轉生之
加藤清高
姬本晃道 著

Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 5 -

-Author-
Smoke Is A Path
烟本是道

[LiberSpark]

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CREATED BY : A_MINERVA

Chapter 201
A Failed Experiment

Black-colored powder could be seen gathered in a clump around which an oil-soaked rope circled. The rope stretched meters away like a long snake with Lorist near its other end holding a lit torch and looking at the black powder clump as if he was deep in thought.

This was his final attempt at that experiment. Lorist lit the oil-soaked rope with his torch and the flame traveled down the rope, quickly surrounding the clump of black powder.

Pssshhh! After letting out a sound and a flash of light, the black powder vanished altogether.

The result remained the same, causing Lorist to sigh in resignation. If he was back on Earth, that clump of black-colored gunpowder should explode. The danger of the explosion was what caused him to stand so far away in the first place. However, Lorist really couldn't understand why the gunpowder mixture from Earth based on sulfur, nitrate and coal, didn't react as intended on Grindia.

Lorist had collected the nitrate off the corners of the walls. As for sulfur, it was obtained by refining a herbal plant on Grindia which the herbalists use to make snake repellant to be sold to adventurers. The plant could be commonly found at places with volcanic activity and it was priced rather cheaply. As for coal, they were even easier to obtain. After getting the ingredients he recalled from his past life's experience, Lorist mixed a huge bucket of black powder and began experimenting with smaller portions before deciding to use them all up to carry out his final experiment. The results were still the same with the powder emitting a flash along with a hissing sound without anything else happening.

There was no explosion or loud noise. The air around the ignited powder didn't even heat up and expand.

That shouldn't be the case, Lorist thought as he scratched his head. Back when he was studying at Morante City, he had heard that the dwarven kingdom soldiers' main

weapon was a firearm. Even though the power of those firearms were only slightly stronger than that of ballistas, they were still firearms nevertheless and Lorist felt that as long as he could synthesize some gunpowder, he would be able to shake up the era of cold arms and usher in a new age of domination of the Norton Family.

What he didn't expect was that actually making functioning gunpowder was more complicated than he had imagined. The recipe he remembered from his past life was of no use whatsoever, causing Lorist much frustration. *Are those weapons used by the dwarves really firearms? What do they rely on to propel the projectile?*

This wasn't Lorist's first attempt. Two months back, Lorist's attempts to make glass, porcelain, paper and cement, had all failed without exception. That caused him to realize that on Grindia, the chemical interactions between the particles were different than that of Earth.

Originally, he thought that making glass would be the simplest to achieve. As the owner of a crafts workshop back in his past life, Lorist was extremely well-versed working glass. He could fashion all sorts of shapes to make animals or other artistic pieces with glassblowing. On the Grindia Continent, the Teribo Kingdom is famed for their production of green glass, so Lorist felt rather confident that glass would be the first thing he would be able to replicate as the materials were simple, requiring mainly quartz.

But the results were like a strike on the head for Lorist. On Earth, after the quartz was melted, it would take a colloid form. After that, it would be relatively simple to use glassblowing techniques to split off a part of the molten glass and press it flat to make glass panes. That was the simplest method of making glass. However, in Grindia, Lorist discovered that the melted quartz turned into liquid form instead without any viscosity whatsoever and it would cool easily into droplet-shaped pieces. Even though they were hard, they were too fragile and there was no way to apply glassblowing to shape the material.

Not knowing why that was the case at all, Lorist went to seek out Charade as he felt that it was probably an issue with his materials. Perhaps, there was another material that he needed aside from quartz to make glass. Charade on the other hand was far too busy as he had been assigned by Lorist the daunting task of settling down the 200000 plus commoners that had just entered the dominion and couldn't be bothered to listen to Lorist's ramblings.

Seeing Lorist trouble him for such a trivial matter, Charade was enraged. Even though he was so busy that he was almost at the brink of death, Lorist had so much free time that he even tried his hand at glass making. Additionally, glass making is a highly protected secret of the Teribo Kingdom and Charade was merely born there and wouldn't know that method anyway. In the Teribo Kingdom, if one were to be found to be snooping around for the method of production and recipe for glass, one would no doubt be hanged.

Lorist laughed bitterly and told Charade that the green glass that cost only ten coppers in Morante City would be sold at 1 large silver each after the Kenmays Family shipped it from over there, with the price hiking up to almost ten times the original amount. Each gold Forde could then only be used to purchase 20 pieces of green glass within the Northlands. Upon mention of money and cost, Charade started to treat the matter seriously and he quickly wrote a letter to his father who was a merchant operating in the Teribo Kingdom and requested him to pay attention to what the glass factories usually purchased. As it doesn't directly involve seeking out the formula for glass production, it wasn't that risky. Additionally, once the materials were known, the mysteries of glass production could then slowly be researched.

Thus, the progress on glass research was put to a halt. After that, Lorist tried to begin making porcelain, only to fail again. In his past life, he had made replicas of various antique porcelain vases and Lorist was pretty sure he remembered the method for that quite clearly. As there has yet to be any porcelain products in Grindia, Lorist figured that he would try his hand at it and possibly come up with a new industry for his dominion.

At first, the porcelain vases and tiles he fashioned seemed fine. But after 7 days of drying, the results disappointed Lorist greatly. Take for instance a porcelain bowl. It should've been smooth and rounded. However, the surface of the bowl he made had a rugged surface and would crumble on touch, completely different from how porcelain should be. Lorist continued the experiments for one whole month and had no choice but to give up in the end to acknowledge his failure.

The same was the case with the attempt at reproducing paper. Two years ago right after the northbound convoy arrived at the dominion, Lorist gave Old Man Balk some instructions on paper production based on the information he remembered from his past life. But throughout these two years, the most they could come up with was borderline useless paper that was only good for use in the toilet. That kind of 'toilet paper' was already being produced at Morante City with the main ingredients being

reed and rice stalks, which is priced at 1 copper coin per stack.

Lorist on the other hand tried using many other different materials, but the result was still the same soft and mushy paper with the only benefit being that it was slightly whiter and finer than the paper produced at Morante City, but cost way more to make with a far more complicated method of production. Even if that paper could sustain the demand of toilet paper within the dominion, causing the commoners to no longer have to use wooden rods to scrub their bottom clean after using the latrine, it didn't solve Lorist's need for the white writing paper at all.

And lastly there was concrete. In most fantasy stories, transmigrators like Lorist usually brought with them three of the greatest inventions, namely, glass, cement, and gunpowder. After the failing at glass production, Lorist figured he should give cement making a try. As the dominion was still in development, there was a great need for green vine glue and the 100000 buckets produced yearly at the Bladedge Mountains was not enough, causing Lorist to have to order 100000 more from the Kenmays Family. This year alone, the demand for it was 180000 buckets and that was no small burden for the family to bear. That's why Lorist wanted to see what he could do to decrease the reliance on green vine glue for construction.

The production of cement was actually rather easy. Lime and clay were first to be calcined before being powdered and mixed with sand and water. After the cement set, it would become concrete. Lorist had a few of his subordinates experiment around and managed to make a pile of cement. The problem was, the cement made was unable to harden. Even though it was mixed with water, it still didn't harden after three days passed and would crumble into pieces upon being kicked at lightly.

But one of his subordinates brought a bucket of green vine glue and added it to the cement mix before moulding it into a few sculptures. After only half a day, the sculptures did harden and were as sturdy as iron, being also far sturdier than green clay structures. But the reason Lorist wanted to reproduce cement in the first place was to replace green vine glue, not green clay.

And now, his latest research venture into gunpowder had failed as well. Was it because the chemical reactions of this world was markedly different from those of Earth? Lorist stroked his cheek as he began to sink into deep thought.

"Milord, what is it that you want to do?" Howard asked.

"Oh, nothing. I was just trying to make an explosive," Lorist replied.

"Explosive? What's an explosive?" Howard asked, confused.

It was at that moment when Lorist realized that there wasn't a term for explosion in the lexicon of the Grindian Language. While there were similar terms like eruption or bursting open, they didn't quite describe the phenomenon of explosion.

"Hmmm, how do I describe it… An explosive is a thing that explodes and an explosion describes a phenomenon in which an object bursts outwards in all directions from the inside when it expands too suddenly, releasing a huge burst of energy and damaging the surroundings in the process," Lorist defined.

"Oh, there's that sort of thing?" While Howard couldn't quite imagine it, he didn't forget to carry out his duty and reminded, "Milord, we should be heading to the ballista workshop of Grandmaster Fellin soon. We are scheduled to meet with him today."

"Alright then, let's go," Lorist said as he suppressed his frustration for now and got on his mount.

The only good news amidst his chain of failures is that the catapult he designed has been successfully implemented by Grandmaster Fellin. The presentation was scheduled for noon that day at the ballista factory situated near the Bladedge Mountains.

"Milord, based on the design blueprints you provided, we have ran all sorts of experiments and finally decided on the appropriate dimensions of this catapult that can throw a 50 kilogram rock at least 600 meters away. Congratulations, milord. You have successfully invented a new ranged weapon! This is the first catapult in the history of Grindia!" Grandmaster Fellin said excitedly.

However, the catapult in front of him looked rather displeasing. Not only was it huge, it was also incredibly heavy and looked far too different from the design Lorist drew on the beastskin blueprint.

"Milord, we had no choice but to do that. If it is not at least that heavy, we will be unable to ensure its stability," Grandmaster Fellin said after understanding Lorist's hesitant look. He quickly explained, "Milord, the hardest part of your design to implement is the arm of the catapult which has to be both tough and elastic. If the arm

is too thick, it would cause the base of the catapult to rupture, but if it is too thin, it will break easily. We've tried making over 200 different catapult arms with different wood and discovered that the one we're using now is the most suitable. However, it still has to be switched out after ten shots or it will crack and snap."

Loirst nodded without saying anything else. What came next was seeing the catapult in action. That catapult had a rather simple construction and used the principle of levers. The huge catapult arm was suspended on a crossbar with the thick end of the arm bearing several heavy, filled boxes to serve as a counterweight with a leather pad tied at the thinner end in which a rock could be placed. A rope was used to fasten the thin end of the arm to the ground and after loading the payload, the rope would be cut and the thick end would be brought down by the counterweight, sending the thin end rocketing into the air and propelling the payload forward.

Lorist was finally assured as catapults were actually rather useful. Even though they weren't that accurate and the firing range wasn't always consistent with a margin of error of around 100 meters, it was considered a success as it was able to hurl rocks weighing near 100 kilograms into the distance. The next logical step was to find ways to improve upon the current design.

Lorist understood that the task of improving catapults couldn't be given to Grandmaster Fellin as he was not a good and insightful researcher despite being a good implementer. Lorist still felt that the most suitable person for the task is Grandmaster Sid. Even though he was an armorer, his mind was quite flexible from the fact that he also designed the various water-powered machines that occupied the space below the waterfall. It was that aspect of the grandmaster that truly caught Lorist's eye, and Lorist figured that since he designed those machines, he could try working on the catapult since it was a machine as well.

After a while, Howard brought Grandmaster Sid over and as expected, the grandmaster was instantly deeply occupied with trying to understand the principle of the lever and began his research immediately.

Directly following that, Lorist also invited Old Master Julian over and included him in the catapult research group along with Grandmaster Fellin and Grandmaster Sid. The reason Lorist had Julian in the team was because he hoped that the old master would be able to use the elastic steel he researched as material for the catapult arm. The base standard Lorist set for the catapults was for them to be at least as easy to aim and operate like the steel ballistas, requiring less than 10 operators per unit. It also had to

be able to fire 500 meters away with a payload of above 25 kilograms and couldn't be too large lest they hinder the march of the army.

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Within the Rose Palace located at the capital city of the Iblia Kingdom, Windbury City, the Second Prince made his return.

The Rose Palace, formally known as the Rose Provisional Palace, was called as such because the Second Prince felt that a true palace fitting for a descendant of the Krissen Imperial Family like him should be built at the imperial capital. That's why he called the palace he built at Windbury City a provisional one to symbolize his ambition to one day retake the imperial capital and return there.

Even though the Second Prince had made his way back, all the servants within the palace were unnerved because their master had completely changed in both act and appearance. He was volatile, unstable, decadent, manic and developed chronic alcoholism. Every day, he would seclude himself within his royal chambers and drink as much alcohol as he could while fooling around with women, losing himself in hedonistic pleasures of the flesh with abandon.

With his 100000-strong army gone within but a single battle and his peerless Blademaster being slaughtered right in front of him by a thick and long ballista bolt, the Second Prince was shocked completely out of his senses. He never would've even dreamed that the Norton Family's might would be that staggering and that Baron Felim and Baron Shazin whom he thought he had control over would rebel. When he was on his way back to Gildusk City, the Second Prince got news that the duke's dominion was under siege by the forces of those two families, forcing him to have no choice but to head to the dominion of the Kenmays Family and leave the Northlands using the suspension bridge.

Originally, he thought he could borrow three legions of soldiers from his father-in-law to fight his way back into the Northlands. But he wasn't aware that Duke Fisablen had already lost all hope for him as there was no way he could use three legions of soldiers to take the Northlands given that he had already lost 100000 within a single clash. That was something that would only happen in the Second Prince's dreams. Duke Fisablen had made up his mind to not let his three legions which he had spared no effort to build to march to their deaths with the Second Prince.

Having been refused entry to the city by his father-in-law, the Second Prine secretly made his way back to Windbury City as news of his complete defeat spread throughout the kingdom. Without any more soldiers under his command, none of the nobles of the kingdom treated him seriously. This sudden chain of events had caused the Second Prince to lose all his ambition and hole up within the Rose Palace to drink away his pain all day.

Sounds of music and laughter could be heard from far away. That was the hall where the queen stayed and a ball was being held there.

"That damned woman!" the Second Prince cursed with bloodshot eyes. While nobody even bothered to check out on him, his consort was actually hosting a ball that would progress into an orgy afterwards! The Second Prince really wanted to carry his sword and slaughter the rest of the frivolous men and women there.

"Fuck off!" he roared as he kicked a nude woman lying by the table aside. That was the maidservant who served alcohol to the Second Prince, but she had just been forcefully ravaged by her master to the point that she was barely able to move.

The woman was relieved that her life wasn't taken and hurriedly crawled aside. The Second Prince then took a few more gulps of alcohol and tried to drink himself to the lowest depths of drunkenness so that he could take his mind of the matters.

"Your Majesty, you cannot continue to waste away like this," a voice rang out from the corner of the hall.

"What do you think I can do at this point? I've left all my wealth at Gildusk City. All the resources I took from the Madras Duchy is gone! And the First Legion I spent three years building is gone too! No money, and no soldiers! Am I still fit to be king? Nobody looks at me in the eyes anymore… I'm finished… I've lost everything…" the Second Prince muttered.

A tall figure appeared before the Second Prince. That was his swordsmanship teacher, and the only remaining Blademaster by his side, Blademaster Zarinan.

"Your Majesty, no matter what, you're still a king. If you don't stand up again, the kingdom will truly lose its future. If you don't have soldiers, you can always recruit more. If you don't have money, you can always find ways to make more. Don't you still have your two iron mines? You can think of cooperating with that trading guild from

the Trade Union that came back then and let them handle the iron mines. That way, you will have a source of income and can begin building another army…"

"No, no way… Half the produce of those mines must be provided to my father-in-law to replenish his own troops," said the Second Prince as he shook his head to freshen himself up. "Teacher, you are right. Since that old guy no longer cares about whether I live or die, then why would I help replenish the the equipment of his forces?! Tomorrow, I will send someone to seek out those from that trading guild and begin a cooperative relationship with them. As long as I can get the money to rebuild my army, I will even deal with a demon!

"Oh, and teacher, can you please make a trip to the Northlands? I want the head of the Norton Family's leader. If I don't kill him, I will never be able to eat and sleep in peace. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been chased out of the Northlands and lose everything…" said the Second Prince with a manic look in his eyes.

"Your Majesty, assassination is not an action befitting of a king. There has never been a case where a king ordered the assassination of a dominion lord. If word of this gets out…"

"I don't care!" roared the Second Prince. "I must kill him! Teacher, you must bring me his head! I want to use it as my wine cup! Teacher, you can definitely fulfil this sole wish of mine just by making a single trip. Even if it's not for my sake, think of your junior apprentice brother, my Uncle Louinse, who died so horribly… Don't you want to avenge him?! Did you forget what your own master said about looking out for your junior apprentice brother?!"

The large man turned silent and after a long while, he opened his mouth and said, "Your Majesty, I shall agree to go to the Northlands and bring you the head of the Norton Family head. But I hope that you will never make a request of me that's so unfitting of a king again."

Chapter 202
Assaulted

The fair, slender figure twitched continuously from Lorist's thrusts accompanied by ecstatic moans. In the end, amidst the loud, long moan, Lorist's hot desires were emptied onto Irina's body.

After giving birth to her child, Irina got more plump and she was no longer small girl she used to be. Lorist took a page out of Hennard's book and made Irina his concubine as well as included her son into the family registry as his first successor candidate.

He continued to toy with Irina's breasts while basking in the climactic afterglow. After a while, she pushed Lorist away and said, "Milord, let me get some water to wash you down…"

Lorist said, "There's no need. Just stay put here before we go for another round…"

"Well, milord, can't we leave it for tonight? It's still only noon right now, aah…" Irina's words were cut short as Lorist once again shoved his manhood into her body…

After giving birth, Irina insisted on staying at Maplewoods Bastide to raise her child and refused to follow Lorist back to Firmrock Castle. She said that it was because she had spent all her life there and had long been used to the scenery and wasn't willing to go to somewhere foreign. Naturally, Lorist didn't force her to come along and allowed her to do as she pleased. However, whenever Lorist went to Maplewoods Bastide, he would spend a few nights there and get intimate with Irina as well as check on his newborn son.

In the 10th month, Lorist was much freer than he usually was mainly because the failures in his experiments had demotivated him quite a bit, causing him to stop his research efforts temporarily. After resting for almost a week at Maplewoods Bastide, Lorist was reminded by Howard that he had to head to Bladedge Mountains to bring Telesti back to Firmrock Castle. So, Lorist bid farewell to Irina and his son and left for the mountains with his guards.

Telesti and her ten plus students had picked a spot to build the academy that was not

that far off from Wildnorth Town. There was a hill there where chrysanthemum plants prospered as well as a serene stream flowing nearby. Telesti liked that place a lot because of the beautiful scenery and ordered her guard escorts to set up camp there so that she could give her students some lectures on nature.

Just as Lorist arrived at the campsite, Alisa rushed straight to him and gave him a firm hug before she said, "Uncle Locke, you're finally here!"

Lorist stroked the girl's head affectionately and brushed some grass off her hair as he said, "You rowdy lass, where were you messing around at? Your hair is full of grass!"

Alisa giggled and said, "The Chino twins are real idiots. They couldn't even differentiate between chickweed and fiddleleaf plants and insisted that there were the same and could both be eaten. They were then given a long lecture by teacher…"

Chickweed was considered to be a medicinal plant that was slightly toxic while fiddleleaf could be consumed as a normal vegetable. As the two plants looked rather similar, it was quite common for careless or uninformed people to think that they're both the same thing.

"Since Alisa is so smart, you can definitely tell them apart, right?" Lorist said as he laughed.

"Of course! I'm definitely the fastest to learn. We had to differentiate such a large pile of plants and I was the one who finished first. Teacher even praised me for that," Alisa said proudly as she waved her arms to indicate how big the pile of grass was.

"Wow, Alisa is so amazing. I'm sure you'll definitely be a great scholar like your teacher when you grow up," Lorist praised.

Alisa then pouted and said, "Hmph, I don't want to be like teacher. She's so timid. One time, she was so terrified after seeing a grey mountain rat that she screamed like her life depended on it. I want to be a female knight like Auntie Pesha when I grow up and ride on horses elegantly and kill magical beasts with my lance in one strike…"

"Oh…" Lorist was quite surprised to find out that Pesha had actually gained such a young follower as he wondered how that busty but slow-witted knight managed to impress Alisa. Then again, he felt that it wasn't a bad idea for Alisa to go on the path of a knight. Given her boyish, rowdy personality, it was hard for Lorist to imagine her as a serene scholar like Telesti.

"Go greet your brother. Have you forgotten about him after not meeting him for a few months?" Lorist said as he ticked Alisa's nose.

"Hmph, you're a bad uncle, always messing with my nose like that… Brother!" Alisa said as she jumped towards Howard who was standing behind Lorist.

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"Teacher, look who I brought here," Alisa exclaimed as she pushed open the flap of the tent and squeezed through the entrance. Lorist also followed her into the tent.

Telesti, who was in the middle of writing and drawing something, raised her head and said with a smile, "Locke, you're here."

"Yup. I'm here to bring you back to Firmrock Castle. The weather will start getting colder in another month and your trip with the kids have taken quite some time already," Lorist said as he approached the easel and assessed the drawing.

"Is this your design for the academy?" Lorist asked.

Telesti stood up and hugged Lorist before giving him a light kiss. She then said, "Yes, that's just the first draft of the design I have in mind. I will have to give it to Grandmaster Ciroba later and let him modify it before the blueprints are to be drawn."

"Alright. We'll leave tomorrow then. We'll first head to Poplar Coast before going to Blackmud Marsh. Grandmaster Ciroba should be at either of those places right now. I also have to check out on the development of the construction of the roads over there before we return to Firmrock Castle together," Lorist said.

"Will we be bringing the children along with us?" Telesti asked.

Lorist thought before he replied, "Let's bring them with us. Since I have so many guards with me, they will definitely be cared for well. Also, the construction effort there is a quite a large scale project and it can't hurt to show these children the might of manpower which can even shape the landscapes and change a swamps into homes."

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Poplar Coast had already been turned into a bustling construction site through the recent developments. With more than 20000 laborers working on building the new

town, the foundation for the town walls had already been completed. Currently, the workers were digging out a moat and using the mud they unearthed to make bricks for the wall. The one in charge of the site was a thin, dark-skinned, middle-aged man whom Lorist remembered to be one of the staff promoted by Supervisor Hansk. He wasn't sure whether the man was promoted due to his own merit or the lack of staff to supervise the site.

"Milord, the work here is progressing smoothly and we will finish the first part of the construction of the wall before winter as well as the warehouses. Next year, we can begin gathering various resources for further work," reported the man respectfully.

"Not bad, you've done great. Continue to work hard. Oh, and, is Grandmaster Ciroba here now?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, Grandmaster Ciroba just left two days ago to Tortoise Hill. I heard that something about the drainage system is problematic and requires a redesign," replied the man.

"Oh," Lorist mused as he nodded. "The day is still young, so I won't stay here to interrupt your work. Please get me some clean water and fill up my water flask. I'll head to the Blackmud Marsh right after that."

"Alright, milord. Please wait for a bit, I'll call someone to get the water."

Slightly further away from Lorist and that dark-skinned man, a few large pots could be seen at a resting spot. Within the pots were large bull bones floating amidst the soup. That was actually one of the benefits the Norton Family provided the laborers. No matter who, one could have some soup to drink the moment one turned thirsty. Not only was the bone soup thirst-relieving, it was also rather nutritious.

The ones taking care of the pots of soup were a fat man and his similarly plump wife. They added some more salt into each pot after a few bowls of soup were served from each.

A tall old man could be seen standing near the pot taking small sips out of his bowl of soup.

"Old man, do sit down and drink slowly. You can even stay here tonight and I'll get you some bull bones to chew on. Don't think that just because they're meatless, they're not good. Just crack the bone open and the good stuff's in the marrow. It's also very

nutritious for a person of your age," said the fat cook warmly as he handed the old, largely-built man a piece of black bread.

"Have this, old man. Dip the bread in the soup and it'll soften right away. Fill yourself up with it for now," said the cook before he went to stir the pot of soup a little more and called his wife to remove some firewood so that the fire doesn't burn too strongly. After that, he went back to the old man's side and sat down.

"I've seen types like you quite often in the recent times. Seriously, I'm not kidding. From time to time, some family members of the war prisoners will come here to seek them out and hope to find their husbands or brothers here. Most of the family members of the captured Northlander soldiers would be able to meet up without issue. But since you said that you're from the Winston Province, this will be a little bit more difficult. Most of the soldiers of the Second Prince's First Legion are people from the Winston Province. But after the battle with the forces of the Norton Family, they lost more than 10000 men. That's why, old man, I pray that you are ready for whatever outcome and hope that your grandson didn't get unlucky…

"Then again, the Norton Family forces are not like the forces of those other savage and violent nobles. They don't kill senselessly or take the belongings of the commoners. That, I can assure you. Like my wife and I, even though we were forced to move here, we didn't have much to complain about. Before that, we were working as cooks for our previous master and we would be beaten and scolded for the smallest mistakes. Only after we came here did we experience true freedom. When the construction work of this town is complete, the Nortons said that they would even give us homes and farmland. I am prepared to start a small restaurant to live the rest of my days in peace. I never would've dreamed that we would be able to spend days like this in the future…

"If you could read, you can easily check the registry to see if your grandson is listed there. But sadly you don't and you only know that he is called 'Silo' without knowing how it is spelled. There are many people with similar or identical sounding names, so you have no choice but to travel from one place and another to find him. Since he's a prisoner, he should be at Blackmud Marsh. There are three spots there and you have to spend some effort to find him. In fact, this is the wrong place for you to come to. The people here are laborers and they are paid for their work while those laborers at Blackmud Marsh are war prisoners who are serving their 3-year term without pay for their own freedom."

"Who's that?" asked the tall old man as he raised his head and looked at the distant

group of people and carriages.

The fat cook stood up and exclaimed happily, "That's the dominion lord! It's so rare for us to be able to see him. I think he's passing through this place to head to the Blackmud Marsh for an inspection…"

"Which one of them is the lord? Is he sitting in the carriage?" asked the tall man.

"No, he's the one riding a horse at the very front. Our lord doesn't like to wear full metal armor. He has long black hair and eyes, so he's quite easy to recognize. Look, it's that one wearing the black cloak. I've seen him once before when he was inspecting the commoner camp back at Firmrock Castle," said the fat cook energetically.

"Oh…" mumbled the tall old man as he stood up. It was at that moment when the fat cook seemed to visualize the tall old man as a razor-sharp sword.

However, Lorist had already traveled far with his guards. The tall old man sat back down and looked no different from his frail self before.

"Thank you, my kind friend. Oh, I really worry for my pitiful grandson… If something bad happened to him, I really don't know if I can bear to continue living… Ah, you said just now that there are three spots at the Blackmud Marsh where I might find him, right? Can you tell me more about those places?" asked the tall old man.

"Hey, old man, were you a mercenary when you were young?" asked the cook, troubled. For some reason, he perceived that man beside him to be a sword. Realizing that the tall man had a large build and was even strong enough to head to the Northlands to seek out his grandson, the cook reasoned that he must've been a mercenary during his younger days given his demeanor.

The tall man nodded and said, "That's right. I was a mercenary for 40 years. Because my grandson's parents died early, I had to head home to raise him. But that kid couldn't resist enlisting into the king's army and said that he wanted to become a knight. After hearing about the king's army's defeat, I rushed my way here to see if I can find my grandson…"

The cook said, "Don't be too agitated. Old man, I'm sure that Singwa will protect your son from all ills. I think that our lord should be heading to Blackmud Marsh to make his inspections. The nearest part from here is the part where the Blackmud Marsh meets the Bladedge Mountains. The next part would be at the central road of

Blackmud Marsh while the last part will be near Tortoise Hill. These three places are where the prisoners were sent to work. However, I think that most of the laborers should be at Tortoise Hill. I heard that the work there is in a bit of a rush as it's really important."

"Oh, then I ought to head to Tortoise Hill to check first. If he isn't there, I'll go to the other two places. Thank you for your bone soup and bread," said the tall old man as he stood up and prepared to leave.

The fat cook hurriedly stopped him and said, "Old man, it'd take you forever to get there on foot! Do you see the carriages filled with stuff over there? Those are the resources that are scheduled to be delivered to Tortoise Hill. I know a few of the coachmen and I will ask them to let you ride with them at noon."

"Oh, I am incredibly grateful," said the tall old man with thanks.

"What's there to thank for? I understand how hard it can be to have no one to rely on outside your home like this. I'm just doing what I can to help. I hope you will find your grandson soon and maybe settle down here to spend the rest of your days in bliss," said the fat cook with a smile.

……

Lorist brought Telesti and the children with him to first check out the land reclamation operations at the intersection point between Bladedge Mountains and Blackmud Marsh. After staying for a day, they continued on to the middle road construction site. The work there was progressing rather slowly mostly because it was frequently under attack from Ironspine Crocodiles. While not many people got injured, the work was slowed nevertheless.

The moment Lorist arrived, he managed to see the three super ballistas show their might by shooting a 20-meter-long Ironspine Crocodile to death. This was the largest crocodile he had seen so far. The children all gathered beside the huge carcass excitedly and the rowdy Alisa was the first to climb up on top of the carcass along with the Chino brothers.

Lorist decided to make that Ironspine Crocodile into a display specimen and thought that the huge beast would be more effective in frightening others than the gigantic mammoth specimen he had. For that, he stayed there for two days to arrange for it to

be carried out before heading to Tortoise Hill.

Potterfang who was in charge of managing the prisoner camp was there to receive Lorist on his arrival. Seeing that the mud wall had been completed with the rest being on schedule to finish before the arrival of winter, Lorist was extremely satisfied.

When he reached Tortoise Hill, Lorist headed straight for the army camp while Telesti sought out Grandmaster Ciroba by herself. Lorist took strolls around the area and bossed people around, satisfying his desire to act like a true dominion lord for once.

On the third day, Lorist decided to head to the other end of Tortoise Hill where the stream was located to hold a grill party in the wilds. As Lorist arranged for his guards to hunt some food for the party, Telesti taught her students to draw the various sights of nature.

Holding two fat, juicy pheasants as he walked out of the forest, Lorist walked to the side of the grimacing Telesti and asked, "Hey, what's wrong? You look down."

"It's nothing… I was just brainstorming for the design of the academy's insignia," said Telesti.

"Haha, what's so difficult about that? Reidy, go to the carriage and get me that small box at the lower storage compartment," Lorist instructed. Without delay, the box was brought to Lorist right away.

Lately, Reidy had been struggling to memorize the diagram Lorist gave him and even frequently forgot the things he had read before. Sometimes, he would zone out and look like an immobile scarecrow.

Lorist opened the box and said happily, "Here, my dear, look at my collection."

Within the small box was a thick velvet cloth that covered many different academy badges.

"Look here, these are the academy badges I've collected during my time at Morante City. These two here are respectively the badge of the Dawn Academy and my dual Gold ranked instructor badge," Lorist said as he caressed his two most precious badges before caving in to the urge to put on the two badges on his clothes. He said excitedly, "Back then when I wore these badges and entered the academy, the students would all make way for me respectfully…"

Before he finished, a loud cry could be heard from afar. "Stand there, old man, agh!"

"There's an enemy attack! Ugh…"

Lorist turned back only to see a tall old man rushing out from the forests with a longsword in hand heading in his direction. Behind the man, three collapsed guards with blood gushing out of their throats could be seen.

"Norton Family leader, I will have your life!" roared the tall man as his body became one with the sword before he approached at a terrifying speed…

Chapter 203
Grueling Battle

Back when the distance between Lorist and the old man was around 50 meters, the three guards that had stepped forward to intercept him, only to have their throats slashed open with only one stroke, allowing the old man to further close the distance to 30 meters. When the old man's body seemed to fuse with his sword, he closed the remaining distance in a flash with the after-images of his sword filling Lorist's line of vision.

Lorist expression changed immediately. At first, he wasn't too bothered by the appearance of that man. But the instant Lorist felt the pressure as heavy as a mountain emanate from that old man encompass him, Telesti and Reidy, Telesti fainted immediately with a pale look while Reidy fared slightly better and only spat out some blood and retreated three steps.

Lorist drew his sword and rushed forward after saying only, "Bring her away right now!"

Clang! The fearsome clash of the swords shook Lorist's eardrums as he was knocked roughly 10 meters away. He felt a sudden ominous feeling in his chest and staggered, almost falling directly to the ground.

Exhaling thoroughly, Lorist straightened his body and looked at the tall old man as he mused, "A Blademaster?"

That old man himself was stunned that Lorist was able to take one of his sure-kill blows, but that allowed Lorist some time to recover.

"A Blademaster, huh? Let me guess who you are…" Lorist said as he stared at the tall old man. "You can't be Duke Fisablen, a person of high status like him won't resort to underhanded measures like this to assassinate me, and neither does he have a need for that. If he wanted to crush me, he would simply lead his Frontier Legion here and settle it all on the battlefield. Blademaster Xanthi on the other hand is a woman and I've met her before. As for Viscount Kristoph who is a subordinate of Duke Fisablen, he shouldn't look as old as you do and he's also a knight who won't be willing to carry

out a dirty assassination…

"Since there are only 5 Blademasters in the Iblia Kingdom, that leaves only the two serving the Second Prince. Since Louinse is already dead, you should be Blademaster Zarinan. Given the Second Prince's temperament, it's not surprising for him to send a Blademaster to dirty his hands with something like assassination. While the other kingdoms and duchies might have Blademasters as well, I doubt that they'd want to assassinate me given that I've no qualm with them. Am I right, Blademaster Zarinan?"

The guards not far away had already been alerted and Els was the first to rush over. But Lorist was worried as he knew that the guards that were at most at the Silver rank definitely wouldn't be a match for that old man. No matter how many guards showed up, they were only as threatening as a flock of chickens to the Blademaster who could kill them with a casual sweep.

Just as Els and a few other Silver ranked guards were about to rush towards the bold old man, Lorist barked his orders to stop them. "Get back! He's Blademaster Zarinan and you're not his match!"

While doing that, Lorist signaled for his subordinates to seek out Josk so that he could pressure the Blademaster with ranged attacks. Even though Josk was only at the Gold rank, his archery skills would still be able to pose a threat to the old man. Otherwise, Lorist's subordinates could also mobilize the carroballistas which even a Blademaster would find hard to fend off en masse.

The observant Els understood Lorist's intentions right away and shouted for his men to stop. As he retreated, he instructed his men to put Lorist's plan into action. Relieved, Lorist inspected his surroundings and saw that Howard had already led his sister Alisa and the other children away from the stream near the hill and was on the way to the Tortoise Hill army camp using a detour. Reidy on the other hand had two maidservants take care of Telesti and sent them away from the zone of conflict using a carriage.

"It is not my wish to cause unnecessary deaths. It was wise of you to stop your men from giving their lives needlessly. Your guess was right, I am Zarinan and I have come on my king's orders to claim your head for him," said the old man all of a sudden as he took big steps in Lorist's direction.

"Is that so? Then let's see if you are able to take my head with you," Lorist said with a cold smile. With both his hands gripping his sword, he had already made his

preparations to engage.

"I really didn't expect that you were able to receive my sure-kill blow. It seems that your defeat of my king wasn't a fluke. However, it's a shame. If you won't serve my king, then you shall die!" Jerking his body forward, Zarinan held his sword high. Countless illusory lightning bolts seemed to materialize around his sword and enveloped Lorist from all directions.

While Lorist sounded relaxed before, he wore an incredibly solemn expression. WIth his two hands grasping his sword and ready to guard his body, he proceeded to flick, wipe, parry, block, slash, drag, stab, obstruct, withdraw, sweep, hack and pierce, using the simplest basic sword movements to defend against the torrent of rapid sword strikes of Blademaster Zarinan.

Clangclangclangclangclang… The swords clashed so often that it almost sounded like it was metal was raining heavily from the sky.

From Lorist's dynamic vision, the sword strikes seemed like countless bolts of lightning that increased in intensity with each following wave. At that moment, Lorist seemed to have turned into a reef amidst the roaring sea, almost being submerged completely by the incessant waves.

Compared to Blademaster Xanthi's light and agile attacks, Blademaster Zarinan's sword strikes were both vigorous and heavy despite being as fluid and quick as Blademaster Xanthi's rapid attacks. Lorist only had one word within his mind at that moment: despair. It was as if he was thrust into a world of unlimited blade storms that barraged him with one strike after another nonstop. During that long and grueling time, Lorist could only painstakingly defend.

"Break!" Lorist suddenly roared as he knocked himself and the Blademaster apart. After making some distance quickly, Lorist struggled to stand with a pale, white look on his face and some blood in his mouth. The silver wire mesh armor he wore had a long strike across it that revealed his bloodied black undershirt within.

It was then when Lorist recalled the words of the princess. She said that while Lorist did defeat Blademaster Xanthi, her teacher and godmother, he definitely wasn't a match for her grandfather and wouldn't be able to survive more than 100 strikes from him. Duke Fisablen was a rank 3 Blademaster while Xanthi was only a rank 2. As for Blademaster Zarinan, he was a rank 3 Blademaster just like the duke.

