissen Royal Family further exacerbated the situation. Had the first young master been alive, he would have definitely refused to accept the order even if that meant making an enemy of all the other nobles in the Northlands as the

Norton Family had pledged their allegiance to the Krissen Royal Family and not some random prince.

The Second Prince was still rather courteous when the first young master was still alive. However, shortly after his death, the Second Prince quickly tossed the Nortons to the duke and didn't reimburse the Nortons for their losses when they fought for him. Not only was this a huge blow to the Norton Family, it could also be considered a huge breach of etiquette and insult against them. But most of the nobles in the Northlands served the Second Prince at that time so the Nortons had no choice but to accept the situation.

Even though Duke Loggins wasn't of the Krissen Royal Family, the ridiculous taxes he levied on the lands under his rule easily rivaled half of the revenue of a noble family's dominion. While the other noble families could still somehow cope with it, the Nortons didn't collect as much taxes from the family members of the garrison troops and had to pay it from their own pockets. Had it not been for the mines, the family's accounts would have been in the red long ago.

Even though the wars in the empire had ended, the duke made no attempt to lower the taxes and instead introduced yet another country-rebuilding tax with bringing back the glory of the Krissen Empire being the main excuse. However, no one knew how long the collection of that tax would go on for. Given that the main transportation route for the Nortons were in the duke's territory, they could do naught but endure yet again.

When Shadekampf finally finished describing the whole situation of the Norton Family's dominion, everyone fell silent. Even Terman, who suggested that Lorist go back to inherit the dominion, was totally speechless. It was practically a pit of fire! Nobody would willingly jump into one and try to put the fire out.

Charade asked Patt and Shadekampf, "Did the family specify a deadline for Locke to return to the dominion?"

Patt replied, "The old master had passed away around the 3rd month of this year and we took about 3 months to come all the way here from the Northlands because we were caught up with bandits, slave traders and conflicts within noble dominions along the way. After arriving here, we took another month before finally finding the young master. My grandfather said that if the young master intends to inherit the position of the lord, he has to arrive at the Northlands before the 3rd month of next year or

another successor will be picked from the illegitimate children of the old master."

Charade nodded and said, "That's great. At least there's still time to decide. For the two of you, you should stay by Locke's side and decide for yourselves which option will be better for him and give him some time to think about it as well. Let's leave it at this for today."

Chapter 44
The Fanatical Female Students

Lorist was starting to feel that his villa might not be as big as he had once thought as the attic was already remodeled into the two children's bedroom and the guest room on the second floor was by Potterfang with only one guest room left vacant. The two servant's quarters were occupied used by Kelly and Reidy as well. It seemed that Shadekampf and Patt have no other choice but to stay in the guest room.

He then decided to got to the storeroom on the first floor to move the things within out so that Patt and Shadekampf could each have one room. When Lorist told those two his intentions, they looked at him with a weird gaze and strongly objected to the idea.

Shadekampf said that he was only Lorist's servant and not his guest, so he only needs to sleep on something during the night and didn't need a room of his own since he was going to be following Lorist around all day. With his position and status, if Lorist were to let him stay in the guest room, it would become a huge joke among the nobles if word got out, as there has been no precedent where a noble would let a servant stay in a room on the same floor with the master. He suggested to have a simple mattress or even a rug be placed on the empty space beneath the stairs for him to lie on during the night.

Patt also rejected the offer to stay in the vacant guest room for same reason Shadekampf mentioned. Being the young master's personal bodyguard, he could only stand guard outside the master's room but couldn't stay on the same floor as the master.

Having come from a world where people treated each other as equals, Lorist almost forgot that he is currently living in Grindia where nobles lorded over the common folk. The mercantile atmosphere in Morante City has also made Lorist forget his status as a person of noble descent, leading him to treat Patt and Shadekampf as guests, only to have his offer rejected and be reminded of the difference in status between them.

Lorist was at a little loss when Reidy gave him a satisfying suggestion, "Master, why don't you remove the flower parterre in the yard and set up two wooden huts there?"

“That’s a brilliant idea, Reidy. We’ll do just that. Go to Supervisor Skali and have her send someone to come work on it as soon as possible. When the construction is completed, pick one of the huts for yourself and let Patt have the other one. Shadekampf will then move into your servant room.”

“Okay,” said Reidy as he dashed out of the villa and went looking for Skali.

“Master, you don’t have to spend any money on us. As long as we have a place to sleep, we’ll be fine,” said Shadekampf.

“Hehe,” laughed Lorist. “I have earned quite a bit lately, you know. Since the both of you have decided to follow me around, then let me handle this my way. Your treatment will also affect the image of the Norton Family. I will treat you the same as how I treat Reidy for now. Every month, you will each receive two gold Fordes. And Patt, I will have someone provide you with the appropriate equipment so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Thank you, young master,” said Patt candidly.

“Master, aren’t you paying us a little too much?” Shadekampf was a little startled as two gold Fordes was equal to six imperial gold coins, or sixty imperial silver coins! When he was working at the Northlands, his salary was only five imperial silvers a month! It had instantly risen by a huge amount!

Lorist merely waved his hand and left no room for negotiation. “That’s what you deserve. But make no mistake, your tasks in the coming days will not be easy. Patt, I see that you’re already a Three Star Iron rank and can break through to the Silver rank within two to three months. Shadekampf, you haven’t been training your Bronze rank Battle Force for quite some time, have you?”

Shadekampf made a difficult expression and said, “Young master, I don’t know why but somehow I keep forgetting the major blood circulation paths I’ve learned… It was already quite a stroke of luck for me to have been able to awaken my Battle Force back in the day. It’s not that I don’t want to practice it, but I just keep forgetting those paths. The old master has said before that I don’t have any talent for Battle Force training and the successful awakening of my Battle Force is wasted on me…”

Like Patt, Potterfang and Shadekampf were both citizens of the Krissen Empire and practiced a standard middle-ranked Battle Force technique taught in the Krissen

Imperial Army. It was a technique that allowed one to train to the Silver rank and allowed the practitioners to train further in any other higher-ranked Battle Force regardless of attributes. However, it was much more complicated than most normal Battle Force techniques and even had higher requirements if used to awaken one's Battle Force.

The first reason why Potterfang came over to Morante City was due to the fact that the city allowed anyone to come and go as they wished because of the propaganda of freedom and equality propagated by the Forde Trade Union. It was his intention to let his children have a peaceful and blissful life over here. The other reason was because the standard army Battle Force technique he had trained in had already reached the peak of the Silver rank so he could no longer advance any further. WIth that in mind, he intended to continue working as a mercenary to save up some money and purchase a high-ranked Battle Force manual to break through to the Gold rank.

In Morante City, Potterfang had a much better chance of buying a high-ranked Battle Force manual as in the former Krissen Empire, such techniques were usually monopolized by the nobles. Unless Potterfang managed to serve under a noble family for more than ten years or have some kind of major accomplishment and get a high-ranked Battle Force manual as a reward, there was no way he could get his hands on one there. As such, Potterfang has been taking up some missions day and night to earn money and put his children in Lorist's care.

Lorist smiled and said, "It's alright. I have a much simpler Battle Force manual with me whose major circulation paths are much easier to remember. As long as you train hard for two to three years, it shouldn't be a problem for you to reach the Iron rank."

Lorist was referring to the basic Battle Force technique used by the students of his Battle Force awakening course. It was indeed a rather simple technique that was ideal for beginners who had just managed to awaken their Battle Force.

Shadekampf could only agree hesitantly to continue his training.

Lorist looked at him and said in a serious tone, "Shadekampf, as your young master, I won't tolerate incompetent subordinates. If you don't at least train to the Iron rank I won't keep you by my side. In the future, I will give you a test every three months and every time I see no improvement in your Bronze Battle Force I will decrease your salary. If your salary gets decreased until there isn't any left, then you'll be sacked. Got it?"

“Yes, young master. I will definitely give it my all,” promised Shadekampf.

“As for Patt, follow me around for a bit to familiarize yourself with the Dawn Academy. When the wooden huts are complete, you can start training with Reidy. When I have some free time, I’ll come up with a training regimen for you to raise your combat potential.”

“Yes, master.” No matter what Lorist said, Patt agreed right away.

“I think you should stop calling me young master. Just call me Locke. I’m more used to it that way,” instructed Lorist.

“Okay, young master Locke,” replied Shadekampf and Patt in unison.

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First thing in the morning, Lorist got up early and was training as usual in the yard. Howard was exercising according to a routine Lorist had given him that had the effect of enhancing one’s fundamental capabilities and physique. Alisa, on the other hand, was still lazing around in bed. Reidy had his own training regimen which also included the eight fundamental sword moves. Lorist had him train along with Shadekampf and Patt.

After finishing his morning training, Lorist could see workers carrying building materials into the yard. When Reidy brought back the contractor the day before, Lorist had him measure the dimensions of the land on which the wooden huts will be built and the contractor said that they could be completed within seven short days as the design of the huts were rather simple. However, the cost for the labor and the materials would cost up to 18 gold Fordes.

Lorist agreed to it without a moment’s hesitation.

Now that he had finished the breakfast Kelly had prepared, he left Reidy at the yard to oversee the workers before bringing Shadekampf and Patt around the academy. Quickly, they arrived at the plaza where the Peterson young master, Dorsedaus, was training at.

Sol, I knew that it would be like this, Lorist cursed in his heart.

“Excuse me, please make way. I’m an instructor,” said Lorist. Looking emotionlessly at

the wave of girls who were all dolled up staring at him with razor sharp glares while moving out of the way, he finally managed to pass through the wave of fanatical female students and made his way to join the other instructors.

“Young master, there are so many girls here that they’ve filled up the whole plaza! There should be at least a 1000 of them, right?” said Patt. He had never seen so many pretty young girls gathered at the same place at one time. His face was reddened from passing through so many of them for the first time in his life.

Lorist said in an annoyed tone, “All the girls in the academy who think they look somewhat decent are gathered here. Even if they aren’t 1000 people, there should be 800 at the very least.”

Yuriy then came over. The group of commoner students he was put in charge of had all successfully awakened their Battle Force and were allowed to enjoy their semester break after they familiarized themselves with the basic Battle Force circulation paths. When they return during the start of the semester, they will be taught the fundamentals of training and applying their Battle Force which wasn’t a huge problem and normal instructors could be put in charge of it. However, Dorsedaus’s training was far more important as it involved the bonus payment all the instructors were going to get. The 3000-gold-Forde bonus promised by President Peterson was far too alluring. Apart from some instructors who were still monitoring students whose Battle Force have not yet been awakened, the other instructors who should have already been allowed to take their vacation came over to work overtime of their own accord.

There were 30-odd instructors and assistant instructors surrounding Peterson Dorsedaus, essentially creating a record high instructor to student ratio that was unprecedented. Then again, there was no other way around that as the instructors had to prevent the fanatical fangirls from interrupting the young master’s training.

That’s right. The female students that were gathered all over the small plaza were there for the heir of the Peterson family. And each and every one of them had the same daydream, that was to get to know the young master better and form a relationship with him to marry into riches and live the rest of their lives in bliss and enjoy the delicacies, jewelries, dresses as well as inexpendable wealth that came with it. Most of the girls who held that pipe dream were of commoner families.

As for the girls from noble families who were far better dressed than the rest of their peers, they were probably smitten by Dorsedaus’s current handsome and dashing

look, or the influence and power of the Peterson Family. Or, perhaps they were encouraged by their family elders to accost the young master so that their families may benefit from a relationship with the Petersons. Unlike most other commoner girls, these noble young ladies had at least a couple of bodyguards standing right behind them.

I'm really out of words. I didn't expect for that fatty who's trying to lose weight to end up becoming top grade bodybuilding material… Lorist sighed inwardly.

Not only was it far out of Lorist's expectations, everyone who had seen the young master who couldn't even run a single lap without breathing raggedly months ago were shocked as well. Nobody could have imagined that after shedding all that fat from the hellish training he had endured, he would have such a perfect and magnificent figure beneath.

Dorsedaus was already 190 centimeters in height in the first place; he was taller than Lorist by about 10 centimeters. But at that point, nobody paid any attention to that because of his obese body. But now that he had successfully slimmed down, his height and physique started to shine through. Coupled with the painful training under the threat of the whip for all that time, he had also developed nice muscles all over his body which gave his upper body a perfect inverted triangle shape, much to the envy of many. The two huge lumps of muscle on his arms only served to further display his strength. His skin even had a healthy tan having been training all day outdoors and gleamed and sparkled from the sweat that trickled down all over.

If Dorsedaus were still the fat lump he was a couple of months ago, even if the female students in the academy knew of his wealthy family background, none of them would even bother to give him any attention. But when he had successfully lost all that weight, the female students who passed by the plaza occasionally accidentally caught glimpses of his handsome form as he trained away all day and stayed there to admire his looks.