Gosh, the gap between rank 2 and rank 3 Blademasters is really too wide! Even though I was able to keep up with Blademaster Xanthi, I have almost no chance to retaliate against Blademaster Zarinan and was busy defending for my life! When Lorist thought that he had discovered a weakness in the old man's strikes, he decided to land one strike in himself to force the old man backwards, only to discover that the opening had vanished and that he had fell into that old man's trap. Had Lorist not reacted quickly enough to parry with his sword and retreat with all his might, his body might've already been cut in half.

Lorist smiled bitterly and thought, *today will definitely be tough… I can only circle around that old man from a distance for now and hope that the carroballista brigade arrives quickly…*

"Brilliant swordsmanship! Your moves are not bad and it is definitely hard to imagine that someone at your age is able to fight with such astounding skill. If my master was still alive, he definitely would've taken you as his disciple and spent all his effort cultivating your talent. Perhaps, you might even become a Sword Saint some tens of years later. But it's a shame that you've chosen to go against my king. You will definitely die today!" Zarinan exclaimed before he rushed forward with his sword again.

Lorist retreated one step after another and noticed that the stream was already behind him and there was no way to run. WIth a flash of inspiration, Lorist leaped into the stream directly.

When Zarinan reached the stream, he found that Lorist was already on the opposite bank on the other side of the stream five meters away.

"If you let me kill you obediently, I will make sure that you don't suffer any pain. There's no point in running away since I'll definitely get to you," said the old man as he shook his head, as if he thought that Lorist's final death struggle was irrational and unsightly.

"Oh, is that so, old man? Well why don't you come over here and try then? Even if I were to die, I will make sure to take a nice bite out of you. Don't forget that you couldn't do anything to me either just now, so it's still unclear who will win. Let's see who'll be the victor in the end," Lorist said as he gritted his teeth.

Blademaster Zarinan did not say anything and leaped before landing lightly on a rock

that was 3 meters away from Lorist.

With a grunt, Lorist kicked his right leg out and sent some internal energy-infused stones and cobblestones on the bank propelling towards the Blademaster. Right after that, he jumped forward to take the offensive since he wasn't able to do much by defending. At worst, he would take the Blademaster down with him even if it cost him his life.

Zarinan didn't expect that Lorist had that move up his sleeves. While his face was covered by the dust and grime Lorist kicked off, he managed to block half of the stones that were infused with internal energy. But those that he didn't get to deflect hit his body and tore his clothes apart, causing him to feel immense pain. That was especially the case with the few cobblestones that brushed by the old man's face, causing two long, bloody scratches to form.

Without waiting for Zarinan to react, Lorist pounced forward like a tiger and attacked without bothering to defend. His sword strikes seemed to overturn the Milky Way itself as they shot forward unimpeded. It was a double-edged sword style that harmed both him and his opponent, causing the old man to struggle haggardly.

Clangclangclangclangclang… The swords collided with each other rapidly once again.

"Ugh…" It was already Lorist's third time being struck flying and this time, he didn't remain standing and instead crashed right onto the bank of the stream, dyeing the water of the stream red with his blood.

Zarinan on the other hand retreated a few steps back. He wasn't in the best condition as his left arm and right leg both bore wounds from which blood spurted out. But worst was his left cheek which was a complete, bloody mess. Even half his ear was shaved completely off.

After trying hard to stand back up straight, Zarinan felt up his injury on the left part of his face and said in a venomous tone, "Good, good… Nobody has managed to wound me in the past 20 years… I really didn't think that you would able to hurt me for real. Anything that can go wrong truly will go wrong… Kid, I bet you can't move now, right? When I get you, I will definitely make you regret that you were born. I will deal with you ever so slowly that you will cry for mercy to have your life ended in one swift blow…"

Lorist struggled on the ground for a few moments before finally getting up, half-kneeling. His body was covered completely in slash wounds, some of which revealed even the whites of his bones with the blood washed off by the stream water.

"Kill!" A Silver ranked guard with only the thought of saving his lord charged forward with a silver blade glow emanating from his sword. The old man lightly waved his sword and the head of the Silver ranked guard landed into the stream, further coloring the water red with blood.

However, ten other guards rushed forward after the first was killed. These guards had been making their way forward when Lorist was busy attacking Zarinan and they planned to overwhelm the Blademaster with numbers without regard for their own lives. Despite that, within a few moments, around 40 of the guards landed straight into the stream, turning the stream into a bloody river.

These self-sacrificing guards of the family only managed to buy another ten minutes, during which Lorist recovered some energy and managed to stand up. However, it pained Lorist to witness the deaths of those guards. Silver and Iron ranked alike, they all rushed towards Blademaster Zarinan. That was not bravery. It was suicide. Of the company of 100 guards Lorist brought along with him, half of them had already died from Zarinan's blade.

Further off in the distance, an alert horn signal could be heard blowing at the army camp near Tortoise Hill and the regiment of soldiers would be able to arrive within another 30 minutes. But that was time Lorist didn't have.

"Release!" Els commanded loudly. Tens of arrows and crossbow bolts headed in Zarinan's direction as well as a few other thrown axes and javelins.

Unfortunately, Lorist's guard unit wasn't the longbowman unit and they only brought with them a few hunting bows and crossbows that didn't shoot far, failing to effectively suppress Zarinan completely.

Standing on top of a corpse of one of the guards that attacked him at the stream, he deflected the various projectiles headed his way easily with a few waves of his sword as he laughed eerily and said, "Hehe, your family soldiers are rather loyal. Since that's the case, I'll kill them off first before I deal with you…"

Els and the rest were only around 50 meters away from Zarinan and that old man

would only take ten minutes to kill off the whole group. By the time the reinforcements coming from afar arrive, Zarinan would've long captured Lorist and fled.

Lorist stood up straight with all his ability and thought, *no... I can't let that old man kill Els and the others. I'm already heavily injured and I doubt that I can deal with that crazy old man... Better think of another way, quick.*

Looking back at the forest behind him, Lorist feigned laughter and said, "Kill them nice and slow, okay? I'll take my leave first."

Using all the energy he could muster, Lorist rushed straight into the ancient forest behind him.

Zarinan turned back and cursed. Killing those guards was only a small matter to him, but if he were to let Lorist escape, that would pose to be a large problem. If word got out that a rank 3 Blademaster let an Iron ranked dominion lord escape, then what pride or face would he have left? Additionally, this was his first assassination attempt and if Lorist really did manage to get away, Zarinan definitely wouldn't get a second chance at killing him. It was obvious that Lorist would increase his defenses so that the old man would never be able to get near him again. If Lorist chose to mobilize 3000 fully-equipped veteran soldiers to get back at Zarinan, he would have to run and hide for his life even if he was a Blademaster.

Zarinan hurriedly changed his direction and charged like a ghost within a blink of an eye into the forest Lorist had escaped into.

Seeing the old man enter the forest, Els and the other guards slumped to the ground. Despite facing a Blademaster, one that had massacred half their unit at that, the fact that they were able to continue to launch ranged attacks was already an amazing feat. Half of their bravery had come from their long and arduous training to instinctively follow orders while the other half stemmed from the depths of their beliefs that they had to save Lorist no matter what even at the cost of their lives.

After tens of minutes, the carroballista brigade arrived rather late along with Josk, Potterfang and more soldiers.

Reidy hurriedly jumped onto one of the carroballistas and cut off the support of the steel ballista, before planting his sword on the chariot's floor and taking three ballista bolts with him before he rushed straight into the forest.

With a flash in his eyes, Els said, "That's right. Take the steel ballistas off and form small teams of 3 ballistas each before following them into the forest…"

Josk dismounted and tugged on Els harshly before asking, "Where's milord?!"

Els pointed at the forests and said, "Milord has lured that old assassin there. That old man Zarinan is actually a Blademaster and I think he was sent here by the Second Prince. Quick, go look for milord! He seems to be badly injured…"

Josk mounted swiftly and spurred his horse forward as he said, "Depart!", before charging into the forest with his mounted archer brigade without the slightest hesitation…

Chapter 204
Bloody Battle

After Blademaster Zarinan zoomed into the forest, he quickly discovered the footprints and blood tracks left by Lorist. With those as his lead, he believed that his prey wouldn't be able to escape him. Even though he was indeed surprised by the skill in the sword showed by that kid from the Norton Family as well as the weird energy that he used that caused him to gain three extra wounds, Zarinan was sure that his counterattack caused quite a bit of damage to Lorist. Even if those tens of strikes weren't critical, they should be enough to ensure that Lorist no longer has any ability to resist.

All of a sudden, his left cheek pulsed in pain while his left arm and right leg felt a burning sensation near the wounds. Blademaster Zarinan knew that blood had stopped flowing from the wounds only because he used Battle Force to temporarily seal them. But right now, his three wounds started bleeding again.

After cursing venomously, the Blademaster brought out a small, circular, silver box and felt relieved that he had some medicine left. Back then when he departed for the Northlands, even though he didn't think that he'd get injured, he brought along some healing supplies just in case, much to his relief.

Taking off the circular cover, some semi-translucent, green-colored gel could be seen within. Blademaster Zarinan applied some of the gel on his wounds before tearing his undershirt into a few smaller cloth pieces to bandage himself up. He only relaxed after he felt the cooling relief of the gel on his wounds. *Very well, Norton kid… When I catch you, I will make you beg for death…*

After following the footsteps for another hundred meters, he heard a stream flow not far away and suddenly felt that something was off. Quickly stepping forward past the shrubs to check, he noticed that the trail ended at the edge of the bank of the stream.

This forest was actually near the Azure River, which led straight to the ocean and was located near some hills. So, it wasn't weird for there to be a long stretch of the bank there, where footsteps were harder to spot amidst the scattered stones. That caused Blademaster Zarinan much frustration as he didn't know whether Lorist walked

upstream or downstream. But he was certain that Lorist was still nearby and could possibly even be behind the boulder near him.

"Don't let me catch you… Or I'll definitely skin you alive!" roared Blademaster Zarinan angrily. After cursing, he listened intently and hoped that Lorist would be unnerved by his scream and run further away instead of staying put.

But unfortunately for the Blademaster, apart from startling some birds within the forest, his screams did not have any other effect.

"I don't believe that he can get that far away from me just because he entered the forest only a few minutes earlier," Blademaster Zarinan mused. Right now, he could only use his Blademaster senses to search his side of the bank to look for Lorist whom he presumed was hiding nearby.

Blademaster Zarinan had heard about many assassinations back during the time of internal strife within the empire. Most of them happened between the First and Second Princes. It wasn't known which one of them began using such measures first, as both of them did things openly with a chivalrous style and it was weird for them to utilize underhanded assassination methods. But after one incident or another, both of them went all out. Since the First Prince was cruel and insidious with the Second Prince being venomous and cunning, the two of them considered each other to be their biggest rival and were willing to do anything at all for even the smallest advantage and frequently hired lowly mercenaries to carry out their dirty assassinations in hopes that they would be able to wipe their rival out without a huge conflict.

Those years were rather rowdy and most people have lost count how many times the First and Second Princes were involved in assassination attempts. The only thing Blademaster Zarinan knew for sure was that the Second Prince used to send mercenaries on assassination missions with the promise that if they succeeded, they would be able to become true landed nobles and leave their lowly status as mercenaries. However, not a single one of those mercenaries returned alive. Given that the Second Prince had two Blademasters protecting him, the First Prince was also quite cautious for his own well-being.

Bribing the servants and attendants to apply poison for assassinations is one of the most commonly used methods. Blademaster Zarinan remembered very clearly that time when the First Prince got hold of the most beautiful female dancer and sent her

to the Second Prince through another noble who attended the Second Prince's banquet. The dancer's soft and gentle movements along with her slender figure caused the Second Prince to be rather excited to the point that he brought her to his chambers before that banquet even ended.

But what the dancer didn't expect was that Blademaster Zarinan was hiding within the Second Prince's chambers even when the two of them were having intercourse. When the Second Prince finally released his pent up desires on the body of the dancer, she believed that the time was right and removed a beast tooth hairclip from her hair. What was worth noting was that the hairclip's blue-colored needle was coated with deadly poison.

Just before the needle pierced the Second Prince's neck, Blademaster Zarinan stepped in and stopped the dancer.

The Second Prince who got out of his bed no longer had his previous gentle expression. The dancer then suffered a horrible fate which included being ravaged by hundreds of ravenous guards for three days and nights. Despite receiving medical care every time she was abused, she still died eventually. The moment news of her death reached the Second Prince, he had the dancer minced into little pieces to be fed to wild dogs.

That was the only assassination attempt that got so close to taking the Second Prince's life. Angered, he began his revenge against the First Prince and the two of them continued to plan one assassination after another, with neither having any success. Later, the mercenaries who were recruited for these missions knew that the chance of success was so low that they didn't bother to participate for the sake of their own lives. Eventually, the two princes had to stop because there wasn't anyone who bothered to carry out the assassinations for them.

But the one who suffered most during the assassination spree of the First and Second Princes was the Third Prince because while the First and Second Princes only had to deal with each other's assassins, the Third Prince was assaulted by killers from both sides because they didn't want the Third Prince to profit from their mutual destruction. And so, the poor Third Prince suffered a spear stab when he was asleep once and even got hit with a poison arrow in the following attempts. Even though he was rescued and attended to in time, he was reduced to only being able to lay resting in his bed weakly.

This time around, it was like the Second Prince returned to those days by sending his only remaining Blademaster to assassinate Lorist. It was apparent that his hate for Lorist was bone-deep. Given his temperament, the Second Prince thought that the sole reason he lost his whole army was due to Lorist. Having been chased out of the Northlands and humiliated so deeply, there was no way he would be able to rest well until Lorist was killed.

The Second Prince believed that as long as Blademaster Zarinan was sent, there was no chance of failure. The Sword Saint of the former Krissen Empire had already fallen 30 or so years ago in the last battle between the empire and the Forde Trade Union. Right now, among the many Blademasters of the kingdoms and duchies, Blademaster Zarinan was the only one who was closest to the level of a Sword Saint and his ability could be described as being on the borderline of the Sword Saint level, with him requiring only a final piece of insight to break through the bottleneck. It was within the realm of possibility for him to ascend to the level of a Sword Saint within as soon as the next ten years.

Apart from a few Gold ranked knights, the Norton Family didn't have any other Blademasters. That's why there was a 90 percent chance for Blademaster Zarinan to succeed retrieving Lorist's head. While the Second Prince was practically insane, he had his own reasons for doing so. First, taking Lorist's head was a form of release for him.

Second, it would be a good show of force for the other dominion lords. Even though he no longer had an army, he still had a Blademaster by his side, so that would cause the other nobles to think twice before they decide to not follow the Second Prince's orders, lest they lose their heads as a result.

As for the vengeance of the Norton Family that would come after the assassination, the Second Prince treated it as nothing more than a joke. He believed that as long as he could maintain his hold on Windbury City, he could simply wait for his father-in-law's reinforcements to defend him from the forces of the Norton Family. If they were to resort to assassination, that would basically amount to suicide as the Second Prince had Blademaster Zarinan by his side, keeping anybody with ill intentions far away from him.

Even if the Norton Family's forces were so strong that they would cause the Second Prince to lose hold of Windbury City, he could still escape to Duke Fisablen's dominion under the protection of Blademaster Zarinan. And if the Norton Family forces give

chase, it would be even better because the Second Prince would be able to sit back and watch the forces of the Nortons clash against his father-in-law's. To the Second Prince, it would be ideal if both of them depleted each other's forces so that he would have an opportunity to make a sweeping comeback at their expense.

Blademaster Zarinan also held the same thoughts as the Second Prince and believed that he was only making a simple trip to the Northlands and that taking the head of the Norton Family leader was merely a small feat. He thought that his trip would only take him one short month and treated it like he would a relaxing walk in the park.

Even though the Second Prince was merely his swordsmanship disciple, Blademaster Zarinan had long considered him to be his own son. As the Blademaster was obsessed with researching the way of the sword, he didn't settle down to form a family. Apart from his junior apprentice brother Louinse, the Second Prince who had begun learning swordsmanship from him since the age of eight was one of the few people who were closest to him. Even though the Second Prince developed various ill habits and attitude problems, he still maintained a good degree of respect to Blademaster Zarinan and after spending time with each other over the course of 40 years, the two had already developed a pseudo-parent-child relationship.

But Blademaster Zarinan never would've imagined that the Norton Family leader would be so hard to deal with. Not only has he not succeeded yet, he even suffered three injuries from that kid's strikes that were infused with a weird force. While Lorist himself wasn't faring that well either and even escaped into the forests with a body full of wounds, if Blademaster Zarinan failed to claim his head, then this matter would become a mark of humiliation that would earn him to scorn and ridicule of the others for the rest of his life.

Not far away in the distance, sounds of people shouting and horses neighing could be heard. They were the reinforcements of the Norton Family forces who had begun their search within the forest. Blademaster Zarinan himself did not really mind them. If he were on a flat plain, he might've needed to retreat when faced with thousands of men and horses. But in the dense forest like this, the Norton Family soldiers did not really pose a real threat to him and he could just kill as many that dared to come at him as he can.

However, he still had no idea where Lorist was hiding and wondered if he chose the wrong direction and deliberated whether he should go the other way upstream.

In actuality, the displacement from Lorist to Blademaster Zarinan was only around 30 meters. He wasn't hiding behind the boulders around the bank or the forests. When he arrived at the bank, he saw a hanging vine and quickly climbed down it. After that, he swung himself on top of a branch nearby to make his way as far from the bank as possible. When he felt tired, he sat on the tree branch and rested after he felt that he was safe enough.

As expected, Blademaster Zarinan began searching around the boulders near the forests and bank and focused all his attention on the ground in hopes that he would be able to locate some tracks without bothering to raise his head to check above.

Breathing a relieved breath, Lorist tended to his injuries after he recovered some more energy. When he was escaping, he had temporarily tapped his pressure points to stop the bleeding, but when he climbed up that tree, his wounds started bleeding again. It was a terrible thing to be bleeding within the forest as some magical beasts that have great sense of smell would quickly be able to locate oneself based on the smell of blood. It was even harder to hide from the magical beasts than from the eyes of Blademaster Zarinan.

Lorist on the other hand carried far more healing supplies than the Blademaster did. There was a hidden pouch on his outer robe in which three or four different types of medicinal ointments were kept. The only troublesome thing was that he had to remove his wire mesh armor to access them. In his last clash with the Blademaster, he had received more than ten sword strikes and his wire mesh armor had been torn to shreds with some of the wire even piercing into his flesh.

Lorist gritted his teeth and managed to remove his wire mesh armor with much difficulty, causing his shirt to be stained red by his blood once again. Since his clothes were also wet, Lorist removed them altogether. After that, he tapped a few more of his pressure points again to stop the bleeding and began to apply some medicine before taking out a curved needle and some goat intestine thread from a small silver box. Following that, he broke off a piece of tree branch and bit on it with his teeth and shivered as the searing pain from sewing his injuries shut assailed his mind.

After cleaning his wounds, he wrapped up his injuries and began to sweat profusely. Lorist was also feeling rather light-headed when he retrieved a small silver flask from the pouch of his outer robe which contained some rank 2 recovery medicine and poured two drops of it into his mouth. Following that, he shut his eyes and rested for a bit before feeling refreshed when his body began to regain some energy.

Lorist then put his outer robe back on before wrapping another piece of cloth torn from his under garment on his body. It was then when he heard the sounds of conflict and death coming from the bank of the stream. When Lorist stood up on the branch and looked, he was shocked to see that it had already turned into a bloody battlefield with hundreds of family soldiers and war horses lying dead all over the bank who were defeated by only one enemy, that ghostly Blademaster which seemed to appear out of nowhere before disappearing altogether.

However, Blademaster Zarinan at that moment looked exceedingly haggard with his hair being all messed up and a few more additional wounds that were previously not visible on his body. There was even one arrow stuck onto his back. No matter how many he killed, when faced with waves of Norton Family soldiers who did not fear death, Zarinan himself couldn't afford to let his guard down and had to give it his all to deal with them.

Just now, the soldiers Blademaster Zarinan were fighting were a bunch of mounted longbowmen. The hundred or so arrows that flew his way weren't much of a threat as he even began to slaughter away at the bowmen. But before he managed to kill the bulk of them, a green arrow caused him quite a lot of harm. He initially thought that the green arrow was similar to the others and he used his sword to lightly block it, only to feel the Battle Force infused within the arrow explode all of a sudden, causing his longsword to be knocked away. With tens of arrows still heading his way, he had no choice to dodge, but he was still struck by one arrow on his back nevertheless.

Having fallen into that trap, Blademaster Zarinan's rage rose sky high and he proceeded to seek out the person who had gotten the better of him. It was then when he noticed that the one who fired that green arrow was a Gold ranked marksman and every time he drew his bow, it made the Blademaster feel that a formidable enemy was coming. With much difficulty, Zarinan managed to wound the Gold ranked marksman, but just as he was about to deliver the finishing blow, another Gold ranked knight parried it away and had his subordinates rescue the marksman.

It was only then when Blademaster Zarinan truly understood why the Second Prince's army of 100000 had been crushed utterly by the forces of the Norton Family. The soldiers he faced were so well-trained that he had never seen any like them and they rushed at him courageously without the slightest hesitation. The Gold ranked knight who had received his finishing blow to save the marksman also had pretty solid swordsmanship that allowed him to defend against close to a hundred strikes from Blademaster Zarinan with much difficulty before he was finally struck once.

Despite the two Gold ranked knights' injures, the Norton Family soldiers weren't the slightest intimidated and continued to rush frantically at Blademaster Zarinan. They were even willing to trade their lives for the chance to land the shallowest injury on the Blademaster. A few of the soldiers even gave their lives just to hold the Blademaster in place after abandoning their weapons and hoped that their comrades would avenge their deaths.

After killing more than 300 men, Blademaster Zarinan already lost count. His Battle Force was also slowly running out. Even if he was a rank 3 Blademaster, his Battle Force was still limited in amount and could not be used indefinitely; he could only last longer than the average Gold ranked knight. When faced with the Norton Family soldiers' frantic assault, his Battle Force was drained even more quickly as the armor the soldiers wore required more Battle Force than usual to cut through.

After that, the tens of ballistas that joined the fray caused Blademaster Zarinan even more grief. He never would've expected that the bolts fired by the ballistas would have even more force than the arrow fired by the Gold ranked knight, causing him to suffer two more injuries as a result with one of the bolts brushing against his left arm and the other boring its way through his right calf, leaving a gaping, bleeding hole behind.

The heavily battered Blademaster understood that if he did not make his escape, he would be overwhelmed by the Norton Family soldiers. So, while he still had some Battle Force remaining, he rushed deeper into the forest and headed towards the location where Lorist hid unknowingly.

Blademaster Zarinan resolved himself to give the Norton Family soldiers a good lesson when he recovered some more Battle Force and cursed internally throughout his escape. He then leaped over the shrub that was blocking his way and made his way up one large tree with the last remnants of his Battle Force before sitting limply on the tree branch.

Blademaster Zarinan was rather satisfied with the large tree as it had thick branches and dense foliage. There was no way anyone would be able to locate him from beneath the tree. After that, he looked around to inspect his surroundings, only to see a pair of eyes burning with anger and a sword gleaming with cold light heading his way, accompanied by a vicious scream. "Bastard! Give me your life!"

Chapter 205
Executed

Clang, clang, clang!

"Ugh!" cried the Blademaster as he fell from the tree.

That old guy didn't think that he would actually make his way to where Lorist was hiding. If he still had enough Battle Force, he would've been elated, but right now he deeply regretted his actions instead and felt that he shouldn't have wasted so much time and energy on the Norton Family soldiers, causing him to fall prey to this sudden surprise attack when he was at his most vulnerable.

Despite that, Blademaster Zarinan still managed to react at inhumanly quick reflexes. However, as he had used up his Battle Force, he only managed to deflect three of Lorist's sword strikes before he revealed an opening for the fourth which left a wound on his left chest. The old Blademaster's rich battle experience dictated him to fall off the tree without resisting to avoid having his chest pierced through completely. Otherwise, he would've been nailed to the tree by Lorist's sword.

Thud! Blademaster Zarinan smashed flat onto the ground by the tree.

"Ack!" The old Blademaster coughed out a mouthful of blood and he looked incredibly bloody, especially since his left chest had been pierced quite deeply. Even though he had removed the shaft of the arrow that had planted itself on his back, the arrowhead was still within his body and the fall just now caused the arrowhead to burrow itself even deeper, sending waves of pain that caused the Blademaster to grit his teeth hard.

Raising his head, Blademaster Zarinan stared at Lorist who was still on top of the tree with a sharp gaze and said, "Kid, so you were hiding here and even know an ambushing trick or two… But as long as I don't die, I will definitely get my payback from you…"

Lorist was also breathing raggedly while he clutched the tree trunk and leaned his body on it. The attacks he launched just now had tugged onto his wounds and caused him to sweat profusely from the pain. Seeing Blademaster Zarinan below the tree,

Lorist's mind filled with rage as he said the following with a cold, icy tone filled with killing intent, "You think you'll get away alive? Dream on! You will die today no matter what. Come haunt me as a ghost if you want your payback so much…"

Darn it all. All the way from Morante City to the Northlands, I've never suffered anything as bad as this! My injuries aside, the family forces also got so many casualties, Lorist thought as he recalled the corpses of the hundreds of soldiers who sacrificed themselves littered all over the stream, causing anger to flare in his mind once again. Given that the Blademaster was at the brink of death, Lorist felt that it was time for him to end it right that instant.

Just as he was about to leap downwards from the tree, the sounds of Norton soldiers searching the forest could be heard in the distance, causing Blademaster Zarinan who was on the ground to quickly roll and crawl away from Lorist's leaping range. After standing back up, he said coldly, "I'll spare you for now, kid… Catch you later…"

After saying that, he stumbled his way deeper into the forest and tried desperately to make his way out regardless of the thorny shrubs that nicked away at his skin.

"Good Sol! Aren't you a fucking Blademaster?! You're even willing to ditch your pride to escape?!" shouted Lorist from the top of the tree.

But Blademaster Zarinan didn't pay him any regard and continued to make his way forward while shielding his head.

Having no other choice, Lorist jumped down from the tree and rushed towards the Blademaster, ignoring his injuries. If he had waited for his soldiers to come first, it might allow the Blademaster to escape. He figured that it was best if he ended the Blademaster while he could lest his family suffers even more harm later on. The old Blademaster had to die!

After tens of minutes, Reidy came over with tens of other guards who brought along with them four steel ballistas. Apart from Reidy, who was blessed with extraordinary strength that allowed him to carry one ballista by himself, the rest of the guards had to carry each ballista with one person holding the front and another at the back, with the third ready to load and fire at a moment's notice.

It didn't take long for the guards to identify the footprints and blood trail left on the ground and a few of them climbed up the tree to find the wire mesh armor Lorist

discarded, a few scraps of cloth and a silver medicine box that was completely empty.

"Milord is still fine," Reidy said, glad and reassured. "This silver box is the one our lord carries around in his hidden pouch for use in emergencies. It seems that he has managed to treat some of his wounds. Let's continue our search and see if we can find any more clues."

"Over here. There are tracks here left by two people who passed through not long ago." Without delay, one of the guards who used to be a hunter found the trail left behind by the two. "Look, cloth scraps of different types can be found on the twigs. It seems that they've passed through the shrubs and are headed in the direction of the wildlands…"

"One of you shall inform Sir Els about this. The rest shall go along with me to follow the trail," Reidy decided.

The sky was darkening gradually and Lorist didn't know how long he had been chasing behind the Blademaster's nor how many mounds or streams they passed through. His chest felt as if it was on fire as he struggled to take in one breath after another. The Blademaster in front of him also began to slow down and was only barely stumbling forward.

"Old… Old man… Did you freaking… Dope yourself with some kind of drug? You're… you're still able to run so far…" Lorist muttered as he struggled to keep up.

Not far away from him, a stream could be seen. Blademaster Zarinan rushed towards it immediately and dipped his head right inside, anxiously taking in one mouthful of fresh water after another.

Lorist also followed suit and stopped at the bank around 10 meters away from the Blademaster and began drinking away. The cool and refreshing water seemed to put out the burning feeling within his chest. After filling himself up with all the water he needed, Lorist looked at the Blademaster and cackled as he said, "Run, old guy… Continue running. Aren't you supposed to be good at that?"

Even though Zarinan wanted to get up, he found that he had not a single shred of energy left. After trying for a few times, he realized that he wasn't able to move and said, "Ki-kid… Don't be so full of yourself… I… I bet you can't move anymore either… J-just wait until I recover some Battle Force… I'll sh-show you…"

Lorist tried hard to sit straight and thrust his sword into the ground to stabilize himself before saying, "Alright. then let's see wh-who's able to recover faster… and who will be the fi-first to die…"

Blademaster Zarinan stopped talking altogether as if he wanted to save the slightest bit of energy that the act would cost him. And so, the area around the stream returned to its former tranquility.

Lorist also stopped talking as he had already begun to calm his breathing so that he may recover his energy sooner.

Time ticked by slowly and after a few moments, Lorist stood up and retrieved the sword he thrust into the ground before heading towards the Blademaster who laid sprawling by the bank of the stream.

When he was around 6 meters away from his nemesis, just as he was about to rush in, Lorist's expression changed suddenly and he began to retreat cautiously.

A gigantic, beige-colored python could be seen within the stream, slowly swimming towards Blademaster Zarinan.

Seeing Zarinan in front of it, the python prepared itself to land a savage bite. Perhaps, it considered Zarinan as a free meal that the heavens had gifted it with; an unmoving prey, just like a sheep with its legs broken so that couldn't escape and could only be swallowed whole while still conscious…

A gold flash of blade glow flared, after which the python's head got split into countless pieces. Blademaster Zarinan had already stood up. As his glowing sword cut the gigantic python into shreds, the blood spurting from its body colored the whole Blademaster blood-red.

At that moment, Blademaster Zarinan was incredibly frantic as the Battle Force he had spent so long to save up had been wasted on the gigantic python. He had originally intended to give Lorist a surprise attack the moment they were close enough.

But Lorist had already leaped forward. After seeing the old man having enough energy to cut the gigantic python apart, he understood that his energy recovered at a rate slower than that of the old Blademaster's. Had it not been for the 'brave' python that sacrificed itself, Lorist might really have fallen into the Blademaster's trap. But since the latter's Battle Force had obviously been used up on the python, Lorist hesitated no

more.

Clangclangclangclangclang…

The crescendo of clashing swords built up slowly once again. But this time around. the one who was knocked flying was Blademaster Zarinan. While the two extra shallow cuts he got wasn't of much consequence, he was sent flying by Lorist's vicious kick and landed on the ground before curling up like a cooked, red lobster while coughing out blood nonstop.

Lorist held his sword with both hands and propped himself up with it as to not fall down. The previous flurry of attacks had completely burned him out and it was already fortunate that he didn't collapse right away. With sweat flowing all over his body carrying traces of blood and a few reopened wounds, searing pain began to assail Lorist's senses.

Blademaster Zarinan struggled to get up before making his way towards the forest in the distance at a staggeringly slow pace while coughing out blood. Lorist was already using the last remnants of his energy to control his breathing; he couldn't even move a single finger and could only look at the figure of the old man fade into the forest.

By the time Lorist recovered enough to move, he followed the blood trail into the forest. The sky had completely darkened by then and the growls of beasts could be heard not far away. What Lorist had to do now was not to find the Blademaster, but rather to find a spot for himself to spend the night safely.

He eventually encountered a large tree and climbed up on it. The tree trunk was so thick that would require more than 10 people linking hands to be able to circle it completely, and that was just what Lorist needed. Knocking onto the surface of the trunk with the hilt of his sword, he heard an echo which indicated that the insides of the trunk was almost hollow. Infusing some internal energy into his sword, Lorist pierced it into the tree and cut out an oval shape with his other hand clutching the bark before pulling it apart, revealing an empty hole within.

This was one of the survival skills Lorist learned back in the days he worked as a mercenary in Morante City. Usually, trees of that size would have holes of differing sizes within which could be used as a temporary shelter. The hole within that tree wasn't too big, but it was just enough to fit Lorist within. After climbing inside, he made two breathing holes on the bark piece he was holding before carefully closing it

back and blocking the makeshift door with his sword. That way, the bark door wouldn't fall outside the tree to the ground.

Within the darkness, Lorist felt deathly tired. But he understood that there was no way that Blademaster Zarinan would lose his life in the forest that easily. He knew that he had to end the old man's life once and for all when he was at his weakest. *After I take care of the Blademaster, I will definitely go to the Second Prince and to give him my 'thanks'...*

Lorist then sat down cross-legged to begin activating the Aquametal Technique by circulating his internal energy despite the pain it caused him. Only by doing that could he recover enough strength and internal energy by dawn to seek out the Blademaster.

The forest at night was a rather noisy place with roars and growls of beasts all over. Sounds of knocking and scratching could frequently be heard from beyond the tree bark door. However, the spot Lorist found was rather special as it was above the 1.5-meter mark of the tree trunk. While that was not an obstacle at all to humans, it was definitely inaccessible to four-legged magical beasts.

When Lorist saw the sunlight seeping through the seams at the entrance of the hole, he knew that dawn had come. After a night of circulating his energy, the internal energy in his dantian had recovered up to a third of its full capacity. Feeling assured that he felt no presences outside, Lorist pushed away the bark door and made his way out of the hole.

I definitely have to find that old Blademaster and kill him today, Lorist pledged to himself.

The beasts that crossed the forest during the night had long messed up the tracks the Blademaster left behind. Lorist could only use his senses and intuition to continue his search.

Meanwhile, Reidy looked at 4 dead guards while shaking his head in futility. During the night, they set up camp on top of a mound and were attacked by many magical beasts that came without pause. Even though they managed to fend them off in the end, they still suffered heavy casualties as a result.

Looking at the four remaining unharmed guards, Reidy said, "You guys, bring the injured and the dead back first. I will go look for milord myself. Don't worry, I grew up

in the wilds and it's easier for me to travel alone. I will leave some tracks for you to follow when you're done."

……

Currently, Lorist had just found Blademaster Zarinan, who didn't make it far during the night. The old Blademaster had also hid atop a tree throughout the night, but he didn't crawl into a hollow one like Lorist did and instead climbed all the way to the top and cut off the tallest branch and carved a spot for himself to lay within.

The difference between his experience the night before and Lorist's was that he was continuously harassed by magical beasts. From time to time, magical pythons and different kinds of magical panthers would launch attacks on him, with many other carnivorous magical beasts waiting beneath the tree as they chewed away at the beast flesh chunks cut off by the Blademaster. That was why Lorist was so easily able to spot Blademaster Zarinan who was perched at the very top of the tree from rather far away.

As if he had a premonition, Blademaster Zarinan turned to look at Lorist from the distance. Even though he had been bothered by magical beasts throughout the night, given his abilities as a Blademaster, he had still managed to recover up to half of his Battle Force. Seeing Lorist appear before him even though he didn't explicitly conduct a search the Blademaster roared before he jumped from the tree he was on to the next tree in Lorist's direction.

Lorist quickly drew his sword and awaited the clash. Both of them understood that if they wanted to take each other's life, it had to be done on this very day. If they let each other go, there might be little to no chance for them to have another encounter in the future. Blademaster Zarinan only cared single-mindedly about bringing Lorist's head back with him because he wanted to release his frustration and humiliation from being injured by Lorist so badly and to fulfill the mission given to him by the Second Prince. Lorist on the other hand only wanted to kill the Blademaster for a simple reason: he had to avenge the hundreds of heroic soldiers who had sacrificed themselves, and what better time to do it than right now, when the Blademaster was gravely injured?

Clangclangclangclangclang…

During this clash, the one who was forced to retreat backwards was Lorist. It was a shock to him that the Blademaster managed to regain so much vigor within only one

night, as if the wound to his left chest and left arm, the hole in his right calf and the arrow wound on his back didn't affect him at all after he bandaged them up for a bit, forcing Lorist to struggle bitterly to defend.

"Good Sol, even though you're already almost 80, you cursed old man, how are you able to recover faster than me?" Lorist barked, not understanding what was happening.

"Hehe, kid, did you think that people call me a quasi-Sword Saint for nothing? I only need to take one more step to actually become a Sword Saint. To think that you would be so dumb to seek me out only to have your life ended here…" Zarinan said gleefully while he took one step forward after another.

"Graawr!" Behind Lorist, a Savage Magical Bear around 4 meters tall appeared and waved both its paws in a slashing motion towards Lorist.

Still able to retain his calm, Lorist quickly fell flat on the ground before kicking his legs and pushing himself backwards through the two hind legs of the upright-standing bear.

"Ugh, it stinks…" Having whoosh through the bottom of the magical bear, Lorist almost felt like vomiting from the stench. But right now, he couldn't be bothered to care about such things and pushed himself up from the ground with both his hands and sending his legs kicking against the bear's back, sending it stumbling forward towards Blademaster Zarinan.

The old man who was elated just before after seeing that Lorist was about to be crushed by the bear's paws was shocked to see the it coming in his direction. But as he was not as agile as Lorist, he was forced to deal with the bear first.