At first, the instructors didn't mind that much as having a few girls around was quite a pleasing thing. It didn't take long for those instructors to start telling the girls about his impressive family background.

So the man training nonstop in the plaza is actually the future heir of the Peterson Family, which is one of the seven most influential establishments within the Forde Trade Union! He even looks so handsome, bright and cheerful! Oh, he looked me in the eye and

smiled! I can't take it anymore! I'm going to faint, thought one of the girls who later became his first fangirl.

In time, the whole academy's female students got to know about Dorsedaus's looks and family background and started gathering around the plaza all dressed up, cheering him on and hoping to gain some of his attention for themselves. Even when one instructor told the girls that the young master was actually doing weight loss exercises and not some kind of strength training, they were all in denial and refused to believe that their prince had any need to lose fat given how he looked now. They even compared Dorsedaus's physique to the instructor's and said that he was the one who needed to lose weight more than the young master and laughed at the belly he had.

Any man would be unable to stand hearing all the praises the fangirls showered on the young master. Some went like, "Oh, he truly is the manliest of men! He's the prince charming of my dreams," while others sounded like, "Look at his magnificent body and muscles! How strong! I really want to jump into his arms and be spoiled by him! Oh… I think I'm drunk with desire…".

Some praises were even more over the top. "Oh the heavens be praised! He is definitely the human incarnation of the Sun God Singwa! Look at his charming smile and deep, complicated gaze… His body radiates nothing but power! It seems that he could shatter a whole mountain with but a huge stomp to the ground…"

Whoa whoa whoa there, young miss… You're talking about a man who only has muscles but not an iota of Battle Force you know, thought Lorist.

"What's with the situation here?" asked Lorist.

Yuriy gave a bitter laugh. "It's like this every day. Most of the instructors are at their breaking point. Why are there so many fanatical female students in the academy?"

"Even I don't know the answer to that… It seems that I have to ask Charade to dispatch someone from the Enforcement Division to maintain the order around here. Also, when overseeing that kid's training, make sure to also be alert and don't let any one of the girls have a chance to get close to him," said Lorist in a worried tone.

"Huh?" Lorist turned to look at Dorsedaus stopping and chatting to a girl who was sitting under a parasol.

“Who’s that?” Lorist asked Yuriy. “Why is no instructor punishing him from stopping his training halfway? Where’s the whip?”

“That’s the daughter of the Morosen Duchy’s duke and she bears the title of a princess. Rumor says that their family are quite close to the Petersons and she often stops by to cheer on the young master’s training.”

“As for the whip…” Yuriy shrugged. “It’s in this box. Nobody dares to use it now! Last time when an instructor tried to teach the young master who was slacking off a lesson, he was almost torn apart alive by the fangirls all over! Right now, they have no choice but to politely encourage him to continue training instead of whipping him like they used to.”

“Yuriy, bring Shadekampf to the great hall and let him see the basic Battle Force major circulation path diagram and have him memorize and copy it down before letting him train in it for about an hour. This fellow finds it hard to remember his own technique’s circulation path and it’s a waste of his awakened Battle Force! Just leave the situation here to me,” said Lorist as he took the whip from the box and walked over to Dorsedaus followed behind by Patt.

Dorsedaus was chatting away happily with the young princess in front of him and ignoring the warnings of the instructors around him about how he still had ten laps to run. Suddenly, the familiar sound of the whip cracked in the air and a searing pain could be felt by the young master on his back. He turned around only to see Lorist’s demonic form standing behind him and instantly balled up on the ground in fear and froze up.

As the crowd around the plaza started to get noisy, the cracking sound of the whip and Lorist’s loud roars resounded throughout the place. “How dare you slack off and ignore the instructors! Your training in the afternoon will be doubled and you’ll get only half the serving of your lunch for today! If you dare to do this again I’ll make sure to starve you for three whole days! Understood?! Now get up and start running!”

After whipping the young master for ten more times, Lorist couldn’t help but hear curses sounding from the crowd of fangirls. He turned and looked at their bloodlust-filled gazes as they seemed to want to rush over and tear Lorist into a billion pieces.

Whap! Whap! Whoop! Crisp sounds of the whip cracking once again reverberated in the air. Subsequently, Lorist’s deep and clear voice reached the ears of everyone

present at the plaza. “If you crazy fangirls dare to interrupt the instructors from conducting the training, then don’t blame me for being merciless! I will ensure that the lash from this whip on your faces will remain forever and ruin your looks! Don’t forget that the Peterson Family will also make sure your families pay the price for interrupting the young master’s training! Who wants to give it a try?!”

Cracks from the ground near Lorist that was caused by his heavy whipping could be seen clearly. The crazed fangirls were finally stunned awake from their trance and looked at those cracks in fear before finally retreating backwards.

If the whip only broke the bones of their hands and legs, they would still be willing to try to enter the sights of the prince of their dreams. However, when Lorist threatened to whip their faces, they started to rethink their actions. After all, there wasn’t a point in showing up in front of the prince with a ruined face…

“How dare you treat my Brother Haus like that!” This time, the beautiful princess finally snapped out of the shock and started reprimanding Lorist before telling the bodyguards behind her, “Catch him and make sure you give him a good whipping.”

The four Silver ranked bodyguards instantly leaped over. Within but a single moment, two of them fell face first towards the ground. The one who was injured lighter was half kneeling and vomiting with a pained expression on his face while the more heavily injured one was twitching uncontrollably on the ground unconscious. The other two bodyguards were stunned frozen and their eyes finally widened as they recognized who Lorist was.

“Your Highness, that’s Iron Locke…”

“It’s precisely because he’s an Iron rank that I asked you to take care of him! Surely four Silver ranks can handle a measly Iron rank without a problem, right? Huh? What happened to the other two?” said the princess as she noticed the two guards lying on the ground.

“Your Highness, That’s Iron Locke the Silver Undefeated. The likes of us are from being able to take him on,” replied the bodyguard bitterly. It was evident that the princess only paid attention to the latest fashion trends and gossip going around the noble parties and didn’t pay attention to anything else, including the news about Iron Locke’s triumph. The bodyguards decided that it was better to not mess with Lorist at all and tried to persuade the princess.

“Hmph…” Since the Silver ranked bodyguards have already admitted that they weren’t a match for Lorist, the princess had no choice but to give up the notion and turned haughtily with a humph after giving Lorist a deathly stare and left. The other two bodyguards hurriedly nodded in apology to Lorist before taking their fallen comrades away without delay.

Lorist returned to the instructor group and appeared to be in deep thought as he looked at the young master training hard while ignoring the subtle curses directed at himself from the fangirls at the plaza.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Instructor Marlin as he came over.

“Look at all those fangirls gathered here to see the young master train… If we move the training venue to an indoor training hall and set up a ticket booth, don’t you think we’ll make tons of money?” mused Lorist.

All the instructors who heard that collapsed on the ground immediately……

Chapter 45
The Decision

On the third day Patt joined Reidy for morning training, he asked him, "Reidy, what's with that weird metal wheel with a chair strapped on it in the corner of the yard? Is it a toy for Alisa and Howard?"

Reidy shook his head and said, "That's not a toy. It's something I used before for my training. It's not like we don't let the kids play with it though. They simply just don't want to."

"A training equipment? I don't see how it could help with training," said Patt as he gave it another look, trying to imagine how it could be used for training.

"I used to play around in the mountains and forests a lot when I was small. There was this one time when I accidentally knocked on a bees' nest. As expected, they began to swarm around me. Swinging a branch around in a terrified manner, I managed to kill quite a few of them. Despite that, I still got stung by many more and had sores all over my body, only managing to recover after a full month. Because of that incident, I've developed a phobia of sorts. Stop laughing, that's what master told me," said Reidy, unhappy with Patt's reaction.

"Alright, sorry. My bad... Please continue your story," apologized Patt.

"Before, I used to learn swordsmanship from my father. When I came over to Morante City, I also got some lessons from Uncle Charlando, the owner of the Red Grace Inn. Don't be fooled by his limp; he's actually a gold-ranked swordsman. When I'm only practicing sword techniques, I would have no problem. However, when I actually spar with someone, the moment I see the gleaming sword coming my way, I will unconsciously be reminded of the shiny tails of the bees that gave me so much grief, causing me to uncontrollably close my eyes and swing my sword around randomly. At that point, I would have already forgotten all the techniques I learned. My father and uncle both came to the conclusion that I wasn't swordsman material..."

"But you seem to have pretty good skills now, don't you? I didn't see any sign of that behavior when I sparred with you yesterday..." Patt couldn't imagine how the current

Reidy still had any of those bad habits. During the sparring match yesterday, he was surprised and quite dissatisfied with the fact that a three star iron rank like himself was evenly matched with Reidy, who was only a three star bronze rank. Additionally, instead of closing his eyes, Reidy had both of them wide open and seemed like he was paying attention to every single move Patt was making. That made Patt doubt the truth of the story he just heard from Reidy.

"Of course, it's no longer an issue for me. I've been treated by master using that training machine. The big metal wheel is called a hollow rotor, which is fitted with a metal spinning chair," explained Reidy.

"Hollow rotor? Spinning chair? These two things managed to treat that bad habit of yours? Do tell me how they managed that," said Patt curiously.

"Alright. When I first started to train with master, he discovered that bad habit of mine and asked me about how it came to be. I told him about the incident with the bees and he theorized that it a phobia had developed within my psyche that causes me to unconsciously close my eyes every time I felt threatened. He called something along the lines of 'ostrich mentality'. Don't ask me what an 'ostrich' is, I don't know that either. According to master, it's a kind of bird that lives in desert that hides its head into sand every time it detects a threat, believing that as long as it can't see the enemy, it would be safe. Do you think there's actually a stupid bird like that?"

"Then what happened after that?" asked Patt impatiently.

"Master said that it would take quite some time to treat the phobia through conventional counseling to slowly reshape my mentality. But he also said that there was a quicker method that made one feel extremely horrible, but would allow one to gain a unique visual ability that lets one see fast-moving objects as if they were moving slowly. As long as I perceive them as slow, I wouldn't feel nearly as threatened, so the instinct to close my eyes won't kick in," explained Reidy.

"So you chose the quicker way?"

"Of course. I decided to do that right away. After that, master had someone make that contraption there. All my life, I've never experienced something more dreadful than being in that chair. It took me almost two whole months to be able to get used to the sensation. After that, master said I was successfully treated and dumped honey all over my body before releasing a couple of bees for me to strike down with my sword.

At first, I was terrified. But when the bees came at me, I noticed that they approached at a snail's pace. I could even see every flap of their wings clearly and managed to easily kill each and every one of them."

Initially, Reidy showed a pained expression when he talked about the treatment process, but he started to sound more eager when he reached the part where he killed the bees.

"Master said that the ability I developed was called dynamic vision. It allows me to perceive fast-moving objects at a slowed rate when I focus. When I sparred against you yesterday, I could see each and every one of your sword strikes clearly and could parry every single one of them without breaking much of a sweat. That's why a bronze rank like me was able to match up to a three star iron rank like you, bringing our sparring match to a draw," said Reidy with a satisfied expression.

Patt looked at the hollow rotor and spinning chair and was instantly moved. "Then Reidy, if I use that chair to train like you did, will I develop dynamic vision as well?"

Slightly stunned, Reidy said, "You should be able to. Master said that this equipment was built precisely for normal people to develop dynamic vision. If you want to try it out, I'll go ask master for permission. However, let me warn you that when you first start, you'll feel so horrible that you might prefer death than sitting in that chair. Are you sure that you don't want to reconsider?"

Patt shook his head and said, "I've made up my mind. As long as I can have the same ability as you, I'm sure my skills will definitely rise and I will be able to better protect master. I think I'll go ask him myself."

"No, there's no need. I'll ask for you," said Reidy excitedly as he turned and ran towards the house entrance.

Patt touched the equipment and thought, *these two things look so simple. I wonder if it's really as horrible as Reidy had described... He couldn't just be trying to dissuade me from using it, could he?*

Without delay, Reidy came back and said happily, "Brother Patt, master has already agreed to let you use it. But he said that you have to endure it no matter how terrible you feel and must absolutely not give up halfway."

Patt said, "I promise that I'll never give up. No, I'll even swear it."

"Alright, then would you like to start now? Master has said that as long as you train the way I did, you'll definitely be able to develop dynamic vision," said Reidy, who looked like he was about to enjoy a good show.

Maybe it's just my imagination, thought Patt.

At that time, the sound of a horse's galloping hooves could be heard near the yard. Kelly had returned from the business sector from a shopping trip.

Reidy and Patt went over to help her carry her stuff into the storeroom.

"Miss Kelly, what are we having for lunch today?" Reidy asked.

"I'm going to make steak, fish soup, salad, fruit pudding as well as Alisa's favorite chicken drumsticks."

"Alright. You should make one less portion of steak. Otherwise, it'll go to waste," said Reidy.