After expending lots of effort, the Blademaster cut the bear into pieces. But before he managed to catch his breath, he saw Lorist stare at him with a sly smile. Without saying anything else, Blademaster Zarinan turned to run immediately.

"Good Sol, is that what a quasi-Sword Saint should be doing?" Lorist complained as he began to give chase.

Now that he had a chance, Lorist immediately grasped it. As the old man's right leg was injured, it was hard for him to dodge and evade the bear, so he could only waste his Battle Force to take it down. Lorist believed that he only had to strike the old man

from a distance before retreating repeatedly to take the old man down.

Even though the Blademaster only had one leg to give him the push, he was still able to move relatively fast and Lorist still wasn't able to catch up to him despite that. Thus they ran all the way to a cliff below which a jade-green river could be seen.

"Well, keep running! Oh, wait, you've made your way into a dead end, didn't you?!" Lorist said as he gasped for air after the tiring chase.

The old man was also breathing raggedly, but he revealed a ghastly smile and said, "Hehe, did you… really think I was trying to run?! This… this spot is a good one… Over here, you won't be able to circle me around… and strike me before shrinking back repeatedly… I finally found the ideal place after so much effort! Kid, this is where your life ends!"

Even before he finished, the old man sent himself flying towards Lorist.

Clangclangclangclangclang…

This time around, their positions were reversed and Blademaster Zarinan was gradually forcing Lorist towards the edge of the cliff. In a few more steps, Lorist would fall all the way down to the river below.

"Hehe, kid, there's no doubt that this will be your end… I…" All of a sudden, the old Blademaster froze as his sword fell from his hand towards the ground. An iron ballista bolt had pierced through his stomach at that moment, leaving behind a large, gaping hole.

"Milord, milord…" Reidy cried as he hurriedly rushed forward to support Lorist who was about to collapse at any moment.

Letting out a breath of relief, Lorist slumped into Reidy's arms. Just as he was about to say something, his expression changed all of a sudden as Blademaster Zarinan whom he thought was dead jumped towards the both of them while crying out, "Let's all die together!"

Both the palms of the Blademaster struck Reidy's back, sending him flying towards the edge of the cliff with Lorist in his arms. In a desperate move, Lorist hurriedly raised his sword and pierced it through the old man's heart, but it was already too late as he was dragged down the cliff in Reidy's embrace…

Chapter 206
Enslaved

One guard rushed into the tent hurriedly with a grim look on his face. "Sir, we followed the trail Sir Reidy left us and arrived at the edge of a cliff where we found the steel ballista he left behind, the Blademaster's corpse and Milord Lorist's sword. But milord and Sir Reidy were nowhere to be found! The marks left on the edge of the cliff seem to indicate that they've both fallen into the river below…"

The four Gold ranked knights within the tent, Fiercetiger Loze, Malek, Belnick and Freiyar, all stood up and said in unison, "Bring us there!"

The nearby area around the cliff had long been searched thoroughly by the guards and when the four Gold ranked knights arrived, they were greeted by the sight of Els, Yuriy, Jim and a few other Silver ranked knights looking at the flowing river beyond the cliff.

"So this is that Blademaster? Milord said he was called Zarinan… Was he sent here by the Second Prince?" Loze said as he inspected the corpse on the ground.

"That's right, Knight Josk and Knight Potterfang had both been injured quite severely by him. The family forces also lost more than 400 good men because of him, among which 11 were family knights," Els said as he approached with a grim expression.

"Did you not locate any trace of our lord?" Malek asked.

"No… He must've fallen straight into the river. This river flows inland towards the wildlands and connects to the Azure River over there. I've already sent someone over to search." Els said.

"We must definitely find our lord. Have the other search parties come here and make sure to search both sides of the banks of this river carefully. I shall take the lead, so you guys can send this corpse back first and look after it. We'll deal with it after milord returns," Belnick decided grudgingly.

……

Lorist was currently experiencing a fever and he only managed to regain consciousness for a bit only to barely hear some people say, "Woke up……. This guy……. incredibly lucky……. Fell straight into the……. Tell the young mountain chief……."

Feeling someone place a cool water sack at his mouth, he took in large gulps of the liquid within before losing consciousness.

The next time he regained consciousness, he realized that he was within a large cloth sack which was being shaken around really hard. Lorist realized that his whole body hurt so much that he almost felt numb from the pain. The insides of the sack was filled with the stench of blood and sweat that caused Lorist to feel like vomiting, but he couldn't even if he wanted to. His head hurt so much that it felt to him like it was about to explode while he kept on sweating. Even though he wanted to cry out, he couldn't do so as his throat felt inflamed and painful with his lips so dry that it cracked. His whole body was also bereft of energy.

The cloth sack continued to shake indefinitely and before long, Lorist realized that the people who were transporting him seemed to be in a rush and believed that he had been stuffed into a sack and hung to the side of a horse, just like how the merchants hung loads on both sides of workhorses. As the shaking continued, Lorist fainted once again.

The next moment Lorist opened his eyes, he was no longer within the large cloth sack and could see the star-filled night sky above him. The chatter of people and horses could be heard nearby and it seemed that they had stopped at some kind of resting stop. Lorist found that he was tossed amidst a pile of grass and left there just like that. But he couldn't move a single muscle, not even being able to raise his head, and could only stare at the night sky quietly while laying sprawled on the ground.

This doesn't seem good, I think I've fallen into the hands of the mountain barbarians, Lorist hypothesized after hearing the noise around him. But what made him curious was why he was rescued and taken away. According to his understanding on mountain barbarian culture and behavior, when the barbarians met a heavily-injured person in the wilds, they would usually kill that person to end the suffering, or rob that person and leave without doing anything else, instead of wasting effort and resources to save that person.

He also wondered where Reidy, who had fallen off the cliff with him, had gone. Was he

similarly rescued by the barbarians? If so, where would he be now? Lorist could barely remember that he was fed some kind of bitter medicine when he was still half-conscious. While the medicine did seem to treat some of his injuries, it made him completely weak and powerless with his dantian being completely empty without a single shred of internal energy within. Right now, Lorist was even weaker than the common person and couldn't kill a chicken even if he wanted to.

For now, he could only lie unmoving. Even though he wanted to activate his technique to recover some internal energy, he found that he wasn't able to do so as his body didn't react at all and only let out a bunch of sweat.

Sounds of giggling approached from the distance as two male and female barbarians approached Lorist. Perhaps they found the place to be nice as it was quiet and sheltered. Not long after, the male barbarian began to make his move, but the female barbarian said something that Lorist wasn't able to hear. But he was able to hear clearly the male barbarian's reply, "That one is gonna die soon, he can't do anything. We don't need to care. Come on…"

Even though the female barbarian wanted to push him away, she was pressed to the ground by the male barbarian and the humping soon ensued.

Lorist smiled bitterly as he couldn't even turn his head to look even if he wanted to. That was what the male barbarian meant when he said that Lorist was on the brink of death. The two continued their 'vigorous exercise' and they had already switched to another position, with the male barbarian having his mate get on all fours with her backside raised. Incidentally, the female barbarian faced Lorist and saw his opened eyes when she raised her head.

"He's awake, he's awake… I have to tell the young mountain chief," said the female barbarian before she pushed the male barbarian away and ran off into the darkness. The male barbarian remained in his ready-to-thrust position for a few moments before looking at Lorist and cursing savagely when he left.

After a while, Lorist was surrounded by a bunch of people whose faces were painted with various patterns, causing Lorist to recall a documentary he watched in his previous life about a few explorers who made their way into a cannibal settlement within a forest. There was a shot where the primitive people gathered around the camera and it was exactly like the scene he saw before him, as if he had become a meat dish ready to be served.

Do the mountain barbarians eat people? Lorist wondered as he tried to recall everything he knew about the barbarians. It was said that during the winter seasons, if the mountain barbarians lacked food, they would cook up the people who starved to death and consume them for sustenance. Given that winter was already on the way, were the barbarians going to bring Lorist back as reserve food?

At the very least, Lorist felt that it was fortunate that he wasn't about to be eaten by the primitive, hairy-looking cavemen as they were often depicted in media of his past life, but mountain barbarians who differed little in appearance to himself. Those barbarians also seemed to be more cultured than those he saw in documentaries in that they would season their food as they were cooking it, unlike the cavemen who probably didn't even know about washing their food before tossing it into a cooking pot.

Lorist shut his eyes and ignored the incessant chattering of the barbarians. Even though they also spoke the same common Grindian Language, after a millennia of living in isolation within the mountains and forests, their language evolved in their own way and included much vocabulary specific to their weird barbarian dialects. Coupled with the slightly different intonation and pronunciation they used, it almost hurt Lorist's head to listen to so many of them speak at once.

All of a sudden, the voices quieted down and Lorist opened his eyes curiously, only to see that the heads that gathered around his face had dispersed with only a young female mountain barbarian within his line of sight. She had a head of long, brown hair with a shiny, golden tiara on her head. Had it not been for the three streaks of painted tiger stripes that covered her face, she would've been considered quite the beauty based on her facial features.

The female barbarian stared at Lorist for a while before asking whether he could already talk.

Another bushy-haired barbarian appeared beside her and it was unclear whether that person was male or female. That person began to feel Lorist up and took out a stick on which some disgustingly sticky substance was stuck and poked on Lorist mouth with it. After being carefully inspected, Lorist was almost choked to death from the stinky breaths of that barbarian.

Before long, the barbarian raised his or her head and said roughly that Lorist wasn't beyond saving and mentioned that the reason he couldn't move right now was because

of the side effect the medicine they fed him, and that it would wear off naturally after a while.

The crowned barbarian woman looked rather happy to hear that and instructed them to save Lorist's life. Before leaving, she looked at him and said, "This is my first flatlander prisoner who has an important position… I will bring him back for daddy to see…"

The things that happened soon after caused Lorist to feel extremely embarrassed and angered. After the crowned woman left, five to six female barbarians beside him stripped him naked. One of them was surprised when she saw Lorist's flaccid member and pointed at it with her finger while saying something that basically amounted to, 'If his member is already so big while soft, then wouldn't it be quite impressive if hardened?' And so the few barbarian women crowded around Lorist's lower body and prodded his junk from time to time.

Lorist was so embarrassed that he wanted to die. Fortunately, his junior didn't react as Lorist himself didn't have any shred of energy left. Otherwise, he was sure that he would be group raped by the barbarian women. The one who got Lorist out of his predicament was the bushy-haired barbarian from before, saying something that caused the barbarian women to leave him alone, but not before they each grabbed his member one last time before leaving, angering Lorist so badly that he almost fainted.

After that, the bushy-haired barbarian got a huge basin filled with a greenish-black paste and proceeded to apply it all over Lorist's body, with extra layers padded onto Lorist's injuries, before feeding Lorist a bottle of sticky, bad-smelling, black-colored medicine, causing Lorist to faint from all his built up anger.

The next time he awoke, he felt his whole body hurt and itch as if he had been encased in concrete. The soreness, numbness and pain he felt in his wounds were especially unbearable. Even though he wanted to scratch them, he wasn't able to as he was still so weak that he was unable to move.

At that moment, a female barbarian with thick lips appeared beside him and her face was full of circular, black tattoos. Seeing Lorist wake up, she fed him a large bowl of meat soup. Not long after finishing the soup, Lorist felt his stomach hurt badly. In the end, he could no longer hold it in and emptied the contents within his stomach while lying down.

As if she knew that Lorist would have that reaction after drinking the soup, the thick-lipped woman had made sure to stand far away before it all happened. When Lorist finally stopped, she called two male barbarians to bring Lorist to the side of a stream and they placed him on the cobblestone bank before washing his body clean.

Even though the cold water made Lorist shiver quite badly, he couldn't move at all and was at the mercy of the thick-lipped female barbarian. When he was finally washed clean, the barbarian woman wiped his body all over with some kind of beastskin before letting him dry under the sun while she began toying with Lorist member, causing him to wish for death to spare him from the embarrassment.

As the thick-lipped barbarian played around with Lorist's thing, she even mocked the other two male barbarians, saying that their manhood wasn't nearly as big as Lorist's, causing the two of them to feel rather dissatisfied and begin lifting their beastskin kilts to compare their manhoods with Loirst's. After a while, the thick-lipped woman finally let go of Lorist's member and began comparing those of the other two men with her hands and gradually engaged in a bout of pleasurable intercourse with the men.

When they finally finished, the two men brought Lorist back to their camp and tossed him into a dark tent. The bushy-haired barbarian once again appeared before Lorist and prodded his body for a bit before nodding with satisfaction. But this time, the barbarian didn't apply the green mud from before and only fed Lorist a bowl of bitter medicine before leaving.

In the middle of the night, Lorist woke up all of a sudden and realized with surprise that energy had returned to his body and he could sit up normally again. His throat no longer hurt and he tried clearing it and realized that he could speak. Even though Lorist was completely undressed, his body was covered by a strong-smelling beastskin. With his stomach rumbling in hunger, he tried to get up but found that his legs were still far too weak.

Lorist then tried to stand up by using his arms to hold onto the support of the tent, but the unexpectedly brittle support cracked and snapped before he could react and the whole tent collapsed with Lorist under it.

A pair of hands soon raised the tent above Lorist and he realized that it was the thick-lipped woman from before. Barely able to sit up properly, Lorist said, "Thank you. Do you have something to eat? Also, my clothes…"

The thick-lipped woman stared at Lorist for a while before leaving and returning with a huge basin that contained a big piece of roasted meat along with four palm-sized, black-colored biscuits as well as a flask with clean water.

Lorist wolfed down his food and quickly finished it within moments. Even the flask of water was drunk completely without a single drop remaining. However, he was still troubled as his clothes still weren't there…

And so, Lorist turned to the thick-lipped barbarian woman and said, "Clothes, my clothes…"

But that woman didn't move a single finger in response.

Thinking that she probably didn't understand the word 'clothes', Lorist tried to mime it with his hands, only to accidentally have the beastskin covering him slide off. The thick-lipped woman's eyes flashed all of a sudden and she stared at Lorist with a hungry look.

This reminded Lorist of the scene when she toyed with her manhood not so long ago. Already panicking, he clutched the beastskin tightly before retreating into a corner like a helpless little girl.

Fortunately, the sky was brightening by the moment, causing the thick-lipped woman to leave. Not long after, two male barbarians wearing beastskin kilts came to Lorist and signalled for him to follow them.

When the beastskin-covered Lorist was brought outside a large beastskin tent, he found that many other barbarian women came over to see him and whispered that the flatlander that was Lorist was awake and could already stand up.

After waiting for a while, he was brought into the tent and sitting within the middle of it was the gold-crowned woman with tiger stripe facepaint. Before her was a small wooden table on which Lorist's outfit and pants were placed.

"Who are you? What's your name? Where are you from?" asked the barbarian woman with a weird dialect of the Grindian Common Language.

Lorist narrowed his eyes and saw that she was toying around with his Gold ranked instructor badge that he had put on back then as he reminisced his glorious days at the Dawn Academy when he was showing Telesti his academy badge collection to give

her some inspiration in designing the emblem for her academy. It was at that point when the cursed Blademaster Zarinan launched his assassination, causing Lorist so much trouble that he had no time to even remove his badges.

"I pay my respects to you, beautiful lady. I am called Locke and I come from the Dawn Academy of Morante City. I am a Gold ranked instructor for that academy," Lorist greeted the woman politely.

"Are you not from the Mordon Family?" asked the crowned woman.

After some deliberation, Lorist realized that she was referring to the Norton Family. But her weird pronunciation caused it to sound like 'Mordon' to Lorist.

"No, no," Lorist said hurriedly as he shook his head. If he had messed up his reply, he was certain that his head would soon end up upon a stake at the barricades outside. After all, the Norton Family had nursed a grudge with the mountain barbarians for more than 200 years.

"Respected lady, take a look at the badges on my clothes. The silver one is the emblem of the Dawn Academy and the gold one represents my status as a Gold ranked instructor there," Lorist replied with a straight face. It's not like he was lying. After all, what he said was technically true a few years ago.

"I guess you aren't lying. The people from the Mordon Family wear no such badges and you do look like someone from an academy. But what does a Gold ranked instructor do? Why have you come to the Northlands and why are you so badly injured?" questioned the crowned barbarian woman.

Thus, Lorist began to tell the tale he spun up. "Respected lady, I am a Gold ranked instructor from the Dawn Academy and I have come here because I've received the invitation from the Norton Family to help them design a castle. I ended up injured like this because I encountered with someone who bears a grudge against me. Initially, I accepted the Norton Family's invitation so that I could avoid my enemy, but who knew that he would chase me all the way here and I kept running away to no avail. Fortunately, I was saved by you, respected lady. Please accept my gratitude. I will definitely return the favor in the future…"

"I don't need your thanks or your favor, and I'm no respected lady. I am the mountain chief of Whitesnow Mountain. Since I've saved you, your life now belongs to me. From

now on, you're my slave, understand?" said the crowned barbarian coldly before raising her head to signal for her servants.

Two huge barbarian men came over from the side and restrained Lorist before putting a thick collar around his neck that was connected to a long chain.

Already despairing, Lorist said, "Then, may I have my clothes back…"

Whap! A whip struck Lorist's back harshly, sending waves of pain down his nerves. One of the men yelled, "Darned pig, you shall address her as master!"

After giving it some thought, the crowned barbarian woman tossed Lorist his clothes and said, "You can have them. But these two badges, I will keep…"

Chapter 207
Mortification

At that moment, Lorist felt like he was within hell on earth. The mortifying humiliation he was receiving was enough to make him wish for suicide.

Being a slave was not a big deal in itself and the humiliation that came with it was still something that he could tough through. Additionally, when the gold tiara-wearing woman who called herself the chief of Whitesnow Mountain returned his clothes, Lorist was surprised to find that the medicine and ointments kept within the hidden pouch of his outer robe was still there. That robe of his also contained many useful tools which the barbarians didn't discover.

It wasn't that the barbarians were careless. Lorist's robe was basically a cloak with two long sleeves by the side and it was easy to see that its two outer pockets were empty. Additionally, it was also strengthened for defense and that was rather common, with metal plates or thick leather patches being appended onto the shoulder parts being the norm. That's why the weight of the robe wasn't an indicator that it contained anything else and after the barbarians checked the two outer pockets, they made no more attempt to look deeper.

Originally, Lorist had planned to endure being a slave temporarily and wait until he was left alone to treat his injuries and activate his technique to recover some internal energy. After that, he would be unstoppable and the party of hundreds of mountain barbarians wouldn't be able to prevent him from leaving for home.

While he was a slave, as he had just recovered from a grave condition as well as the fact that he was the first person of status captured by the female chief of Whitesnow Mountain, those other barbarians didn't treat Lorist badly and only tied his collar chain to a wooden post outside the main tent. It was worth mentioning that two other huge wolfdogs that were also chained to that wooden post.

For some reason, these two wolfdogs displayed keen interest in Lorist, licking and sniffing him from time to time. He later realized that those were not signs of friendliness as he noticed that the wolfdogs looked at him with the same look they gave the bloody bony meats the barbarians fed them. At that time, Lorist understood

the true meaning of the phrase 'a tiger that leaves its mountain gets bullied by the dogs' quite literally.

In the evening, the thick-lipped barbarian woman came over and brought Lorist to the riverside before giving him a piece of linen cloth, indicating for him to wipe himself clean. Having been licked all over during the day by the wolfdogs, Lorist ignored the stares of the barbarian woman as he stripped naked and jumped straight into the river to wash himself thoroughly.

After he finished bathing, he was brought into a small tent by the barbarian woman and served a huge piece of roasted meat, three biscuits and a huge bowl of meat soup. When Lorist finished all his food, the woman cleaned up after him and brought him back to the tent's entrance.

That night, the barbarians threw a bonfire party with the main attraction being the bushy-haired barbarian who danced and sung around the fire alone, mumbling something unintelligibly for almost half an hour, causing Lorist to be impressed with that barbarian's stamina. In the end, the barbarian tossed a pinch of shiny powder into the fire, causing it to suddenly burst outward and let out lots of sparks. The barbarians that witnessed the show intently cheered out right away before singing and dancing around the fire freely.

It was then when Lorist realized that the women in the barbarian party far outnumbered the men, with each male barbarian having at least two women dancing beside him. Frequently, some of the barbarians disappeared from the dancing grounds before a repetitive thumping sound could be heard behind some bushes.

As the people dispersed, the thick-lipped barbarian woman came over and brought Lorist into the tent. She pointed at a pile of grass and instructed him to sleep coldly before leaving.

Finally being left alone to his own devices, Lorist was elated. If he could activate the Aquametal Technique to recover some internal energy and consume two drops of rank 2 medicine, his days of freedom would be guaranteed.

Patience… I must wait for a little longer… Finally, no sound could be heard outside. Lorist then sat up cross-legged and got into position. Just as he was about to begin circulating a major cycle, the tent flaps flipped open and through the candlelight, Lorist could see the face of the thick-lipped barbarian. She entered the tent, stripped

herself bare before she headed towards Lorist.

Terrified, Lorist said, "What are you going to do…"

The thick-lipped barbarian said with a threatening voice, "To do you…", before leaping straight for Lorist.

Even though he tried to resist, he didn't expect that the thick-lipped woman would train in Battle Force, allowing her to easily suppress all his attempts at retaliation. Lorist was then stripped bare and both his hands were tied up using the chain on his collar. She dragged him to a nearby tree and fastened the chain before suppressing both Lorist's legs with her hands and proceeded to use her mouth to take in Lorist's member. With only but a few sucks, Lorist's manhood stood hard as steel against his own desires.

After that, she gripped onto his meatstick, positioned it against her privates before sitting herself down while letting out a moan of pleasure.

Lorist incredibly frustrated about that. What humiliation he had to endure! However, there was no way he was able to prevent the barbarian woman from straddling him over and over. In the end, Lorist fainted from the sheer anger he felt.

When he woke up the next morning, he was tossed a palm-sized biscuit by the thick-lipped barbarian woman and realized that the other barbarians were already packing their tents and were preparing to depart.

During the journey, Lorist was chained to a Northlander horse that was also carrying other loads by its side. They only stopped in the evening after traveling for the whole day. However, the barbarians didn't set up their tents and planned to rest out in the open under the night sky. While Lorist wasn't able to activate his technique to recover internal energy, he felt relieved that at the very least he wouldn't be forced into having intercourse with the thick-lipped woman since he was out in the open with the other barbarians.

During the next three days of traveling, Lorist got to eat two meals a day with the first in the morning being a large biscuit, followed by roasted meat and meat soup for dinner. He also got a flask of drinking water. By the time the fourth blister on Lorist's feet popped, the barbarians finally stopped to set up their camp properly. Upon hearing some of their conversations, Lorist got to know that they would rest for the

next few days before continuing to their meeting point.

During the night, the thick-lipped woman brought Lorist to take a bath again and seeing the smile on her face, Lorist felt troubled the whole time. As expected, before the bonfire party ended that night, that barbarian woman pushed Lorist into the tent once again. His resistance was futile as he was once again taken advantage of by the barbarian woman as she pleased.

On the next day, Lorist tried to make the best of his time to execute a minor cycle when he was confined and nobody was around. He also took two drops of rank 2 medicinal mixture and by the time night came, he felt that his empty dantian refilled with the slightest bit of internal energy. If he had not been injured or not consumed the weird medicine the barbarians gave him, his internal energy would naturally recover. But right now, his condition was akin to a normal person who didn't train in any martial arts.

The thick-lipped woman came over again at night. Even though Lorist already had a very small amount of internal energy within his dantian, he was still unable to resist the woman's Iron ranked Battle Force. Surprisingly working against his favor, the rank 2 medicine he took before caused him to last even longer, allowing the woman to do Lorist three whole times throughout the night.

On the next day, Lorist sat without moving within his tent and secretly activated his technique again to recover. By the time night came, he already saved up slightly more internal energy than he did yesterday. He planned to ambush the female barbarian by knocking her unconscious with his internal energy and utilize his technique to recover more of it throughout the whole night in peace. If he succeeded, he would have at least a quarter or third of his dantian filled when dawn breaks and he should be able to make his escape.

That night, the thick-lipped woman brought Lorist to take a bath before bringing him the same meat soup she did the days before. However, the soup tasted a little weird with traces of bitter herbal taste. Even the meat within was cut into odd, round shapes with them tasting a little raw despite being cooked.

Initially, Lorist thought that it was due to the barbarians' inappropriate handling of the ingredients and he felt that it was already quite fortunate for him to have something like that to eat as a slave. But by the time he finished his food, he only realized that the oddly-shaped meat was in fact slices of some kind of magical beast's

male sexual organ. And the herbal taste he detected within the soup reminded him of a few kinds of herbs with aphrodisiac-like effects. He rebuked himself internally for not recognizing it at first even though he was a trained herbalist himself. That soup was served to him to enhance his sexual prowess.

Raising his head and looking at the thick-lipped barbarian, Lorist saw her wearing a lewd smile as if she was looking forward to their activities during the night. Cursing in his mind, he consoled himself by thinking, *that the aphrodisiac soup would give me more energy, if anything. When the bonfire party starts later, I will take all the time I have to recover my internal energy… By then, I will show you what I can do…*

The bonfire party proceeded as usual. When it was about to end, the thick-lipped barbarian woman went to look for Lorist again.

Lorist had already made his preparations and plotted how he would go about not raising the woman's suspicion when entering the tent and knock her unconscious when she least expected it. *Tomorrow, I will be free, like a released cage-bird that soars freely in the sky…*

However, the thick-lipped barbarian woman didn't enter the usual tent and instead brought Lorist to another larger beastskin tent. She opened the flaps and pushed Lorist inside.

He was surprised to find that within it were three barbarian women with lustful, green eyes waiting for him. Two of those women were rather largely-built and their physiques differed not much from that of men's.

Lorist had to admit that the aphrodisiac soup was pretty effective as his lower member didn't get a shred of rest for the whole night. He forgot how many times he did it, only that he had fainted when the women were busy humping him nonstop. The internal energy that he had so painstakingly saved up had also been used up and he could no longer move in the slightest.

The next night, Lorist was also served with a large bowl of aphrodisiac soup, but he refused to take any food. And so, four barbarian women came up to him, two of whom included the ones who had done it with Lorist the night before. They forcefully pressed him on the ground, chewed on the meat within the soup before force-feeding the chewed pieces by mouth. After that, they emptied the soup into Lorist's mouth. Truly, it was a cruel sight to witness.

That night, five of them ganged up on him.

Lorist really felt like committing suicide as there was no way he could continue to live life as is.

Never had he suffered this kind of humiliation that would put even a pig to shame. *Oh wait, that's not right… Pigs wouldn't feel ashamed and would simply hump away happily,* Lorist thought. But he definitely wasn't a breeding pig and he didn't expect that he would be treated as such after being captured by the barbarians. He only had his large member to blame for his misfortunes…

After he was tossed underneath the sun, Lorist recalled two of the martial arts classic novels he read in his past life and considered whether he should endure the pain for his livelihood or kill as many of those barbarian women as he can before dying himself. It was truly a difficult choice.

Wouldn't it be easier to kill myself? He never would have even dreamed that he would end up in this kind of predicament. Lorist was so embarrassed at the fact that he wasn't able to resist in the slightest when the demonic barbarian women humped him night after night.

A few figures blocked the sunlight that was shining upon Lorist and with a loud whap, he felt searing pain in his back. He then heard a hateful barbarian cry out, "You darned pig… Stand up…"

Just beat me to death already, Lorist thought as he played dead without saying a thing.

The barbarian woman wearing a golden tiara, also known as the chief of Whitesnow Mountain, came forward and asked, "What's wrong with him?"

After some whispers, the few barbarians around Lorist left.

At night, he was bathed, fed aphrodisiac and stripped again in a routine manner. He was then laid onto the familiar grass patch before one of the barbarian women began teasing Lorist's member. On the other hand, he didn't resist at all and let them do as they pleased. He scanned the tent before closing his eyes and thought, *well, two more barbarian women just showed up… I think I won't be able to sleep peacefully tonight…*

The aphrodisiac soup he consumed moments ago worked its wonders again and Lorist's manhood stood up tall and high. The barbarian women felt the massive rod

up as if they were unwilling to let it go for even a second before one of them prepared to sit upon Lorist's body.

Right at that moment, the woman who wore the golden tiara marched into the tent with four other attendants, each holding a long, black whip. All of a sudden, cries of begging and forgiveness resounded within the tent.

Lorist opened his eyes slightly and saw that the woman chief and her four attendants were whipping the seven kneeling barbarian women who were crying and begging nonstop but did not dare to run. After a drawn-out whipping session, the crowned woman shouted for the other women to scram and walked up to Lorist who was lying on the grass patch and inspected him before glancing at his erect member. After that, she ordered the four attendants to bring Lorist into her tent.

Oh no, just after escaping from a wolf's mouth, I fell right into a tiger's? However, he didn't expect that he would be brought to a section of the tent that was separated with a beastskin divider and tossed onto a grass patch there. After throwing Lorist his clothes and pants, the barbarian men left him alone.

He finally got some much-needed sleep without being bothered.

The next day, one of the attendants of the crowned woman entered and kicked Lorist awake before bringing him outside the main tent and giving him a biscuit. After that, he tied Lorist to a wooden stake, but this time around, the two wolfdogs weren't there with him. At night, that same male attendant gave him another biscuit and a flask of drinking water before bringing him back to his corner within the large tent to sleep.

Two days passed and Lorist felt that he regained a little more vitality. The time when he was oppressed by the barbarian women had drained him so much that he felt completely empty. So, he secretly took another two drops of rank 2 medicine and prepared to activate his ki technique to regain some internal energy to escape. Only, the barbarians began to pack up and leave on the next day itself and their destination was not another rest stop but rather their main settlement…

Author's note from chapter 210:

I'm really sorry I have to say this, but the recent experience of the main character with the barbarians was not a result of me receiving emotional shock that caused me to

mess the story up, and neither it is an expression of my dissatisfaction with my dear readers. In actuality, I have detailed this plotline as far as two years back and I am only writing according to the draft I prepared back then.

This is one of the main character's personal experience with the mountain barbarians and unlike most other novels, I don't want to make the main character rule over the barbarians for no good reason nor give him another beautiful female character out of nowhere. To the main character, this experience is terribly horrifying for him as he had encountered a group of barbarian women whose men have gone out to war for almost a year. As the main character was injured and couldn't resist, he was subjected to that horrifying treatment as many readers have so kindly pointed out. Originally, I could have skipped this story thread. But in the interest of meaningful character development for the main character that will shape his eventual attitude towards the barbarians, I have chosen to keep it the way it was planned and wasn't able to change it.

To many, this will be a horrible turn-off much like poison and it is your choice if you choose to drop this story. As a writer, that is not something that I can force. But to me, telling a good story and bringing my readers more of the rich cultural differences of the Grindia Continent and its exciting and magnificent history is what I am really trying to do.

-Smoke is a Path, Author of Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

Chapter 208
Wooden Shack

This time around, the barbarian troupe traveled for five days straight. Along the way, Lorist managed to gather a good amount of thatch which he used to make a pair of grass sandals for himself. After that, he requested one of the male servants of the female chief to cut off two pieces of beastskin from the one he used to cover himself at night to be used as padding for his sandals, thus solving his problem of having to travel bare-footed.

That male servant actually seemed rather fierce. Even though he wasn't that old, being at around 15 or 16 years of age, his large size would suggest otherwise. He was quite curious when he saw Lorist working on his sandals and squatted down to look for a good amount of time. That skill was actually learned by Lorist during his days as a mercenary and the sandals he made were based on the cloth shoes from his previous life, meaning that the left shoe was slightly different from the right, unlike most other grass sandals worn by the commoners of Grindia.

The finished grass sandals was taken by the male servant for him to satisfy his curiosity. But he didn't claim them for himself and returned them to Lorist after giving them a good look, with the condition that Lorist teach him how to make those sandals. Lorist was quite eager to do so as well and he chatted with the barbarian throughout the lesson.

According to the barbarian servant, the gold-crowned barbarian woman saved Lorist because she was worried that he would be ravaged to death by those ravenous women. If he had died, she wouldn't be able to show him off to her father, since Lorist was the only flatlander that wore a gold badge that signified his relatively high status.

This explanation made Lorist understand why the female mountain chief had ignored him even though she bothered to save him. He took that chance to ask that young male servant whether there was another person alongside him when he was first found. He really wanted to know where Reidy was.

The male barbarian nodded and said that there was an idiot with great strength that caused even two Six Ringed Ulay to be unable to hold him down. However, apart from

his strength, that idiot wasn't good at anything else, so they tossed him to the rear end of the troupe and had him take care of the workhorses.

Ulay was a term made by the mountain barbarians to describe warriors. The number of rings was an indication of their Battle Force power level. The barbarians believed that Battle Force was actually a gift from their mountain deities and they divided the 'power of the mountain spirits' into 12 different 'ring levels'. Each 'ring' represent a unit of strength and the more rings one had, the stronger one would be. A Six-Ringed Ulay was roughly equal to a Three Star Iron ranked Battle Force user.

Lorist was really agitated as he finally got some news about Reidy. However, he didn't understand why that barbarian called him an idiot.

The barbarian then explained that 'the idiot' was also a mute and when they found him, he was injured all over his body and had even used his teeth to bite a magical wolf to death. However, he behaved rather well and was rather obedient as long as he was fed. Apart from being really strong, he didn't do much to cause trouble.

Lorist felt like that description didn't quite fit Reidy, but if it was really him, then something bad must've happened. Even so, Lorist had to prioritize his own safety for now and he was only allowed to roam around the main troupe where the female mountain chief was, so he couldn't go to the rear troupe to check if that idiot was truly Reidy and had to be patient until the time was right.

Perhaps because he had taught that young barbarian how to make grass sandals, his dinner that night was far more luxurious than usual. That barbarian male brought Lorist a meaty thigh. Even though half of it was charred, it was still meat, and Lorist was incredibly glad to be able to have some as he had eaten nothing but the black, musty biscuits for the past few days.

During the night when they camped out in the open, Lorist leaned on the luggage that was offloaded from the horses and covered himself with his beastskin blanket, seemingly asleep. In actuality, he was seated cross-legged and slowly circulating a minor cycle to recover some more internal energy. His current situation prevented him from executing a major cycle as he was worried that some barbarian would come to give him a kick when he was in the middle of it. If that really happened, in the best case, he would lose control of his cultivation. In the worst case, his body would be paralyzed partially and he would truly be beyond salvation.

In the distance, a volcano that resembled Fuji Mountain could be seen. All the barbarians cheered out excitedly as they were about to reach their meeting point.

After another half a day of walking, the volcano seemed incredibly near. However, the troupe didn't travel directly towards it and instead took a turn and headed towards a slightly shorter mountain.

Halfway up that mountain, they arrived at a settlement at the bottom of a large cliff which was surrounded by a wooden stockade. The gates of the stockade were already open and the barbarian troupe marched into it proudly as the elderly and young watched and cheered.

After entering the derelict-looking stockade, Lorist realized that there was a large cave at the bottom of the cliff and that was where the barbarian troupe was heading. However, just as they were about to enter it, Lorist was dragged out of the troupe. According to the male barbarian servant, Lorist wasn't allowed to step into their sacred cave since he was a slave.

That's why Lorist could only stand by the cave entrance and could only watch as the every barbarian from the troupe gradually entered the cave.

This was the first time Lorist got to see the full barbarian troupe. When he was traveling, he only knew that the troupe had hundreds of people and around thousands of work horses. But he didn't know why they ventured into the wildlands in the first place. Now however, he understood that the barbarian troupe was sent to hunt and collect enough food for the barbarians to survive the winter. It became obvious to him when he saw the dried meat packed into beastskin bags that were hung on both sides of the work horses.

"Sol, even though these savages can enter the cave, someone like me can't?" muttered Lorist softly outside the cave. He was quite curious what the insides of that large cave looked like, but just at that very moment, he saw Reidy.

Reidy looked incredibly dirty and was almost completely naked, save for a beastskin kilt that he wore around his waist. He was bare-footed and his hair was completely messed up. Apart from the lack of face paint and tattoos on his body and face, he looked no different from the other barbarians. But the Reidy he saw before him truly looked like the idiot described by the male barbarian attendant. He was quite aloof and only moved when the people in front of him bickered at him.

At that moment, Lorist instantly jumped and called out to Reidy as he tried to run over to him, only to feel a harsh tug coming from the collar he wore, causing him to fall flat onto the ground. One whip-wielding barbarian male immediately rebuked Lorist and began whipping him, causing him to shield his head with both his hands while enduring the searing pain.

After the barbarian whipped Lorist four to five times, the blank-eyed Reidy began to growl all of a sudden before leaping and pushing the whip-wielding barbarian to the ground and trying to bite at his throat, causing the barbarian a huge fright. But with his quick reflexes, he hurriedly stuck the whip into Reidy's mouth and listened to the squishing sounds as it was chewed to pieces by Reidy's teeth.

A few other barbarians came over from the side and pulled Reidy away from the male barbarian, who then got up from the ground with his face reddened with anger. He pointed to Reidy and scolded loudly before having the other barbarians release Reidy with the intent on teaching him a lesson himself.

But out of their expectations, Reidy didn't attack that barbarian after he was released and instead rushed straight to Lorist's side.

With all fours on the ground, he prodded onto Lorist's body with his head much like a dog trying to get its master's attention, though without actually licking Lorist.

Everyone who witnessed that sight was flabbergasted and the male barbarian realized that Reidy had attacked because of the flatlander slave. Lorist sat up and gave Reidy a tight hug as he let out streams of tears. The reason Reidy was like that was because he had suffered heavy impacts to his head. From the look in his eyes, it seemed that he couldn't recall anything else apart from his attachment to Lorist.

"What is going on here? Why is the entrance to the cave blocked?" asked the tiara-wearing woman as she came over with a group of attendants.

The male barbarian hurriedly reported, "Mountain chief, that idiot seems to recognize that flatlander slave and the slave also hugged him while calling him Reiti or something. The slave was blocking the way of our troupe and I wanted to pummel him, but then that mute idiot leaped over and tried to bite me…"

The woman with the golden tiara waved her hands to signal that she understood the situation. Looking at the hugging guys on the ground, she asked Lorist, "Oi, who is he

to you?"

With a face full of tears, Lorist raised his head and said, "He's my student and is also my attendant. If he didn't save me back then, I would've been killed by my nemesis., But I didn't expect that we would separate after falling into the river and right now he's become an idiot like this and can't even speak…"

The crowned woman nodded and said, "Since he's your attendant, I will allow you to bring him with you. Don't block the way into the cave. You are my first flatlander slave of high status, so you can bring your attendant with you as proof of it."

Lorist really didn't mind that he was being treated like a flatlander slave as being able to stay with Reidy was already a huge surprise for him. He hurriedly brought Reidy away to the side of the cave to stop blocking the entrance as he wondered how he should inspect Reidy's condition. He needed to know specifically which part of his head was injured.

By the time the sky darkened, everyone from the barbarian troupe were finally inside. After that, the male attendant approached Lorist and brought him to an old wooden hut within the stockade and called an old barbarian man out. After being told something, the hunchbacked old man nodded before he proceeded to bring Lorist and Reidy to a small wooden shack not far away and signalled for Lorist and Reidy to enter it.

But the male attendant from before stopped Lorist and said seriously, "You will be spending winter within this shack and if you might die if you are not careful. Since there's still a little time before winter, go collect some dried grass or something to keep warm. If you need anything, tell me, I will try my best to aid you. Oh, and I'm called Ashu and you can have the guards standing outside the cave to deliver a message to me when I'm inside."

After Ashu left, the hunchbacked old man smiled and said to Lorist, "A flatlander slave with status? Hahaha, how ludicrous. I've never heard of something this laughable., But no matter, since you will no doubt die during the winter. The mountain chief won't bother with two frozen corpses after all."

After saying that, the hunchbacked old man asked Lorist to follow him back to the wooden hut and tossed an old beastskin sack to Lorist. "Take it, this will be your food for the whole month. I hope that you will survive it, haha… Now scram back to your

little shack."

The sack contained many kudzu roots. They were plants that were similar to potatoes and contained a high amount of starch. They tasted a little bitter and were harvested from a kind of vine plant, making it a great meal substitute when food was scarce. That sack weighed around 25 kilograms and Lorist finally understood how the biscuit he had been eating for the past few days were made. Basically, the kudzu roots were ground into powder and mixed with meat chunks and vegetables before it was cooked atop a hot rock surface, resulting in the biscuit that was suited for long travels.

The shack was rather small, not exceeding 5 square meters large. The ground within the shack also had a hole that was almost one meter deep. Fortunately, they were halfway up a mountain and the altitude was rather high. Otherwise, if rainwater got into the hole, it would be stay there and be incredibly hard to remove. The shack was basically constructed by a chaotic assortment of wooden branches of different lengths plunged into the ground, forming a wall that was roughly 1.5 meters tall with a makeshift roof on top. Not only was the shack not insulated from the air outside, the starry night sky was also visible from within. There was also a patch of dried grass within the shack that stank with a rotting smell. The ground within the shack was also rather muddy and some feces could be spotted at the corners of the shack. Some shameless person must have used the shack as their latrine just recently.

It didn't even have a door and its entrance was only covered with a piece of torn, old beastskin. Lorist recalled what Ashu said as well as the old hunchbacked barbarian's snickering laugh. It was true that if he truly planned to spend winter within the shack, he and Reidy would end up becoming two frozen corpses by the end of winter.

However, Lorist didn't put that matter to heart and thought, *only people with something wrong with their heads would spend winter in a shack like this.* Since there was no longer anyone to watch over him, Lorist could finally begin his internal energy recovery undisturbed. By the time he recovers, he would bring Reidy back to the dominion right away and wouldn't bother to continue staying there as a slave.

Even though it was rather cold at night, he decided that it was better to stay outside in the open using his beastskin cloak as a windbreaker than stay within the smelly old shack. Lorist found a few broken pieces of earthenware and brought some water from the water pool nearby and began washing some kudzu roots to make food for Reidy and himself. Lorist consumed two of those biscuits while Reidy ended up eating five.

When dawn was breaking, he walked back into the shack with a solemn look and sat down beside the snoring Reidy. Lorist's condition wasn't that simple as he had thought because after he completed a major cycle circulation throughout the night, he recovered far less internal energy than expected. Additionally, he noticed that the meridians within his body were incredibly withered and dried up with many places requiring recuperation and repair, causing him to have much difficulty activating his ki technique. His internal organs also still hurt quite a bit.

Having successfully executed a major cycle during the night, Lorist had recovered up to 10 percent of his full capacity. On days he wasn't injured, he could execute three whole major cycles within that span of time and could at least recover half of his internal energy capacity even if he had previously used it all up. Right now however, it was as if he had returned to the days when he just began to train in the Aquametal Technique and he had to clear out his blocked meridians and repair the damages they sustained. Lorist estimated that it would take at least two months' time for him to recalibrate his body's condition to return to his former state.

If one were to quantify internal energy, the ten percent of it recovered by Lorist during the night would be more or less equal to 100 'threads'. It was no wonder Lorist had only managed to recover one or two threads after executing minor cycles during the past few days given the level of internal damage he sustained. At that time, he was already incredibly excited at the fact that he could recover any internal energy at all and didn't consider why the rate of recovery was so slow. He finally understood what it meant to lose everything he worked for over the years within one single night.

Lorist sighed deeply before lifting Reidy up and leaning his body against his own. Reidy opened his eyes and looked at Lorist without a shred of hostility and was told to keep quiet and stay still. Lorist then placed his right palm onto Reidy's back and activated his technique and sent in his internal energy into Reidy's body to inspect his state.

Reidy's body turned out to be in a rather bad condition; the Blademaster's double palm strike he sustained on the back before he was pushed down the cliff had destroyed a few circulation nodes of Reidy's hexagonal circulation diagram, causing him to be unable to use Battle Force altogether. And given that he had fallen from the cliff of roughly 20 meters of height, his head sustained severe impact without the protection of Battle Force when he rolled down the sides of the cliff before falling into the river, causing internal bleeding and clotting within his brain. Lorist theorized that it was these blood clots that caused Reidy to lose most of his memory and it was

already a small miracle that Reidy had still been able to recognize Lorist.

To treat Reidy, there were two ways. The first involved restoring his Battle Force circulation and using it to clear out the blood clots within his brain. But since Reidy had lost his memory, even if his body was restored, he wouldn't be able to remember the proper method to circulate Battle Force for the recovery. The second method involved using Lorist's own internal energy to first clear out the blood clots within Reidy's brain to restore his mental faculties. However, the effects of that method would take much longer to manifest.

Perhaps, I have no choice but to spend winter in this shack with Reidy, Lorist thought as he turned to look at the derelict walls of the shack.

Chapter 209
House-building

Lorist was prepared to build a new house to spend the winter. During the morning, just as he was about to look for Ashu, the latter came over to look for Lorist and brought with him two magical goat skins and a sack of dried meat.

He apologetically said that as he had no other valuables and that those resources were the most he could offer and he hoped that Lorist and Reidy would be able to survive the winter.

"Thanks, Ashu. I also plan to build a house over here since we will definitely die if we spend winter within that shack. I wonder if you can help me borrow some tools?" Lorist asked.

"Build a house?" Ashu mused curiously. "But winter is coming in less than 20 days. Do you have enough time? It took tens of people two whole months to build that hunchbacked old man's old wooden house. Do you think the two of you can do better?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Don't forget that I'm a Gold ranked instructor for architecture from the Dawn Academy. If I can't do it, then no one can."

Given the straightforward personality the barbarians usually had, Ashu believed Lorist's words without much debate and nodded before he said, "Alright. I will go tell the mountain chief about it and if she agrees, I will bring you some tools."

He left and returned quickly and said that the mountain chief had agreed to Lorist's request to build a house. But apart from being allowed to borrow tools, the two wouldn't be provided any manpower. On the other hand, Ashu was tasked to supervise Lorist and Reidy while they built the house.

Lorist looked at the building tools Ashu brought with him. Apart from an axe, a shovel, a hoe and two rusted saws of different sizes, the rest were farming tools like sickles and pitchforks. According to Ashu, the barbarians usually didn't farm and would at most would only grow a few vines which they would use for their travels. He also mentioned that the tools were left behind from a long time ago. Apart from seeing

them once when he was still small during the construction of the old man's house, Ashu said that the tools were usually left within their storehouse unused.

If Lorist could use his internal energy and Reidy could activate his Battle Force, building a house that would allow them to survive throughout the winter was an easy task. But right now, both of them could only be considered stronger than average normal people. With Lorist also having lost his sword, he could only improvise with the tools he had on hand.

During the first day, Lorist dismantled the shack with Reidy. With the hole within it as the center, they drew up a plot of land of 3 meters wide by 5 meters long and started digging. Ashu watched in stupor before he stopped Lorist and said, "A house this large with so much space would be hard to keep warm! The smaller it is, the warmer it will be."

Lorist laughed and said, "No worries, my house will be warm even though it's large. You'll understand when it's completed."

Ashu could only hold his doubts and wait.

On the second day, Lorist asked Ashu where he could get some clay before sending Reidy to a stream nearby to dig up some of it during noon. In the afternoon, they mixed the clay with the mud that they dug out the night before and added some fibrous vines and dried grass into the mix to make some bricks.

On the third and fourth days, Lorist and Reidy cut down more than 50 trees with diameters up to 30 centimeters under Ashu's supervision. Ashu himself also helped out a lot and brought four work horses to help move the logs into the stockade. Had he not contributed, Lorist and Reidy would have taken at least four more days to move them all there.

On the fifth and sixth days, Lorist and Reidy sawed the tree logs into two halves under the curious gazes of the people of the barbarian settlement. They looked at the both of them work as they wondered what kind of house those 'dumb slaves' would build.

On the seventh day, the both of them stacked up the almost-dry bricks and filled the seams between the bricks with more wet clay. Following that, Lorist had the logs that were cut in half all sharpened and one end before lining them up along the insides of the brick walls. Soon, the wooden logs circled from one end to another and a conical

wooden wall could be seen within the hole they had dug out. Apart from the entrance which was left unblocked, there weren't other windows or openings on the walls.

Ashu wondered as he asked Lorist, "Why do you need another wooden wall inside the clay brick wall?"

Lorist was applying some clay into the space between the logs as he said, "When winter comes, the clay wall will freeze up and won't be able to retain as much heat. By adding an extra wooden wall just behind the clay wall, it can prevent more heat from escaping. This is called double insulation."

Ashu nodded as if he understood Lorist's explanation before asking two more questions. "Why don't the walls extend straight up from the ground but slanted towards the middle instead?"

Lorist then drew an inverted v shape on the ground with a stick and said, "If the house is built slanted like that, it won't collapse from the weight of the gathered snow. That's why the walls are built with a similar angle to the roof."

It was then when Ashu's doubts had been cleared.

On the eighth to tenth days, Lorist worked almost entirely on the roof. It extended all the way from the top to the ground at a slanted angle and the whole house looked like a triangle when viewed from the side with a hole right in the middle where the entrance was.

On the eleventh day, Lorist started to work on the fire pit and stove, with the smoke channel having already been dug in the ground beforehand. However, there was no cover above the fire pit and Lorist couldn't just put a piece of wood atop it either as it would easily catch fire. He had to somehow find a way to separate the wood from the fire.

And thus, he tore apart his outer robe and took out the six thin steel plates that were embedded within it to provide better defense for the wearer. Lorist had Ashu ask for the help of an Eight Ringed Ulay, a wielder of the 'power of the mountain spirit', that was roughly equal to a Two Star Silver rank in terms of Battle Force cultivation, and had him use his blade glow to cut out a 1-meter-long, 0.8-meter wide and one inch thick stone slab with which Lorist placed upon the fire pit. He paid the Ulay two of the steel plates for his services.

After that, Lorist traded two more steel plates with Ashu for 30 kilograms of kudzu root, some lamb and a large earthen jar, because the food he had been given by that old man which was supposed to last for that month was almost finished.

Lorist then gifted the last two plates to Ashu as thanks for his help thus far. Troubled by the fact that he received something for free, Ashu got a dagger and gave it to Lorist in return.

The next few days saw Lorist being incredibly busy working on the door of the house, some clothes for Reidy, collecting enough charcoal as well as making two sets of wooden bowls and spoons. Most importantly, he also had to get some food that he will need to survive through winter as well as some salt.

Upon the completion of the house, Ashu fostered a deep-seated respect for Lorist. Never would he dare imagine that a shabby shack like that could be changed into a cosy house within a little more than 10 days. He was especially impressed with the fire pit Lorist installed into the floor and was shocked to find that it could be used to also heat up the bed during the night. Additionally, the whole house was able to maintain its internal warmth, much to his surprise.

During the time he spent constructing the house, Lorist had already understood most of the things about the barbarian tribe that was led by the chief of Whitesnow Mountain. According to Ashu, it was originally called the Nubik Tribe, and Ashu and the mountain chief were originally people of the Habibaba Tribe. A few years ago, the leader of the Habibaba Tribe went to the Smormilgen Mountain to participate in the Kubawesson Festival that was held once every 12 years during which they will make offerings to their mountain gods. And during the Bywessi Conference, a Jambassen would be chosen to be the leader of the tribes in the nearby area.

After that, the leader of the Habibaba Tribe declared himself the Jambassen and led his warriors to conquer the other seven tribes within the mountainous area, one of which being the Nubik Tribe. However, unlike the other tribes that were absorbed into the Habibaba Tribe, the Jambassen had his beloved daughter become the new leader of the Nubik Tribe and gave her control over the nearby barbarian territory before declaring her the chief of Whitesnow Mountain. And so, the Nubik Tribe changed its name to the Whitesnow Tribe.

Ashu was the playmate of the Whitesnow Mountain chief since his childhood and he had naturally become her attendant when she became the leader of the tribe. Ashu

told Lorist that there were around 1300 people within the Whitesnow Tribe, but Lorist doubted it because he didn't even see that many people and remarked that he only saw the elderly, women and children when they collected wild fruits and firewood. Apart from the men that Lorist traveled with in the troupe, he didn't see any other barbarian males.

Ashu said that it was to be expected because the Ulays and 400 plus men of the Whitesnow Tribe followed the Jambassen to war. One year ago, the Habibaba Jambassen got into conflict with the Jambassen of another area and both of them plotted to take over each other's territory, causing disputes between the two factions. The Whitesnow Tribe had also sent 400 men to join the war effort and they would only return after the first round of snow that year.

Lorist finally realized that the reason the family's development during the past two years didn't get disrupted by any barbarian attacks was due to that. Apart from the 1000 plus barbarians who attacked the army camp at the intersection point of the two mountain ranges two years ago before they were driven away by Josk's mounted archer brigade and Pajik's garrison company, there were no other reports of barbarian skirmishes. He now understood that it was because the barbarians had changed their target. At that moment, Lorist hoped that the barbarian tribes would be in conflict for as long as possible.

What he found most laughable was what Ashu said about his fate. While Lorist was the first flatlander slave of high status of the mountain chief, he was also the first flatlander slave she caught. And right now, she had no idea whatsoever about what she would do with Lorist.

It wasn't like the barbarians didn't own slaves; the shabby wooden shack was built for the very purpose of housing them. However, as those slaves were other barbarians, after two or three months of foraging and hunting with the tribe, they would quickly assimilate into it and become one of its members.

However, Lorist and Reidy were known to them as flatlanders and after they become slaves, they wouldn't be allowed to join the tribe. Currently, they were waiting for the Habibaba Jambassen to return from his military expedition, after which the chief of Whitesnow Mountain would show Lorist off to him. But in the meantime, she had no idea what to do with Lorist.

Quickly, winter arrived and the barbarians of the Whitesnow Tribe all entered that

large cave to spend the winter. And as flatlander slaves, Lorist and Reidy were forbidden from entering their sacred cave. Because of that very reason, the female chief granted Lorist permission to build his house without any objection because she was fine as long as Lorist didn't escape when they were within the cave. In actuality, given Lorist and Reidy's current condition, if they tried to leave during the winter, they would no doubt die, so there wasn't really much of a difference.

Had it not been for their status as slaves, Ashu would have moved into the newly-built house with them right away. According to him, the cavern extended quite deeply and there was even a small subterranean stream within it. But during the three months the barbarians stayed within the cave, the air within would smell progressively worse even though it might be hard to realize it in the beginning.

While there was quite an extensive network of smaller caverns within it and even a few openings for ventilation, the combined waste excretions of the thousands of people and livestock would cause the stink to permeate the whole cave. After winter, everyone who came out of the cave would smell absolutely horrible. While the hunchbacked old man couldn't enter the cave because of his injuries and had to stay outside to monitor Lorist and Reidy, many other barbarians actually envied the fact that the old man didn't have to spend winter in the cave.

Ashu then pointed at the other derelict shacks within the stockade and said, "Look. Apart from your old shack which was built to house slaves, the other shacks here aren't that much better. While they are still habitable during summer and autumn, nobody would be able to survive in those shacks during winter period and the spring rainy season and can only stay within the cave. I hope that after this winter, the mountain chief can order the other people of the tribe to aid you to build more houses like that for us…"

I don't want your help, thank you, Lorist thought. *When I recover my internal energy, I will return to my family dominion right away. Who would want to stay here for a few years to help you build your houses?* Despite that, Lorist maintained his smile and asked Ashu how he could get enough food and salt for the winter.

Ashu said that the tribe can't give Lorist and Reidy food from their public food stores given their status as slaves and it was already quite hard for them to bring out the month's worth of kudzu roots before. If Lorist needed more food, he would have to get them himself. Ashu said that hunting was one of the best ways and whatever Lorist caught would belong to him. As for salt, he suggested Lorist to travel to a saltwater

lake across the mountain where there would be ample salt chunks scattered around the bank. He also added that some people would be sent there for a trip later and he would ask them to bring Lorist an especially large chunk for the time being.

Sigh, so slaves have to rely on themselves to survive too... Even so, Lorist still found it surprising that being a slave of the barbarians was far better than being a citizen of most other dominions of nobles. As a barbarian's slave, the prey one hunted would belong to oneself whereas commoners who hunt within the dominion of a lord are obligated to give at least half of their gains to the dominion lord as tax, with some worse rates going up to as high as 75 percent. For example, if a commoner killed a wild boar, it would be fortunate if he was still left with even the boar's head after the lord came to collect the tribute.

I wonder how many commoners would come running here to become their slaves if this spreads, Lorist thought, before he shook his head and stopped thinking unnecessary thoughts. As a slave, he should be aware of his own status. Since he was a flatlander, he wasn't allowed to venture too far and couldn't carry any weapons with him. The prey he could hunt in the nearby area were also very sparse, with only some wild hares and pheasants which he could catch.

He did however not require any weapons to catch those two animals. Lorist recalled a practical method he learned during his days as a mercenary to make hunting traps. Using a vine and some goat skin, Lorist managed to make more than ten traps which he laid within bushes and shrubs. When he checked the traps on the next day, he found that he had gotten quite a good harvest of three pheasants and four hares. As winter was just days away, these animals were all plump with fat. Lorist was elated and thought that if his gains continued for the rest of the days at that rate, he would quickly be able to gather enough food.

Lorist used a pheasant and a hare to trade 25 kilograms of kudzu roots with the hunchbacked old barbarian and two other hares for a few more magical beast skins. Additionally, he gifted Ashu with a pheasant and cooked one for himself that night for dinner. He then smoked the remaining hare meat to save it for the winter.

After another night, Lorist went to check those traps again and found three captured pheasants and three hares. This time around, he used one of each animal to trade for a wooden bucket with which to carry water and just like that, the house was equipped with the basic daily necessities.

Seeing Ashu looking at the traps curiously, Lorist casually taught him how to make them. However, he didn't expect that after Ashu learned the skill, it spread to all the other barbarian children and when Lorist checked the trap site two days later, he realized that the whole bush was laden with traps belonging to others. With so many traps cramped together, how would the pheasants and hares of the mountain not notice them?

However, after he saw Ashu's innocent expression, Lorist was so frustrated that he didn't know if he should even get mad at him. Without the hares and pheasants, Lorist turned his attention to the stream around the mountains.

The barbarians didn't eat lots of fish were because they didn't have any nets, didn't know how to fish them, and also because fishes had too many fine bones, making them relatively hard to consume. Even if they did want to catch some, they only used the spearing method and could only catch the larger varieties of fish, albeit with little success.

While Lorist didn't have any fishing tools with him, that didn't stop him from using his wit. After spending a day digging a large pit with Reidy at the riverbank, Lorist made a small bypass from the river to the pit he dug and allowed water from the stream to flow into it. On the next day, he made a small wooden 'gate' with the twigs he found and installed it in the middle of the small stream to redirect the fish to swim into the pit. Following that, he cut the pit off from the river before removing the water within with a wooden water scoop and caught more than 100 fish in one go, among which 20 were of rather large size.

Seeing that his method worked great, Lorist woke up the next day with the intention of repeating the process. But just as he was bringing the wooden gate to the stream, he saw the female chief of Whitesnow Mountain head there with her attendants. She then told Lorist and Reidy, "Come with me. I will bring you two to see my daddy."

Chapter 210
Mountain Barbarians

This time around, Lorist and Reidy did not have to walk and instead rode a Northlander Horse surrounded by the rest of the troupe. Perhaps the barbarians were shocked at how skilled they were at building that house and began treating them more nicely. Even the ration of meat they were given during the travels were the same as the other barbarians.

'Perspectives can be deceiving'. Lorist found that saying to be especially true. Even though that Fuji Mountain-like volcano seemed really close to them, the troupe spent more than half a day to arrive at its foot. They had to pass through a black pine forest before circling around two smaller hills before Lorist was able to see their destination. Halfway up the mountain was a large military base which was fortified with a wall constructed from messily stacked up rocks.

As the troupe of the Whitesnow Mountain chief approached the base, a blowing horn could be heard coming from the walls of the base. Ashu, who was riding behind Lorist, told him that the horn signalled that they were welcome and that the base was the meeting point for the Habibaba Tribe. The Jambassen who returned yesterday from his military campaign had impatiently sent for someone to notify his daughter, the mountain chief, to meet him.

When they arrived at the entrance of the base, Lorist realized that it only had a wooden gate sealing the entrance. When he entered, he saw that the setup of the base was not unlike that of normal flatlander settlements with the houses on both sides of the streets having stone walls. But what intrigued Lorist was the structure of the roofs of the various houses which were all over the place.

The talkative Ashu spared Lorist the trouble of asking and explained the origins of the base to him. It was said that tens of years ago, there was a brave, young warrior of the Habibaba Tribe that had always wanted to venture to the flatlands and understand how the people lived. And so, he left the tribe on a journey to explore the world.

But the world he soon found himself in was a cruel one. The moment he arrived in flatlander society, he was captured and turned into a slave and was forced to construct

buildings for the towns and cities of the flatlanders. After 40 years of toiling away, he was abandoned due to his old age and disease. But he managed to survive as a beggar and made his way back to the Habibaba Tribe despite the odds.

The former warrior barbarian, now old and sick, regretted his past decisions greatly and felt horrible because he wasn't able to contribute to the tribe that had raised him. So, he decided to use his experience and knowledge of building that he gained during his 40 years of slaving away to construct a mighty base for the Habibaba Tribe. Unfortunately, right after he finished building the main palace and was halfway done with the rest of the base, he passed away and returned to the embrace of the mountain deities. Having lost the guidance of the barbarian architect, the other barbarians improvised and made roofs of all kinds of styles, resulting in the lack of uniformity for the buildings that Lorist saw.

Ashu proudly said that the base, Balibak Citadel, was named after the barbarian architect.

While Lorist was not the least bit interested in what the base was called, he was curious about the palace Ashu mentioned as he didn't know that barbarians would be able to construct one.

After walking for more than half an hour, the palace was right in front of Lorist's eyes.

"Pffft!" Lorist couldn't hold his laughter back and thought, *can you even call this a palace? This is obviously a canteen built for the construction workers! The only difference is that the wooden building in the middle is two times bigger than those in normal canteens!*

The building in the middle was actually a wooden steeple. Using the wood they got from the Black Forests as its square base foundation, it was built with a pointed roof. On the sides of the steeple were two long wooden buildings that resembled the sleeping chambers of construction laborers, with the only difference being that they were built using timber. Normal construction laborer housing wouldn't use materials that expensive.

Ashu furrowed his brow and said, "What are you laughing about? We're here at the palace, so be more serious…"

Lorist shut his mouth immediately and managed to stop his laughter. *What a joke! This*

is the palace of the barbarians? I really did learn something interesting from this trip after all…

The chief of Whitesnow Mountain at the front dismounted and nodded to her few attendants before pointing towards Lorist and Reidy and telling Ashu to get another attendant to hold both of his prisoners and escort them into the palace.

Lorist later confirmed that the 'palace' was indeed modeled after a canteen. Before they even entered the building, the loud chattering from within could be heard clearly. Once inside, he saw what resembled a large canteen hall. The whole place was lined with 4 long tables arranged in parallel on each side with only a 2-meter-wide walkway between the tables for people to cross. Each of the tables sat 20 or so people and kudzu roots, fruits and roasted meat were served to them. There was an estimated 200 people feasting away within that room, with some getting so drunk that they began to cause trouble by harassing the barbarian waitresses who were serving the food and others standing on their tables and singing out loud. Lorist even witnessed a few big-built barbarian men humping away with a few barbarian women in the corner.

The walkway was rather long and at its end was an elevated platform on which a wide table filled with food stood. Behind it sat a lion-like muscular man who looked at the chaos within the hall with a lazy gaze, occasionally smiling as he drank more alcohol from his silver cup.

Seeing the mountain chief approach him, that huge man revealed a loving smile and began to laugh out loud. His laughter reverberated throughout the canteen, or 'palace' hall, and caused the chatters and laughters to stop. "Oh, my dear, the most beautiful flower of Fire Spirit Mountain and shiniest pearl of Whitesnow Mountain… You're here! Hahahaha, come over quick. Let daddy take a good look at how my beloved songbird is doing…"

The mountain chief said in an annoyed voice, "Daddy, why are you being so loud? You frightened the rest of them," before she leaped into the bosom of the huge man and said, "Daddy, this time you left for such a long time… I wasn't able to see you for a whole year…"

Patting on the shoulder of the mountain chief lovingly, the man said, "My little princess, it's not that daddy doesn't want to get back here sooner, but that old lion Bilulu just didn't want to admit his loss. Had it not been for the winter, daddy here would have stayed there longer and take that old lion's den. I will spare his life for now

and if is still defiant to me, I will go there to teach him another lesson next year. Haha, daddy also found a nice husband for you this time around. My beautiful songbird is already an adult and it's about time you got married. Alik, come here."

On the table left to the mountain chief's father, a tall and large barbarian youth stood up and stepped before the mountain chief and her father. With both hands crossed at his chest, he bowed to the mountain chief and said, "I've long heard about the great name of the chief of Whitesnow Mountain. I, Alik, am a fond admirer of yours. May Kubawesson bless you with protection, the prettiest moon of my heart…"

The mountain chief looked at Alik curiously, causing him to lower his head shyly under her intense gaze.

The large man laughed out loud and said, "My beloved songbird, Alik here is really famous and he's already a leader in the Enbri Tribe and is also a Ten Ringed Ulay. If he did not lead his 300 Ulays to penetrate that old lion's defense line, daddy here might have fallen into the lion's trap and won't be able to return. That's why I brought him here to see you, so bring him around and show him our mountains and livestock, understood?"

The mountain chief blushed as her father had called her to show her future husband the livestock they would be offering as dowry. If all went as planned, her wedding with Alik was basically set in stone.

"Huh? Who are those two?" asked the huge man after he saw Lorist and Reidy who were surrounded by four of the mountain chief's attendants.

"Daddy, they are the flatlander slaves with high statuses that I captured. Look, this is his badge," said the chief of Whitesnow Mountain as she gave Lorist's academy and instructor badges to her father before stealing a glance at Alik to see his expression, obviously feeling that her capture of Lorist and Reidy was a praiseworthy achievement.

Her father laughed out and said, "My darling, flatlanders are really cunning, so don't you go around getting tricked by them. Bring them before me so that I can ask them myself."

The mountain chief said, "Daddy, this flatlander is quite skilled and said that he's an architectural instructor and knows how to build houses. But the house he built wasn't

as big as the palace and it even looks weird, like a steep mountain."

Lorist and Reidy were promptly brought forward. As the man played around with the two badges, he looked at Lorist like a predator did its prey. "Tell me about who you are… Hmmm…"

Stepping forward, Lorist bowed before reciting the lies he told about his career as a Gold ranked architectural instructor from the Dawn Academy, his grudge with his enemy who chased him all the way into the river up to his rescue by the mountain chief and his reunion with his student that was currently mentally ill and mute.

The large man stopped Lorist before he finished and asked, "What kind of thing is an architectural instructor?"

"Well, respected Jambassen, an architectural instructor is not a thing… You can think of it as a person who teaches others how to build…" Not knowing how to answer the Jambassen, Lorist changed his phrasing to better explain what he meant.

The large man laughed out loud and said, "You? Teaching others to build? Are you fitting enough for that task? You're still so young, who would believe that you can teach others to build? Also, how can you prove that you do know how to teach if that was the case?"

One annoying thing about the barbarians was that they only believed in things they could see.

Lorist looked at the large man's table and saw a huge bowl with one cooked kudzu root within. Taking it from the bowl and placing it on the table, he flipped the bowl over and took the dagger that was pierced into the roasted meat. After that, he cut a few fruits into cubes and placed them on the upwards-facing bottom of the bowl. He then removed the skin from the piping hot kudzu root and gradually turned it into paste form before applying some to the fruit cubes on top of the bowl. In a few short moments, a mini castle could be seen.

The large man, Alik and the mountain chief were flabbergasted when they saw Lorist use nothing but a simple dagger to make a small white castle on top of the bowl.

Lorist then put the dagger back down before retreating a few steps. After bowing again, he said, "Great Jambassen, this is how I teach others to build."

The huge man scratched his head as he looked at the kudzu castle on the table before looking back at Lorist, seemingly at a loss for what to say. Just before, he had mocked Lorist for being young and inexperienced, but he didn't expect that Lorist could build a small beautiful castle like that out of nowhere, proving him wrong without giving him any face. Understanding how awkward it was for her father, the mountain chief said, "Not bad, this castle looks really nice. Can we build something like that too?"

Lorist nodded and said, "Respected mountain chief, it is definitely possible. However, it will no doubt require lots of time, manpower and some resources only obtainable from the flatlanders."

"How long will it take?" she asked.

"Based on your conditions here, I estimate that it will take at least three to four years and more than 10000 workers," Lorist said, greatly exaggerating the magnitude of the project.

Furrowing her brow, the mountain chief said, "If it'll take that long, forget it. What about building a palace like this one that belongs to my daddy?"

Lorist replied, "Oh, this won't take long. You only need three months and 1000 workers. However, respected mountain chief, it is not the right time to build right now and we have to wait until summer comes to begin our work. It is not possible to do so in the snow and rain."

The huge man patted on his thigh and said, "When I was still small, it took Balibak one whole year to build this palace for my father. Since you said that you're almost as skilled as him, then build another palace like this when summer comes next year. It will serve well as my daughter and Alik's new home. Then, it's decided."

The mountain chief began acting spoiled again with her father, who merely laughed out and waved for Lorist and Reidy to be brought away.

In the following five to six days, Lorist and Reidy were kept locked inside an old stone house. Ashu visited them a few times and said that the mountain chief had been bringing Alik around to see the sheeps and cows and their relationship was developing fast after spending most of their time together. In a few more days, Alik would return to his tribe and move them here to merge it with the Whitesnow Tribe before getting married with the Whitesnow Mountain chief.

Lorist noticed that Ashu seemed quite down when he talked about the matter, as the playmate from his childhood was going to marry another man. While jealousy and envy was hard to let go off, when compared with Alik, a Four Ringed Ulay like Ashu really wasn't appealing enough. It was the sad case of a plebeian falling in love with his master.

Two days later, snow started falling near the mountains, marking the arrival of winter. Lorist and Reidy were released from the stone house by Ashu and were told that they would return to the Whitesnow Tribe on that day. He and a few other attendants brought Lorist to a high vantage point where hundreds of people gathered and said that those people were the men of the Whitesnow Tribe who were sent to fight with the Jambassen who would also return to the tribe with them. Currently, the mountain chief was bidding farewell to Alik and after she sent him off, they would begin the journey back to the tribe.

It didn't take long for Lorist to spot the two lovers who were embracing. The mountain chief hugged Alik so tightly as if they were meeting for the last time in their lives. After a long moment, Alik finally got on his horse and left with his attendants while the mountain chief waved her hand nonstop towards him in the distance and only ceased when he was out of her sight.

On the way back, the mountain chief suddenly called for Lorist and asked him about the construction of the 'palace' in the following year over and over again. It was not until Lorist promised that he would build a far bigger palace (canteen), than her father's that she stopped pestering Lorist.

Looks like this lass just can't wait to get married and is already looking forward to her palace even though winter just started… How impatient…

When they returned to the stockade, Lorist realized that the hunchbacked old man had occupied the house he and Reidy built. When Ashu reported that to the mountain chief, she had the old barbarian man whipped. Ashu then told Lorist that taking possession of other people's belongings without permission from the leader was a grave crime. He also said that it was a shame that Lorist was a slave. Otherwise, he could make the old man his personal slave for that transgression.

I finally have some time for myself, thought Lorist as he shut the door of his small wooden house. From that time onwards, he would be spending three months there during the winter. He wanted to use the chance when nobody would bother him to

properly treat his injuries and begin restoring Reidy's memories before returning to the dominion.

Chapter 211
Departure

So it's already the 1st month of the year 1772, Lorist thought as he looked at rows of stars drawn on the wall. The barbarian that was responsible for keeping time was the bushy-haired barbarian witch doctor. Even though Lorist wanted to know only the date, he had spent lots of effort to get it out from the witch doctor who frequently talked in riddles, much to Lorist's frustration.

During the past 30 or so days, Lorist and Reidy basically stayed within the small wooden house, apart from occasionally going out to clear the snow or empty the latrine, as well as one occassion when they went on a fishing trip when the snow stopped temporarily. Despite getting up to 50 kilograms of fish, they met with a barbarian patrol group on the way back and half of their gains were confiscated.

But it was precisely because of that encounter that Lorist discovered a huge weakness of the barbarians. Their military force during the winter was incredibly lacking. During the past two years around this time, Lorist was leading the family forces in their struggle against the magical beast wave and it was quite common for them to operate within the snowy lands at temperatures around negative 20 to 30 centigrade. The main reason his forces were able to do so was their emphasis on winter gear that had incredible heat insulation, which included a fur coat, fur cap, a pair of gloves, an outer windbreaker as well as a face mask. They could be said to be equipped fully from head to toe.

Naturally, a large part of that success was thanks to Lorist's experiences in the frozen frontiers during his past life and his willingness to use the precious furs of the magical beasts to make warmth-retaining clothing for his soldiers without the slightest hesitation. Even though the cotton plant didn't exist on Grindia, these magical beast furs were far better than them in regards to retaining heat. In addition to the fact that the Norton Family soldiers have awakened their Battle Force, their increased circulation also helped to stave off the heat.

Compared to the fur winter gear of the Norton Family soldiers, the barbarians only wore a few layers of beast fur casually tossed over their upper body. They merely hung

a few of them on their upper body but left their legs bare. Not only that, the fur clothes they wore also had large sleeves. It was no wonder that an Eight Ringed Ulay, which was the equivalent of a Two Star Silver Battle Force user, was so cold that he felt like dying. They were already complaining badly about how they had to come out to patrol in that weather.