"Why? Is the young master not coming back for lunch?" she asked.

Reidy smiled and said, "Nope, it's not the young master. You'll know soon....."

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As night descended, a veil of silence blanketed the land. Even the frequent croaking of frogs around the Moon Lake was significantly quieter.

Lorist got up and stood by the window of his room, looking straight at the night view of the Moon Lake. A chilly breeze lifted the curtains, making it seem like they were dancing under the illumination of the silver moon.

The sandglass on a table nearby showed that it was around two in the morning. Despite that, Lorist had no desire whatsoever to sleep. After pondering for a bit, he decided to go take a walk by the Moon Lake to calm himself down.

The 8th month has already passed and it was currently the 1st day of the 9th month. The academy semester break was officially here.

Few days back, President Peterson sent a box containing notes worth 30 gold coins to

Lorist and thanked once again the instructors as well as the assistant instructors for their help. His son Dorsedaus has successfully managed to awaken his battleforce along with the last batch of students.

Academy Head Levins also issued the promised reward of 1000 gold Fordes to the instructor team. Coupled with President Peterson's gift, there was at least 4000 gold coins in total. As the head instructor, Lorist collected 300 gold coins. Hughes, Marlin and Anfya each had a bonus of 200. The 24 other instructors each got a hundred gold coins while the assistant instructors got 50 each. The remaining gold coins were used for a celebration at the Red Grace Inn where everyone engaged in fervent merrymaking. Lorist was forced to drink so much that he puked over three times.

As for the aftermath of the duels, Lorist finally secured his title as the Silver Undefeated the moment he got his 3000th win. When the dueling event was finally over, the academy administration had Lorist's physical proportions measured for the life-sized statue they were going to commission for him. During the next semester, his statue would be erected within the academy, forever immortalizing the legend of Iron Locke the Silver Undefeated.

In a few more days, Els finally wrapped up his betting pool. By that time, Lorist will finally receive the 26 thousand gold Fordes he was entitled to, causing him to have a grand total of almost 30 thousand gold Fordes. In Morante, a person with that kind of money could already be considered a tycoon who would be able to live in luxury for tens of years even if they stayed jobless.

When the next semester comes during the 10th month, there would be nothing for Lorist to do at the academy, meaning that he could use that time to enjoy his life at home or go adventuring with a couple of friends as he has done in the past. Even though the semester break had finally arrived, Lorist still felt a heavy burden deep within his heart, causing him to be unable to relax. He didn't have any appetite and started having sleepless nights.

The silver moonlight made the lakewater glisten. Lorist sat on a large rock by the bank and stared at the moon's reflection as he fell into deep thought...

Indeed, he was merely trying to run away. During the past few days, he could still use the dueling event and the battleforce awakening course as an excuse to postpone the decision to return to his homeland. But now that everything was settled, he had no choice but to face the facts squarely.

Why should I return to inherit the dominion? That place is completely foreign to me and I don't know anybody there at all. Also, the house is also in deep trouble, so accepting the title of the lord is equal to jumping into a pit of fire... Lorist really couldn't understand. He had lived in Morante for the past ten years and formed deep connections with the people there. He even had a stable job and was practically a living legend. Morante was where he belonged.

Very much satisfied with his life here, Lorist was really unwilling to go to the Northlands to inherit the position. As Shadekampf had remarked when he first arrived, the standard of living in Morante was far better than that of the Norton dominion; Morante was practically paradise. When it came to food and many other necessities, Lorist's homeland couldn't even compare as it was far too underdeveloped.

So, why, then did he feel a tinge of longing in his heart? It was as if a voice called out nonstop for him to leave Morante and return to his dominion. Perhaps the blood and soul of the Nortons that was ingrained within him was causing him to feel a deep desire to develop his dominion and strengthen his house. That was probably the deepest dormant instinct all descendants of the Norton family had.

Even though Lorist really wanted to stay in Morante, that conflicted with the deep imprint on his soul. His mere resistance to the idea of returning caused him to feel unsettled and bothered to the point that symptoms of insomnia and bad appetite manifested. If he continued to go on like that, who knew how bad it would become, should he choose to endure the torturous contradiction within his mind? *Maybe if I continue to endure this until the 3rd month next year, the feeling will disappear when the family picks the late lord's illegitimate child as the heir,* Lorist thought.

So what if that person isn't from a proper line of descent? Doesn't he also have Norton blood flowing through his veins? The moment Lorist merely thought of the notion, a sudden intense wave could be felt within the core of his being, sending chills down his spine.

"Achoo!" sneezed Lorist.

Alright, fine... Illegitimate children still have a fundamentally different statuses from the descendants with legitimate bloodline... Oh little Locke... It truly feels like we are two people sharing one body... Now that my mind is living in your body, it wouldn't be comfortable for any of us if you continue to struggle like this... Come on, I beg you... stop

making me feel so bad... After his sincere pleading, the wave in his body finally calmed down. But a barely audible sobbing could still be heard in his mind. "I want to go home... I want to go home..."

That's right. I want to go home too. Little Locke, your homeland is still within reach, but there's no way for me to return to mine...

Lorist silently teared up as he sat alone on the rock by the lake. As the first rays of dawn broke the veil of the night sky, a trail of dried tears could be seen on his face. Lorist stood up and faced the rising sun before saying, "Little Locke, let's go back home together."

Chapter 46
Convoy Plans and the Oath of Allegiance

That's right, why don't I just head back? I can treat this trip back to the Northlands as an adventure and also resolve the inner conflict I have with the desperate desire to return home this body has. Whether I will inherit the position of the lord is a whole other matter altogether. If things are really that bad there, it'll never be too late for me to return to Morante City and live my life out in luxury. I wonder why I have been losing sleep over something as small as this…

Lorist's mood instantly turned for the better as if a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders. Now that he had decided to go back, he couldn't just visit empty-handed and had to plan and prepare carefully and also wait for Patt to recover from the spinning chair…

On that day, Lorist stood by the window of his study seeing Reidy drag Patt across the yard like a dead dog and strapping him onto the spinning chair before pulling the rope and spinning it faster and faster. Patt, who had been tortured quite horribly for the past few days didn't have the ability to resist at all and didn't even have enough energy to scream for help. He only made a grunt or two from time to time in protest…

Hehe, he's reaping what he sowed. Did he think that dynamic vision is this easily acquired? Back in his previous life when Lorist was still serving in the military, his comrades who could endure unspeakable hardships without batting an eye and were even able to joke around as they used their knives to dig out bullets from their body, couldn't withstand more than two days on the spinning chair. The moment they tried it, they were scared shitless and didn't dare to get on the chair ever again.

The unpleasant feeling after getting on the spinning chair came from the intense vertigo that could turn a 7-foot burly man into a limp noodle within minutes. When Lorist used Reidy as his guinea pig four months back, it took him two whole months for him to be able to get used to the sensation. He also had Potterfang try it out once after he had just recovered but that was also the last time Potterfang used that chair. It seemed that unless one was forced to keep going on to the spinning chair, one would instantly lose that determination to continue using it.

Reidy was doing that exact thing to Patt just as Lorist had once did to him. It was no wonder he was so elated when Patt showed some interest in the training method. For some reason, it was in a human's nature to wish for someone else to experience what one had suffered from before. When one fell into a pit, one would also hope that someone else would suffer the same fate as well.

It had been seven days since Patt started training with the chair. It seemed that he would take at least two months to recover just like Reidy. Lorist decided that he wasn't going to return to his homeland with Shadekampf and Patt empty handed. He recalled that the merchant group led by his uncle was at least worth 1000 gold Fordes or more. Even though the scale of their operations were quite small when compared to the other merchant guilds in Morante City, they were able to earn about 300 gold coins of profit each expedition: that was more than 1000 imperial old head gold coins. Even though Lorist's annual income was close to that, that amount of money would easily boost the family's financial and military strength by a lot.

Now that Lorist did not lack any money, he decided to bring out a few thousand gold coins to form a merchant group or a supply convoy to alleviate the family's grim situation. Even though he still wasn't set on inheriting the position of the dominion lord, the least he could do was to contribute some resources to make up for the fact that he was currently occupying the original owner's body.

However, the process of actually forming a merchant group wasn't simple. The scale of the group and the goods to be delivered had to be carefully considered. Otherwise, if the family a certain type of supplies he brought, the whole trip would end up a waste of time.

He was thankful for the presence of Shadekampf for that. While he wasn't the most talented person when it came to Battle Force training, Shadekampf was quite well-informed of the status of the dominion and understood what type of resources would be most beneficial to the family given his prowess in management taught to him by Butler Gleis. Every night, Lorist had Shadekampf go to his study to tell him more about the dominion to make a list of the things that the family is really in need of.

Now that the question of the resources was settled, what about the manpower required to run the merchant group? Currently, apart from Lorist, Shadekampf and Patt, it was still uncertain whether Reidy would want to follow him back. After the new year, he would only just turn 17 and the highest he can reach while training within these few months was the One Star Iron rank. Lorist was also a little worried about

Reidy joining as the trip to the Northlands would no doubt be filled with various risks and dangers. *I guess I'll cross the bridge when I come to it. At most, I'll hire a few laborers for a high price.* Lorist was quite confident that he would be able to accomplish that with the amount of gold Fordes he had.

The next problem was the route they would take. According to the map, there were three paths that lead to the Krissen Empire's capital from Morante City and there was only one route from the capital that lead to the Northlands. Lorist recalled that the journey when he traveled to Morante City with his third uncle's merchant convoy took about 57 days. The merchant convoy mostly had four-wheeled carriages and could travel about 50 km per day. That meant that the distance of the Northlands from Morante City was about 3000 km.

Before the fall of the Krissen Empire, it was much easier to travel to and fro. Now that the former empire's territory had been split up between 3 kingdoms and 7 duchies, various complications would arise when they cross borders and customs. *Given that I'm a noble who's on the way back to inherit my position and my convoy isn't planning to conduct any business, I shouldn't have to pay a lot for the toll costs, right? I better make sure of that before I start the trip. Maybe I should try contacting President Peterson,* thought Lorist, as the Peterson Group also had business connections with certain companies in the former empire's capital. If Lorist were to join them on the way to the capital, it would save him lots of trouble.

The last concern Lorist had was the issue of defense and security. Given the volatile state of the former empire's territory, it was not uncommon for convoys to be attacked and pillaged by bandits along the way. After deciding that he would hire a group of mercenaries for a high price to protect his convoy, Lorist went to the mercenary guild to get an idea of the fees required, only to return later on that day with a grim expression. Nobody would have expected that a team of 45 mercenaries would cost 1000 gold Fordes to hire. There was even a restriction that the convoy couldn't be too large. The Gold ranked mercenary band leader was very clear that the price was the best they could offer. If there were to be more than 12 carriages or if the convoy transported weapons and equipment, the price would have to rise even more as it couldn't be helped.

After 6 years of constant conflict, the territories that once belonged to the Krissen Empire lacked resources so much to the point where certain nobles even impersonated bandits to pillage unknowing merchant groups. If the bandits were to get their eyes on the weapons or equipment, the convoy would instantly become a

lucrative target and cause the mercenary protectors to inevitably incur losses and casualties.

Coincidentally, Lorist intended to transport some weapons and armor as Shadekampf had listed that as a resource that the family was in dire need of. The 2000 gold Fordes required to hire a mercenary group was far more than the price he used to procure the resources. Instead of hiring mercenaries, Lorist figured that it would be better for him to form a group of 100-odd armed force to protect the convoy and believed that many Silver ranked mercenaries would be willing to tag along for the trip to the Northlands for a couple of gold Fordes. *Sigh, let's settle the issue of security when the time comes.*

That was how busy Lorist had been in the recent times, going around the city's Business Sector frequently to check on the prices of the resources he intended to transport to his homeland. At any rate, Lorist didn't plan to stay at the Northlands for long. He could be said to have fulfilled the least of his responsibilities to the family by sending them resources to make his contribution. He would later return to Morante City again to enjoy the rest of his life.

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What Lorist didn't expect was the suggestions from a few people to him when he was busy with the preparations. The first one to approach Lorist was Reidy. "Master, are you planning to return to the dominion?"

Lorist nodded and said that he was indeed going back for a while, but he wasn't sure if he would inherit the position yet. Now that Reidy was here, he was about to tell him that he had planned for Reidy to stay at the city. "Reidy, I think you should remain at Morante City. The journey to the Northlands will no doubt be a long and arduous one, not to mention the risks involved…"

"No, master. I'm definitely following you along," Reidy replied resolutely, cutting off the rest of what Lorist had to say. "I'm your personal attendant. How can I ever leave your side? I will not let you leave me behind."

Lorist felt rather surprised and said, "What if Old Char and Els object to it? It's going to be a rather dangerous trip, you know…"

"The main reason I came to Morante City was to join a mercenary group. But for some

reason, it had morphed into a syndicate instead and I have no intention of hanging with the likes of them. I already have no other relatives so I am free to go wherever I want, including following master along, so other people's objections don't matter!" exclaimed Reidy with a resolute face. It seemed that he had already set his mind to it.

"Alright, then you can come along," agreed Lorist. He didn't want Reidy to feel that he had been left behind. Since this attendant of his was stubborn and loved challenges, Lorist thought that it wouldn't be too bad for him to experience an adventure like this and thus allowed him to follow along.

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The moment Shadekampf left the study, he bumped into Potterfang outside and hurriedly apologized to him. He has always been quite curious about the mercenary who his master had cared so much about. When Potterfang came back and finished his mercenary mission, he even called for Shadekampf to talk about the situation of the Norton Family. It was then when Shadekampf got to know that Potterfang was also a Northlander who even used to be a military commander in one of the former Krissen Empire's most prestigious armies.

"Is Locke in the study?" asked Potterfang.

"Yes, he is," he replied.

"Thanks."

Lorist was currently looking over the list of items and resources that he intended to bring back to his homeland which he had gone over once with Shadekampf just moments ago. It could be seen from the list that the homeland was really bereft of even the most basic resources to the point that it was questionable how the family could survive till now. The amount of resources required posed quite a problem to Lorist as it required over 100 horse carriages to transport, which was something he couldn't afford to do at the moment. *It seems that I have to cut down on some of them and only bring the essentials. It'll be much easier to take care of the convoy with only 20-30 carriages.*

"When are you leaving?" Potterfang asked Lorist.

"Ah, Pog, you're here," Lorist greeted as he stood up and stretched for a bit. "Well, the soonest I can leave is when Patt fully recovers, which is in another two months or

more. I hope that I'll be able to depart around the 20th day of the 11th month."

"Oh…" Potterfang merely nodded. "Two days ago, I asked Shadekampf about the situation of your family and it does sound pretty dire. I was under the impression that you wouldn't go back there."

"I don't have a choice, my family needs me now. As a descendant of the Norton Family, I have the obligation to go back and share the burden with them," said Lorist as he smiled and shook his head in futility, feeling that he sounded a little too pessimistic when he said that, as if he was going to give up on everything here in Morante City and actually go back to help his family out for real.

"Oh, Pog, you're just in time. I have something to give you," said Lorist as he changed the subject.

He reached into his drawer and took out a high-ranked Battle Force manual with five other gold coin notes and placed them on the table.

"Pog, your Battle Force is of the metal attribute, right? Here is a Battle Force manual that I've prepared for you that'll enable you to train all the way up to the Gold rank. It even contains some insight from the original owner of the manual who had managed to break through to the rank of the Blademaster. This was given to me by my ex-girlfriend as a memorial gift before breaking up with me, but I have totally no use for it. I'm giving this to you in hopes that you will be able to break through into the Gold rank. As for whether you can become a Blademaster, it'll have to depend on your ability and effort. Don't even bother rejecting this gift. Count it as a parting gift from me."

Potterfang looked downwards to the manual and his whole body was shivering uncontrollably……

However, Lorist didn't take note of any of that. He continued to tell Potterfang his plans, "As for these 500 gold coins, it's not for you. It's my gift as a teacher to my precious disciple, Howard and my cute Alisa for you to hold on to. While Howard's physical qualities are rather good, don't neglect his nutrition as well as his physical training and teach him some of the basics of Battle Force when he finally awakens his own. If his Battle Force attribute is different from yours, then I will find a way to help him acquire a high-ranked Battle Force manual.

"Also, I believe that you won't be willing to continue staying here after I leave no matter what I say. I've already had Els purchase a house near the Red Grace Inn for your family to move in in the future. This way, Charlando, the owner of the inn, can help you take care of Howard and Alisa when you're out on mercenary missions and private requests. Actually, Pog, I hope you can reconsider letting me get you a place as an instructor at the academy so that you will be able to continue living here when you become a Gold Swordsman. It'll be better for the kids too…"

Before Lorist finished, Potterfang suddenly stood up and left the room without saying anything.

"Erm…" Lorist was stunned. *What's the meaning of this?*

In a moment, Lorist heard footsteps from the corridor outside followed by a knocking sound on the door. Potterfang had returned to the room.

However, he was dressed very differently than before. He was currently wearing a ceremonial military officer outfit of the former Krissen Empire with a sword strapped to his side. Potterfang move forward solemnly and knelt before Lorist on one knee before raising his sword over his head and announcing, "I, Grei Potterfang, captain of the 9th Brigade of the 3rd Heavy-Armored Corps, am willing to take Norton Lorist as my lord and liege and pledge my allegiance to the Norton Family. Under the witness of the War God, I am willing to give my utmost to contribute and serve under the banner of the Nortons and will absolutely not let my lord down."

Lorist was so surprised he jumped in his seat. This was the oath of allegiance which was commonly initiated to represent the pledging of one's service to an emperor, a king or a grand duke of a duchy. If this ceremony was carried out to nobles not of that rank, it signified that the initiator of the ceremony was willing to share the fate of whom he was pledging his allegiance to, regardless of good or bad times and be loyal for the rest of one's life and even be willing to follow one's lord into rebellion if necessary. This relationship was even closer than that of a lord and the knights of the family.

"Pog… This… this is…" Lorist was totally without a clue on how to respond.

Potterfang remained kneeling with his head lowered without a single movement.

Aren't these ceremonies only carried out after communication between both parties?

Coming at me all of a sudden is unfair! Not being able to do anything else, Lorist stepped forward and received Potterfang's upheld sword and unsheathed it before tapping the longsword on Potterfang's head, followed by each of his shoulders as he announced, "From today onwards, our fates will forever be intertwined. You shall see me as your liege and serve as my arms and feet. Let the War God be the witness of this oath and may time engrave this relationship in the prestigious future that is to come."

Lorist had no choice but to respond as such. If he had hesitated for a little too long, the person who initiated the ceremony would feel that he was ignored and this was a grave insult to the initiator. If it was serious, the initiator would slit his own throat on the spot. Otherwise, he would view the other party as a sworn enemy for the rest of his life.

Taking the sword back from Lorist, Potterfang stood back up and made a deep bow towards him before saying, "My lord."

Lorist gave a bitter laugh. "Pog, is there really a need for that? You could've been so much better off here in Morante City. Why did you choose to jump into that fire pit with me?"

Potterfang also laughed lightly before saying, "I wouldn't have stayed in Morante City either way. To be honest, I've been wanting to go back to the Northlands for quite a while. Since I would have to serve some family one way or another to make a living there, I might as pick you. It makes even more sense considering all that you have done for me."

"Then what about the two kids?" Lorist was already starting to worry about them……

"I've already asked Howard about that. He said that you're his master, so he definitely wants to accompany you on this journey. As for Alisa, she's like a redbud flower that grows in the wild and not a weak flower that grows in the safe shelter of the greenhouse. I personally think that you, my lord, pampers her far too much. As a daughter of the Northlands, she'll definitely need to go back and experience the polishing of the harsh wind and snow there," replied Potterfang.

"Sigh……" *Alright. I guess Potterfang's family is coming along to the Northlands as well.*

Potterfang then took the high-ranked Battle Force manual and said, "Great, I can finally accept this proudly with my head held high. I hope that I will be able to break into the

Gold rank within two months so that I will able to better serve you." He then turned and left the room.

"Pog, please don't call me 'lord' and use my name like you always do," said Lorist.

"Alright, Lord Locke."

Chapter 47
Knights and Gifts

Ever since Potterfang referred to Lorits as 'lord' in public, Lorist suddenly felt a trend brewing in the academy. He didn't know if it was Kelly spreading rumors around, but the workers at the Gold ranked instructor residences started greeting him rather cheerfully. Sometimes, when they saw him walking by, they would step aside and bow when he passes by and bow deeply as they say, "Good day, lord," which Lorist was horribly not used to.

Then came Terman. It was already getting rather late that night when Shadekampf reported that Terman had come to visit.

Lorist felt that it was rather weird as Terman usually wouldn't visit alone without anybody else, especially that late in the night. *Maybe something's wrong? Or perhaps it's something about the Swordsmanship Society? Then again, there shouldn't be any activity since it's the semester break…*

Lorist then went downstairs to receive Terman at the lounge.

He asked Terman to have a seat only to be ignored. Instead, Terman stood in front of Lorist rather respectfully and said something that startled him badly. "I've resigned."

"Huh?" Lorist was totally stunned…

He's just joking, right? Terman's the vice captain of the Enforcement Academy and is also the vice chairman of the Swordsmanship Society… Why didn't I get notified about his resignation even though I'm the Swordsmanship Society's chairman? Who permitted it?

"I've thought about it for the past few days and finally made my decision this afternoon. Charade doesn't know about it yet. I went to talk to the academy head about it and he has agreed to my resignation," said Terman solemnly.

"What made you want to do that?" Lorist got more confused the more he thought about it. Terman's position at the academy earned him roughly 9 gold Fordes every month. That was a salary that many would be envious of. Why did he suddenly resign?

Terman lowered his head and said, “I’m starting to feel that my days in the academy are far too uneventful and boring. I’m starting to crave some real battles. My father told me that as a knight, the greatest shame he had was that he didn’t perish on the battlefield but to an illness instead. Being a knight myself, I don’t intend to succumb to the same fate as my father’s. I believe I should go all over the place to seek conquest and battle.”

What… What kind of reason is that? Are you still the cool, collected and reliable Terman that everyone loves and trust? Don’t tell me someone got transmigrated over here and took over your body? As Terman’s good friend, Lorist felt that he had the responsibility to at least try to stop him from making such a rash decision before everything can no longer be taken back.

Before he could think of something to convince Terman to reconsider his decision, Lorist saw Terman kneeling in front of him on one knee. “Locke, this is the last time I will refer to you as such. Would you be so kind to take in a friend who has nowhere else to go with you on the journey north?

“I, Waprey Terman, am willing to pledge myself as a knight of the Norton Family and take you, Norton Lorist, as my lord and liege. I will follow in your steps and conquer your enemies for you.”

Lorist was shaken yet again……

He suddenly noticed Potterfang standing beside them with Lorist’s longsword in hand which he passed to him.

Drawing the sword out of the scabbard, Lorist tapped Terman on each shoulder twice and said solemnly, “Rise, my knight.”

And thus the simple knighting ceremony was completed. Potterfang received Terman with a hug and said, “Welcome, my fellow brother.”

Oh, it’s the good old welcome speech. At least that part is normal, thought Lorist.

Shadekampf happily greeted Terman with a bow. *As expected of the young master. Yet another Three Star Silver Swordsman joined us. Something like this would be unimaginable in the Northlands… The Norton Family will definitely prosper under the young master’s leadership!*

Shadekampf suddenly recalled something important and hastily reminded his young master, “Young master, you still haven’t had a family knight badge made. I’ve brought you the design……”

“Give this to Reidy and tell him to order it from the badge makers. Oh, and prepare one Gold ranked one as well. Pog’s going to break through really soon,” said Lorist.

I really don’t get why Terman would decide to pledge himself to me as a knight… Maybe that’s the difference between this world and the one where I came from… In Lorist’s previous world, the attitude of the people there were quite individualistic in that they often seeked accomplishments by their own ability to showcase their merit. However, the Grindians mostly racked up their accomplishments in service to a noble family instead. This was the main difference of the different cultures.

Lorist was starting to get more and more frustrated at the glaring differences between the two cultures. “Oh, Terman, you have a high-ranked Battle Force manual that’s passed down in your family already, right?”

“That’s true, milord,” replied Terman.

“Then I won’t give you a Battle Force manual. Shadekampf, go to my study and get that piece of Mizek Stainless Steel Armor for Terman as his knighting gift,” instructed Lorist.

The Mizek Stainless Steel Armor was the staple product of the Mizek Sector of the Temanda Kingdom and was well-known for its relatively higher defense compared its counterparts which allowed it to withstand piercing strikes better than most other armors. However, the supply for the armor was rather low and it was really hard to even purchase one as it sold out rather quickly. Lorist had gotten one from President Peterson for 300 gold coins because he wanted to be protected any hidden attacks on the trip to his dominion. Never would he have expected that he would be giving it away just three days after getting his hands on it.

“Thank you, milord,” said Terman as he accepted the armor thankfully.

Lorist then went upstairs and let Potterfang and Terman by themselves to celebrate the newly-formed brotherhood. “I’m going up to take a rest, I can already feel a headache coming. Terman, there’s still a vacant guest room upstairs so you can move over for now.”

Since Terman had already resigned from his post as a Gold ranked instructor, he could no longer stay at his villa at the instructor residences. It was fortunate that Lorist still had an empty room.