During the days when the snow didn't fall, the barbarians who hid within the cave would send out around a hundred people to patrol the stockade during morning and night, mainly to check if there were any carnivorous magical beasts hanging around. That's why when they met with Lorist and Reidy who were returning from their fishing trip, they were incredibly surprised because the both of them left the stockade without permission. Lorist told them that he had no choice because they were running out of food and had to capture more fish to sustain themselves.

The barbarians were troubled as leaving the stockade without notice was considered to be a grave crime. But it wasn't that they wanted Lorist to starve to death either. After the bearded leader of the patrol team discussed with his teammates, he decided to confiscate half of the fish as punishment. Even though they disliked fish because of the bones, it was still quite pleasing for them to be able to drink a huge bowl of fish soup during the winter. And so the matter was settled and the bearded leader even sent someone to bring Lorist a huge sack of kudzu roots after he returned to the cave. In that regard, the barbarians weren't that bad.

With the passing of the 30 or so days, Lorist had almost recovered halfway from his injuries and managed to save up a third of his full amount of internal energy within his dantian. In another ten plus days, he would be able to completely repair his damaged meridians, and the thought of that relieved him greatly. Also, of the many blood clots within Reidy's brain, only one large one remained as Lorist had been using his internal energy to gradually remove them over time. He believed that Reidy would return to his former self after that last one was removed.

The weather outside on that day was rather bad with a huge snowstorm covering the whole area.

Lorist sat cross-legged above the fire pit on the stone slab with the temperature within the house was as warm as spring. He had just finished another round of treatment for Reidy and the latter was already sound asleep in a corner. After every treatment session, Reidy would turn really sleepy and sometimes would be out cold for tens of hours a time, causing Lorist to sometimes worry that he would never wake up again.

After circulating another major cycle to recover the internal energy he expended on Reidy's treatment, Lorist shut his eyes and recalled the moments when he was fighting Blademaster Zarinan. He found it really laughable that he had felt so confident after defeating Blademaster Xanthi. At that time, he truly believed that no one else within that world would be able to force him into a corner when it came to swordplay and was really full of himself. But an assassination by an old Blademaster had been able to shake him up so badly with no warning. Not only was he personally injured, many loyal soldiers of the family also perished, causing Lorist regret that was hard to put into words.

He had believed that with his good swordsmanship and mighty family forces, he would be invincible and would be able to mess around unabated. But in retrospect, Lorist found that he had been too arrogant and ignorant. If a rank 3 Blademaster was able to push him into a grave corner, what would he do if he was faced with a Sword Saint? He would no doubt lose everything he cared about. He realized that only with personal strength could he be confident and without worries in this world.

Having acknowledged his errors, Lorist gained a newfound realization to take himself seriously from now on and train even harder than before. Currently, even when he was sitting cross-legged to rest, he was recalling every strike of the Blademaster with clarity and mentally simulated how he would block them and make counters.

Bam bam bam! The door of the house was knocked on loudly and Lorist opened his eyes immediately. *Weird, who would be coming here on a stormy day like this? I should be careful, it may be some magical beast that's banging on the door. I'd be dead meat if I really opened the door for a magical beast.*

"Who's this?" Lorist shouted out.

"It's me! Open the door!" said the person outside.

Lorist then opened the door and the one who rushed within was the hunchbacked old man who wrapped himself with so many furs he looked like a huge meatball.

"So cold… so cold…" he muttered with his face almost green like rusted iron. Some frozen streaks of mucus could also be seen near the old man's nose as he stomped around to rid himself of the cold.

"Why have you come here?" Lorist asked coldly.

"Why? Hehe, kid, this place belongs to me now! You two, scram!" said the old man as he snickered wildly.

As the old barbarian man could no longer resist the cold within his shabby old house, he had decided to get his hands on Lorist's own small wooden house.

"Have you forgotten that time when you were whipped? Also, with the furious snowstorm outside, where would we go?" Lorist said as he stared at the old man without actually considering him a threat.

"I don't care where you go. It'll be even better if you freeze to death. I still haven't paid you back for that time I was whipped. You actually dared to rat me out… I'd like to see if you can find anyone to complain to right now! There is no way that the mountain chief will leave the cave in this weather. You'll have to wait for another two months if you want to complain to her! Now, get out quick!" roared the old man as he raised a thick whip up with his right hand.

The old barbarian man swung the whip against Reidy's back, causing him to wake up and look at the old man, confused at what was happening.

"Are you still gonna stay here?!" shouted the man angrily at Reidy as he raised his whip again for another swing.

It was then when Lorist stepped forward and held the whip tightly with his hand.

"Cursed slave, you dare resist me?!" shouted the rage-filled barbarian man.

Without saying a word, Lorist landed a harsh punch right onto the old barbarian man's chest where his heart was.

"Ugh…" groaned the man before he stopped moving altogether.

Lorist did not use that much internal energy when he punched that old man as he only needed him to stay put for ten minutes or so. After removing the two thick cow skins the old barbarian man wore without any regard, he tossed the old man outside the house onto the snowy grounds. After closing the door, Lorist said to Reidy, "Don't worry, get back to sleep."

"Oh…" Reidy muttered as he lied back down.

After half an hour, Lorist put on one of the cow skins and opened the door to take a look. The hunchbacked old barbarian man had already frozen to death and Lorist removed the snow from the old man's corpse before he brought him back to the shabby old house.

The old house was freezing cold and there was a broken earthen pot within that the old man used as a brazier, but the firewood inside were all cold and wet. Lorist also realized that there were a number of large holes around the walls of the house. Originally, they were covered up by mud and clay, but they had probably fallen off after being frozen stiff, allowing the snow and wind outside to gush into the house from the holes. No wonder the old man wasn't able to stand being in his house and desperately tried to occupy the one Lorist built.

There was a pile of dried grass where the old man probably slept and Lorist tossed his corpse upon it and placed the cow skin he brought with him on the corpse, making it seem like the old man was sound asleep.

After that, he searched the house for a while and discovered that under the pile of grass was a rusted longsword. Apart from some trash and random goods within the house, there wasn't anything else worth noting. The old man still had quite a lot of food remaining, but Lorist didn't touch that and only cut off a wooden plank from the house with the longsword and used it to smudge his tracks when he returned to his own house.

The snowstorm continued for four days and three nights. When it cleared up, Lorist and Reidy immediately proceeded to clean off the snow that had gathered on the roof and after a long while of work, they saw the patrol team emerge from the cave.

The leader of the team was the same bearded man who led the previous patrol. He greeted Lorist when he approached.

Lorist pointed to the hunchbacked old man's house and said, "During the past few days, the old man would ask me to help clean the snow off his roof every time the snow stopped falling. But this time, he still hasn't come out yet. I wonder if something has happened to him…"

And so, the bearded leader made his way to the old man's house and it didn't take long for a commotion to break out.

Lorist went there to join the fray and when the bearded leader saw him, he waved his hand and said, "The old man has already frozen to death. Come here, there are a few skins and furs that you can use as well as a few sacks of kudzu roots. Take them."

Lorist happily returned to his house with the furs and kudzu roots before bringing Reidy along with him to clean up the snow around the broken old house. After that, he dug a huge hole in the ground and buried the old barbarian man within it.

Now that the old barbarian man was gone, only Reidy and Lorist remained within the stockade as all the other barbarians stayed within the cave. Had it not been for Reidy's current state, Lorist would've left the place right away since nobody would be able to stop him.

During the chilling-cold days wrought with snow and storm, apart from helping Reidy heal and further repairing his damaged meridians, Lorist also used the skins obtained from old barbarian man to make leather pants, gloves, cloaks, masks as well as some eye shields to prevent the eyes from freezing over using a small, razor-sharp blade, a long needle and a few fish hooks which he kept hidden within his old outer robe.

Even though his sewing skill wasn't that good, Lorist did manage to make leather equipment for two people in less than ten days. After that, he preserved some food for the upcoming journey and also made some wooden skis for his travels. All he had to do next was to wait until the day Reidy returns to his former self.

In the following days, Lorist would train his swordsmanship in a borderline insane fashion even during stormy days. Even during nights when snowstorms ravaged the stockade and covered the ground completely white with snow, the moment he recalled a scene during his battle with Blademaster Zarinan, he felt as if he gained some insight and would work himself to exhaustion outside in the snow. Just like that, Lorist refined his swordsmanship step by step as the days passed.

By the time the wooden wall within the house was filled with three other rows of small stars marking the days, Reidy's treatment had already reached its last stage. As Lorist tapped on Reidy's pressure point behind his head with his left hand, he used his right palm to support Reidy's back from behind and injected some of his internal energy into Reidy's head in small pulses against the last remaining blood clot. When it was finally disintegrated, Reidy lost consciousness.

But this time around, he woke up within only four short hours. When he opened his

eyes, he saw Lorist sitting beside him and said, "Milord, it was as if I was dreaming for a long period of time…"

Lorist laughed out and said, "Do you remember what you dreamed about?"

After furrowing his brow for a few moments, he shook his head and said, "I can't really recall. I think there were many other people around us, but you were always by my side, milord. Oh, weren't we on that cliff back then? I remember shooting that old bastard in the back once. After hitting my head when we fell off the cliff, I can't recall anything else. Milord, where are we right now?"

"We are currently the slaves of the mountain barbarians." Lorist proceeded to briefly explain the recent events to Reidy before he ruffled his head and said, "If you didn't lose your memory, we would've back at the dominion long ago."

Reidy shook his head and said, "Milord, I think you made a mistake. You should've returned to the dominion as soon as possible. While the family can do without me, it definitely can't go on without you…"

Passing the small silver container with rank 2 medicine to Reidy, Lorist said, "Don't worry about things that don't concern you. Do I look like the kind of lord that will abandon my own family knights? Within the container holds the last two or three drops of rank 2 medicine. After you drink it, circulate your Battle Force immediately. I will give you three days to prepare and we will head back to the dominion when you recover. After all, you won't be able to survive the cold outside if you can't use your Battle Force."

Catching the container, Reidy said, "Milord, have your injuries recovered?"

"Don't worry, I'm already fine. All that's left is for you to patch yourself up. Consume the medicine and begin quickly," Lorist said with a smile.

Three days later, Reidy looked at his silver blade glow excitedly and said, "Milord, look! My Battle Force seemed to have grown with the blade glow even lengthening a bit."

Lorist however continued to draw on the wooden wall with a piece of charcoal without saying anything.

Putting his sword down, Reidy asked, "Milord, what are you drawing?"

"Oh, I promised the leader of the barbarians here to build a canteen for them. But since we're leaving soon, I won't be able to fulfill that promise. That's why I'm drawing up a set of diagrams and procedures for the construction here. I only hope that they can understand it well enough to finish the canteen on their own. I'll be done soon, so you should go pack up. After this, we will make our leave," Lorist said as he continued drawing.

When Lorist placed the charcoal in his hand down and brought up the torch to get a better look at his drawings, he told Reidy, "Even the mountain barbarians should be able to understand these simple drawings, right?"

Right after that, a loud knocking on the door cut their conversation short.

Reidy opened the door and saw a person wearing thick furs walk inside. After that person removed the furs, Lorist realized that it was that thick-lipped female barbarian.

Feeling the humiliation well up in his mind, Lorist looked at her with a cold gaze and asked, "Why have you come here?"

The thick-lipped barbarian woman smiled as she said, "I'm pregnant. The witch doctor said that it's your child…"

As if a bolt of lightning had struck him, Lorist began shivering all over. Reidy was completely flabbergasted by what he has just heard.

The barbarian woman continued, "My husband died last year in battle and now I even have your child. That means, I can get married to you and you won't have to be a slave anymore! You can join our tribe and I'll definitely treat you well…"

Before she finished, Lorist's figure swerved to reach for his sword that was placed above the fire pit before he pierced it straight through the thick-lipped barbarian woman's chest.

She lowered her head gradually and looked at the longsword that had passed through her torso before slowly turning her gaze back to Lorist with an expression filled with despair and agony as life slowly left her body. Her pale lips twitched as she struggled to say something with great difficulty. "W… Why…"

Lorist was still shivering as his grip on his sword loosened. He stepped backwards slowly before collapsing into a sitting position atop the fire pit and said, "You… you are

the cause of the greatest… humiliation I have ever suffered in all my life…”

As the thick-lipped woman fell backwards, Reidy stepped forward to catch her, only for her to say one last thing before she breathed her dying breath. "My… my child…”

The atmosphere within the small wooden house was so chilling that it almost felt like time itself was frozen. After a long while, Lorist raised his head and said, "We'll leave immediately…”

Reidy looked at the corpse of the barbarian woman in his hands and said, "Mi-milord… What… What do we do about her…”

Sighing, Lorist said, "Bring her with us and find a place to bury her."

Atop a lone mound, Lorist dug through the frozen earth without regard to amount of internal energy it consumed to make a pit to bury the barbarian woman within. After that, he sat by the grave marker for a long while.

"Forget this matter. This has been a long nightmare for me as well," Lorist said as he finally stood up.

Reidy merely nodded.

"Let's go. We should be heading home," Lorist said, before he swung his hands to gain some momentum to ski down from the hill, with Reidy following behind. The two of them streaked through the snow-covered plains as quickly as lightning…

Chapter 212
Setting Out

From the depths of darkness came a voice that whispered, "My… my child…”

Started awake from sleep, Lorist sat straight up on his bed. He was relieved to find that he was in a familiar room. *Oh, I've already returned to the dominion for a month or so and I'm here at Firmrock Castle… I'm no longer that pathetic, oppressed slave. Bu-but… why do I keep dreaming about the last words of that thick-lipped barbarian woman?*

But the kid is not mine! Lorist denied with a fervent rage. He still recalled the days when the barbarian woman forced herself upon him. During that time, she also did it with two other barbarian men when she brought Lorist near the stream to bathe. There was no way that the child could so coincidentally be his, and her claim that it was his was based on the witch doctor's arbitrary reading.

It was as if there were two different people arguing within his mind. One of them maintained the view that the child was not his and that it wasn't wrong for him to kill her for leaving a mark of eternal shame on him that will last his whole life.

The other kept doubting himself. *She's only a barbarian woman who had lost her husband, and without a child, she wouldn't have any status within the tribe when she gets old. No matter who she does it with or how she forced me to do it with her, she only did it to have a child for herself. What's wrong about that?! She only wanted a child for herself! I shouldn't have killed a poor widow like her! All she wanted was a child…*

Leaning on the headboard of his bed, Lorist couldn't help but tremble while sweating profusely.

"Locke? What's wrong?" asked Telesti who was sleeping beside him.

"Nothing, I just had a nightmare," Lorist said as he lowered his head and gave Telesti a kiss on her forehead. "I'm going to start training my swordplay soon. You should get more sleep since you're pregnant right now. Take better care of your health, alright?"

"Okay…” Telesti mumbled before she turned and fell back into deep sleep.

Lorist made a bitter smile and thought, *this must be my punishment.* When Lorist returned to the dominion, he heard that when he was being assassinated by Blademaster Zarinan, the fainted Telesti was discovered to be pregnant one month later. At that time, Lorist's whereabouts was still unknown, causing her much pain and worry. Every moment she thought of Lorist, her face would be covered in tears. It was so bad for her that she almost had a miscarriage.

By the time Lorist returned to the dominion, the pregnant Telesti who was also emotionally sensitive was especially insistent on staying by Lorist's side, and he also treated her with utmost care and even agreed to her request that the child she was bearing would also inherit the name of her adopted family, Nico, instead of being registered as a member of the Norton Family.

At the same time, every time Lorist saw Telesti's bloated belly, he would recall the pregnant thick-lipped barbarian whom he killed and even dream about her dying words only to wake up shocked and sweaty.

Perhaps, I was wrong and shouldn't have killed that barbarian woman. While Lorist was a little regretful for his actions, he had felt incredible shame when he heard the woman say that she was pregnant with his child back then. With the desire of killing her being fostered throughout the time when she forcefully bedded him, Lorist only knew how to react by feeling anger from the pain and humiliation he suffered, causing him to take up his sword from the fire pit and pierce it into her chest without a second thought.

It was only when he had killed her that Lorist snapped out of his wild fervor and realized that he had just taken a human life, no, two human lives. And that child she bore could possibly be his. That's why he slumped into a blank stupor by the grave marker of that woman after he buried her.

I can't continue like this, Lorist thought as he rubbed his face. Removing his sleeping robe and changing into his normal attire, Lorist left his bedroom and took his sword with him before heading downstairs. *I should do something to keep myself occupied and forget this matter as soon as possible. Since it has already happened, there's no point for me to continue wailing like this in regret. If I continue to have nightmares like this, it won't be surprising if I eventually lose my mind.*

……

Back then, Lorist's journey home with Reidy was a rather smooth-sailing one. In fact, they actually bumped into a few guards who were looking for them. Upon seeing Lorist and Reidy returning safe and sound, those guards who had searched painstakingly for three months let out loud cheers of joy.

The ones who led the guards were Gold ranked knight Belnick and Els, who both welcomed Lorist and Reidy into the main tent with tears of joy streaming down their faces. After that, they informed Lorist about the situation of the family during his three months of absence.

Upon knowing that Lorist had suffered an assassination attempt by a Blademaster, as well as the injuries sufferd by Gold ranked knights Josk and Potterfang, the four Gold ranked knights, namely, Fiercetiger Loze, Freiyar, Malek and Belnick, headed to the assassination site immediately and began to search for Lorist and Reidy. When they realized that the two couldn't be located and had possibly fallen down to the river below, they had a meeting with Charade, Terman and the others and decided jointly to hide news of Lorist's disappearance from the three allied families. At the same time, they sent a battalion of 500 men to Maplewoods Bastide to ensure the safety of Irina and her son.

"Milord," Belnick said embarrassedly, "During the meetings, we also discussed that if something bad truly happened to you, we would let the young master inherit the position of the Norton Family head and give him authority over the family after he is raised until the age of 18…"

Lorist nodded and said, "It's alright, I can understand that. You guys have planned for this quite thoroughly. How are Josk and Potterfang doing?"

Belnick replied, "Knight Josk's injuries are rather light and they pose no restriction to him at the moment. A few days ago, he even said that he wanted to join the search for you. Knight Potterfang on the other hand is more badly injured and has to rest bedridden for at least two more months. Blademaster Zarinan had managed to make a deep cut from his left shoulder to his chest and Potterfang almost couldn't be saved. That fellow Fiercetiger Loze was incredibly pissed and kept saying that he wanted to go to Windbury City to capture the Second Prince to avenge you, but he was stopped from doing so by Knight Charade."

Els added, "At that time, Charade told Loze that our priority was to find you first and that revenge won't happen right away, managing to stop Loze from pursuing the

matter temporarily. We have already been searching around the wildlands for three whole months and were just about to give up hope. Thankfully for the protection of War God Singwa, you returned to us safe and sound, milord."

Lorist suddenly recalled something important and asked, "What is the date today?"

Els replied, "It's the 19th day of the 2nd month of Year 1772 of the Common Grindian Calendar."

"Then was there a magical beast wave within our dominion during winter?" Lorist asked.

Belnick and Els laughed out and Els said, "Milord, are you still worried about the magical beast wave? It's already gone. During last winter, only a couple of magical bulls arrived at Hidebull Mound and even then, they were blocked from entering the dominion by the wall stretching all the way from Tortoise Hill. We mobilized the family forces and killed all the bulls in one go. However, I heard that recently, the number of magical wolves beneath the walls was increasing and the patrolling soldiers complained that the howls were too noisy for them to bear."

As the magical beast wave that had plagued the family had truly been exterminated, Lorist let out a breath of relief for the successful resolution of that huge problem. After he returned to the camp of the guards who were searching for him, he made his way back to the dominion after spending a night there.

When he arrived at the dominion, he received news about Telesti's pregnancy and judging by the time, the child should've been conceived during the 10th month of the previous year when he went to Bladedge Mountains to bring Telesti back to Firmrock Castle. After he heard that she almost had a miscarriage from her grief, Lorist hurriedly went to comfort her and had been stuck with her ever since. He was also constantly reminded of the barbarian woman he killed when he saw Telesti's belly and was haunted by the nightmares frequently.

……

During the meeting held a few days ago, Lorist discussed his experience of the assassination attempt by the Second Prince's Blademaster and expressed his condolences for the family knights and soldiers who had sacrificed themselves heroically. After receiving requests from some within the family to take revenge, Lorist

appointed Loze as the head of three pike cavalry brigades and two heavy infantry brigades with Malek as his vice along with two carroballista brigades and the light cavalry scouts led by Yuriy to capture the Second Prince, effectively sending up to 24000 soldiers to Windbury City.

The next thing Lorist discussed during the meeting was the reinitiation of the development of Blackmud Marsh as well as the development of the dominion formerly belonging to Count Spenseid that was renamed the Salus Settlement. Within the next two years, he would prioritize settling down the commoners. If they were able to successfully develop the Felicitas Settlement and the Salus Settlement into the main food providers of the dominion, only then will the Norton Family have a stable footing on their path to prosperity.

Apart from that, another high priority project was the construction of the shipyard. So far, the intersection point between Bladedge Mountains and Blackmud Marsh, which was a shallow swamp, had been filled in and made into level ground. With the path heading to the highlands near Blackmud Marsh already available, the next step was to expand the area of the highlands by carrying out land reclamation on the shallower areas by the coast. It was estimated that the reclaimed land would be enough for a small port for ships to stop within as soon as next year.

Lorist requested Old Man Balk to begin the construction of the shipyard right away alongside the construction of the port instead of delaying it until the port to be completed so that they could learn to build smaller ships in the meantime. He hoped that the Norton Family would be able to set sail on the seas as soon as possible that way.

As for Gold ranked knight Freiyar, he was tasked by Lorist to handle the formation of the navy and said that he would rather having the trained soldiers wait for the completion of the ships than beginning training only after the ships were completed. If they begin training after the shipyard's completion, that would be a little too late. Lorist believed that he had to first have a batch of navy marines ready so that they could set sail right away.

……

After Lorist trained for an hour or so, he saw Howard waiting outside the gate and asked curiously, "Weren't you taking care of your father? Why have you come back here?"

Howard said, "Father said that I'm your attendant, milord, and I have to be by your side at all times. His injuries will recover completely in another month and he can already make some slight movements, so he won't need me to take care of him all the time anymore."

Lorist agreed with that assessment as he had visited Potterfang two days ago and saw that he was indeed recovering well.

After pondering for a while, he asked Howard, "How many days has it been since Fiercetiger Loze and Malek left?"

"They left two days ago and will arrive at the Hendliff Suspension Bridge in another six days. From there, they will launch their attack on Winston Province and will be able to reach Windbury City in roughly 15 days." Howard understood the geography of the land well and was quite accurate at estimating the traveling speed of the family forces.

After stroking his chin in thought, Lorist decided that he would leave the pregnant Telesti alone for now and said, "Howard, after I have lunch with Telesti later, you'll act like you've received an urgent letter sent by Baron Shazin and Baron Felim that calls for my presence at Gildusk City to meet up with them to discuss the deployment of soldiers to the capital, understand?"

Stunned, Howard retreated warily and asked, "Milord, what are you planning?"

"Nothing, really. I only want some time for myself. Dumb child, just listen to what I say and I will bring you with me to the royal capital of Windbury City for a trip. Otherwise, the two of us will be staying here and won't be able to go anywhere else," Lorist rebuked.

After deliberating for a while, Howard agreed and said, "Then you have to promise me that you won't leave me behind. I also want to go there with you to get to know the place."

……

While Telesti didn't suspect Howard's lie at all, she cried out sadly at the thought of Lorist leaving her for somewhere far away. Lorist tried hard to console her for days and said, "My dear, even if you don't care about your health, you have to think about the little Nico that's in your belly. Don't worry, I'm not going to war or anything, I'm

just going to meet those two idiot barons. It's not dangerous at all and I'll return quickly. At most, it will take up to 20 days or a month."

Howard clicked his tongue and thought, *ah, milord's lying again… It will take at least one month or more for our trip to Windbury City…*

After expending a lot of effort to finally calm Telesti down, Lorist sighed as he exited the door and said, "Howard, you should remember this well. The more intelligent a woman is, the more troublesome she will be, especially when she's pregnant when she will be more emotionally sensitive than usual. You should learn from my example and not get in a relationship with a female scholar in the future…"

Howard merely looked at Lorist with a distasteful expression.

Els, Patt and Reidy had long received word of Lorist's plan to leave and had already prepared the guard brigade to accompany him.

Lorist said, "Patt, bring a few guards with you to take Blademaster Zarinan's body with us. Fiercetiger Loze and Malek forgot to bring it with them when they left a few days ago. We will bring this cursed old man's body to Windbury City and let everyone know that the Blademaster sent by the Second Prince was killed by our family forces. With the corpse of the Blademaster, let it be known that others who side with the Second Prince and has hostile intentions towards the Norton Family will end up like the Blademaster!"

"Long live the Nortons!" cheered the guards after hearing Lorist's speech.

Howard thought as he cheered, *great, milord has also come up with a good excuse to head to Windbury City…*

Chapter 213
Analysis

When Baron Shazin and Baron Felim got the report from their messengers, they thought that something was off. A few days ago, the Norton Family forces passed through their territory to head towards the royal capital of Windbury City to capture the Second Prince. Right after that, they got word that Lorist wanted to meet with them and wondered what was up.

However, that didn't stop them from welcoming Lorist's arrival. But when the two barons saw the corpse of Blademaster Zarinan nailed upon a crucifix, they were stunned speechless.

This time around, Lorist came within a four-wheeled carriage upon which the crucifix was installed and had Blademaster Zarinan's corpse nailed upon it so that it could be paraded around as he traveled. Since the Blademaster's corpse had already been embalmed, it wouldn't rot within the next two to three months.

"Locke, it's a little too excessive for you to be doing this, right? After all, he's a rank 3 Blademaster and is even considered to be a quasi-Sword Saint. Nailing his body on the crucifix is a little in bad taste…" Baron Felim said as he looked at the body.

"Chack, I've never treated him as a Blademaster. He's but a lowly assassin that was sent to kill me. Since he can disregard his reputation as a Blademaster and sink so low to carry out an assassination, I can naturally treat him as a common assassin since he failed," Lorist said disdainfully. Baron Felim's full name was Felim Chalvode, and Chack was his nickname.

"I heard your family forces suffered huge losses, right?" Baron Shazin asked. He had seen Blademaster Zarinan twice before and knew that his abilities far exceeded those of Blademaster Louinse. It was said that Louinse wouldn't be able to last more than 100 strikes when fighting against Zarinan. Additionally, when Baron Shazin was still serving as a Gold ranked knight of Duke Loggins, he had been toyed with by Blademaster Louinse twice when they sparred and could only endure the anger he felt at him, so he can only imagine how much stronger Blademaster Zarinan could be.

Lorist sighed deeply before he said, "This old fellow killed up to 500 of my good men and 11 Silver ranked family knights. Even Potterfang and Josk were injured heavily and I had to heal for two months myself. That's why I've decided to no longer let the Second Prince off on this matter. I nailed the old guy on the crucifix so that I can spread the word about how the Second Prince actually used an underhanded method like assassination against me by employing a Blademaster so that everyone else can see that he isn't fit to be king. That way, even if I capture him, the Norton Family won't be considered to be rebelling against a royal family."

"So what if you capture him? The reputation of a king-killer is definitely not something you want to bear…" Baron Felim said worryingly, with good reason. Even if the Second Prince did not deserve to be a king, he was still technically one and in Grindia, killing a king brought no good reputation to a noble family.

"It's fine. I will first imprison him for a period of time and send him to be judged by the Second Highness of the Andinaq Kingdom since his family is the rightful successor to the Krissen Imperial Family. This is their family matter," Lorist explained his decision, to which the two barons thumbs-upped in agreement.

"This method of yours is savage. Not only does it leave nothing to be criticized, it also allows you to get your revenge. The Andinaq Royal Family hates the Second Prince to the bone because if the Second Prince and his associates did not raise the banner of rebellion, the great empire wouldn't have perished and shattered just like that. If the Second Prince falls into their hands, it would already be considered humane if he was simply hanged to death," praised Baron Felim.

Baron Shazin pointed at the corpse of the Blademaster and asked, "Locke, are you going to march into Windbury City just like that? Do you need any help from us?"

Lorist sighed and said, "Hennard, Chack, you idiots… The reason I'm here is to ask you to mobilize your forces…"

Baron Shazin's full name was Shazin Hennard and he had no other nickname. Before this, he used to be one of the five Gold ranked knights serving Duke Loggins and even led a military campaign against the Norton Family. Ever since he was captured by Lorist, his fate took a completely different turn.

Baron Shazin was stunned by what he heard and asked, "Why do you need us to do that?"

"Didn't you three other families say that my forces swept the land barren without leaving even a single commoner for you to take? I'm presenting a huge opportunity to you guys now yet you're still unable to see it… What can I say about you? During this excursion of my family to capture the Second Prince, do you think anyone within the Winston Province can stop our advances? What are you doing sitting and watching by the sidelines instead of reaping some benefits for yourselves?! Send your soldiers to raze the place you idiots! People, money and food, they're all up for the taking!" Lorist exclaimed with an annoyed look.

"Ugh…" Baron Felim had already understood Lorist's intentions. But with a face blushing with embarrassment, he said, "Locke, it's not that we don't want to mobilize our forces… It's…"

"It's alright. I understand your concerns. You're just worried about the two Frontier Legions stationed at Pedro City, right? I heard that you sustained some losses the last two times you sent your soldiers to the Winston Province," Lorist said with a laugh. After that, he waved to Howard and said, "Howard, bring me the map of the Iblia Kingdom."

"He's called Howard and is also my disciple like Reidy. His father is Potterfang, which the two of you should be acquainted with. Right now, he has just awakened his Battle Force and is accompanying me as an attendant, so look after him for me, alright?" Lorist said as he introduced Howard to the two other barons.

"That's a given," said the two barons in unison. Hennard even took out a jeweled sword and gave it to Howard as a meeting gift.

As Baron Felim himself didn't have anything fitting to give, he started suggesting that Howard and his illegitimate daughter meet up sometime. He praised his daughter to the heavens and said that she was not only beautiful but also obedient. And given their similar age, with her being 15 that year, one year younger than Howard, the baron thought they would be a good fit. Even though she was only the baron's illegitimate daughter, she was also included in the registry of the Felim Family.

The more he got to know Howard, the more Baron Felim liked him. In stark contrast to the rough and quiet Reidy, Howard looked more refined and had an intelligent and calm aura. As Baron Felim had been looking for a suitable husband for his beloved daughter, he found Howard to be the ideal candidate, given his Gold ranked knight father and his status as Lorist's personal disciple. With his looks and charisma being

better than most, Howard's future was sure to be a bright one and the baron felt that having his daughter marrying Howard would be a great idea.

Howard himself was dumbstruck by that as he didn't expect to be introduced a wife just because he was asked to fetch a map. He so embarrassed by Baron Felim's actions that his face was completely reddened as he panicked on how he should respond. In the end, Lorist saved him from the predicament and said, "Alright, Chack, finding a son-in-law is not an urgent matter. Perhaps you would want to discuss this with Potterfang when we finish things over here since Howard and your daughter are still young. If both of you agree, then maybe we can let them be engaged first. It won't be too late to officiate their marriage when they reach 20."

Baron Felim said, "She's not that young. When my daughter was born, her mother was only 16…"

Hennard and Lorist both shoved a middle finger in Baron Felim's face as they both thought that it was far too predatory of him to lay his hands on a 15-year-old girl, causing him to be completely speechless.

Lorist then proceeded to spread the map of the Iblia Kingdom open before tapping on the two provinces belonging to Duke Fisablen and said, "Duke Fisablen was originally the second son of a viscount from the Wild Husbandry Province. After that, he joined the army and was promoted to be the commander of the Frontier Legion for his stellar military achievements and at that time, the Frontier Legion was one of the largest cavalry armies set up to defend the northeastern plains of the empire from the grassland barbarians with a force numbering up to 25000 soldiers. When Duke Fisablen became the leader of that legion, he expanded it greatly and gained a huge victory over the grassland barbarians around 34 years ago, allowing the empire to establish the Eastwild Province, earning himself the rank of the duke in the process. The Eastwild Province was also made the hereditary dominion of the Fisablen Family.

"Given that the Frontier Legion had around 78000 soldiers, rivaling the army of the empire itself, the duke was always under strong suspicion from the central powers of the empire. As such, the duke could only focus his efforts on managing the Eastwild Province and the Wild Husbandry Province to protect his own family. During the civil war of the empire, the Second Prince went to the Eastwild Province to see Duke Fisablen and subsequently took his daughter's hand in marriage, thus securing the support of the Fisablen Family for himself and cementing the foundations of the Iblia Kingdom.

"After the formation of the Iblia Kingdom, the Second Prince paid no heed to the livelihood of his subjects and stubbornly sent his soldiers to attack the Melein Duchy, but was eventually defeated at the hands of the Fiercegale Legion of the Melein Duchy. Not only did the Second Prince suffer a huge loss, the battles also completely ravaged his Southern Province. Under such circumstances, the Second Prince borrowed three divisions of cavalry troops and took the opportunity to cause trouble when our northbound convoy and the Andinaq Kingdom were marching through the Madras Duchy. In the name of defending the Madras Duchy from the invasion of the Andinaq Kingdom, the Second Prince used his forces to swallow up the the Madras Duchy's Delamock Province.

"However, he didn't expect that the whole situation would take a completely different turn when Duke Madras signed a peace treaty with the Andinaq Kingdom all the while he turned against the Second Prince and defeated his troops at the battle at Kobo City. Having no choice but to retreat from Delamock Province, the Second Prince took the chance to occupy the dominion of the Duke of the Northlands after my family defeated Duke Loggins.

"Only after occupying the dominion of the duke did the Second Prince have some territory under his direct control. That's also why he left the Iblia Kingdom's Southern Province, which is to say, the three southern commanderies, and the Winston Province where the royal capital of Windbury was, uncared for. That's because the three commanderies were already a wasteland and to recover it was to put in lots of funding and effort to resist the attacks of the Melein Duchy's soldiers. To the Second Prince, that was not a worthwhile endeavor, hence his willingness to leave the provinces be.

"Additionally, within the Winston Province, apart from Windbury City, the rest of the land belonging to the Second Prince had long been sold away, and the lack of his own land there prevented him from raising an army. That's why after he took over the duke's dominion, he stayed there without returning to the royal capital and used the food and resources he took from the Delamock Province to form the First Legion of the Iblia Kingdom before he jumped right back into the game of war and domination.

"But what the Second Prince shouldn't have done was to anger us, the Norton Family, ultimately causing all his efforts to go to waste. He had to run all the way back to the royal capital with tens of guards and even sent his Blademaster to assassinate me. How truly shameless of him.

"Judging by how Duke Fisablen stationed his Frontier Legion, he must've already filled

up the vacancy left by the three cavalry troop divisions he lent the Second Prince. Right now, the Frontier Legion should have a full 78000 soldiers with 43000 of them stationed in the Eastwild Province alone.

"Duke Fisablen also stationed two cavalry divisions at the border between the Eastwild Province and the Wild Husbandry Province and another division at Eastriver Citadel as the main force to resist the attacks of the grassland barbarian hordes. Additionally, there's also another division of soldiers stationed at the border of Eastwild Province and Southern Province. The moment the forces of Duke Melein invades the three southern commanderies, the cavalry divisions would be able to react immediately to defend against the invasion before more reinforcements arrive.

"Even though the Second Prince was willing to leave the Southern Province and Winston Province unattended, Duke Fisablen definitely wasn't. If the two provinces get conquered by an enemy, then the Wild Husbandry Province and the Eastwild Province will be under threat from both sides, and that would spell the beginning of the end of the Fisablen Family. But the most laughable part was that even though the Second Prince didn't care for the two provinces at all, he still refused to hand control of them over to the duke. It is apparent that he distrusts his father-in-law greatly. Otherwise, the Iblia Kingdom would've been far more stable even if the Second Prince was a puppet ruler.

"The soldiers Duke Fisablen stationed at the Wild Husbandry Province numbering around 35000 was led by the duke's adopted son and Blademaster, Viscount Kristoph. Given that the Wild Husbandry Province wasn't the main site of conflict with the grassland barbarians, only one cavalry division was stationed there at the border of Eastwild Province which also serves as reserve troops just in case reinforcements are needed. The remaining 25000 men was instead stationed at Pedro City within the Winston Province. The moment word of conflict within the Winston Province breaks out, the two cavalry divisions stationed at Pedro City will take immediate action and be able to reach any location in the Winston Province in five short days.

"By the way, I heard that the two of you suffered some losses from the cavalry divisions stationed there during your last two attacks, right?" Lorist ended his long-winded explanation by asking the two barons his question with a smile.