“Alright, milord,” said Terman,

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The news of Lorist’s departure to the north to become a dominion lord spread like wildfire overnight in the academy. When Lorist was returning to his villa from doing some errands, he bumped into Supervisor Skali who gleefully forced Lorist to come with her to her house where she advised Lorist to pay close attention to his health as the Northlands were desolate and much colder than the rest of the continent. After that, she took out a hand-knitted fur coat and gave it to him before wishing him all the best on his journey to become a great lord.

Lorist accepted the coat but he was still curious about how she got to know all that even when he didn’t mention a word of this to anyone else……

After dinner, Instructor Marlin came to visit and brought along a large chest which he said contained the things his wife always used and said that it was his gift to Lorist as he believed that it would prove pretty useful during his journey.

Lorist almost fainted when he heard that and desperately tried to reject the gift. Why would he need the things Marlin’s wife used on the trip? His misunderstanding persisted until Marlin opened the chest. In the box were a set of horse armor, a saddle and some stirrups. Apparently, Instructor Marlin often referred to his treasured horse Jenny as his second wife.

Carefully caressing the items, he told Lorist that since Jenny was getting old and losing its ability to gallop, the items weren’t much use for it and he only kept them for old times’ sake. Now that Lorist would no doubt be riding on a horse or two on the journey north, these items would prove quite useful, especially the armor, which would give a horse a decent boost in defense.

Thanking Instructor Marlin, Lorist opened a couple of bottles of wine and drank together with him.

Instructor Marlin chatted with him quite cheerfully as he bragged about the heroic antics in the days when he served in the city garrison. In the end, he was sent back

home totally wasted.

During the afternoon of the next day, it was Instructor Anfya's turn to come pay a visit. She brought with her yet another large chest. First and foremost, she told Lorist about her husband, Instructor Claude's successful breakthrough to the Blademaster level after gaining some insights following more than half a year of training. This was an event that would forever change the Dawn Academy's status, position and their reputation.

Lorist hurriedly congratulated her. Instructor Anfya then told him that within the chest were seven good quality swords which were part of Instructor Claude's collection. He had heard that Lorist was about to leave for the Northlands to inherit his position as the lord and believed that these swords would come in useful. While he was confident in Lorist's swordsmanship, he was concerned that Lorist's longsword wouldn't be able to handle the constant battles that he would no doubt experience in the future. That's why he decided to present these swords to him to aid in his journey.

Lorist thanked her again and started to think about what to gift to Instructor Claude to congratulate him for his recent success. Already seeing through Lorist's intentions, Anfya politely declined the kind sentiment. She mentioned that the main factor for her husband's breakthrough was the duel he had with Lorist one year back which gave him many insights to ponder over. As for herself, she said that she had already learned the art of pulse reading from Lorist so he didn't need to trouble himself over something like that.

Hearing Instructor Anfya put it like that, Lorist laughed out loud. While he couldn't think of anything to give to Instructor Claude, he had the perfect gift for her wife. Asking for her to wait downstairs, Lorist went up to his study and came back down with an intricate box in hand a gave it to her.

Instructor Anfya opened the box and was incredibly delighted. Just as she was about to take it out to closer inspect the gift, Lorist told her to take her time at home and also reminded her to not tell anybody else that she got it from him to save himself some trouble.

Instructor Anfya nodded and carefully made her way back with the box safe in her embrace.

In the following days, Lorist received tons of gifts that filled his study whole. Almost every one of his acquaintances came over to give him a parting gift that ranged from weapons, gloves, shoes, cloaks as well as cold-resistant clothing. Instructor Hughes gifted him a good set of leather armor while Welledor, the knight training instructor, gave him a pair of golden horse spurs. Instructor Wensen from the horse riding course gifted Lorist a fine Illinoihaus Horse. The breed of the horse was the favorite of heavy-armored knights as it was large in stature and was able to withstand a relatively heavier load as well as being quite intelligent and had one of the fastest acceleration times. The only drawback was that it wasn't suited to long distance gallops and was rather picky with its food.

Loboff from the herbalism faculty gave Lorist a set of test tubes and lab apparatus commonly used in the concoction of herbal medicines. The chest that contained the tools was even cushioned properly so that the things within wouldn't easily break. Lorist really didn't know what to say. *It's not like I'm going back to be a herbalist, am I? What would I be able to use it for?*

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Next came Charade and Yuriy. Lorist felt relieved when he saw that the both of them came empty-handed and seemed that they were not here to send him off with gifts. He invited them to the lounge and Lorist was shocked the moment he heard what Yuriy had said.

"Locke, I have come here today with Brother Charade to join you on your journey. We have both resigned and are ready to become your knights."

Charade merely stood there pouting without saying a word.

Yuriy stared at Lorist go into the washroom and come out with a mirror-like silver plate in his hand. After looking into his reflection for a few moments, he finally let out a long sigh.

"Locke, what are you up to?" asked Yuriy, weirded out by Lorist's erratic actions.

Lorist replied, "I was checking if something had suddenly grown on my face and gave me a domineering air that caused the two of you to join my cause. Good thing there wasn't anything weird, cause you guys are just messing with me, right?"

Yuriy laughed out and said, "Locke, we're serious about this."

Lorist didn't want to believe it. "It's alright, stop kidding around. I still have lots of things I need to work on and I'm already exhausted. To joke around with me at a time like that is really not what friends do, you know?"

Yuriy's face turned solemn as he said, "Locke, I've really resigned from the academy. You know that I'm from the plains of the Khawistan Khanate's, right? Had it not been for the fact that my parents saved a count's life before, I wouldn't be studying at Morante City now. Just a while back, that count came back to me and asked whether I would like to become a knight under his family. I've turned him down as my father had perished under his service. While I'm the horsemanship instructor at the Dawn Academy, the students of my course don't respect me as I'm originally from the grassy plains. You should know this as well. Had it not been for you and our friends, I would have left this place long ago. Now that Terman has chosen to follow you, I would like to as well. I believe that he made the right choice to become your knight. This way, we can all be together even after you leave for the north."

"Alright, your reasoning has left me fully convinced. I welcome your participation, Yuriy. But what about the fatty? Since when was he the kind of person who would be willing to serve under another?" asked Lorist as he looked at the pouting Charade.

Yuriy laughed before saying, "It's like this. He received quite a bit of shock during this afternoon."

"Shock? What kind of master was able to pull that off? I should really pay that person a visit to learn that from him," said Lorist curiously.

"It was Terman," Yuriy replied.

"There's no way. How did Terman even do that?" Lorist was intrigued. Terman has always been a straightforward fellow who had always been messed around by the fatty instead of the other way round.

"Didn't Charade's father come over a couple of days ago?"

"Yup, I know about that. I even paid him a visit," nodded Lorist.

Charade was also not a local of Morante City. His family came from the Teribo Kingdom which was famous for its green and oil glass products. His father was a merchant who had property in both Morante City and the capital of the Teribo Kingdom. Other than that, he was also the cousin brother of Academy Head Levins and also contributed

quite a lot financially to the academy. This was also why Charade was able to act so unrestrainedly as nobody dared to find any trouble with what he did.

During the two days Charade's father came to visit, he treated Academy Head Levins to a meal. After the meal, they decided to wander around in the academy, only to bump into Terman and Yuriy.

At that time, Yuriy was conflicted as to whether he should resign just like Terman. When he left his quarters, he saw Charade's father and Academy Head Levins and went forward to greet them. Just as he was about to wave hello, Terman approached while wearing the Norton Family's knight badge with Charade following him. As Charade was laughing at Terman's newly-obtained badge, Charade's father quickly pulled him away and gave a deep bow to Terman and asked extremely politely, "Good day, milord. Is there anything I can help you with?'

Terman, Charade, Yuriy and Levins were all stunned speechless……

Suddenly, the atmosphere turned weird in an instant. Charade's father then asked carefully, "Milord, you…"

Terman instantly ran away…

After snapping out of his trance, Charade shouted at his father. "Dad, that's my friend! Why did you do that?! That's super embarrassing! Gah!"

However, Charade's father knocked his head harshly and said, "That guy is a noble! Did you not see that badge on his chest? What a domineering Raging Bear! The sides of the badge also have a laurel design, which means that the family has at least 200 years of history. Even if he is your friend, you still have to act respectfully. There is nothing embarrassing about that, got it?

"In this world, there are two things that is worth one's respect. The first is a noble title and the other is knowledge. For example, your Uncle Levins here is respected for his extensive knowledge and the status of an academy head. However, knowledge can only awe a person for so long before it ceases to be inspiring once a certain amount of time passes. However, noble titles that can be passed down through generations can even raise the status of the whole family. Don't think that just because I'm wealthy, I don't have to abide by these customs. Even the richest man would need to show utmost respect when seeing a noble from a rural area, because they have the right and power

to kill any commoner that dares to disrespect them, and that includes you as well.

“Don’t even bother getting pissed off now. Are you thinking that you got away with getting on the bad side of some nobles before? Those people are different from landed nobles. They are mere honorary nobles whose titles are empty and hollow as they don’t have a proper dominion, just like Uncle Levins. His title is only honorary and it can’t be passed down to his descendants. You can easily tell the difference from the badges they wear. Why is your uncle not wearing his noble badge, you may ask? That’s because he feels that it’s embarrassing as he doesn’t have a dominion nor does he have subordinates of his own. Without those, what kind of influence would one have anyway?”

Academy Head Levins was still speechless…

“It’s my fault for not being able to procure a noble title for you to inherit. The titles you can purchase with money are merely honorary titles which don’t really mean much. If you can manage to get a hereditary noble title for family, then I would die without any regrets! Your status in the academy doesn’t count for crap in the real world. In the end, you’re only a tool for your uncle’s use to settle his problems. Think about it, aren’t you just like the bodyguards of the high-ranked officials of the Trade Union? Even though they seem high and mighty and earn lots of money, they are but useless tools that can only follow orders.”

Academy Head Levins started freezing all over again…

Charade’s father sighed once again before continuing, “Back then I placed my hopes on you to help the family gain a noble title. But looking at you now, I only hope you can live out the rest of your life peacefully. Let’s hope that your sons and grandchildren will try harder to achieve that dream for our family…”

After saying that, Charade’s father turned and walked away alone, leaving Academy Head Levins, Charade and Yuriy standing amidst the leaves that were blown up by the twirling gust……

The three of them were completely silent. At that moment, Yuriy used the opportunity to tell the academy head about his resignation, to which he agreed immediately.

Seeing the fatty who was standing there flabbergasted, Yuriy added, “Charade here is also going to resign……”

Academy Head Levins merely turned to his back and started to leave. But he still said one thing, “Go… All of you, leave as you please. I hope that your ambitions will be achieved and wish you a safe journey.”

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“And that was what happened earlier. Locke, if you don’t accept us as your family knights, then we’ll have no choice but wander around as lordless knights,” said Yuriy.

Chapter 48
Northbound Journey Strategy

Ever since Charade and Yuriy became Norton Family knights, Lorist suddenly realized that the current situation was more and more out of hand.

When Lorist brought up the resources that he would transport back to the homeland during the meeting with the other knights, Charade started to laugh out loud at the plan. Even though he was Lorist's knight, he didn't even bother to give Lorist any face. He grabbed the map of the Northlands from Lorist and said that his focus should be on cleaning up the mess the Norton Family was currently in and give them a chance to start afresh instead of sending them resources to merely help them survive.

According to Charade, a prosperous family with huge potential for development should have the ability to change and reform to adapt to whatever situation they may be in instead of holding onto old detrimental traditions and customs. The sad part of Lorist's current plan was that it focused only on sending resources back just to make do for the moment instead of considering how to develop the family further in the long run.

Lorist was a little embarrassed and even felt a little guilty as Charade had nailed his original intention: that was to return to Morante City after delivering the resources and live out the rest of his life without worries. However, given the situation now, there was no way he would dare to say something like that, otherwise Charade would instantly leap over and kill him for that. Imagine what the reaction of his friends who were willing to cast away their comfortable lives in Morante City to jump into the pit of fire that was the Norton Family's dominion when they hear that Lorist was planning to return to Morante City from the beginning…

Charade continued giving his opinion. He believed that the main reason that the Norton Family had fallen to such a predicament was the severe lack of manpower. As long as that problem was addressed, the Nortons would no doubt be able to rise again.

For example, when it came to the magical beast horde during the winter, it wouldn't be a problem for the family if they had the human resource to expand and fortify the defensive infrastructure of the dominion and could probably even profit from slaying

the beasts and selling their meat and fur.

As for the mountain barbarians, Charade said that he has talked to Shadekampf about it before and he discovered something that had been overlooked by everyone else: ever since the first conflict between the Norton Family and the barbarians, the family has been on the defensive side and only retaliates when the barbarians invade without taking the initiative to wipe them out even once. If they could afford to start an expedition or two to annihilate the barbarian tribes, they wouldn't be constantly harassed by the barbarians for so long. That's why the main solution against the barbarian threat was to launch an attack on their home bases and kill all who resist while capturing the rest to use them for road building and developing the desolate lands. Charade was filled with bloodlust and excitement when he talked about that solution.