Baron Felim nodded with his face flushed red and said, "The first time my family sent the troops there, we encircled a bastide manor and began our siege. But after four days when victory was almost ours, we got ambushed in the middle of the night. Only half

of our 2500 soldiers returned alive."

Hennard added with a tone of dissatisfaction, "The second time around, I sent out my soldiers as well along with Chack and managed to conquer two dominions. Just as we were about to continue, we encountered the two Frontier Legion cavalry divisions. Our combined forces number 15000 men and theirs being around 20000, and we weren't worried about facing them in an open field battle. But they resorted to hit and run tactics by assaulting our camps and destroying our supply lines, using the mobility of the cavalry troops to their utmost advantage to harass us, forcing us to have to retreat. After that, we saw that our supply lines weren't able to keep up with us, so we had to abandon our spoils and return as quickly as possible without any gains. That attempt alone cost us two families up to 3000 troops…"

Baron Felim added hatefully, "Even though our two families did manage to cause them around 3000 casualties, both attempts ended in our failure and that's why we gave up on attacking Winston Province. If we don't solve the issue of the two cavalry divisions at Pedro City, then we will not be able to enter Winston Province as we please."

Lorist clapped his hands as he exclaimed, "That's exactly it! This time, I have come here to discuss with you on how to get the pain in the neck out of your way. The Norton Family will be mobilizing 24000 soldiers to head to the royal capital to capture the Second Prince and I believe the two cavalry divisions there will make their move the moment they receive the news. As long as we are able to catch the two cavalry divisions by surprise and defeat them, Winston Province will be free for us to roam and we can take whatever we want."

"Alright, I'm in. I'm going to rally my troops now," Hennard said.

"Wait a second," Lorist said. "This time around, we're facing off against the cavalry divisions of the Frontier Legion that specializes in mobility. I'm sure that you've seen my forces. Apart from the carroballista units, the rest of them are all cavalry troops. Originally, I wanted to move as quickly as possible as I hoped that we can arrive at the royal capital before the enemy is able to react, allowing us to capture the Second Prince without any sort of warning. Additionally, we can also retreat without being harassed by the two Frontier Legion cavalry divisions.

"However, during the past two days, I have a feeling that I should just exterminate those two legions in one go. That way, not only can I stand up for the two of you, I can also show Duke Fisablen that the four families of the Northlands is not something that

should be messed with. Two days ago, I received a letter from that Kenmays fellow and he said that the sale of salt to the Wild Husbandry Province got into some trouble. So, I want to teach Duke Fisablen a lesson and show him our might."

"Alright then. I'll send out 8000 cavalrymen and all of them are my elite troops armed with new equipment," said Baron Felim as he made his decision. His total troops numbered 15000 and the 8000 cavalrymen among them were already considered experienced veterans.

Hennard gave it some thought before he said, "Then I'll send out 12000, all of whom are also fitted with new equipment. The only thing is I don't have that many cavalry soldiers…"

Even though Hennard had reorganized the original Northland Army into a force of 24000, he only had one division of cavalry troops.

"Alright, that makes 20000 troops. We only have to wait here another two days. I've already ordered my family's knight brigade and one carroballista brigade to rush over here. Coupled with the 2000 guards I have with me, we will have a total of 28000 soldiers. By that time, we will trap the cavalry divisions of the Frontier Legion and bash them up. They will not be able to escape even with their increased mobility. Also, you guys should send out more scouts to secretly take note of the movements at Pedro City. As long as the cavalry divisions make their move, we will follow straight behind and let them have a taste of being ambushed," Lorist decided.

Chapter 214
Royal Capital

On the 4th day of the 5th month of Year 1772, the Norton Family of the Northlands suddenly deployed 24000 elite family soldiers to encircle the Royal Capital of the Iblia Kingdom, Windbury City. They declared that the reason for that was to capture the king of the Iblia Kingdom, the Second Prince Iblia of the former Krissen Empire, for his underhanded actions of sending a Blademaster on an assassination attempt against the leader of the Norton Family, Count Norton, who had been entitled by the Andinaq Royal Family.

The regiment of soldiers defending the city discarded their weapons and surrendered wisely, mainly because of the disparity of their forces against the Norton's with every one of them knowing that they had no odds of success to begin with. Additionally, the garrison forces of the city were far too weak compared to the Norton Family forces, and it was especially apparent when the 1000 or so carroballistas were pushed near the city walls, causing all the garrison soldiers to lose any hope of defending the city altogether.

Lastly, the garrison force's leader made his decision after the Gold ranked knight, Fiercetiger Loze, gave his ultimatum. According to Loze, if the garrison soldiers don't give up all resistance, the forces of the Norton Family will not let the family members of the soldiers off even if they die in battle. He advised the soldiers who decided to resist to take their family members' well-being into consideration.

After the Norton Family forces entered the city and strictly forbade any traffic into or out of it, the Second Prince who was hiding within the Rose Palace heard about the commotion. It was as if a lightning bolt had crashed down on him during a sunny day. He was already incredibly worried about how Blademaster Zarinan still hadn't returned yet and felt a bad omen welling up in his heart. Despite that, he still believed that his teacher wouldn't lose since he was a quasi-Sword Saint. At most, he was probably just injured after the assassination attempt and was resting up somewhere else.

But little did the Second Prince expect that as he waited impatiently for the

Blademaster's return while paying attention to any rumors of misfortune befalling the leader of the Norton Family, the Norton Family forces began their attack on the royal capital. The Second Prince was so greatly shocked that he killed the maidservant who had delivered the news to him and stripped her bare to put her clothes on himself and secretly left the Rose Palace while crossdressing to head to the commoners' ghetto.

Hiding among the poor commoners was indeed a rather good idea as the Second Prince understood that the soldiers of nobles weren't interested in the dirt poor commoners and usually swept the business area of the city clean first before going for the middle-class citizens and other rich nobles within the city. But the Second Prince underestimated how 'morally bankrupt' the forces of the Norton Family were as they took not only the money and resources but also considered the lowly commoners to be a great resource to develop the Northlands with. As long as the commoners receive their farmland and settle down nicely at the dominion, they would turn into one of the most loyal defenders of the Norton Family.

Even so, the crossdressing Second Prince's mustache drew much attention to him, but the Norton Family soldiers did not recognize the king of the Iblia Kingdom and were only mildly curious about the crossdressing man. Some of them believed him to be some kind of pervert while some gay soldiers wondered if the crossdressing Second Prince was someone with similar inclinations…

At that moment, a few Norton Family soldiers with an unhealthy enthusiasm for conducting searches even prepared to feel the Second Prince up to see if he did indeed have any balls, with some of the gay soldiers jumping excitedly, wanting to do the same, and were ready to bring the Second Prince to 'interact' in the nearby cabin. Faced with the thought of his rear orifice possibly being compromised, the Second Prince finally caved and loudly declared himself to be the king of the Iblia Kingdom and requested to be treated accordingly.

But nobody paid any heed to what he had to say and only focused on his fair and unblemished skin that was a consequence of his pampered lifestyle. To some of the sexually excited soldiers, the Second Prince was practically a gift from heaven! These ravenous family soldiers seemed to stare at the Second Prince with glowing-red eyes and disregarded what he had to say entirely. It was only after they had released their pent up desires that they bothered to listen to the gasping Second Prince who still insisted he was the king.

The Second Prince was then brought before Loze and Malek in that state. After getting

a few other nobles to confirm the identity of the naked Second Prince whose backside was still mildly bleeding, the usually loud Loze was completely speechless and could do nothing but look for a few herbalists to give the Second Prince some treatment.

After getting word that the Norton Family forces invaded Windbury City, the two Frontier Legion cavalry divisions stationed at Pedro City made their move under the order of Viscount Kristoph and arrived at Windbury City three days later, trapping the Norton Family within the city.

Viscount Kristoph was still rather clear-headed as he didn't launch an assault on the royal capital right away and only used the better mobility of his troops to keep the Norton Family forces stranded within it. While he wasn't confident that his two divisions would be able to take on the forces of the Norton Family in an all out battle, Viscount Kristoph was assured that he would be able to stop the Norton Family forces from leaving with all the wealth and resources of the royal capital.

Five days passed without confrontation, but Viscount Kristoph was not impatient in the least. To him, the longer it dragged on, the better it would be for him. Firstly, he understood that the food supply within the royal capital was limited with most of the food of Winston Province within the hands of the noble families. He believed that when the food within the city runs out, the Norton Family forces would no doubt crumble and he would be able to obtain victory easily. Secondly, he had already sent a messenger to Duke Fisablen and the duke himself would be leading two other cavalry divisions over in another five to six days. That way, the Norton Family won't be able to retreat even if they wanted to like a turtle trapped within an urn.

But Viscount Kristoph didn't expect that on the next day itself, the Norton Family forces mobilized an entire army as if they were preparing for an open field battle. The viscount thus positioned one cavalry division directly facing the Norton Family forces with another at its flank in preparation to intercept the Norton forces before engaging their flank with the true aim of harassing and slowing down the enemy's progress.

But then, the blaring of the horn made Viscount Kristoph realize that his two cavalry divisions were the ones that had fallen into a trap. As the soldiers closed in on each other on the battlefield, the two cavalry divisions were eventually encircled and pushed into a tight corner outside the walls of Windbury City by the forces of the Norton Family, the Shazin Family and the Felim Family that numbered almost 50000 soldiers.

Seeing that his cavalry divisions had been forced into a corner by the forces of the three families of the Northlands, sealing off their attacking capability in the process, the viscount ordered his men to begin digging trenches on the battlefield. This time around, he understood that he was in deep trouble as he had already lost the perk of mobility that allowed the cavalry soldiers to soar to their utmost battle potential. To make a path of survival for himself, Viscount Kristoph decided to to lead the charges himself. But all three of this surprise attempts were shut down completely by the incessant longbow and carroballista fire, causing him to have no choice to retreat with his forces having suffered huge casualties.

Looking at his soldiers who had lost all morale, Viscount Kristoph made yet another decision. He stepped on the battlefield alone with sword in hand and requested a duel, with the request that if he won, he hoped that the three families of the Northlands will allow the remaining 14000 plus soldiers of his to leave while he would be willing to submit to the three families and accept whatever treatment. However, if he lost the duel, he would order his cavalry soldiers to surrender unconditionally.

Even though Hennard and Baron Felim expressed their vehement objections, Lorist still agreed to Viscount Kristoph's request and decided to take the viscount on himself.

Viscount Kristoph who was a rank 1 Blademaster quickly realized with despair that he wasn't a match for the young count of the Norton Family, whose swordplay was cold as winter, which caused him to feel as if he had been tossed into a land filled with snow. Lorist's sword strikes were like ephemeral snowflakes that were able to enter the smallest gap in one's defenses. Even though they looked light and weightless, when the viscount's sword clashed against Lorist's, he felt as if he was being pushed back by the great earth itself. He finally believed the rumors about how Blademaster Zarinan failed his mission and was killed himself despite being sent to assassinate Count Norton.

Viscount Kristoph who had painstakingly withstood more than 200 strikes eventually had his sword knocked away by Lorist, causing him to disheartenedly order his soldiers to surrender without resistance. The remaining 14000 cavalrymen complied with the order and became the prisoners of war of the Norton Family.

After the defeat of the two cavalry divisions that were causing Lorist quite some concern, he kept his promise and ordered his two carroballista brigades to help the Shazin and Felim families sweep clean the castles and estates of the other nobles in the Winston Province. Lorist insisted that they prioritize taking food as only with it

can the dominion truly be stable. He said that the Norton Family would be willing to buy the food the two families took at two times the market price.

After entering the royal capital, the first thing Lorist did was to check out the Second Prince who was walking with his lower body exposed. That was the first time the two of them met face to face and after Lorist heard about his encounters, he lost control of his laughter and said that the Second Prince had it coming for him as this was all his own fault in the first place. Lorist didn't care about the cold, venomous gaze the Second Prince gave him. The Second Prince spat on the ground and left without a single word.

During his occupation of Windbury City, Lorist made a few orders that many found to be weird. Firstly, he still paid his respects to the queen of the Iblia Kingdom who stayed within the Rose Palace and even ordered his guards to keep the place safe and secure. Secondly, apart from the few food stores belonging to the royal family, Lorist didn't touch any of the assets of the other nobles or tycoons within the city and didn't even make a single threat.

Thirdly, the Norton Family also didn't engage in any large-scale moving of the commoners and only brought away a few tens of thousands of poor commoner work smiths from the commoner area of the city, causing some of the nobles to sigh in relief, as the Norton Family was willing to 'do them a favor' to move the poor commoners out of the city for them, which many of the nobles considered praiseworthy.

The only part of Lorist that dissatisfied the nobles within Windbury City was their perception of his short-sightedness from how he held his grudges deeply. Lorist erected a tall pillar in the central plaza of the royal capital and installed the crucifix bearing Blademaster Zarinan's corpse upon it with the reason that the Blademaster listened to the Second Prince's order and attempted to underhandedly assassinate the leader of the Norton Family. That caused the nobles who once felt pride in having a rank 3 Blademaster protecting their city to feel gravely insulted and humiliated.

On the 19th day of the 5th month, Duke Fisablen who was leading two more cavalry divisions as reinforcements received word that Viscount Kristoph had already been taken captive. After hearing about how two of his other cavalry divisions had been completely wiped out, the duke stayed at Sunset Lake Town which was 50 kilometers from Windbury City and no longer pressed forward. Instead, he even set up a defense line and sent a messenger to the royal capital to meet Lorist.

When Lorist met the messenger, he expressed that he had no intention at all to exterminate the Iblia Kingdom and said that the reason for his actions was his personal grudge with the Second Prince, as was apparent from his polite treatment towards the other nobles of the royal capital without the slightest ill inflicted upon them. After that, he brought the messenger to meet with the queen who was staying at the Rose Palace and the messenger confirmed that she was indeed the daughter of Duke Fisablen. The queen of the Iblia Kingdom still lived as freely as ever and wasn't the slightest affected by the events of the prior days. She still had the mood to invite the other nobles within the city to grand balls and parties to make merry.

Despite that, Lorist rejected two requests the messenger made. The first concerned the payment of ransom for the release of Viscount Kristoph and the 14000 plus soldiers. Lorist said that Duke Fisablen should only begin to negotiate for their release after the forces of the Norton Family makes its way back to the dominion since it was rather inappropriate to hold such discussions at the moment given that the military campaign was still ongoing.

The second request concerned the fate of the Second Prince. Lorist insisted that he would not agree to releasing the Second Prince but promised that he would only imprison him without letting any harm come to him since he doesn't want the Norton Family to be tainted by the reputation of a king killer. As for the lack of a king for the Iblia Kingdom, Lorist stated that it was not his problem to worry about as he was only a count of the Andinaq Kingdom and that he wouldn't interfere with the official affairs of the Iblia Kingdom since he only bore a personal grudge against the Second Prince.

The messenger was flabbergasted as he had never heard such shameless reasons ever before throughout his whole career. When he broke out of his stupor, he said that everything about the Iblia Kingdom directly concerned Lorist, from the matter with Duke Loggins all the way to the Second Prince himself.

Lorist on the other hand argued against it by citing that the Norton Family had carried out its duty to protect the northern borders of the empire without any intention of partaking in the political affairs during times of war. However, the Duke of the Northlands and the Second Prince overestimated their abilities and instigated the conflict themselves, causing the Norton Family to have no choice but to retaliate. But arguing like that with the messenger was to no end and there was no real need for them to waste their breaths on semantics.

As for the matter of the Iblia Kingdom's vacant throne, Lorist suggested that the

queen's son who was staying at Duke Fisablen's be made king after the forces of the Norton Family retreat from Windbury City. That way, Duke Fisablen himself could use the ascension to make himself a regent for the young king and take control of the Iblia Kingdom entirely. He also added that as long as Duke Fisablen didn't mess with the four families of the Northlands, they could no doubt have a peaceful relationship.

After the messenger left, Lorist stayed within Windbury City for a little more than ten days before he led his forces back to the Northlands. Baron Felim and Baron Shazin on the other hand returned with a haul full of stolen goods and practically swept clean almost two-thirds of the whole Winston Province. The endless chain of carriages carrying food, wealth and other resources was so long that it almost seemed like a flowing river. Apart from those, they even forced up to 200000 commoners mostly belonging to the nobles of the Winston Province to move into the Northlands with them.

One day after the Norton Family left the royal capital, Duke Fisablen led his soldiers to retake Windbury City. Two months after the three families of the Northlands moved their newfound resources and commoners back to the Northlands, the duke who had just taken control of the city could no longer withstand the incessant bickering of the nobles there and casually gave the right to rule to his own daughter, the queen of the Iblia Kingdom, before hurrying back to the Eastwild Province.

This time around, the three families of the Northlands truly made a big haul from razing the Winston Province. Apart from the gains reaped from Windbury City that belonged solely to the Norton Family, the rest of the pillaged resources and citizens who were moved were divided equally among the three families. Lorist gave the responsibility of looking after the commoners and their loot to Malek and Fiercetiger Loze before he left by himself to head to Firmrock Castle ahead of the others because Telesti was about to give birth.

Chapter 215
Arrangements

Even though Lorist left for three whole months and only just returned to Firmrock Castle right when Telesti was about to give birth, he had almost constantly had his guards send some gifts and love letters to her during his absence. That was why Telesti forgave Lorist for breaking his promise easily, much to Lorist's relief, as it wouldn't do her any good to receive any kind of shock just before giving birth.

When Charade entered the study and saw Lorist laughing out loud, he asked curiously, "What are you so happy about?"

Lorist waved a letter in his hand with a smile and said, "I just received news that Duke Fisablen ran back to the Eastwild Province. The letter states that ever since the duke was made the regent of the Iblia Kingdom, he had been busy arguing with the other nobles all day long and didn't have time to do other things, with several of his new policies secretly resisted by the other nobles. In the end, this Blademaster duke could no longer deal with his huge workload and eventually resigned from the position of the regent of the kingdom and left the capital, leaving only one cavalry division to guard it. Currently, the head of the Iblia Kingdom is that beautiful queen of theirs."

"That poor old guy must still don't know that this was all planned by you," Charade said as he shook his head. "When I first heard the messengers tell me that you didn't allow our family forces to raid the city's other nobles of their wealth and resources and your good treatment to the queen, I knew you were up to something. It was when you let our family's two carroballista divisions help Hennard and Felim's families sweep the rest of Winston Province clean without killing the nobles that resisted us that I confirmed my suspicions and understood that your target was Duke Fisablen himself all along."

"No, you're wrong about that. In actuality, I wasn't directing these troubles to anyone in particular. It was that old duke who made the jump into that pit of mess himself. When we mobilized the soldiers this time around, I made it really clear that we were only there for the Second Prince himself and didn't have any intentions of going against the other nobles of the Iblia Kingdom and didn't stop them from spreading the

reputation of our family as bandits throughout the whole continent."

Lorist stood up before he reached for a small barrel of fruit wine and took out two silver cups. After he poured the wine, he handed Charade one cup and said, "Try it. We got this from a vineyard within the Winston Province."

Charade tasted the wine and praised its deliciousness. "This tastes rather good. Then again, Locke, I'm really confused by what you're doing. Even though you didn't take anything from the nobles in the royal capital, you still helped Baron Felim and Henard pillage most of the nobles within the Winston Province. Aren't those two actions a little contradictory?"

"Hehe…" Lorist giggled as he said, "Not at all. What you don't understand is the type of people the nobles of the Iblia Kingdom are. Initially when the Second Prince found his kingdom, he used his authority to entitle others and enfeoff them land to sell noble titles, causing most of the land within the Winston Province apart from the royal capital to be sold away and tens of new noble families to appear. That's why the Iblia Kingdom has the most landed nobles compared to the other powers nearby.

"The Second Prince relied on the funds he gained from selling titles and land to build an army to attack the Melein Duchy. But little did he know that he would proceed to suffer huge losses over the next two years, with the battles he fought turning the whole Southern Province of his kingdom into a ravaged wasteland. The nobles who had bought their titles could also foresee their stark future and had long escaped to the royal capital to protect their wealth and also to pester the Second Prince to be responsible for the damage he caused to the Southern Province.

"During the previous year, as the Second Prince wasn't able to borrow any soldiers from Duke Fisablen, he still had to give some kind of satisfying resolution to the nobles who stayed at the royal capital. That's why he decided that he would try to conquer the Madras Duchy's Delamock Province and move the dominions of the nobles within the royal capital there while trying to make a small profit for himself all the while resolving the food debt he owed Duke Madras.

"You'll understand after taking a look at this map. Given that the Delamock Province is well known to be one of the largest food producers of the former empire, do you think the land of Winston Province which is situated right next to it will be any worse? In actuality, the Second Prince lacked the power over his subordinate nobles unlike Duke Madras, and wasn't able to stop the nobles he entitled from doing whatever they

wanted after they were enfeoffed their land within the Winston Province. Hence, the nobles stopped focusing on planting food because it was unprofitable and instead started up all kinds of fruit wineries and plantations. That's why after the Southern Province of the Iblia Kingdom was rendered useless, the Iblia Kingdom began to lack a good food source, with most of the food being within the hands of the nobles of Winston Province. The high price of food was solely the fault of those nobles.

"And given the high price of food, the nobles of Winston Province took the opportunity to stockpile more and more of it while trying hard at the same time to prevent other sources of food from entering the kingdom so that they could profit by maintaining the high market price of food. That naturally incited the envy and jealousy of the nobles of the ravaged Southern Province, causing much conflict to manifest between the two factions. That was also one of the main reasons why the Second Prince was so reluctant on returning to the royal capital as he couldn't be bothered to mediate between the arguing nobles.

"That's why when word of our three families attacking the Winston Province spread to the royal capital, the nobles who stayed there actually cheered for our arrival because that meant that the Winston Province nobles that they envied so much would finally be getting the short end of the stick. That is also the true intention behind my actions. Initially, I even felt that we needed to mow down the number of nobles of the Iblia Kingdom just like what you and the convoy did when you passed through the Andinaq Kingdom. Through hanging all those nobles, the state of the kingdom became far more clean and stabilized.

"However, if we do that, we would only be doing a favor to the people in power of the Iblia Kingdom. In the case of Duke Fisablen, if he manages to tidy up the four provinces of the Iblia Kingdom, his power and influence would no doubt multiply by a few times. By cleansing the Iblia Kingdom of the extra nobles, we would be making a larger enemy for ourselves instead and I definitely wouldn't do something that foolish.

"That was the reason for my explicit instructions to the Felim Family and Hennard's forces to not kill the nobles they pillaged and only take all their food and movable assets as well as their commoner subjects so that the Winston Province nobles would be on bad terms with those at the royal capital. If I raided the nobles at the royal capital, all the nobles would be united in their hatred towards us. But now that I didn't touch those nobles at the royal capital, surely they will be jumping with joy at the losses of the nobles of Winston Province.

"There's no doubt that the nobles of Winston Province hate the fact that we've moved their commoner subjects away the most. Without them, they will not be able to gather wealth and plant food. And given that the Northlands had a natural border, which is Metropoulos River, there's no way that they will be able to retaliate against us. If they want more commoners, they will have to take them from other people. But since I have moved the poor commoners away from the royal capital, those nobles won't have anyone to rally. That means that they will have no choice but to prey on the Delamock Province of the Madras Duchy which is just nearby.

"The last time the Second Prince attacked Delamock Province, the ones who funded that operation were the nobles of the Southern Province who stayed at the royal capital with the Winston Province nobles only reluctantly providing small amounts of food and few soldiers to fulfill their obligation. So naturally, if the nobles of Winston Province wish to attack Delamock Province, they will receive strong objection from the nobles of the Southern Province.

"In the past, the suggestions of the nobles of the Southern Province would frequently be met with objection from those of the Winston Province. And back then, the Southern Province nobles were unable to compete in terms of military might with the Winston Province nobles and could only endure. But right now, the two noble factions are roughly on equal standing and anything the Winston Province nobles propose will definitely be opposed by the nobles of the Southern Province. That's why when Duke Fisablen made himself the regent of the Iblia Kingdom, he realized that the division between the two noble factions caused him to be unable to get anything done, as the order to deploy soldiers couldn't be passed. It was actually rather smart of him to resign from the position of the regent and head home right away.

"If Duke Fisablen had been more ruthless, he could've killed off all the nobles who opposed his will and could possibly maintain his grasp on the kingdom and push it towards a direction he had hoped for. It's a shame that the old man didn't do so, perhaps because he lacked the courage to do so or he was too self-aware about the reputation of his family and understood that an act like that would make the Fisablen Family public enemy number one, causing him to be willing to give up just like that and head back to his own domain.

"As we are too far away from the Winston Province, it wouldn't be appropriate for us to set our sights on it, at least not before we have control of the whole of the Northlands. That's why it is my intention to cause as much chaos there as possible. With Duke Fisablen now gone, there's no one powerful enough to stifle the conflict

between the two noble factions and war would surely break out. It won't take long until we see soldiers facing off against each other. By then, we only have to watch them kill each other off from the sidelines."

After Charade heard everything, his eyes were completely dazed before he said, "Locke, I didn't expect that you would change so quickly after becoming a dominion lord. Your thoughts stretch further and further away into the future and you're even able to predict things to such an extent now…"

Lorist shrugged as he said, "I had no choice. I only found out that nobles don't just organize hunting events or mess around by organizing dance parties and hooking up with other beautiful noble ladies all day long after becoming a dominion lord myself. Instead, I have to constantly worry about the affairs of my family and consider its future, the livelihood of the commoners as well as being responsible for my knights and subordinates. There is also much deceit and vested interests among the interaction with other nobles, so if I don't consider my options thoroughly, I will no doubt be taken advantaged of badly. Circumstances have forced me to change my way of thinking."

Finishing the wine in his cup, Charade wiped his mouth before he said, "Alright, stop complaining already. You've been doing a great job and the family's future is looking brighter than ever. Back to the main topic, why have you sought me out so urgently?"

Lorist pointed to a thick stack of beastskin documents that were on the table and said, "At the end of this month, the near 40000 poor commoners we moved from WIndbury City and the 70000 plus commoners from the Winston Province will arrive at our dominion and I will leave their affairs to you. Settle them down at Salus Settlement since they're lacking people over there. This new influx of commoners should satisfy the need there.

"Alongside the commoners are the 15000 prisoners of the Frontier Legion. Duke Fisablen will definitely not give up on these soldiers as the total population of the Wild Husbandry Province and the Eastwild Province numbered less than 500000. Had it not been for the refugees of the ravaged Southern Province that made their way to the duke's dominion, he wouldn't have been able to build up a full army within these few short years. This time around though, the soldiers we captured were all elite soldiers and not the 30000 who were lent to and wasted by the Second Prince years ago, so the duke will definitely pay for their ransom to get them back.

"I won't be letting the captured soldiers into the central part of the dominion, so I will leave it to you to arrange for them to work on building the roads and other infrastructure in the Salus Settlement. As it's a waste to just let the elite workforce leave like that, when the messenger of the duke comes to negotiate for their release, do your best to postpone it so that we can squeeze as much work out of them as possible."

Charade almost burst out laughing as he said, "Locke, you're getting more and more crafty for you to want to utilize the slightest bit of manpower like that… If Duke Fisablen knows about this, there's no doubt that he would cough out blood in anger. Alright, I understand your intentions well so leave it to me. I will make sure that the duke pays a handsome sum to get these soldiers of his back."

Lorist circled around his study as he stroked his chin before he said, "Duke Fisablen doesn't have that much money and his adopted son and treasured general, Viscount Kristoph, is still in my hands as well as his 15000 soldiers. I suspect that he isn't able to afford a high amount like this. That's why I've decided that I won't demand money from him but livestock instead. The Wild Husbandry Province and the Eastwild Province produce the most livestock among the other provinces of the former empire with over half of the market share in livestock controlled by them, as summarized by the records of the Morante City market research report.

"Previously when you guys killed off so many nobles of the Northlands, didn't you make lots of vacant lands? We can use those lands as our family's pastures. If we take one cow for each prisoner we have, we'll be getting at least 15000 of them already. I wonder how many cows should I charge for Viscount Kristoph's release… Definitely not less than 10000. Just place the cows we get within the western area after we get them and convert that place into the largest pasture in the Northlands."

Charade nodded and said, "So far, the only place that produces livestock within the dominion is Maplewoods Bastide with them having up to 2000 cows and sheep. Even though some commoners have begun rearing livestock within the Felicitas Settlement, most of them are sheep and they number only up to a few hundred, which is considered to be really small-scale. Had it not been for the meat we got from the extermination of the magical beast wave, the family dominion would have run out of meat a long time ago. This idea is not bad as the western area of the Northlands is not too dangerous and suitable for the livestock to graze in."

"Then it's decided. Also, our three families had taken quite a huge amount of food with

us this time around and our family got a share of around 32.5 million kilograms alongside some other valuables. I have decided to use this food to stabilize the situation of Salus Settlement and I'll leave the handling of the food to you. Since Hennard and the Felim Family don't lack any food, they're willing to sell their share to us according to market price, and I've already agreed to that. I'll leave the rest to you then," Lorist added.

"Alright, I already have the gist of it," Charade said before he took the related beastskin documents on the table into his hands. "Locke, how many days is it until Telesti gives birth?"

"Perhaps within a few short days. I estimate it to be around the 11th or the 12th day of the month," Lorist said as he looked at the window outside.

"Are you going to treat her properly and accordingly?" Charade asked.

Lorist shrugged his shoulders and said, "What choice do I have? You know well that I've proposed marriage to her multiple times over but she always turns me down with the excuse that she has taken an oath of celibacy to the God of Knowledge and Wisdom, Siminglyde and will stay unmarried for life. I hope that she'll change her mind after giving birth to this child…"

"Oh, thinking back to that year when we set out from Morante City towards the Northlands… It *has* already been five years, huh… You're already 29 now and it's about time you formed your own family as a dominion lord. Miss Telesti is definitely a rather good fit to be your official wife, so you had better try harder to persuade her," Charade said as he sighed.

Lorist nodded and sent Charade out when he was about to leave. When he opened the door however, he saw Howard standing outside and snickered before he said, "Fatty, by the end of this year, Baron Felim will be coming over to spend the winter and his 15-year-old daughter will be coming with him…"

Stunned, Charade said, "Baron Felim? He's only 35, right? How would he have a daughter that young? And he's still not married yet, right?"

Lorist laughed out loud and said, "That's his illegitimate daughter and I heard that the child's mother was only 16 when she gave birth while Baron Felim himself was only around 18…"

"What a savage!" Charade cursed loudly, despite the envious look he had on his face. "But what does his daughter have anything to do with him coming over to spend winter?"

Lorist looked at the blushing Howard before he said, "The baron has taken a great liking to this young one and wants to bring his daughter over here for them to meet. If they get along, he'll negotiate with Potterfang about their engagement."

Charade laughed out and said, "That's a great thing, Howard! Congratulations for getting a wife even though you only accompanied milord for such a short trip! I think you should join milord on more trips in the future as well…"

Unable to resist being poked fun at by the two, Howard turned and left, leaving Lorist alone with Charade to laugh out loudly by themselves.

Chapter 216
The Decision of the Duke

On the 13th day of the 8th month, Lorist's daughter was born and Telesti, who had just become a mother, named her child Nico Olijess, and there was nothing Lorist could do about it. Even though Lorist had wanted to discuss with Telesti about their formalized relationship and status, Telesti rejected that suggestion and insisted that she would be living by herself.

"Locke, I understand your intentions," said Telesti gently with her daughter Olijess in her embrace. Her child was of far more importance to her than Lorist currently. "I think that this arrangement is pretty good as it is. Don't tell me that you won't acknowledge her as your daughter just because we are not married. To be honest, I'm just a scholar and am not fit to become the wife of a dominion lord, because that position comes with responsibilities like dealing with other nobles and the such. In the future, I will have to focus my attention on the formation of the academy and I'm already satisfied now that Little Oli here will be succeeding the name of the Nico Family."

Having not been able to convince Telesti who wouldn't budge even the slightest, it wasn't as if Lorist could throw a tantrum in front of the mother and daughter and could do naught but leave.

Amidst his frustration, Lorist took his sword and looked for Viscount Kristoph whom he imprisoned. Right now, only that rank 1 Blademaster could qualify as a suitable sparring partner for Lorist. After enduring around 100 strikes from Lorist, Viscount Kristoph wisely conceded his loss. After taking a towel from Howard, he asked, "What's up with you today? You seem much wilder than usual…"

"It's nothing, I'm just a little troubled by something on my mind. Also, I'm going to make a trip to Maplewoods Bastide two days later. Do you want to tag along?" Lorist asked.

Even though Viscount Kristoph currently had the status of a prisoner of war, he was still allowed to leave Firmrock Castle as he pleased. Apart from being forbidden to return home, he was allowed to act as other nobles would.

"Forget it, I think it's better if I stay here. I've been wanting to have some free time to meditate on our duels and I don't want to follow you along just to be your training dummy all day long," said Viscount Kristoph as he rejected Lorist's offer.

Since he had expressedly denied the offer, Lorist didn't force him to go along with him. After that, he went to the rear mountain of the castle where a new training facility was built and saw Reidy training in the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique which Lorist had taught him within a small stone house.

What intrigued Lorist wasn't the rate at which Reidy progressed in his training of that new technique but rather how it didn't have any effect whatsoever on Reidy's Silver ranked Battle Force. Unlike Lorist, Reidy's Battle Force didn't get sucked into the meridians or his dantian. No matter how Lorist pondered about it, he could only hypothesize that it was due to the difference between the two techniques with the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique being more stable and peaceful as opposed to the Aquametal Technique's overbearingness. Another possible reason was the fact that Reidy was already firm in his Silver ranked Battle Force before he began to train in the new technique whereas Lorist began training in the Aquametal Technique when he was at the Iron rank. Due to the stability of Reidy's Battle Force, it was possible that it took priority over the first stage of the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique which was still unable to shake the stability of Reidy's Battle Force.

Lorist had Reidy sit cross-legged before he sat behind him and placed both his palms against Reidy's back. As Reidy activated the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique, Lorist inserted some of his own internal energy into the flow to aid him. The advantage of that was that Lorist would be able to reinforce Reidy's sensation of internal energy flowing within his meridians while being able to grasp Reidy's status and progress while he trained in the technique.

After a minor cycle, Lorist retracted both his palms and confirmed that the state of Reidy's body was more or less as he had predicted. After he began training in the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique, even though he still had his Silver ranked Battle Force cultivation, Reidy was no longer able to progress in Battle Force training. In other words, he would forever stay at the One Star Silver rank and wouldn't be able to break through to the next stage.

The first two stages of the Dan Ocean Ki-Refining Technique mainly concerned the familiarization of the circulation of a minor cycle within the 12 standard meridians and the expansion of thereof. The main focus lies in cultivating the ki and storing it up.

The truly difficult parts of the technique only starts at the following three stages with the third stage focusing on the opening of the 8 extraordinary meridians and the connection of thereof with the 12 standard meridians so that the internal energy in one's body can flow in a major cycle. The full attainment of training at the third stage would signify that one has already reached the peak of the Bright Stage, with the fourth stage of the technique signifying one's venture into the Dark Stage, and the fifth stage of the technique being at the legendary Transformative Stage. To use a Battle Force analogy, a person at the Transformative Stage would probably be at the level of a Sword Saint.

In actuality, Lorist wasn't looking forward to his trip two days later to Maplewoods Bastide. Ever since the assassination attempt he suffered last year, he hasn't gone there to visit his treasured son yet. But he still had to since he received a report from Old Man Balk about the completion of the shipyard as well as the argument between the work smiths on what kind of ship to build first, hence necessitating Lorist's personal visit for a decision to be made.

Lorist told Reidy to stay there and continue his training as he would break through to the second stage in another three months. Since Lorist already had Howard by his side during his visit, there was no need for Reidy to serve as his attendant during that time.

The moment he arrived at Maplewoods Bastide, he was received happily by Irina. Despite that, his two-year-old rowdy son had completely forgotten about his own father. Not only did he cry when Lorist tried to hug him, he even crawled over to give Lorist a bite as he felt threatened when Irina, his mother, had her attention focused on Lorist, causing Lorist to feel incredibly mixed feelings.

Lorist felt that he hadn't treated the mother and son well enough and decided to have the two follow him back to Firmrock Castle to live there with him. At least that way, that child of his would not forget who his own father was that easily. But Irina was as stubborn as Telesti when it came to that regard and refused vehemently to leave Maplewoods Bastide, causing Lorist to have no choice but to give up on the notion.

After spending two days at Maplewoods Bastide, Lorist headed to the Bullhorn Bay. Bullhorn Bay was the name for the bay at the intersection the Bladedge Mountains and the Blackmud Marsh and it was called as such due to it being shaped like the horn of a bull. Initially, it was only a term which the prisoners who worked there referred to the bay with, but eventually it stuck and the family adopted the name formally and used it in its maps.