The other issue was the one regarding the garrison troops that many people working for the Norton Family had close relations with. This was a difficult and delicate situation to handle as the Nortons couldn't afford to wipe them out yet given that the territories of the former Krissen Empire had just emerged from the ashes of six years of civil war and the land was in peril with the citizens living harsh, tormenting lives and bandits popping out all over the place. During this northbound journey, it was imperative that the convoy destroyed bandits along the way as they raised and trained their own elite army. By the time they arrive at their destination, they would have an experienced elite fighting force that would no doubt be able to easily crush the rebellious garrison troops. The members of the army could also become citizens within the dominion, thus further boosting the available human resource of the Nortons.

Regarding the territorial squabble with the Kenmays, Charade didn't believe that to be a real problem as the Viscount would obediently give the mines back to the Nortons or be prepared to be completely annihilated by the army that was forged along the journey. Should that come to happen, the Nortons would have yet another piece of land they could rule over.

The real distressing problem was the presence of Duke Loggins, who was notorious for his avaricious nature that was obvious from his frequent schemes to swallow up the riches of the noble families under his rule. That person was like a blood-sucking leech to the Norton Family who could do nothing but endure as they had no ability to resist him at present. Charade said that it was up to Lorist how he wanted to handle this matter. He recommended that if their forces were strong enough by then, they

should just crush the lord duke in one fell swoop. However, if they don't yet have the abliity, staying low and waiting for an opportunity to strike was the wiser move.

Taking a map of the territory of the former Krissen Empire, Charade pointed to it and said, "Everyone, look. The former Krissen Empire is currently divided into three kingdoms and seven duchies, among which, the Lormo Duchy neighboring the Falik Plains has already sided with the Forde Trade Union. The next one is the Redlis Kingdom, ruled by the First Prince of the former Krissen Empire, that occupies 7 of the 29 provinces that used to belong to the empire, making it the power with the most territory and might in the area. Next, we have the Farkel Duchy, Forund Duchy, Handra Duchy and the Shabaj Duchy that occupy the center and most prosperous area of the territory that used to belong to the empire. These four duchies even formed a military alliance and they are currently entangled in incessant conflict with the Redils Kingdom.

"The kingdom of the Third Prince of the former Krissen Empire, the Andinaq Kingdom, only has power over 3 provinces. However, the capital of the former empire is under his control and he is the officially sanctioned heir to the empire named by the former emperor himself, and his status is much higher than the other nobles because of that. Had it not been for the Forde Trade Union inciting the First and Second Prince to rebel, the Third Prince would have ascended to the imperial throne. Due to the constant pressuring of the trade union, the Andinaq Kingdom's power is currently the weakest among the rest and can't even compare to some of the other duchies. The Third Prince should be the ones the Norton Family should have good relations with, or even pay allegiance to, as he is the true heir to the Krissen Royal Family.

"Lastly, let's pay attention to the Second Prince's Iblia Kingdom which is situated near the territory of the Nortons. The Second Prince has always had a rather bad reputation among the nobles of the empire and he is often regarded as a cold, selfish, lustful, opportunistic schemer who doesn't have any outstanding achievements whether it be in governance or the military. In actuality, the nobles in service of the Second Prince are a divisive mess. They only pledge their allegiance to him in name and frequently fight among each other and even ignore his orders outright. If the Second Prince did not have the backing of his father-in-law, Duke Fisablen who rules over the northeastern grassy plains, there is no way the Second Prince would be able to found his own kingdom.

"Occupying the northeastern area of the former Krissen Empire, the Iblia Kingdom rules over 5 provinces including the Northern Highlands, as well as the Madras Duchy

which is subordinate to the kingdom in name only. The current power the Iblia Kingdom is fighting against is the Melein Duchy, which is the loyal supporter of the Third Prince's Andinaq Kingdom and serves to defend the former royal capital from the Second Prince's forces. For the Second Prince to be able to conquer the royal capital, he would have to first find a way to handle the Melein Duchy. The problem is, Duke Melein used to be the commander in chief of the armies of the former empire and his troops are among the most experienced and skilled. The Second Prince has been quite unsuccessful in his attempts to defeat the duke's forces for the past two years.

"The nobles under the Second Prince include 2 dukes, 7 marquises, 19 counts, more than 40 viscounts as well as 100-odd barons, among which 90 nobles are newly-entitled by the Second Prince himself, essentially giving away titles for more funds, resulting in the hilarious situation of some counts having territories that are even smaller than the neighboring barons. One of the 2 dukes under his service is Duke Fisablen who used to be the general of the Border Defense Army of the empire that was mainly responsible for keeping the barbarians of the plains out of the nation. During the power struggle among the three princes, he supported his son-in-law the Second Prince and he's so influential that he can be even said to be responsible for the founding of the Iblia Kingdom by himself.

"The second duke under his service is Duke Loggins. Look at the map here, the Northern Highlands take up about half the area of the Iblia Kingdom's territory. The only thing about it is its relatively low population. Now, look at the Norton Family's dominion. It occupies a third of the Northlands that is mostly desolate and undeveloped. Duke Loggins's dominion is the most prosperous part at the south of the Northern Highlands, right across the Watar River. The duke actually has ambitions to make the whole of the Northlands his dominion to form his own duchy. But due to the lack of military force as well as the pressure from Duke Fisablen, he had no choice but to accept becoming a part of the Iblia Kingdom. Right now, he is occupied with the formation of his Northland Army so that he can have some leverage against Duke Fisablen's army that he will also use as his main force to form his own duchy in the future.

"During the formation of the Iblia Kingdom, the Second Prince has agreed to make Duke Loggins the overlord of the nobles of the Northern Highlands to gain his support. This is the main reason why the Norton Family is currently subordinate to the him. However, the Second Prince also granted more than 90 titles to some new nobles, among which more than 40 of them had been enfeoffed land in the Northern

Highlands. Viscount Kenmays is also one such noble.

“The sudden entitlement of so many nobles was because the Second Prince had hoped that the Northern Highlands would develop faster with the new nobles in charge. But in actuality, it has caused quite a bit of trouble for Duke Loggins. After gaining their titles, the nobles have been involved in countless conflicts for territory and 3 newly-entitled noble families and 1 old noble family have already perished. The duke has since changed his plan on taking the whole of the Northlands by force and is instead secretly fanning the flames of war among the nobles to reduce their power and force them to rely on him. This is why the current situation of the Northlands is incredibly volatile and no noble is safe from it.

“That concludes the report on the political situation in the Northlands. It is currently the perfect chance to reap some profit over there. As long as we manage to raise a strong military force, the unification of the Northern Highlands is also achievable. This is why I believe that Lord Locke’s plan of transporting resources over there is completely unviable. If anything, bringing too much resources with us would only make us a tempting target for bandits and even some local hegemons. If we raise an armed convoy, however, the local lords would instead worry about being attacked and think twice before acting. As for the bandits, they would serve as the perfect target to train our forces with. In fact, we should minimize their deaths and make the strong and able ones members of a suicide camp that we will later use when we lay siege. For those unfit for battle, we can even use them as a labor force to develop the Northlands with.”

A loud applause erupted from the audience, and Lorist was no exception. Charade has always been a person who looked at the bigger picture. Lorist already noticed that back in the day when they took up mercenary missions together. Charade would never accept missions that was beyond their party’s capability and his record of not having a single member in the group die on his watch was testament to his abilities.

Too bad Charade didn’t know about Lorist’s original intention to bail after transporting the resources to the Northlands. He must have been quite shocked by his father’s lecture and is probably trying his best to secure a noble title in the Northlands.

Lorist raised a small objection and said that while Charade’s strategy was praiseworthy, the cost of bringing refugees into the Northlands was too large, as they would cause quite a bit of issues there, mainly because of the lack of farmland in the dominion as well as the lack of food to sustain the refugees’ livelihoods.

Charade merely snorted at that notion and said that it didn't make any sense, because Lorist's original plan involved transporting enough resources to last the people in the family for up to five years. Did he plan to have his family members stay in the comfort of their castle and never venture out? It would be much better to use the food they were transporting to tempt the refugees into joining and procure more food and provisions on the way. He believed that they would have enough food for up to 2 years by the time they reach the Northlands and they could use that timeframe to develop the land. Yuriy asked, "What if the locals don't intend to sell us any food? How would we sustain the refugees then?"

Charade replied, "Do you think we carry swords and spears for nothing? If they don't want to sell it willingly, we'll force them to! After all, we're just a group of traveling refugees and are not there to occupy their dominions. The nobles wouldn't bother to gather their armies to deal with us because even if they do, their own forces will be severely depleted and that would leave them vulnerable to the neighboring dominion lords. That's why the best thing they can do is to appease us and pray that we leave their dominions for the Northlands as soon as possible."

"What if there isn't enough farmland when we reach the Northlands, some of you might say? That is a non-issue, as we can have these refugees do other tasks like mining, building roads, constructing castles as well as hunt magical beasts. Given the size of the Norton Family dominion, are you worried that we'll run out of land to develop?" Charade also mentioned that there was a lot that could be removed from the list of items they would transport. For example, the ten carriages worth of iron ingots can be left out as they are heavy and difficult to transport. Instead of purchasing iron ingots, it would be better for them to recruit people who know how to scour the land for ore veins as well as metallurgists. Charade believed that the vast lands of the Norton dominion would definitely have resources waiting to be found.

He also asked Lorist how much money he intended to use to purchase the goods in his initial plan, to which he replied 10000 gold Fordes.

"What would you do with the remaining 20000? Leave them to rust? All of us here are prepared to go through thick and thin with you without a thought of coming back. We can't afford to skimp on the preparation! Hand me all your money and I'll use them to purchase the things we actually need."

Sol, this fatty knows my wallet like the back of his hand… His share of the profit that Els just sent him two days ago as well as the rest of his savings all went to Charade's hands

just like that. Lorist accepted his current predicament and sighed, *how would I be able to come back to Morante City and live out the rest of my life in leisure now that it's come to this?*

Having gained the authority to manage the funds, Charade started discussing with the rest of the group about the resources they would need. Mainly, they required weapons and equipment, food and clothing as well as enough carriages to transport all that. However, that was secondary to building a formidable armed force they could rely on to escort their convoy. Charade thought that it wouldn't be good to rely fully on mercenaries as he understood their nature well: when the fight was to their advantage, they would give it their all, but when things start turning unfavorable, they were the first ones to flee.

"Here," said Potterfang as he pointed on a black spot on the map. He was pointing at Port Nupite.

Potterfang said, "The Hanayabarta Kingdom rules over this archipelago and the slave trade is not forbidden by their government. Port Nupite is the largest slave trading harbor on the Grindia Continent. We can go there to purchase some slaves to form an armed force with."

Charade replied, "Oh, I know of that place. But I've never went there myself so I do not know the finer details about the situation there. Though, I've heard that that place is extremely chaotic and lawless."

"One of the mercenary missions I have done involved escorting a group of slaves at the port. It is indeed rather chaotic but I've also met several close acquaintances whom I got to know back in the days I served in the army. Currently, they are working as guards for the port and I think I can get them to give us more information about the place. It would be best if we could wait a few days before doing so as I'm just about to break through to the Gold rank."

Breaking through Battle Force ranks wasn't inherently difficult. As long as Potterfang familiarized himself with the Battle Force circulation diagram and was able to circulate his Battle Force according to that route flawlessly, he would naturally be able to break through to the Gold rank.

Charade nodded and said, "Alright, then I'll be coming along with you by then. As for the things over here, I'll leave it for our lord to handle."

Potterfang suddenly had a question to ask, “Knight Charade, I know for a fact that you’ve never been to the Northlands before. How, then, are you so well-informed about the situation over there?”

“It’s simple,” Charade replied, “The ambassadors sent by the Forde Trade Union to mediate the conflict between the Third Prince and the other powers have just returned. I managed to get ahold of one of them through my contacts and used a high price to purchase a journal of what he had seen and experienced over there.”

Potterfang lowered his head as a sign of respect, “Knight Charade, you truly have contributed a whole lot.”

Charade returned the nod. “Don’t be so polite. It’s only natural to do that for the sake of the family.”

At that moment, Yuriy made a suggestion. “Hey, since the academy has quite a number of old students, especially the ones in the Swordsmanship Society, shouldn’t we go ask some of them if they want to join us on the journey? This way, it’ll be much easier for us to form the armed force with their help.”

“Great idea. Terman, you help Yuriy out with that matter. The only requirement is for them to have good attitudes and be at the Silver rank. Do tell them that this expedition will be dangerous and risky and that anyone who wishes to return after they reach the Northlands will also be given 20 gold Fordes. If there are any who are willing to join the Norton Family, tell them that Lord Locke will knight them when we finally reach our destination,” said Charade.

He also asked Terman and Yuriy to try to seek out any professionals who wish to join the journey and help develop the Northlands. Anyone with some sort of skill or trade like herbalists and smiths were welcome. He mentioned that the development of the dominion cannot lack people with skills like those.

Potterfang nodded in agreement to that idea.

The knights then gave Lorist a salute before leaving after the meeting concluded. Potterfang quickly went back to continue his training while Terman and Yuriy started to handle the task Charade had given them. As for the fatty himself, he was quite busy haggling around with various merchants to get a good deal for the resources they would require for the northbound journey.

Sitting alone in his study, Lorist sat as his desk thinking before he finally realized something. *It's over… Now I really have no choice but to go back and inherit the position of the dominion lord…*

Chapter 49
The Academy Armory

Raising his head to look at the greenish-grey tower, only to see Academy Head Levins standing at the balcony, Lorist put his hand to his chest gave a deep bow to him before turning and leaving.

The day before, Lorist received the academy head's letter that asked him to go to the academy head's office.

When Lorist entered the room, Academy Head Levins behaved politely and courteously towards him. Kknown that Lorist was about to return to his homeland to inherit the dominion, the academy head wished him good fortune and expressed his hopes that Lorist would one day become a great leader. After that, he told Lorist that the academy had a bunch of old equipment that were gathering dust which he could buy should he need them for the journey.

Thanking the academy head, Lorist removed the Dual Gold ranked instructor badge and placed it on the table. Given that he didn't know how long it would take for him to return to Morante City once again, Lorist said that he would forever remember the ten years worth of good times he spent at the Dawn Academy.

Holding the badge in his hand for quite a while, the academy head gave it back to Lorist and said, "Keep it as a memento. And don't even get started about your resignation. You are our academy's pride and legend. At the very least, you can be the honorary instructor of our academy. The Dawn Academy welcomes your return whenever."

After saying his farewells to Academy Head Levins, Lorist went to the armory where the training equipment for the knight and swordsmanship courses were kept. Even the training swords used by Lorist's students had to be obtained from the armory before the classes start.

The supervisor of the armory, Kurzim, was expecting Lorist's arrival. After greeting him, he brought Lorist to one of the warehouses which was packed full with various equipment.

“In here is a total of 320 training cavalry spears which will work perfectly well like a normal spear after installing the speartip. There’s also 700 training swords which is usable after some sharpening. Aside from those, there are 500 diamond-shaped training shields, 150 crossbows as well as 24 full body knight armors and 220 plate armors used by heavy-armored troops. Oh, and there are also 82 sets of cavalry armor suitable for scouts,” said Kurzim.

Lorist was quite delighted and surprised as all of the items were mostly new and weren’t in need of any maintenance. Two days ago before Charade brought Potterfang to Port Nupite, he reported that there were no issues when he purchased provisions and horse carriages, but it wasn’t the case when it came to weapons and equipment. First, the price was rather high. Secondly, most of them were not complete. While they were able to get quite a number of longswords and greatswords, they weren’t able to get good armors as most of the protective equipment in the market were leather armors which were usually favored by mercenaries. Metal armors were low in supply and each set cost quite a sum as well. Additionally, there wasn’t enough time to order some to be made. Now that Lorist had been given access to the academy’s armory, this problem was essentially solved.

“Uncle Kurzim, why does our academy have so many sets of plate armor? I recall that our academy doesn’t train any heavy-armored swordsmen. Also, what’s with those cavalry armors? I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Lorist.

“Hehe, Locke, have you forgotten that our academy has merged with the Yellow Ribbon Academy? These plate armors originally belonged to them. Due to the exceedingly few applicants for the heavy-armored swordsman course, the academy had it cancelled, rendering these equipment useless. They wanted to sell it off at first, but the academy head said that you might have some use for it,” explained the old supervisor.

Lorist laughed out shyly as he had totally forgotten that the Yellow Ribbon Academy mainly offered training courses for armed guards as well as supervisors. It wouldn’t be weird for them to have some plate armor.

“As for these cavalry armor……” Kurzim stroked his chin and tried to refresh his memory. “It seems that these were the result of a failed experiment and they have been in the warehouse for more than ten years. But the condition is definitely brand new as they have been well-maintained over the years.”

“A failed experiment?”

“That’s right, it must have been fifteen years already. At that time, there was a book published about the knight occupation that raised a lot of controversy. The author boldly claimed that the end of heavy-armored knights was coming and that cavalry in the future would be quick, agile and be able to employ hit-and-run tactics from far away, unlike the current fashion of battle which involves two armies charging straight on into each other. The author used the scout as an example. In one of the battles he described, a scout cavalry unit was able to totally dominate the battlefield and far exceed heavy-armored troops in both speed and performance. The author then posed a thought-provoking question: should an army unit be composed entirely of light cavalry that primarily employs hit-and-run harassment tactics on heavy-armored knights, who would win?

“Back then, the arguments between the knight training course instructors about that topic were really heated. The academy administration also got interested in the theory and believed that if they could realize the concepts described by that book, the whole occupation of the knight would change forever and thus grabbed the opportunity to begin research into lightweight cavalry troops. A research budget was then allocated to a professor that specialized in protective equipment to come out with a new type of armor suitable for lightweight cavalry. The original plan was to have 150 sets manufactured for a cavalry company to be formed to carry out the first test drill. However, the Battle of Mount Blanco happened and the 30000 mighty lightweight cavalry troops of the Khawistan Khanate were totally decimated by the Lormo Duchy’s heavy-armored knights with only less than 4000 of them surviving. As a result, the book was regarded as a huge joke and the academy also stopped the production of the armors midway, leaving the completed ones here ever since,” explained Kurzim.

“Oh, so that was the case,” said Lorist as he opened the box and took out a set of lightweight cavalry armor. Upon inspecting it, Lorist got a rough idea about it.

The heavy-armored knights that were so popular in armies donned chain mails before wearing full body plate armors and had extremely good defense. Lorist has also heard from Instructor Marlin once that the city garrison scouts were basically issued a chain mail and a leather armor to wear over it, and the scouts of the different nations on the Grindia Continent were no different.

But the lightweight cavalry armor Lorist held in his hand was an amalgamation of a plate armor and a chain mail. The chest and shoulder parts were protected by the

breastplate and pauldrons while the arms and lower torso were covered by chain mail. One advantage of this combination was that its defense was superior to the common armors worn by scouts and lighter than the full body armors knights usually wore. The one drawback was that the design was not practical as it was inferior to full-plate armor in terms of defense and another layer of chain mail couldn't be worn with it because it would increase the load borne by the wearer by too much. It's no wonder nobody had found a use for it for the past 10 years. However, Lorist didn't mind it and believed that the armor was indeed quite suited for scouting troops.

"Alright, I'll take all of these, Uncle Kurzim. How much would all of these be?" Lorist asked.

Kurzim was momentarily stunned and exclaimed, "You're buying them all?! The academy head was prepared to auction them if you didn't want any, but it seems that he was worried for nothing after all. This will save me a lot of trouble from having too. Wait for a bit, let me give you a figure.

"The grand total for 320 training spears, 700 training swords, 300 training shields, 150 training crossbows, 24 knight training plate armors and 82 lightweight cavalry armors is 3836 gold coins. I've already given you a great discount for the lightweight armors at 10 gold coins each; they cost about 30 gold coins each to make back then." Kurzim's arithmetic ability was quite good given the speed at which he got the total cost.

"Oh, that's right. Uncle Kurzim, can I have the equipment maintenance facility fix up these items for me? I want the training spears to have the speartips installed, the swords sharpened, the shields coated with a layer of stainless steel and all the armors be engraved with the insignia of my family. I will pay for the extra cost," said Lorist thankfully. The price offered by Kurzim was already a third of what it would normally cost according to market price.

"Of course. The academy equipment maintainers have nothing better to do anyway and are either gambling or drinking away during the semester break. I'm sure they would be happy to be able to earn some extra cash," said Kurzim as he smiled.

"That's great. I'll bring someone over in the afternoon who knows how the insignia is made. I'll also be giving the maintainers a bonus when they complete the work. Also, can I settle the bill 3 days later?" asked Lorist.

“Of course, Locke,” said Kurzim, nodding.

…….

Sol, that fatty only left me with 3000 gold Fordes to buy the equipment and weapons we need. The 300-odd weapons and several tens of armors have already cost me about 1000 gold coins.. I guess I have no choice but to sell of that building I just got to be able to afford the costs, thought Lorist as he grit his teeth at the thought of having been forced by the fatty to have no choice but to inherit the position of the dominion lord.

That afternoon, Lorist brought Shadekampf to the academy armory and briefed him about the engraving the insignia on the equipment before heading to the Red Grace Inn to see Els. After a while of waiting, Els showed up and was surprised to hear that Lorist was about to sell off his newly-acquired building and asked him why.

Lorist then told him about the situation and Els asked him to wait before running off somewhere. He returned later with a small box in hand that contained 50 gold coin notes worth 5000 gold Fordes in total.

“Brother, this is the entirety of my savings and about half of them came from the betting pool you helped out with. I know you wouldn’t accept my money for nothing, so let’s consider it a loan with that building as the mortgage. Write up a contract that states that you will transfer the ownership of the building to me should you be unable to pay me back 10 years later. Aside from that, the yearly rent from that building that amounts to 70-odd gold coins will be my interest for the loan. How’s that?”

“Alright, we’ll do it your way. Els, thank you. You’ve really saved me big time,” said Lorist thankfully.

Els sighed and said, “There’s no problem. After all, I don’t have anywhere else to spend my money anyway. If I did not have so many attachments over here, I would’ve loved to follow you to the Northlands, especially after seeing that damned fatty show off in front of me.”

He was referring to Charade who came over to the inn two days ago with Potterfang and 10 other senior students of the academy who were willing to join the expedition to throw a welcoming party. When Els arrived, Charade told him this, “From today onward, you shall refer to me as ‘Honorable Knight’ because I’m now a noble and you’re just a commoner. You shall show me respect,” which, needless to say, enraged

Els to the max.

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After bidding Els goodbye, Lorist rushed back to the Dawn Academy and settled the bill with Supervisor Kurzim as he was afraid that the maintenance of the equipment would somehow be flawed if he really paid them three days later.

Kurzim laughed and said, “And there I thought that you didn’t have enough money on hand. It seems that you really need these equipment quite urgently.”

Lorist gave a bitter laugh and said, “Uncle Kurzim, you should know that the trip to the north won’t be a peaceful one. Charade intends to form an army to escort the convoy back to the Northlands. It is a huge help for the academy to be able to sell me these equipment.”

Kurzim gave it some thought before saying, “Then, come with me. There are still two storehouses that I think you should see. Maybe they’ll be quite useful to you as well.”

He brought Lorist to two stone rooms that was situated behind the warehouse and opened the door to one of them. Lorist was greeted with a whole pile of scattered equipment that was about half a person tall.

Kurzim said, “This is where we store all the broken equipment that are deemed too much of a hassle to repair. We only clean this place up once every few years. Some of them gets recycled while others go to the incinerator. I believe there should be something that you can use here. For example, look at this spear blade here. You can use it as the sharp tip of a javelin. If you need anything from here, Locke, feel free to take it. It’s all free. Just tip the maintainers a bit and they’ll be happy to fix them up for you.”

Lorist was exhilarated and he took Kurzim’s hand and shook it fervently. “Thank you, thank you. Uncle Kurzim, you have truly helped me out immensely.”

Kurzim laughed loudly and said, “Don’t shake so hard! This set of old bones won’t be able to handle the stress! Here, this is the key for the rooms so that you can have somebody come sort it out later.’

……

After having dinner, Lorist asked Terman and Yuriy to go into his study and told them about the storehouses in the armory.

Terman was excited to hear that. So far, there were 38 senior students of the academy who were willing to join the expedition to the Northlands and Charade and Potterfang brought 20 of them to Port Nupite some days back. He suggested that Yuriy, who was planning to bring a few others to the Khawistan Plains to purchase some war horses, to leave a few people behind to go sort out the usable items in the storehouses.

Charade had also given Yuriy 3000 gold Fordes before he left to buy 200 war horses. But the price of one horse in Morante City was at least 30 gold coins. That was why Yuriy planned to go back to his homeland with a few others to purchase the horses from the breeders directly instead of letting the darned horse merchants profit.

Lorist was against Yuriy bringing lesser people as he would be gone for at least a month. It was safer to go in a larger group just in case something were to happen. He said that he can just hire ten students from the academy part time to clean up the storehouses and mentioned that he would go monitor them personally from time to time since he wasn't going to leave the academy anytime soon.

……

After sorting out the items in the storehouse for three days, Terman sent someone to ask Lorist to come over.

Lorist could see that the pile was cleaned up halfway and expected that the sorting process could be completed within 3 more days. The equipment that Terman deemed still usable piled up rather high.