The Bladedge Mountains and the Blackmud Marsh had already been connected and it no longer took more than a day to travel from Maplewoods Bastide to Poplar Coast. When Lorist arrived at the passthrough at Bladedge Mountains, he saw Grandmaster Ciroba, who was currently placed in charge of the development of Blackmud Marsh, and his assistant Zanben, seemingly measuring something halfway up a hill with some other people. After seeing Lorist and the others, they hurriedly rushed over.

"What are you guys doing?" Lorist asked as he dismounted.

After the passage of a few years, Grandmaster Ciroba no longer wet himself when he saw Lorist like before. On the contrary, he was extremely grateful that Lorist had given him an opportunity to utilize his talents as a development project on the scale of the one at Blackmud Marsh was not something any other kingdom or nation could afford to undertake and fund given the chaotic conditions of a time of war. Grandmaster Ciroba was certain that once the project was completed, his name as a great architect would forever be imprinted upon the annals of history and he believed that to be his true calling.

However, as he had treated Lorist like a demon in the past and had wet himself quite a few times when he first met him, Grandmaster Ciroba still felt rather awkward when he faced Lorist. So, he instructed his assistant Zanben to do the talking.

After bowing with respect to Lorist, Zanben said, "Milord, we are seeing if we can build a citadel halfway up the hill here and are measuring the total surface area available."

"Oh?" Lorist mused as he looked at the surroundings and thought, *this is indeed a rather good spot.* Originally, that place used to be a high peak up a mountain but now, it seemed like it was cut in half by a very large blade with the peak having broken off into multiple rock formations that filled the bottom, becoming part of the path itself. By building a citadel there, not only could they oversee Blackmud Marsh, they could also seal off the path from Bladedge Mountains to Poplar Coast. Given the terrain, the citadel would be easy to defend but hard to conquer. As long as a division of soldiers was stationed there, the safety of the construction of the port city would be assured.

"Not bad, you have truly thoroughly considered your plan," Lorist praised.

"Milord, so far we're still in the planning stages and we're still considering whether we should also excavate half of the neighboring mountain connect it with this one. By doing that, we can increase the surface area and also have the water source at the

mountain behind be used for this citadel. However, by doing so we'll be effectively doubling our workload and we're currently debating whether it's worth the effort," Zanben added.

Lorist nodded and said, "I have great faith in your abilities and trust that you will make the best choice in the interests of the Norton Family. I'll leave this decision in your hands and won't butt in."

"Milord, there is however one thing we must get your word on," Zanben said as he stepped forward. He pointed at the sea and said, "Milord, in the original plan for the construction of the port city, we were prepared to reclaim the reef area of the sea but after a year of surveying the territory under the leadership of Grandmaster Ciroba, we realized that landfilling the reef area which can be tens to hundreds of meters deep is not a worthwhile effort. Not only would the operation be on a very large scale, it would also leave the safety of the port city at risk in the future. I believe we should keep the reef area as it is and only fill out the area near the shipyard and build two jetties that stretch into the deeper parts of the ocean. That is already enough to satisfy the need for the family's fleet…"

"How about this, I will be at the shipyard during this period of time, so, summarize your thoughts and suggestions about the project tonight and send it to me in a report alongside the original blueprints and plans for the port city. I will gather the others from the other family departments for a discussion before I make a decision," Lorist said before he nodded towards Grandmaster Ciroba and headed straight for the path to the shipyard.

The shipyard was located at the deepest part of the bay and the land behind it was filled with huge, dried timber. Old Man Balk brought a few other woodworkers with him and guided Lorist into a wide hall, within which was a huge water tank in which tens of miniature model ships of different designs and sizes floated.

Old Man Balk pointed at the floating models and said, "Milord, these models here include most of the boat types In Grindia, but we were unable to decide on which we should construct first. Some think that we should begin with a warship while others think that a merchant vessel would be a good choice. That's why we have asked milord to come here to make a decision."

Lorist shook his head and said, "So far, our family still hasn't established a sea trading route yet so there's no need for a merchant vessel. However, warships take a long time

to build given how complicated they are, and we don't really need it that soon. For the first ship to be built for the family's navy, it should be one that we can use to train in the sea with."

"But, milord, there isn't a ship specifically designed for training…" said the oldest work smith as he stood forward.

"If there isn't, you can always design one yourself. The requirements for a training ship is simple. It only has to be middle-sized, have a couple of ranged weapons and be easy to handle and control. There's no need for it to be too fast or tough and it only needs to be able to resist stormy weathers and travel further into the ocean. The main purpose of the training ship is to familiarize our navy marines with life out on sea as well as train them in several other seafaring skills so that they can develop basic combat ability on sea. You may discuss the specifics according to the requirements I've stated and begin designing the ship accordingly. Can you achieve at least that?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, I guess we can try," said the old worksmith as he looked at his other partners and nodded.

"Then it's decided. Go have a discussion and make a blueprint and model for me to inspect. I will be staying here for the time being until you come up with a design I'm satisfied with," Lorist said.

……

On the windy grasslands where cows and sheep could be spotted grazing stood a huge and majestic citadel that looked like a crouching, fierce magical tiger from afar.

That was the control center of the Eastwild Province and it was the main base of the war god of the Frontier Legion, rank 3 Blademaster Duke Fisablen. It also served as the main camp for the Frontier Legion and it was called the Crouchtiger Castle.

Currently, Duke Fisablen had a face reddened with anger with the silver cup in his hand crushed into an unrecognizable ball of metal. No matter who one was, if one received a chain of bad news throughout the whole morning, one would definitely be put in a bad mood. One of those reports even shook the war god duke to the core.

Within the hall stood tens of the duke's family knights who were all silent and unmoving. Not one of them were willing to appease their lord as there was nothing

they could do about their duke's current temper but brainstorm on how to resolve the current predicament.

"Grandfather, what's going on?" asked Princess Sylvia as she walked into the hall dressed in valiant hunting garbs. Her presence brought relief to those family knights as the duke would definitely not lash out angrily in the presence of his beloved granddaughter.

"Oh, my beloved darling, why are you here? I just got a few pieces of bad news in the morning that caused my mood to sour," Duke Fisablen said as he revealed a forced smile.

"Oh, let me see what they are about," said Princess Sylvia before she took the few beastskin documents that were on the duke's table and read them through. "A report from the Wessia Merchant Guild? They said that they will be changing their mining equipment for the following two years and will be willing to reimburse our family with gold Fordes? What does that mean?"

Duke Fisablen sighed before he said, "Sylvia, your uncle, the king of the Iblia Kingdom, actually sold the two crucial iron mines of the kingdom to the Wessia Merchant Guild and allowed them to manage them for up to 30 years. Within the whole of the Iblia Kingdom, only those two mines can easily produce good quality iron ores and they are the most important source of material for military equipment within the kingdom. According to the agreement the king signed in the past, one third of the produce from those mines would be provided to our Frontier Legion.

"Now that the mines are under the management of the Wessia Merchant Guild, even though they acknowledge the agreement with the king, the agreement only stated that they will provide iron ores and not manufactured military equipment. Their claim about changing their mining equipment is merely one of their lies. Even if they reimburse our family with gold Fordes instead of iron ore, what use would we have for them? Our family needs military equipment, not gold coins. Right now, we can't even purchase military equipment even if we have enough funds…"

"Grandfather, don't be so hasty. I know a place that produces great military equipment and I can get you in contact with the people in charge," said Princess Sylvia.

"And who exactly is that?" asked the duke with surprise.

"They're the Norton Family of the Northlands. The armor worn by their family forces are among the most impressive I've seen and boast incredible defense."

"The Norton Family? No way, they are our enemy. Not only did they imprison that uncle of yours who is our king, they even captured your Uncle Kristoph and 15000 other soldiers of the Frontier Legion. I'm already incredibly troubled about what price I should offer to ransom them back," Duke Fisablen said while shaking his head.

"Grandfather, I recall that the leader of the Norton Family said something like this. 'There are no eternal enemies, only eternal profits.' I think that even though you consider him an enemy, they might not see us in the same light. Also, it was uncle's own fault for setting his sights on the Norton Family in the first place even though they did not even provoke him in the slightest. They are merely abiding by their oath to defend their dominion and the border of the empire but uncle still wanted to conquer them and even sent a Blademaster to assassinate the leader of the Norton Family after his failure. That's far too underhanded and insidious of him.

"It was already quite merciful for the Norton Family to only capture him without hanging him straight away. Also, didn't he treat auntie quite well when his family occupied the royal capital? Godmother and I have seen Count Norton in person before and he even escorted us back home after defeating uncle's army. Just let me go to the Northlands for a visit for that purpose while I try to negotiate for the release of Uncle Kristoph and the soldiers too. What do you think?" Princess Sylvia persuaded her grandfather as she held his hand tightly in a spoiled manner.

"'There are no eternal enemies, only eternal profits', huh? Hahaha, that saying is rather interesting. Alright then, Sylvia. Go to the Northlands with Xanthi and see what kind of response the Norton Family will give us," said the duke as he made his decision.

Chapter 217
Visit

When Lorist received word that Princess Sylvia was on the way to Firmrock Castle with Count Kenmays, it was already near the end of the month and he had already stayed at the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay for almost an entire month. Currently, not only had the shipyard begun building three training ships and one survey ship, they were also researching an idea put forward by Lorist concerning speedy warships.

The current mode of battle used by nations with navy forces were only limited to traditional ship-boarding. For instance, when Lorist was studying in Morante City, he saw the fleet of the Forde Trade Union once. Their ships were basically like huge rectangular walls installed onto a floating bodies and during battles, two adjacent ships would only begin firing ranged weapons like ballistas and longbows when they were around 300 meters apart. And as the ships approached one another, the battle would shift to close combat between the two ship crews with the conflict only ending when one side was completely annihilated or forced to surrender.

It was too bad Lorist's experiments with gunpowder were unsuccessful. Otherwise, he could manufacture iron cannons and take the world of naval warfare by storm. As the owner of a workshop in his past life, Lorist was no stranger to sail-powered warships and he could easily make tens of miniaturized ones easily. However, without any cannons at his disposal, those ships would only be useful as merchant vessels at most.

Despite that, Lorist still designed one three-masted sail-powered warship with its focus on ranged weaponry and good mobility. As for the weapons, the steel ballistas and catapults could be installed on the ship for that purpose. The ship only had to avoid being approached by other ships at all costs and exterminate enemy ships by using kiting tactics.

"Alright, just design that ship according to my specifications for now. In terms of ranged attacks, if us, the Norton Family, claims to be the second best, I doubt anyone else would dare to claim to be the best. You must be at least that confident. After finishing the ship, I believe we can start running some drills. By then, we'll be able to

see whether this type of speedy cruiser would be practical or not," Lorist said to the shipbuilders beside him.

"Yes, milord…"

After leaving the shipyard, Lorist returned to Maplewoods Bastide and spent three whole days with Irina while toying around with his slow-witted brat until he was satisfied before leaving for Firmrock Castle.

Before Lorist managed to wash off the grime on him that built up during the travels, Howard entered and informed him that Princess Sylvia had come over to visit. Having no other choice, Lorist could only wash his face and have a change of clothes before meeting his visitor.

Princess Sylvia only brought one maidservant with her on the trip and looked to be in an angry mood. The moment she saw Lorist, she began complaining immediately. After listening to her complaints for quite a while, he understood that Princess Sylvia had been shocked after the discussion with Charade. She believed that Charade's suggestion of three cows as ransom for each captured Frontier Legion soldier was far too ridiculous.

Lorist smiled warmly and said, "Since a princess like yourself had to make a visit over here personally, as a dominion lord, I will have to give you some face. How about this… Each Frontier Legion soldier's ransom will be only 1 cow, with a squad leader's ransom being 10 cows, a company leader's being 100 and a regiment leader's being 1000. As for Viscount Kristoph's ransom, it's up to you. Will that be acceptable?"

That was already incredibly magnanimous of Lorist as a mere 'favor' to the princess as the new ransom was only a third of the original one proposed by Charade. Princess Sylvia's face suddenly flushed red as she lowered her head and said in a shy tone," Thank you, Elder Brother Locke…"

Lorist didn't feel particularly deserving of that since this whole thing was nothing more than a good cop, bad cop charade he had planned with Charade beforehand. By giving Duke Fisablen this discount, the duke would owe the Norton Family a favor in the future. Additionally, it was even more significant since the one who made the visit was Princess Sylvia herself. As for how she addressed Lorist as 'Elder Brother Locke', there was nothing weird about it as she had been doing so when she was being escorted by Lorist on the way back to the Wild Husbandry Province some time prior.

This time around, Lorist intended to quickly settle this matter and send Princess Sylvia on her way back before taking a bath and checking out on Telesti and his daughter. As he had been gone for a month, he missed them quite a lot and he didn't really want to deal with Princess Sylvia anymore. Even though the princess was indeed the most beautiful girl Lorist had ever seen and was even considered to be a goddess by Count Kenmays, Lorist felt that she existed in a completely different realm from him. Psychological age aside, Lorist himself was 8 years Princess Sylvia's senior and he only considered her as he would a cute and energetic girl in the neighborhood.

However, Princess Sylvia didn't leave even after the matter of the ransom was concluded and even tried her best to loiter around. A little annoyed, Lorist smiled and asked, "Your Highness, do you have any other matters? If you do, pray tell. I will definitely help you out to the best of my ability."

Princess Sylvia let out a relieved breath and said, "Elder Brother Locke, this time around I didn't just come to talk about the matter of the ransom. I was wondering if you could sell some weapons and equipment to the Frontier Legion…"

"Huh?" Lorist mused, shocked. Princess Sylvia's request was completely out of his expectations. He gave it some thought before he raised his head to look at the princess and said, "As a friend of mine, I hope that you can tell me the reason you've approached my family to purchase weapons and equipment."

With a troubled look, Princess Sylvia said, "Originally, the equipment required by the Frontier Legion are sourced from the Iblia Kingdom for no cost as my grandfather had an agreement with the king that stated that a third of the produce from the two iron mines of the kingdom would be made into equipment by the facilities of the king himself and provided to the Frontier Legion.

"But we didn't expect that after the king was defeated by the Norton Family and fled to the royal capital, he actually rented the only two iron mines the Iblia Kingdom relied upon to the Wessia Merchant Guild for 30 whole years. Even though the Wessia Merchant Guild still acknowledged the king's agreement with my grandfather, they were only willing to provide us with a third of the ores themselves and not pre-made equipment and weapons because it wasn't explicitly stated within the agreement…

"And just before I came over to your dominion, we received a notification from the Wessia Merchant Guild that they had to use two years' time to change their mining equipment and could only reimburse us with gold Fordes worth the value of the iron

ore they ought to be giving us. However, we don't need money and instead require equipment.

"The main enemy of the Frontier Legion are the grassland barbarians from the northeastern plains. Even though the quality of the equipment produced by the kingdom is rather low and caused it to wear and tear quickly, we were still able to sustain ourselves with the constant influx of new equipment. But without the iron mines, we can no longer make up for the broken gear and in the recent smaller skirmishes, our forces were forced to fight with incomplete gear against the savage grassland barbarians.

"That's why, Elder Brother Locke, I hope you can lend a hand since the Frontier Legion is also defending the empire's borders just like what the Norton Family is doing and provide us with the armor and equipment produced by your family. The Fisablen Family and the Frontier Legion will definitely remember the kindness you show us…"

"The Wessia Merchant Guild?" Instead of answering whether he would agree to the princess's request, Lorist focused his attention on the Wessia Merchant Guild instead. "Weird, why has the Wessia Merchant Guild stretched their hands towards the Iblia Kingdom?" he muttered softly.

"Elder Brother Locke, you know about them? Oh, right, you mentioned that you studied at Morante City during your youth. Then you must know the merchant guild quite well then?" Princess Sylvia said after she heard Lorist's muttering with her keen aural sense.

Nodding, Lorist said, "That's right. I've heard of the Wessia Merchant Guild but I don't really understand them well, even though I was at Morante City for ten years. The Wessia Merchant Guild is one of the seven largest merchant guilds of the Forde Trade Union and they're ranked at third place. For a high up merchant guild like that, us mercenaries working at Morante City didn't have much interaction with them. However, they are most well known for producing good military equipment.

"You should know about Mizek Stainless Steel Armor, right? They're considered one of the armors with best defense around and are produced in the Temanda Kingdom. But the Wessia Merchant Guild holds all the rights to sell the 20[1] or so units of armor produced yearly. It can be said that the Wessia Merchant Guild is one of the largest groups dealing and producing military equipment."

"No wonder…" Princess Sylvia mused with astonishment. "After we received the notification from the Wessia Merchant Guild, our family knights were all fuming with rage and felt that they were being duped by the guild and requested to be allowed to teach them a lesson. But my grandfather only laughed bitterly as he refused their request with the only reason being that the Wessia Merchant Guild was one of the seven largest guilds in the Forde Trade Union and that it wouldn't be wise to provoke them. If relations with them really turned sour, the trade they have with the Eastwild Province and the Wild Husbandry Province might be cut off and that would cause the lives of the commoners to degrade badly…"

Lorist smiled without saying anything else and thought that even though Duke Fisablen has a force of 70000 plus soldiers and controls two whole provinces, his true might could possibly not even compare to that of the Kenmays Family. The two provinces he controlled encompassed only grasslands from head to end with not even a single mine available. Even if the Fisablen Family wanted to develop their agriculture, they must first invest huge amounts of funds to set up irrigation infrastructure. And it didn't help that they had to rely on merchants from outside the dominion for even a single earthen pot and only had cows and sheep as well as their related products for export.

Currently, the salt merchant committee managed by Count Kenmays did not only deal with salt. They were also responsible for the distribution of the daily-use products produced by the Norton Family, especially at the provinces controlled by Duke Fisablen. Even though the products were varied and trivial, the quantity produced and consumed brought the Norton Family up to 3000 gold Fordes of profit yearly even though they only had 10% share of the salt merchant committee.

Had it not been for the fact that Duke Fisablen was a mighty rank 3 Blademaster with his famed and elite Frontier Legion, there would've been no way for the Iblia Kingdom to be founded in the first place. From Lorist's point of view, it was extremely simple for him to deal with Duke Fisablen. He only had to close the borders between the two provinces and the Iblia kingdom and prohibit all trading activities there. In two to three years, the Frontier Legion would collapse without so much as a single fight.

"Elder Brother Locke, you still haven't said whether you'll sell the equipment to us or not," Princess Sylvia reminded.

"Selling them isn't a problem. I'm just worried that your family won't be able to afford it," Lorist said with a bitter smile.

"My family has enough money and will be able to take out a few hundred thousand gold Fordes," Princess Sylvia said in a dissatisfied tone.

Lorist shook his head and said, "It's not that I'm looking down on your few hundred thousand gold coins, but I'm afraid that amount of money won't be enough to outfit even a division of soldiers…"

"Ah? Is it that expensive?" Princess Sylvia said, a little dazed.

"It's not a matter of expensiveness but rather whether it's worth this amount. Your Highness, I see that you're not too informed about weapons and equipment. How about this, tomorrow noon, I will hold a banquet to formally welcome your arrival to Firmrock Castle. After that, I will show those equipment I have for sale for you to pick. With Viscount Kristoph also attending, you don't have to worry about me giving an unfair price since he's quite well-versed in these things," Lorist said.

"I apologize, Elder Brother Locke. I didn't really do any research into military equipment, so please forgive me for my tone just now. I will leave for now, so see you tomorrow," Princess Sylvia said with her head lowered.

"No problem, don't take it to heart. See you tomorrow," Lorist said as he waved his hands generously.

After Princess Sylvia bowed and took her leave, she turned back and said, "Thank you, Elder Brother Locke. You're truly a good person."

"Huh?" Lorist mused. *What's with that all of a sudden?*

On the next day, after the welcoming banquet, Lorist brought Princess Sylvia and some others to the hall on the second floor where various armor and weapons were on display.

"Princess Sylvia, Blademaster Xanthi, Viscount Kristoph, the equipment my family has for sale are all displayed here and you may make your pick. However, the price tags listed beneath each item are only reserved for members of our alliance. If your family wishes to purchase them, the price will be 20% higher and that's already a huge discount I'm willing to make," Lorist said without holding anything back.

"Ah! 100 gold Fordes per set?! Isn't this the armor used by the forces of the Kenmays Family?" Princess Sylvia exclaimed with astonishment. As she had visited the

dominion of the Kenmays Family before, she remembered the gleaming silvery armor rather well. At that time, she only thought that it looked rather good but didn't expect that each set would cost this much.

Count Kenmays nodded and said, "Yes, Your Highness. This is indeed the armor set purchased by our family at that very price."

"Uncle Kris, I heard you say before that the metal armor provided to us by His Highness the king wasn't worth more than 10 gold Fordes each. Why are the ones sold by the Norton Family so expensive?" Princess Sylvia asked with a disturbed look. At that price, it would be exactly like Lorist had said: they wouldn't be able to outfit even one division of troops with armor.

As Viscount Kristoph had good understanding of military equipment, he laughed bitterly and said, "Your Highness, each set of armor sold by Count Norton here are all exquisite products with impeccable quality and defensive capabilities. Compared to these, the metal armor provided to us by His Highness is nothing but garbage, In other words, the metal armor we used was only slightly better than leather armor produced by our family and would spoil after only one year of wear. On the other hand, no matter which armor here you pick from, they will definitely be far better than those metal armor. If we care for them well, we might even be able to leave the armor for our children and grandchildren as family heirlooms."

Blademaster Xanthi nodded in agreement.

"However, our family doesn't have that many gold coins…" Princess Sylvia said as she hesitated.

"Please take a closer look at this set," Lorist said aptly as he led the others to a set of concise looking armor. "This set of armor was originally designed for my light cavalry scouts and comes with throwing weapons, a longsword and a pike. It's extremely suitable for your Frontier Legion's cavalry troops and is priced at only around 65 gold Fordes. Even though it's the cheapest armor we offer for sale, its defense capabilities are rather good and is only 20% weaker than the armor of the Whitelion Legion of the former empire. I think that this is more than enough for you to use against the grassland barbarians. If you don't have enough gold coins, I have another suggestion. You can pay us with cows and sheeps. What do you think, Your Highness?"

"Alright then, we'll trade the armor with you with livestock. If we don't have enough,

we can simply rob more of them from the northeastern plains," said Viscount Kristoph excitedly without even waiting for the princess's agreement.

Three days later, Princess Sylvia left with Blademaster Xanthi, Viscount Kristoph and 3000 of the released Frontier Legion soldiers with the remaining 12000 only allowed to leave until the agreed upon livestock was delivered when they came to retrieve the armor and equipment they purchased.

"Good Sol, have you gone insane?" Charade said in one of his rare instances of swearing. "Are you going crazy along with the Fisablen Family? How can you agree so casually to accept up to 2 million cows and sheep for the ransom of their soldiers and the purchase 100000 sets of equipment? I don't think they have that much livestock themselves within their two provinces…"

"Viscount Kristoph said that he would lead his soldiers to rob the grassland barbarians for more cows and sheep," said Lorist lazily.

"Ugh…" Charade was stunned as he didn't expect that the Fisablen Family had that method to their disposal. "Even if they rob them, we won't have that much manpower to manage the livestock!"

"Hey, don't worry. The agreement states that they will pay in installments of 400000 plus cows and sheeps yearly for five years. We only have to leave around a few tens of thousands alive and kill some off to make dried meat and sell some away within the family dominion. I believe they will be sold out rather quickly since our dominion's population is already nearing 800000 and the demand for fresh meat will be high. As for the people required to manage the livestock, I've already discussed it with them and they said that they'll provide around 1000 households of herders, which equates to around 5000 people, to us and each household will be in charge of ten cows. By then, we can just set up a town at the west area of the Northlands for these herders to stay at and let them take care of up to 500000 animals."

Having heard Lorist's sound explanation, Charade left without saying anything else.

"Don't forget to close the door when you leave! I'm gonna take a short nap now, darn I'm tired!" Lorist said as he lifted both his legs and put them on the table before leaning back on his chair.

Bam! The sound of the door being slammed shut echoed throughout the room.

Chapter 218
Whale Island

"Milord, I think that the deal you made with Fisablen Family was a really irrational act on your part. From a strategic point of view, this is basically akin to strengthening one's enemy…" Howard who had been bothered by the deal for two whole days could no longer hold back and took the chance during tea time to tell Lorist his thoughts.

Lorist calmly popped a honeyed scone into his mouth before he washed it down with some tea and looked at Howard with a smile.

Howard blushed after Lorist stared at him without saying anything. When he got fed up, he said, "Master, please tell me why you agreed to the deal with the Fisablen Family. Everyone else is saying that it's because you have been beguiled by Princess Sylvia…"

Lorist hurriedly turned behind to take a look and was relieved to find that Telesti was still sitting on the grassy ground nearby with her newborn child along with Little Vinny. Even though Telesti's young maidservant had already grown into a fine young lady, not a trace of her childish and playful personality disappeared as was evident from her continuous toying with the baby's legs. Neither of them heard what Howard had just said.

"Come over here, you brat," Lorist said with a solemn look as he stretched his hand to ruffle Howard's hair into a bird's nest shape. "Looks like you've grown and are able to consider things from a strategic perspective already… Not bad… Alright, sit down right here. It's time to give you a lecture.

"Howard, answer this question of mine first. What is Duke Fisablen and the Frontier Legion to you?" Lorist asked.

Howard gave it some thought before he replied, "Master, even though Duke Fisablen and his Frontier Legion hasn't clashed with us directly so far, no matter what, they're still a potential threat to our family. If we want to attack the Iblia Kingdom in the future, they will become our enemy. Many other people are of the same opinion as I am."

"The Iblia Kingdom? Hehe, Howard, you should set your sights further. Don't just look at things that are right in front of you. In my eyes, I have never took Duke Fisablen and the Frontier Legion seriously as I think that they're not fit to even be considered our enemy," Lorist said arrogantly.

"Master, why do you think so? Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion has up to 78000 elite soldiers and that number can definitely rival the forces of our family. And after the armament deal with them is carried out, their military might will only increase! You can definitely not be too careless!" Howard advised.

"Hehe…" Lorist snickered and said, "Howard, tell me what you think about Duke Fisablen's abandonment of the position of the regent of the Iblia Kingdom and his return to his lair at Eastwild Province."

"That's because of the plot you laid against him, master. Currently, the Iblia Kingdom is in a really deep mess and there's nothing the duke can do about it, so he has no choice but to give up on it," Howard said after he recalled the details about the situation.

Lorist shook his head and said, "You're wrong about that, Howard. No matter how good a plan or plot is, it would be nothing but a parlor trick in the face of true power and might. Actually, if the duke was ruthless enough, he could've cleansed the nobles that opposed him and gathered up the ones in favor of him to build up support for himself. He definitely has the capability to do so. As long as he can restore order to the kingdom and restart productivity, the Iblia Kingdom will no doubt be able to regain its vitality within five years, and not remain in its current chaotic state as a dying nation.

"But Duke Fisablen gave up on that notion because that was a path of no return. Either he succeeds in his effort or the Fisablen Family dies in vain for it. That's why he was afraid of doing so and was willing to abandon the kingdom so that he could be assured that his family would be able to continue on. As long as he has the Frontier Legion, no matter who it is, one would still have to treat the Fisablen Family with respect. Even if the duke himself was no longer present, the Fisablen Family would still be able to exist and survive based on the Frontier Legion alone.

"From that point, it can be seen that Duke Fisablen had long lost his ambitions. Even though the founding of the Iblia Kingdom was only possible with his support, the kingdom is already pushed to its limit. And Duke Fisablen understands well that his departure would signify that he has abandoned all attempt at saving the Iblia

Kingdom.

"Let's look back at the Frontier Legion. Back then, the reason it was formed was to resist the attacks of the grassland barbarians of the northeastern plains. But nobody expected that when Duke Fisablen took command of the legion, its might would increase that quickly. Not only was it able to suppress the grassland barbarians, it was even able to expand the territory of the empire by conquering a whole province at the border. That's why the biggest enemy for the Frontier Legion is still the grassland barbarians of the northeastern plains.

"And while the Frontier Legion does indeed boast a number of 78000 men, half of the soldiers from the legion are actually required to defend against the attacks of the grassland barbarians. In the past, Duke Fisablen only needed three to four cavalry divisions from the legion to suppress his opponents within the Iblia Kingdom. However, ever since our family exterminated the Second Prince's force of 100000, the duke understands that it would be incredibly hard for him to take us four families of the Northlands on with the soldiers he has on hand.

"The act of ordering 100000 sets of equipment from our family with Princess Sylvia being their representative is akin to the Fisablen Family presenting an olive branch to us, signifying that they have no intention of being our enemy as well as to test whether our family really has the might to oppose them. By agreeing to this deal, we have expressed that we don't intend to treat the Fisablen Family as our enemy as well as making a subtle statement that our family doesn't mind the fact that the Frontier Legion's strength would increase from their purchase of our military equipment.

"Many people within our family are worried that the 100000 sets of equipment would greatly increase the strength of the Frontier Legion and think that selling the equipment to them is like making trouble for ourselves. Actually, they are so afraid because they've heard of Duke Fisablen's fearsome reputation as the war god of the plains. Howard, let me ask you, if our family's forces faces off against the whole of the Frontier Legion right now, do you think we would lose?"

"That's impossible. Given the might of our forces, the Frontier Legion has absolutely no chance of success at all. Whether it be the quality of the soldiers or equipment, our forces far surpass the Frontier Legion in those regards," Howard said confidently.

"Then, do you think the Frontier Legion will be able to fight on equal grounds with us or perhaps even defeat us if they're armed with the equipment we sell them?" Lorist

asked again.

Howard stayed silent as he pondered upon the possibility before he finally shook his head and said, "They still don't have much odds of success even if that was the case. Our family forces' logistics support is still far superior to the Frontier Legion's. Even if we don't use any tactics whatsoever and fight them by the book, while they might win a number of battles using specific strategies and tactics, they'll still be defeated in the long run. But milord, even if that were the case, our family forces would suffer huge casualties as well, and that's why I think it's bad for us to strengthen the enemy like that…"

Lorist nodded and said, "Howard, you really are quite thorough in your considerations and I'm incredibly glad that you are able to do so. But you have to remember one important thing. As a general or commander, when you set foot on the battlefield, you have to consider your subordinates and soldiers as a mere number and be able to make calm observations about the state of battle at all times. You can definitely not allow anger or sympathy cloud your mind. Naturally, you have to think well about how to defeat the enemy while minimizing casualties to your own forces as well. But you must never forget your original goal just because you are suffering more casualties than expected, because if you don't obtain victory, all the casualties you incur would have been in vain. Only by securing your victory can the sacrifice be justified.

"What you said just now makes a lot of sense and the 100000 sets of equipment will indeed increase the might of the Frontier Legion. But you and the others who worry have forgotten the most important thing. This is a trade and you must consider the price the Fisablen Family and the Frontier Legion must pay to fulfill their end of the bargain. To our family, the 100000 sets of equipment is only 1 year's worth of production. But we are able to get up to 2 million cows and sheep from it.

"Livestock of that number is almost equal to two magical beast waves, each with more than one million beasts. That's definitely not a price the Fisablen Family can afford to pay since the Eastwild Province and the Wild Husbandry Province, the two largest livestock-producing provinces, only has a yearly output of 500000 cows and sheep. They definitely can't give us all the livestock they produce since they have to rely on them to trade for food, mounts, salt and other necessities for daily life. On the other hand, our agreement stipulates that they have to provide us with 400000 cows and sheep yearly for five years while we only have to give them two Frontier Legion divisions' worth of equipment per year, which goes up to 20000 sets yearly.

"That's why the Fisablen Family and the Frontier Legion set their sights on the grassland barbarians to rob their tribes of their livestock. But do you think the barbarians are a bunch that can be easily provoked? The tribes that have up to 100000 or more animals are those that have at least tens of thousands of members with all of them being capable soldiers as well. Even if the troops of the Frontier Legion arm themselves with the equipment provided by our family, that doesn't mean that the soldiers of the Frontier Legion would be impervious to damage and they will still suffer some casualties. I estimate that five years later, the Frontier Legion might need another twenty to thirty thousand sets of equipment to replace the broken ones.

"In some way, the signing of the agreement with us by the Fisablen Family is akin to having them work for our family for five years, all the while causing the grudge between their family and the grassland barbarians to grow even heavier. Even if they get all the gear we agreed to sell them five years later, they can only focus their efforts on resisting the retaliatory efforts of the grassland barbarians. And with five years of time to develop, do you think the might of our family will stay the same? By then, I think that we won't even consider the Frontier Legion to be of the slightest threat to us."

"Five years, huh?" Howard mumbled while scratching his head, before he smiled embarrassedly and said, "Master, I really have forgotten the most crucial factor of all: time…"

After reconsidering the whole situation, Howard's eyes shone with understanding. "Master, so basically if they sign the agreement, it means that the Fisablen Family and the Frontier Legion would have no choice but to be on friendly terms with us and can definitely not antagonize us in any way, because they have to use their elite soldiers to rob the barbarians of their livestock. In fact, they'll be trying their best to get on good terms with us to prevent themselves from being sandwiched by enemies from both sides and also due to the fact that we're in complete control of their supply of military equipment."

"Not bad, that's the gist of it. In the end, the people within our family opposing my decision can only see what's directly in front of them are worrying about nothing," Lorist said with a smile on his face as he lifted his tea cup up.

Right after that, Patt brought a dirty-looking family soldier hurriedly before Lorist and said, "Milord, there is an urgent report from the navy camp. During their drills, the three training ships sustained attacks by whales and two of them were flipped over

with many casualties among the marines. So far, up to 370 of them are still missing…"

"What did you say?!" Lorist yelled with a look of shock on his face as he stood up and knocked over the table in front of him along with the teapot and cup placed upon it.

……

Lorist left that night itself along with his guards and arrived at the navy camp Bullhorn Bay on the afternoon of the next day.

"Milord, I have betrayed your trust because of my own incompetence and caused the navy troops so many casualties…" said Gold ranked knight Freiyar with an incredibly regretful look on his face.

Patting on his shoulder, Lorist said, "This is not your fault. I know that you have expended lots of effort on setting up the navy camp and you were also not aboard any of the ships during this training drill, so this incident was beyond your control. First, prepare something for me and the guards to eat. We haven't had anything hot since yesterday afternoon…"

The incident occurred as followed. During the middle of the 10th month when the three ships were handed to the navy camp for the marines to use during their training, they only sailed within Bullhorn Bay to familiarize themselves with the ships' properties and capabilities. But after doing the same thing for ten plus days, the navy troops were a little sick of repeating the same thing again and again and decided to head out of the bay. Just like that, each following sailing drill saw the ships sailing further and further away from the bay until three days prior, they discovered a small island roughly 50 or so kilometers away from Bullhorn Bay. However, that island was surrounded by a school of playful whales.

That island was not documented on the various maps probably because it wasn't large enough and was skimmed over by the Magi when they drew the maps of the Grindia Continent. That's why the maps that were passed down through the generations didn't have a record of that island. So, the marines took it upon themselves to name the place 'Whale Island' after the whales that frolicked around it.

During the training session two days prior, Freiyar himself had also gotten aboard one of the ships and saw the island for himself. At that time, he even refused the request of some soldiers to dock on the shore, mainly because he felt that the whales around

the island were too numerous and he was worried that something bad would happen to the training ships if they approached so carelessly without preparation. But little did anyone expect that the group of marines whose turn to train was yesterday would be unable to resist their curiosity to check the island out, causing three training ships each carrying 200 excited people to sail straight towards the island.

Just when they were within 5 kilometers of the island shore, the two ships at the forefront started being assaulted by the whales, the largest of which was as big as a training ship itself. After the largest whale jumped and rammed into one of the ships, causing it to flip over entirely, it rammed against another ship immediately following that. By the time the single remaining ship retreated to a safe distance, its crew only managed to save 23 people by sending smaller life boats in with the remaining 377 marines who were originally riding the two flipped ships still missing in action.

Freiyar explained the details of the situation in a deep voice and everyone understood what it meant to be missing at sea. Apart from the few fortunate ones who had been spared from the horrible fate, the rest have most likely departed from this world.

"Whales are not magical beasts. So, why did they attack our training ships?" Els, the leader of the guard brigade, asked.

"I'm not sure about the reason either," said Freiyar as he shook his head. "Ever since the incident yesterday, I've asked a few older boatmen and some fishing folk and according to their explanations, it's possible that the whales have stopped near Whale Island because they were nursing their young. That's why they might've considered the three training ships to be encroaching upon their territory and launched their attacks.

"Milord, currently all the navy marines are in a very horrible mood due to the incident yesterday. I was considering whether we should punish the marines and captains that managed to return alive. After all, the tragedy only happened because of their overwhelming curiosity and recklessness…"

"If you had formally ordered them to not approach that small island, then I won't oppose to punishing them," Lorist said.