Seeing Lorist inspect the items, Terman said a little reservedly, "Milord, this pile contains the things that seems usable after the first sorting. I think that after going through it again, only about a third of this will actually be useful. The reason I asked milord to come over today was because we discovered a few ballistas within the pile that's still in perfect condition. I really don't know why it had been put in here. I wonder if we can take this along with us as it will no doubt be incredibly useful during the journey."

It was only after being told that Lorist noticed the 12 ballistas arranged neatly in a row at a corner. Other than lacking a bowstring, the rest of the parts were in good

condition, especially the bowstave, which was made of some unknown type of wood coated with a glossy shine. This type of weapon was usually installed on war chariots for ranged support. It was weird how they were left in the storehouse for broken equipment.

Lorist asked for Supervisor Kurzim and after looking at the ballistas for a few moments, he flipped the beastskin book in his hand and said, “Ah, it’s here.”

According to him, these 12 ballistas were designed and constructed by a crafting professor and his students for the use of the city garrison. However, even though they were of good quality, they required too many people to operate. Each one needed one man for aiming and firing, one for driving the chariot and another to load the ballista. That was why they were left in the storehouse with the other retired equipment.

Kurzim said, “You can take them if you want. There’s even a label on the ballistas that says ‘defunct’. Though, you’ll have to string them up yourself.”

Both Lorist and Terman were extremely delighted. With the 12 ballistas, the armed convoy would have yet another method at their disposal.

Chapter 50
In Which Els Reports for Duty

Lorist regretted spending 1400 gold Fordes to purchase the 300 plus weapons and sets or armor from the market. After buying the old equipment off the Dawn Academy, he had Els go check out if any other academies had some old equipment up for sale as well. Unsurprisingly, after bribing a supervisor of a couple of swordsmanship academies with 100 or so gold coins, he managed to get up to 120 sets of used plate and scale armor as well as near a thousand spears for only 500 gold Fordes.

Lorist also told Els that this was a great opportunity for profit and encouraged him to get to know these armory supervisors better so that he would be able to purchase the used equipment for a low price regularly. "Look," said Lorist as he held up one of the plate armors, "It may look a little old, but if you have it polished and maintained, it would look and function almost as if it's brand new. If you do that and sell them in bulk at a reasonable price, there's no doubt that it'll be super popular with the mercenaries."

Spending money as if it were water, Lorist noticed that the 3000 gold coins he had was about to be completely used up. However, he still couldn't bear to let the old equipment of the other academies go unpurchased and wasted. Now that he had already spent quite a bit to bribe those supervisors, there's no way that he would leave those equipment alone, would he?

After giving it some thought, Lorist decided to go with it and auctioned off some of his belongings. They were mirrors handmade by Lorist himself. Back in the day when Lorist was still designing clothes for his ex-lover, he spent ten-odd gold coins to obtain a number of transparent crystal slabs. Some were left over and he intended to use them to try to make a telescope, but gave up after failing for a few times.

When Louise and Charlando were getting married, Lorist was thought hard about how to present them with a unique gift. That's when he used the crystal slabs to make 9 mirrors. Having been the head of a craftsman factory in his previous life, it wasn't hard for him to make those mirrors. He gave one of them to Louise and another to Anfya just a few days before and was left with seven of them.

The process of making the mirrors were not hard and the materials were easy to obtain as well. Worried that the mirrors would cause quite a stir on the market and garner unwanted attention for him, he didn't let anyone know that he made them. Now that he lacked the funds, he decided to sell a couple of them and asked Reidy to call Els over.

Lorist decided to offer 4 of them up for sale. When Els saw the mirrors on the table, he let out a surprised gasp. "Oh, so that mirror Louise had was your present..."

"How did you know about her mirror?" asked Lorist.

"Oh, that Louise treasures the mirror so much that she wouldn't let anyone see it. But I, the stealthy Els, have been playing around with it for quite a while. Just two days ago, I used it to shave my face! It's definitely much better than looking into my reflection on a silver plate. Of course, I placed it back in place so well that Louise wouldn't suspect a thing," boasted Els shamelessly.

Lorist told him that he hoped that he could arrange for someone to have the mirrors auctioned and instructed Els to say that the mirrors were found within some ruins and that they might have been magical mirrors that have lost their powers and have been in the collection of a rich family until they decided to sell them off recently to bring the family back from its dire financial state.

The mirrors Lorist made all had their own unique characteristics. The first one was circular with a diameter of about 15 cm with an intricate silver frame around it. Lorist spared quite a bit of effort and carved quite a number of English alphabets on the mirror to give it a simplistic, yet enigmatic feel.

The second one was a rectangular mirror with dimensions close to that of a book. Wrapping a random book with golden foil, he emptied the middle of the book and placed the mirror within. He even used gold to engrave the Chinese poem 'Quiet Night Thought' onto the page before the mirror, believing that there would be someone who would end up spending their whole lives researching the eccentric and foreign Chinese characters.

The third mirror was oval-shaped and Lorist fashioned a handle for it so that it could be used as a hand mirror. It was made of a special black-colored wood only found in Grindia which he obtained from dismantling a chest that was said to have been passed down through thousands of years. Lorist only spent a few gold coins to buy the chest

from the market and used its wood to make the base and handle of the mirror. On the back and handle of the mirror, Lorist carved an intricate pattern of the Five Blessings found in traditional Chinese art.[1]

The fourth mirror was the one Lorist spent most time on. He used bronze to replicate a mirror used by the ancient Chinese and set a transparent crystal onto the reflective surface. He even tried to make it look old and slightly rusted to give it an air of ancient mystery. Beneath the mirror were the words 'Bright Moon Looking Glass' engraved in common Grindian script.

After agreeing to Lorist's request, Els kept the mirrors for himself and admired them for about half a day before he was willing to put them to auction.

Ten days later, all four of them had been sold without any incident and generated a revenue of 13000 gold Fordes. After deducting the auctioneer fee, Lorist was left with more than 10000 gold Fordes.

When Els delivered the money to Lorist, he told him that the four mirrors had caused quite an uproar in Morante City especially with regards to the weird engravings found on them. Some experts truly believed that they used to be magical mirrors that have lost their powers and the words found on the them could very well be what the magicians used to activate their mystical powers. When the auction for each of them started, the price increased exponentially. Els even said that he made quite a number of bids intentionally to raise the price.

Lorist was extremely happy with the outcome of the auction. However, that ploy would only work once and he rejected Els's proposition to make a few more.

With the money in hand, Lorist purchased almost all of the used equipment from the other academies. By the time Yuriy returned with 353 war horses, they had enough weapons and equipment for a whole army.

There was an estimated number of 50000 spears, 2000 sharpened training swords as well as a little less than 1000 two-handed greatswords and shortswords. As for the shields used for training, there were roughly 600 while there were 800 other shields of various designs. Additionally, they had 700 crossbows, 2000 plus cavalry lances, 1500 javelins, 71 sets of full body knight armor, 583 sets of plate armor used by heavy swordsmen, near a thousand sets of chain mail and scale armor, 2000 and more sets of leather armor as well as 12 ballistas mounted on chariots.

All these equipment have already been maintained and fitted for battle, the process of which consumed materials up to 2000 gold Fordes' worth. The shields and armors also have the Norton Family's insignia engraved upon them. Lorist paid the four academy equipment maintainers 10 gold Fordes each and the other students from the academy 5 gold Fordes each. They were eternally grateful for getting so much from only working for a month.

At times, Lorist would daydream about the 10000 more gold coins of profit he would get by selling the refurbished equipment off, but he dismissed that notion almost instantly. Charade's letter had returned and it stated that he and Potterfang had successfully acquired 700 strong, young slaves and 2800 others who were their family members and were currently on the way to the Lormo Duchy's Armatrin Harbor and is awaiting Lorist and the rest's arrival. The only weird part of the message was that Charade asked Lorist to not forget to bring the spinning chair and the hollow rotor along.

What is Charade thinking about? Lorist was completely clueless about it as when Charade had tried out the spinning chair for the first time, he started crying for his parents nonstop after getting off it. No matter how Lorist tried to convince him that training with the spinning chair would help him develop dynamic vision and give his swordsmanship a huge boost, Charade said that he refused to do that even one more time, even if doing so would give him the ability to fly. *What would he do with that now? Don't tell me he's going to train with that on the way to the Northlands... We'll never make it in time if that's the case. Sigh, I guess I'll find out sooner or later since bringing those along would only require one more carriage.*

Now that Patt had recovered, he had developed the initial stage of the dynamic vision ability. However, even though he would be able to react better when compared to normal fighters, it was still quite far off from Lorist's natural born ability. Every time Patt was reminded of his experience on the spinning chair, he would shiver in fear due to being tormented countless times by Reidy over the course of the training.

I guess it's about time we made a move. Lorist went to visit President Peterson once again and rented three large ships through the Peterson Merchant Guild which he would use to transport the equipment, personnel, horses as well as the thousands of sets of clothing Charade had ordered before he left. While the amount of clothing was no small number, it cost the least when compared to the rest of the things they bought at only 700 gold coins. Terman has been put in charge of having somebody pack the clothes up for the past few days before they depart.

I guess I'll have to wait for another two days... Due to Yuriy having to order the saddles and other items the horses needed, it cost Lorist another 1000-odd gold coins, thus making him feel that raising an army was extremely costly. Within but a few days, he had invested over 40000 gold Fordes and was left with less than 2000 for himself. He still haven't paid the cost for renting the ships either.

The day before they left, Lorist visited Instructor Claude, who had just recently become a Blademaster and handed his book collection to him for safekeeping. Lorist only took 100 of the ones he thought was most important on the journey and left the rest to Claude so that he could one day send it to the Northlands when there was an opportunity. Both he and his wife accepted the request happily.

Finally, it was the day of the departure. All three boats of the Peterson Merchant Guild slowly left the Hidegold Bay. Raising their sails, the ships sailed northward.

Looking towards the Hidegold Bay and the shrinking image of Morante City, Lorist felt a torrent of different emotions that were hard to express with words. *I'm finally leaving the city I consider my second home. I wonder how long would it be until I make my way back here once again,* thought Lorist as he let out a sigh. Given the uncertain nature of his future, he was worried about whether he would do well with his companions when they arrive at the Northlands.

At this moment, Alisa's clear laughter could be heard nearby. That girl thought that the journey was all fun and games and jumped around on the deck playfully, anticipating reuniting with her father after days of not seeing him.

Seeing Lorist a little downcast, Howard asked, "Teacher, what's going on? You don't seem too happy..."

Lorist smiled and replied, "It's not that. I just feel a little sad because your Uncle Els didn't come send us off today."

After he said that, Lorist heard a familiar voice ring out by his ear. "Milord, your knight, Brennan Evanport is here reporting for duty."

A silhouette suddenly jumped down from the ship's mast and landed on one knee, kneeling in front of Lorist. "I, Brennan Evanport, am willing to take Norton Lorist as my lord and liege and become a knight of the Norton Family. I shall struggle and fight to my very last breath under the banner of the Raging Bear."

Lorist was surprised and delighted. "Els, why have you come?"

Not saying anything, Els merely pointed towards his shoulders, indicating for Lorist to complete the knighting ceremony.

Lorist took out his sword and tapped on each shoulder twice and tossed the sword aside before lifting Els up and giving him a big hug, "I welcome your participation, my knight and brother."

After that, Els started feeling Lorist up and said, "Badge. Where's my knight badge?"

Lorist pushed Els away and said, "Sol, why would I have a badge on me? Don't touch me all over like that. Don't tell me you swing that way?"

"You're the one that swings that way! I was only trying to see if you have the badge on your person. Stop ruining my reputation," said Els exasperatedly.

"Alright, alright. Shadekampf, go get a knight badge and give it to Knight Els," instructed Lorist.

"So, tell me why you're here. Was Old Charlando willing to let you come?" asked Lorist.

"He doesn't know, I snuck out secretly. I've left him a letter though and have made arrangements for Jindoz to take over as the syndicate boss in my absence. The old man won't have time to bother with me anyway as he'll be busy staying home taking care of his newborn children soon enough. And Jindoz is quite a capable guy. I believe the syndicate will prosper even further under his management. I personally feel that coming to the Northlands with you to venture around is the best choice for a person like me," said Els as he looked towards the cabin, secretly complaining about how long Shadekampf was taking.

After a few moments, Shadekampf came back and presented the badge to Els. As he was putting it on, he asked Lorist, "Why didn't I see Terman and Yuriy around here?"

Lorist pointed towards the other two boats and said, "They're on each of the boats respectively and are tasked with transporting the equipment and horses. You'll be able to see them when we reach Armatrin Harbor. I'm sure they'll be damned shocked to see you here."

Having put his badge on, Els looked down at his chest with much satisfaction. "I don't

really care about their reactions. What I'm interested in is the look on Charade's face. Let's see who's the 'Honorable Knight' now."

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