Freiyar gave it some thought and said, "No, I didn't give them the explicit order to not approach the island…"

"Then forget it. Even though the marines on duty must always be disciplined and obedient, having lots of curiosity and desire for exploration is not a bad thing in itself. Even though such a tragedy occurred in the early stages of training, we cannot allow this incident to impact our family's dedication to set sailing into the seas. No matter it be the island or territory of the whales, as long as they are part of the ocean, then the Norton Family's fleet will definitely roam across it unabated!

"Freiyar, you should first focus on consoling the marine troops. I will have the shipyard build whaling ships right away and by spring next year, our family will begin hunting those whales. We will turn that 'dominion' of the whales to become the lands of their demise," Lorist said as he thumped his hand hatefully on the table.

Chapter 219
Grandmaster Sid

While it was easy for Lorist to make that kind of proclamation, he didn't really have a method he could use to take revenge against the whales as he would require whaling ships. Lorist had been to the Relic Islands before and the locals there were adept whalers. However, they mainly used canoes and swarming tactics against the whales like wolves surrounding a wild bull before using harpoons coated with tranquilizers against them and dragged the whales to the shore when they were paralyzed to be cut open and eaten raw.

It was definitely impossible for Lorist to have the marines learn how to hunt whales from the locals of Relic Islands. What he needed now was a huge whaling ship, so he visited the shipyard again and summoned his shipwrights to begin discussing on how they would go about building the whaling ship.

The training ships constructed for the navy troops were merely 24 meters long and according to the report of the marines who returned alive, they said that the gigantic whale that rammed the first training ship was already 30 meters long. The whaling ship had to at least be two times the size of a whale to be able to stand a chance against it. Thus, Lorist turned his attention to the completed keel of the sail-powered survey ship he designed.

The survey ship was planned to be 75 meters long. In stark contrast to the world of his previous life, the Black Forests had lots of huge trees and it was incredibly easy for them to obtain good quality wood, causing them to not have to construct the keel out of smaller composite parts, further simplifying the construction process.

Since they were going to convert that survey ship into a whaling ship, the watertight bulkheads must be strengthened even further to be able to resist direct ramming attacks of the whales. One of the workers suggested that it could be done by adding another layer of 20-centimeter-thick boards and nailing them tight with copper nails. Even though that increased the mass of the ship and would decrease its mobility, the ship would be able to take more punishment without breaking as easily. Lorist happily accepted that suggestion and rewarded that worker with 10 gold Fordes.

Thus, the plan to change the survey ship into a whaling ship was approved by Lorist. But another problem that had to be solved urgently quickly surfaced. It was already the 11th month with winter on the horizon and it was impossible to continue the construction of the ship In the snowy days to come.

Initially, Lorist had intended to build a huge wooden building so that the construction could proceed indoors, but after trying his hand at drafting the blueprint for such a building, he gave up the notion as a building of that size wouldn't be possible with the construction technology and standards of Grindia. At that moment, Old Man Balk suggested a solution, that was to work on the initial construction of the ship at a cave found beneath a cliff near the place where the wood for the shipyard's use was stored. After winter ends, they only had to move the various ship parts out for further assembly such as erecting the mast, etc. That way, the work wouldn't take more than one month to complete.

Lorist personally went to check the cave out for himself and found that it was incredibly wide and agreed to Old Man Balk's suggestion. During the four months of winter, the two whaling boats' hulls would be constructed there at the same time. He assured Old Man Balk that manpower wouldn't be a problem as he believed that the commoners within the dominion who weren't working their farms during the winter definitely wouldn't mind working for some extra cash, which the family would naturally pay for. He only had to make sure that the quality of their work was upheld.

After leaving the shipyard, Lorist rushed to Bladedge Mountains with his guards. This time around, he was headed for Grandmaster Sid's refinery.

As a saying went, 'one must have the right tools prepared for the right job'. Even though the power of the steel ballistas used by the carroballista division were more than enough against the whales since their skin weren't as tough as the strong hide of the magical beasts, they were incredibly huge in size, so the bolts used by those ballistas were a little too short. Additionally, Lorist wouldn't be content on just killing the huge whales as they were very useful animals all the way from their meat, skin, fats and oils. Even their bones were the ideal material to make umbrellas with.

If the usual ballista was used for whaling, there was a risk that the whale would ram against the ship at the moment of its death and shatter the structure of the ship. That's why Lorist planned to have specialized harpoon shooters installed with had hundreds of meters of steel cable loaded onto the ship. He also wanted the normal ballista bolts to be modified into harpoons, allowing the whalers to drag the corpse of the whale all

the way back to the port after they killed it.

When Lorist arrived, Grandmaster Sid thought that he had come for the 100000 sets of armor ordered by the Fisablen Family and even reassured Lorist that there would be no problem for them to produce 8000 stainless steel armor plates without issue, since he was only in charge of the plates. After that, he would send those plates to the armament production plant and the workers there would take over and use the plates to make proper sets of armor.

Right after that, Grandmaster Sid brought Lorist to see his latest breakthrough which concerned the catapult Lorist tasked him to redesign some time prior. Lorist was surprised when he reached the test area as he saw a six-wheeled mobile catapult as opposed to the heavy and immobile lever-based catapult he designed some time ago. However, the torque-based mechanism of the initial torsion catapult design was replaced by a steel wire spring mechanism.

Originally, Lorist had wanted to make a torsion catapult that utilized a halter, but he was quite troubled when he couldn't recall which animal tendon he should use so that the catapult would be able to launch the payload. So, he had no choice but to settle for a lever-based catapult instead. He didn't expect that Grandmaster Sid would give him such a pleasant surprise by using an elastic wire spring to replace the torque mechanism he had originally designed.[1]

"Grandmaster Sid, how did you manage to think of using a spring to make a catapult?" Lorist asked, feeling a little ashamed. Even though he had come from a world where technology and industry developed at breakneck speed, Lorist wasn't able to come up with that simple solution that solved all the problems as he had only managed to recall a replica of the roman catapult he saw on the television once, causing him much embarrassment as he was a transmigrator from a far more advanced society.

Grandmaster Sid stroked his beard gleefully and said humbly, "Milord, actually, I made the discovery by accident."

Pointing at the water-powered machines by the waterfall, Grandmaster Sid recalled and said, "Before, the largest water-powered presser has always posed a problem when it came to resetting the position of the setter, so we used a U-shaped metal circlip to keep it in place. However, that kind of usage stressed the circlips too much and eventually we had to make a lot of them to replace the worn-out ones. During one of the times when a circlip lost all elasticity, we decided that we might as well coil the

circlip a few more times before putting it back in. We didn't expect that the coiled circlip regained its function and took far longer to wear out from usage than it did before.

After you tasked me to improve the design of the catapult, it made me think of the coiled circlip we accidently made previously so I started experimenting immediately and realized that this type of coiled up metal wire circlip had the best effect. Then again, I feel that instead of calling them coiled up circlips, it's better to just call them metal wire springs. Yeah, we'll do just that from now on.

"Milord, look over here," Grandmaster Sid said as he pointed at a metal plate that looked like a minor segment of a circle on which five straight lines were carved along with a few rows of words. "This plate measures the distance we can launch the rocks and if the catapult is set to the highermost line, it will be able to launch the payload 100 meters away. The lowermost line is the setting that will allow the catapult to launch it 500 meters away. However, this catapult can only throw stone projectiles of a unique shape made by us because rocks of different sizes will affect the firing distance of the catapult unpredictably.

"Look here, milord. I've used both steel and wood to construct the body of the catapult, so it's incredibly sturdy. As for the six-wheels at the base of the catapult, taking the stability and recoil into consideration, we had no choice but to increase the weight of the base. While the catapults are a little slow to move, they are incredibly flexible in that they can fire regardless whether the army is on the march or not because it only requires three people to operate.

"One person will be in charge of its movement, another will load the stone projectiles and the last will fire it. Milord, this metal wheel over here rotates after the payload is launched and pulls the catapult arm back to the metal plate so that an operator can set the firing distance by aligning the arm with the corresponding line. After that, a stone projectile can be loaded onto the bucket and the projectile can be launched by pulling the control lever."

"Grandmaster Sid, you really surprise me greatly with your genius in mechanics and design. I take that this catapult can already be moulded and mass-produced?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, I still feel that this catapult has two shortcomings. First, the heaviest projectile it can launch is 25 kilograms, and second, the steel wire springs still don't

last long enough. After around a hundred launches, the spring will have to be swapped out. I have been trying hard to figure out how I can reduce the wear on the springs but I still haven't managed to succeed so far," Grandmaster Sid explained.

"No, Grandmaster Sid, you have already done exceptionally well. The endurance of the springs are due to the material used and not the fault of your design. As for the maximum projectile weight of 25 kilograms, that can already be considered to be rather good because if the projectiles get any heavier, they will no doubt affect the mobility of the catapult. If that's all the shortcomings you can think of, then they're not big deals. For now, produce 300 of these catapults for me. I am going to form a catapult division," Lorist said.

"As you wish, milord. I will arrange for my men to begin manufacturing them immediately. However, do you want to see how I have optimized the catapult you designed?" the old grandmaster asked.

"Oh? You've even improved upon that one?" Lorist mused curiously as he wondered how the revamped catapult looked like.

Grandmaster Sid brought Lorist to the side of a four-wheeled carriage within which a lot of parts were stored. The carriage was even covered with a rainproof oiled cloth. The grandmaster called five other people over and instructed them to move the carriage to an empty lot further away and begin assembling the parts it carried.

After the oiled cloth was removed, blocks of wood and a few other steel parts could be seen. Lorist instantly understood that it was a disassemblable catapult. Within a short half hour, a 5-meter-tall lever grounded catapult appeared before Lorist.

"Milord, the only shortcomings of your catapult design is the time it requires for assembly which can only be done quickly by trained personnel. But the advantages are obvious: the heaviest weight it can launch is 75 kilograms and the furthest firing distance is 600 meters. That's why I modified it so that it can be disassembled for ease of transport by carriage to another place," Grandmaster Sid said.

"Not bad, you've done a great job. This design is really ingenious. With the catapult you designed and this disassemblable one, I believe that no castle or citadel will be able to stop the advance of the forces of our family," Lorist praised.

"How about this, grandmaster, make 10 units of this assembly-based catapult as well.

I think I'll have 200 of those wheeled catapults and ten assembly-based grounded catapults in one brigade. Let's call it the Thunderbolt Brigade then. Submit a report on the production cost of the catapults and submit it to me. I will approve it right away."

"Thank you, milord," Grandmaster Sid said.

Howard who was following behind Lorist to make records reminded, "Milord, do you have anybody in mind to command the Thunderbolt Brigade yet? Should we also classify information about this brigade?"

Lorist gave it some thought and answered, "Howard, record my orders. Transfer the commander of the First Local Defense Brigade, Ovidis, here to become the commander of the Thunderbolt Brigade and order him to bring along half of the more experienced family soldiers from his brigade along with him. As for the other vacancies, have the veteran soldiers from the other units fill them up.

"Second, Family Knight Paulobins will be promoted to become the Firmrock Castle First Local Defense Brigade's commander with the transferred soldiers replaced by new ones from the new recruit camp. Other than that, the Thunderbolt Brigade doesn't need to be categorized as top secret, just confidential would do."

"Yes, milord," Howard said as he handed the orders he wrote down to Lorist for his stamp and signature before putting it into a silver container to be sent out by the guards.

"Oh, and before I forget, Grandmaster Sid, I have come here for something else," Lorist said as he stopped the grandmaster who was about to leave. "The family navy marine brigade got attacked by whales during their last training session and we lost two training ships as a result and incurred heavy casualties. I plan to deal with these whales and a large whaling ship is already in construction back at the shipyard, but we still require a large harpooning ballista to use against the whales."

"A large ballista? Milord, you should've sought out Grandmaster Fellin for this…" said Grandmaster Sid with a troubled look. He believed that ballistas were Grandmaster Fellin's department and his workshop was not far away from his own either.

"Grandmaster Fellin, huh… Hehehe, he won't do," Lorist said as he shook his head. "While Grandmaster Fellin is indeed an expert in the construction of ballistas, he always designs his creations by the book and doesn't have any spark of innovation or

creative insight. That's why I am unable to hand such an important task to him. Additionally, the time limit for this task is quite limited and we'll have to begin the production during the coming spring. I still feel more assured if I have you work on this."

Lorist's compliments caused the grandmaster to be in an incredibly good mood. He smiled and said, "Since milord looks up on me so much, I will give it a try. However, I still hope that you can have Grandmaster Fellin research in collaboration with me since it'll be more convenient for him to answer some of the questions I might have…"

"No problem," Lorist agreed, before he turned back and instructed, "Howard, go to the ballista workshop and invite Grandmaster Fellin over. After that, bring a few guards to move the one carroballista and super ballista from the workshop over here."

"Yes, milord."

Grandmaster Sid was incredibly interested in the super ballista and he even wanted to try firing it once, much to the shock of Lorist and Grandmaster Fellin. If an elite family soldier had to rest for at least one hour to recover from the firing recoil, an old man like Grandmaster Sid might just lose his life during the attempt. It was only until Lorist ordered one of the guards to demonstrate firing the super ballista that Grandmaster Sid realized that it wasn't a simple toy that could be fired by just anyone.

"Milord, can you tell me some of the requirements you want for the large ballista?" Grandmaster Sid asked.

Lorist took out some writing instruments and proceeded to draw a ballista bolt. The ones who saw the drawing gasped as it looked incredibly savage and vicious. The bolt itself was three meters in length with the sharp tip of the bolt taking up half a meter of the whole thing. The tip had three sharp edges that all had deep blood grooves as well as three reverse hooks at the end of the head of the bolt. There was also a round ring behind the bolt that was used to secure the metal cable and the whole bolt was to be constructed with stainless steel.

"I want the large ballistas to be able to fire these specialized bolts which we will use to capture the whales with. They must be larger than the steel ballistas for the carroballistas to be able to fire a bolt of this size, but can't be as large as the super ballista because we can't have that kind of recoil when firing on a ship. The firing distance should be between 100 to 150 meters and the main criteria is for the head of

the bolt to be able to successfully penetrate the body of a whale. Additionally, the course of the bolt must also not be affected by the cable attached to it, so the force of the ballista must be higher."

After looking at the drawing and contemplating the requirements Lorist gave him for a long moment, Grandmaster Sid finally said, "Alright, milord, I already have a rough idea in my mind. I will try my best to make this new ballista for you within three months."

"Alright, then I'll be leaving this to you."

Chapter 220
Flying Fish of Dawn

This was an incredibly weird ship as her body was slender like a sharp razor blade. On Grindia, the ratio between the length and width of a ship was 5 to 1 at the very least, but this ship was different with its length being 30 meters but its widest part being only 5 meters wide. She floated on the surface of the ocean, proudly showing off the figurehead sculpted in the image of the dragon-slaying Dawn Goddess with one silver nameplate on each side, both engraved with the name of the ship: Flying Fish of Dawn.

At that moment, the seven white sails hanging on the three masts the Flying Fish of Dawn were fully opened, capturing the winds and propelling the ship across the deep blue ocean like a speedy arrow with the view of Bladedge Mountains in the distance slowly fading away.

Lorist stood on the bridge of the ship and welcomed the wind that blew straight at him and caused his black cloak to flap around nonstop. Standing beside him was his student and attendant, Howard, along with Els, Patt, and Jim, the three leaders of the guards. Also present were the leader of the mounted archers, Gold ranked marksman Josk, the vice leader of the carroballista brigade, Dulles as well as Gold ranked knight and commander of the marine brigade, Freiyar. The captain of the ship was Silver ranked family knight Wilson with his quartermaster being Old Jack.

Wilson was a huge man of 30 or so years of age and he was originally a captain of a merchant vessel. However, due to his encounter with pirates, the goods he was transporting had all been taken and he was apprehended by the owner of the goods despite surviving his encounter. Having no way to pay back the goods he lost, his whole family of five were sold to slave traders by the owner in a fit of rage. In the end, they were purchased by Potterfang who bought the slaves to form the very first forces of the northbound convoy. During the northbound journey, Wilson managed to rake in some achievements and was made a family knight by Lorist in the main camp of Nadegas City. Since Lorist had heard about his past and experiences, he elected to make Wilson the captain of the Flying Fish of Dawn.

Quartermaster Jack was 50 years old that year and he also had a background of a slave.

However, his experiences were even more shocking. He had been a sailor for 30 or so years and he got to know a widow when he was 40 and decided to settle down and spend the rest of his life with her. And so, Jack resigned from his job and brought the widow back to his hometown. But before two months even passed, the First Prince initiated his rebellion and sent the Krissen Empire spiraling into the chaotic times of war. His small hometown had been invaded by the forces of the First Prince and his wife died as a result, with him being captured and made a slave and eventually becoming one of the workers of the Kenmays Family. He was finally released when Lorist returned to the Northlands. Now that Lorist wanted to form his naval team, an experienced sailor like Jack could finally be of some use and thus he was made the quartermaster of the ship.

It was currently the 8th month of Year 1773. At the 4th month of that year, the Norton Family had two whaling ships built equipped with the harpoon cannons designed by Grandmaster Sid and began a frenzied massacre against the whales of Whale Island and managed to rake in near a hundred whales for the Norton Family. During that time, much manpower and resources had been gathered up at Bullhorn Bay and it only took three months for this three-masted sailing ship Lorist designed to be built.

"Milord, this is the fastest ship I've ever seen so far and she is even able to travel at 11 knots on full sail. I believe that we won't be able to find a faster ship than her anywhere on Grindia," said Captain Wilson excitedly as he never even dreamed that he would one day become the captain of a magnificent new ship like this.

"That's right. I believe that this is no doubt the fastest ship on Grindia. I estimate that we will be able to see the Platinum Beach which is within the Sidgler Province of the Madras Duchy tomorrow afternoon," praised Old Jack as he agreed with Captain Wilson.

"Oh, Old Jack, have you been to this part of the sea before?" Lorist asked.

"Yes, milord. 30 years back, a few of the larger merchant guilds in the empire formed a coastal survey team and hoped that we can find a good spot along the coasts of the empire to build a port and establish a sea transportation route. Back then, I was only 23 and had already worked as a sailor for 8 years, so I was part of the team as well. The survey team set out from Armatrin Harbor of the Lormo Duchy and traveled along the coast of the continent northward for a little more than three months. The furthest we managed to go was the Lost Forest which is located north from the Black Forests," replied Old Jack.

"Did you manage to find a place to build a port in the end?" Lorist asked.

"No. Back then, the survey team stopped their efforts after reaching the Jillin Harbor of the Andinaq Kingdom because further up north, the condition of the coast would be the same along the Bladedge Mountains. Even though the coasts were shallow, they were filled densely with dangerous reefs and there was no way for ships to approach the coast. Had we not used smaller boats to resupply our ship, the crew would've lost their wits completely. I still recall back then when the president of the merchant guild that organized the effort said that the coastlines there must've been cursed by the gods because we weren't able to find a suitable place to dock at all," Old Jack said.

"Then what happened after that?" asked Howard, who was enraptured with the story.

"After that we continued on northward. After all, we're paid to sail so we had no reason to stop. Also, the merchant guilds that organized the effort said that they wouldn't stop until they found somewhere to build a port and doubled our pay. In the end, we finally found a place to dock near the Lost Forest and those few merchant guilds started to discuss about occupying the place and moving some commoners there to expand their territory before gaining acknowledgement from the empire to become landed nobles themselves.

"But the night three days after we docked, our camp got attacked by gigantic magical beast gorillas that came from the depths of the forests. They tore apart every man they saw and I was incredibly lucky back then as my shift required me to be on the ship. I personally witnessed the bodyguard of one merchant guild's president, a Two Star Gold ranked swordsman, being torn apart into two halves by a magical gorilla who later ate him whole. I continued to have nightmares about that for almost one whole month…

"Of the 700 plus people who were on shore, only 41 of them made it back. We had to give up on two transport ships to even have enough people to man the remaining five ships and returned to Armatrin Harbor in shambles before disbanding shortly after collecting our payment. It's even rumored that the three merchant guilds had lost so much from that venture that they went bankrupt. However, for a low-ranked sailor like me, it's already incredibly lucky that I survived at all. That's why I refused to join any other survey teams after that and only worked securely on the merchant vessel for a living…"

After Old Jack finally concluded the story of his adventures, Howard turned to Lorist

and asked, "Are magical gorillas that strong?"

Lorist patted Howard's head and said, "Didn't you read one of the books in my collection about magical beasts? The information recorded on it is pretty accurate, but the part about the magical gorillas occupying the Lost Forest was only confirmed after the survey team Old Jack was part of returned. An adult magical gorilla is about 4 meters tall and it is blessed with unparalleled strength and can be said to be one of the top three strongest magical beasts. If a Gold ranked knight can calmly circle around the gorilla, there was a good chance he could escape without being harmed. The one Old Jack witnessed dying was an exception and he probably lost his life because he panicked. That's why, retaining your calm is always the most important."

Howard lowered his head respectfully and said, "Thank you, milord. I understand now that no matter what situation we encounter, we must always stay calm and keep a clear mind. Only by doing that can we escape our predicament."

"Hehe," Josk who was listening smirked as he came over to ruffle Howard's hair. "This kid is sounding more and more like an adult day by day. Did he mature overnight after his engagement? Having a wife really does change a person…"

During the 12th month of the previous year before the snow fell, Baron Felim went over to the Firmrock Castle with his 15-year-old daughter as promised. According to him, the mother of his daughter was more like his junior apprentice sister. When he was learning from an old knight, he fell in love with the knight's only daughter and the young couple couldn't control their lust for each other and the young maiden ended up conceiving a girl at the tender age of 16. During the 11th month of that same year, she gave birth to a daughter.

Two years later, the wandering Baron Felim got a piece of bad news about how his lover had attracted the undue attention of a new baron's son when she was out in town to purchase medicine for her sick father. The girl gave her harasser a harsh kick in a fit of retaliation, embarrassing the baron's son greatly. As a result, the baron's son killed Baron Felim's lover with a sword and burned her bedridden knight father alive. Fortunately, Baron Felim's daughter was in the care of their neighbor because the old knight was too sick to take care of her, allowing her to escape the misfortunate incident.

Baron Felim said that since he was only a wandering knight back then and he was busy searching for a way to restore the glory of the Felim Family, he had to endure it even

though he developed a huge grudge for that noble family. It was only after five years during the civil war of the empire when he served under the Second Prince that he was valued and given command of a troop of soldiers. He used that chance when he was marching back from an expedition to assault the town of that baron who was also allied to the Second Prince and buried almost a hundred of the people affiliated with that family alive to avenge his dead master and lover.

Baron Felim's daughter Katrina was an incredibly obedient and mature girl who was blessed with a delicate, beautiful look. After Katrina and Howard met, the both of them got along pretty well and Potterfang felt quite satisfied to have a daughter-in-law like her. So, Lorist organized the engagement ceremony for Howard and Katrina and the two of them would marry after Katrina reached the age of 20 and underwent the ceremony of adulthood.

Lorist saw Howard's flushed face and decided to step in to spare him the embarrassment. "That's enough, Joe. Stop messing with my disciple. You know how easily embarrassed he is, so stop wasting your efforts to tease him and use that time to find yourself a wife instead."

Josk shrugged and said, "Milord, you know me. My heart is already sealed tight and will no longer beat for another woman. I think that I will be better off spending the rest of my life freely by myself."

Lorist shook his head and said, "That won't do, you have to form a family and give birth to a few healthy children to pass down your impressive marksmanship heritage. I'm sure that Baron Omador and that lover of yours will be cheering for your bliss from the paradise of the war god."

Josk merely stayed quiet without saying anything else.

Sensing that it would be insensible to continue pestering Josk, Lorist didn't press on and said to Howard, "Go check out on Knight Charade and see if he's feeling any better."

The Flying Fish of Dawn's current voyage destination was the Andinaq Kingdom. There were a few reasons that prompted Lorist to take this journey, with the first being the transportation of the imprisoned Second Prince there so that the family no longer had to waste any food feeding him. As a prisoner, the Second Prince was still pretty arrogant and even promised others who visited him empty positions of power in hopes that they would break him out of jail. There were some idiots who actually

believed his words and thought that it would be a good opportunity for them to shoot for the moon and actually bothered to bring the Second Prince's letter to request for help to the dominion of the Fisablen Family, only to end up being captured by them and sent back to the Norton Family's dominion to be hanged in front of Firmrock Castle.

Apart from that, Lorist wanted to visit his other piece of land, Silowas Island. Five years ago when Lorist accepted the Andinaq Kingdom's entitlement of the position of the count, the Second Highness enfeoffed his own principality, Silowas Island, to Lorist in an effort to make up for his mistake. However, as Silowas Island was a lone islands amidst the seas, and Lorist was busy leading the northbound convoy back to the dominion at that time, he had no time to bother with the island. Now that the Bullhorn Bay was developed and there was a way out to sea, Lorist could finally check his new dominion out.

After hearing that Lorist was about to leave on a trip, many family knights all scrambled to join in. As they had spent too much time working on nothing but development paperwork for so long, many of them couldn't help but want to experience something new by going along with Lorist on that trip. However, even though the newly-constructed Flying Fish of Dawn was 30 meters long, it was rather narrow. Apart from requiring 28 sailors and a captain, vice-captain, and quartermaster, they could at most bring along 27 more people.

Josk was dead set on following Lorist no matter what so he naturally took one of the places. Freiyar on the other hand said that since he was the commander of the navy marine brigade, he naturally couldn't miss out on the virgin voyage of the Flying Fish of Dawn and took the second place on the ship. Dulles said that since the ship would be outfitted with five new steel ballistas, he had a responsibility to teach the marines how to use those ranged weapons to their full potential, so he brought along five other steel ballista shooters from his unit on board.

Since Lorist was on board, Howard would naturally be there as well, followed by Els and Patt with the reason of ensuring Lorist's safety. The Second Prince also had to be there. Charade on the other hand wasn't the slightest interested in going, but as Lorist said that the family didn't have a specialized officer for this trip, he dragged Charade along with him and left Shadekampf in charge of the former's tasks temporarily. After all, he was going to the royal capital of the Andinaq Kingdom, the former imperial capital of the Krissen Empire, and he would need someone to persuade some high-ranking and capable officers to go back with them to the family dominion.

Just like that, 14 of the 27 places had been taken up. Initially, Charade got seasick and frequently vomited all over the place. Within only one day, he had turned into a bedridden patient and it was only after Lorist made some medicine to help with his dizziness that he managed to get some sleep at all.

The night of the 8th month brought with it the cold breeze from sea. Lorist put on an outer cloak and sat on the bridge of the ship as he stared at the starry sky in deep thought.

Apart from the lookout crew on the mast of the ship, everyone else were sound asleep. The sails on the three masts had also been retracted with only the vertical sails at the head and tail of the ship still catching any wind at all, causing the ship to sail ever so slowly across the calm surface of the sea.

A silhouette appeared on the bridge, followed by the thumping of firm footsteps before the figure sat down beside Lorist with a small barrel of fruit wine and a silver cup in hand.

"Are you feeling any better?" Lorist asked.

The one who just came over was Charade. "After having some medicine and sleep, I no longer feel like puking, but I'm still a little dizzy nevertheless. It's weird, you know. I remember that I never got seasick when I was younger. Why would it hit me like that now that I've grown? Well, I slept too much during the day so I can't get any more sleep now and decided to come look for you."

Pouring some fruit wine into a cup and toasting Charade, Lorist said as he continued to stare at the stars, "Fatty, I was thinking whether we should use this chance to check out on Morante City. Old Jack said that given the speed of this ship, we can reach the Buried Treasure Bay within one month. Don't you want to go back and check on the academy? You can also write your father a letter and tell him you're doing very well with us."

"Forget it, I'll only tell him when you give me some land and make me a landed noble. I will surprise him when that happens," Charade said after taking a swig of wine.

"Then you'll have to wait four years more. Without serving the family for at least ten years, you won't be given a dominion. However, I'm only a count right now so I can at most entitle two viscounts and four barons. Additionally, I can't enfeoff the land within

the family dominion so I'll have to see what we have to work with when we go to Silowas Island. If I can become the Duke of the Northlands, then I can enfeoff you guys richer lands."

"Locke, I actually have a thought. If you actually become the Duke of the Northlands, it's better if you don't enfeoff the land of the Northlands to anyone else. Naturally, you can have some manors and bastides for your Gold ranked knights, but it's better if you don't keep any landed nobles within it. I think that the Northlands should be unified and ruled only by the Norton Family. Only with that can the family have a secure foundation to continue on for the next hundreds or thousands of years. As long as we can seal off the two bridges and one crossing point that link the Northlands to the rest of the continent, the Northlands can exist as its own unit. No matter what happens in the outside world, the Norton Family will still be able to sit calmly in the Northlands and watch the happenings unaffected. Even so, given that we now have Bullhorn Bay, we must also form a strong armada to ensure the safety of the family dominion."

"What you said makes sense and those are my thoughts exactly. But we still have to wait for the opportune time to be able to achieve all that. What our family has to focus on now is to continue consolidating our power."

As the Silvermoon continued to shine upon the peaceful surface of the ocean, the waves sparkled with its light. The Flying Fish of Dawn continued sailing upon the silver, sparkling waves towards the distance…

Chapter 221
Tax Collection

On the 32nd day of the 8th month, the Flying Fish of Dawn arrived at Silowas Island. The journey from Bullhorn Bay all the way to the island took 17 days and that was mainly because it was their first voyage there and the crew was unfamiliar with the situation at sea, so they elected to travel more slowly at night just to be safe. Old Jack said that when the sailors get used to traveling that route, it would take at most 10 days for them to make the same trip again.

Silowas Island was the only large island near the coasts of the Andinaq Kingdom and it was almost 150 kilometers away from shore. Usually, it would take a ship one day to travel from the coast of the kingdom to the island. The surface area of the island was enough to fit one county and three viscounties. But it was a shame that it was a dormant volcanic island, so two-thirds of the island's surface was covered by volcanic mountain ranges, beaches and forests with not much land to farm on at all.

According to the information Lorist was given when he accepted the enfeoffment of the island from Second Highness Auguslo, the total population of Silowas Island numbered fewer than 5000 with it having three villages and a small town called Whitebird Town. Given that it was quite inconvenient to travel to and fro the kingdom by sea, the nobles of the former empire and the current ones of Andinaq Kingdom considered Silowas Island to be a rural place, with there being precedent some refusing enfeoffment there in the past.

After the civil war of the empire ended, the Third Prince who founded the Andinaq Kingdom was worried that Second Highness Auguslo, who had incredible military achievements, would threaten the First Highness who was better at management and administration for the inheritance of the throne. The Third Prince didn't want his two sons to reenact the civil war that broke the empire into pieces, and he believed that war would not break out for a long period of time and that the state of the kingdoms and various duchies would stay the same, with the reason being that he thought that they would require some time to recover from their losses of the war.

With that consideration in mind, the Third Prince appointed the more reliable and

resourceful First Highness to be his successor and decided to deprive the Second Highness of his soldiers so that he wouldn't pose a threat to his elder brother's position. Thus the Third Prince used the excuse that they were unable to sustain three huge armies to disband the Second Highness's Whitelion Legion and also sent the Fiercegale Legion to the Melein Duchy to help Duke Melein resist the Second Prince's assault.

In the end, the Third Prince also converted the whole of Silowas Island into one principality and gave it to the Second Highness as his hereditary dominion. The Second Highness was also ordered to go there and wasn't allowed to leave unless he was summoned back, effectively sealing his fate as an exile in stone. To the Third Prince, with the First Highness whom he personally taught managing the affairs of the kingdom and the threat that was the Second Highness gone, he felt that his first son would soon easily be able to succeed his throne and allow the state of the Andinaq Kingdom to stabilize.

What the Third Prince didn't expect was that he would actually be the target of the waves of assassins sent by the First and Second Princes and eventually got hit by a poisonous arrow despite his best preventive efforts. Even though the Third Prince managed to get rescued in the end, he became bedridden and ill. And the First Highness whom he thought was reliable and steady turned out to be a person of weak character and was taken advantage of the allied nobles of the Andinaq Kingdom who saw through his facade, causing much pressure to build up on the Andinaq Royal Family to the point that the territory of the royal family was divided between the nobles. Thus, the kingdom plummeted into yet another state of unrest.

The Second HIghness who had lost his army could only panic on Silowas Island as he had no power at all to affect the royal family and the kingdom's predicament. But during that time, Second Highness Auguslo got news about an incredibly large-scale convoy entering the borders of the kingdom that boasted a huge military escort force. Back then, that convoy was already in conflict with the Andinaq Kingdom nobles at the Green Plains.

Thus, the Second Highness left Silowas Island on a ship and hoped that he could mediate the conflict between the convoy and the noble faction while gaining some advantages for himself. What he did not expect however was before he even arrived, he got more news of the Battle of the Green Plains. The convoy's forces which numbered half of those of the allied nobles actually won a landslide victory and all the nobles that participated in the conflict were hanged by the convoy's forces as they

continued their travels, razing one dominion after another to the ground.

Most crucially, that convoy flew the Raging Bear flag of the Norton Family and seemed to be intent on returning to their dominion in the Northlands, and the Second Highness's female knight and lover, Norton Glacia, was someone from the Norton Family. So, the Second Highness traveled to the camp of the convoy one night and used his lover's relationship with the Norton Family and the gear of his disbanded Whitelion Legion to successfully persuade Charade, Potterfang and the rest to agree to a cooperative relationship, successfully using the convoy to his advantage to cleanse the Andinaq Kingdom of those nobles and helping him rise to prominence.

After gaining enough power and influence in the kingdom, Second Highness Auguslo summoned the Fiercegale Legion back and restructured the Royal Family's Local Defense Legion and tossed a huge number of vagabonds and refugees to the northbound convoy while he proceeded to stabilize the kingdom and restore agricultural production.

Back then, the northbound convoy was in a precarious position as it still had strong enemies to deal with ahead in their journey and was also facing a food crisis, having been stopped from advancing at the border of the Madras Duchy. Had it not been for Lorist's trip to help out the northbound convoy, it might have collapsed in due time or forced to walk a path of blood and death to continue their journey.

The moment Lorist reached the convoy, he saw through the plan of the Second Highness almost right away. To bring Lorist to his side, Second Highness Auguslo even promoted Lorist to a count to elevate his status and enfeoffed his own hereditary dominion, Silowas Island, to Lorist as compensation for his troubles.

Right after that, Lorist led the convoy's troops to cross Egret Lake and attacked the army camp at Bread Hills during the night and managed to encircle Lichtana Citadel, thus securing a route for the convoy to continue traveling northwards. Following that, he barged into the Madras Duchy and conquered Kobo City during a snowy night and finally managed to bring the northbound convoy back into the Northlands. On the other hand, in concert with Lorist's movements, the Second Highness forced the Ironguard Legion who guarded Lichtana Citadel to surrender and occupied the Madras Duchy's Yungechandler Province.

When Lorist led the family convoy back to the Northlands, the Second Highness overhauled the citadel on the mountain path as a defense for Yungechandler Province

and used the Madras Duchy's largest trade city, Vanades City, to turn Duke Madras's Seamountain Legion against the Second Prince's 'reinforcements', successfully causing the two sides to clash against each other. Following that they, would no longer pose a threat to the Second Highness.

After that, Second Highness Auguslo consolidated his soldiers and resisted the invading First Prince and his army of 70000. Initially, he ordered the Fiercegale Legion to steadily resist the First Prince's forces, forcing the First Prince to lose over half of his army of 70000. After that, Auguslo attacked the First Prince's remaining 30000 elite troops at Flowater Creek and managed to eliminate them altogether, forcing the First Prince to don the disguise of a refugee to escape.

After the attack at Flowater Creek, the Second Highness led his soldiers on a counterattack against the Redlis Kingdom and managed to force the First Prince to sign the peace treaty which stipulated that two of the provinces of the Redlis Kingdom would be given to the Andinaq Kingdom. After the Second Highness pulled his soldiers back, Duke Madras who had suffered heavy casualties against the Second Prince sent someone to him to request for peace as well, causing Yungechandler Province to be given to the Andinaq Kingdom, allowing it to become the largest nation after the fall of the Krissen Empire with Second Highness Auguslo's reputation soaring to the point that he was called a war god of the new generation.

It has been five years since then and Lorist finally managed to stabilize the situation of the Northlands and further expand and develop his family dominion. This trip to his new dominion, Silowas Island, was his first.

Silowas Island's port was built at the coast near Whitebird Town. It was a curved wooden bridge that stretched into the clear and blue ocean that boasted a clean and white beach.

What surprised Lorist was there were seven to eight other ships docked on both sides of the wooden bridge, a few of which were decorated rather grandiosely with their flags flying the emblem of some other noble families. It seemed that Silowas Island wasn't as rural and secluded as what others had said after all.

With no docking guide boats around, the people of the town near the coast were uninformed of the Flying Fish of Dawn's arrival. Not even one person showed up at the port to look at what was going on.

The Flying Fish of Dawn had already had her three sails retracted and only relied on the sails at the front and back to slowly propel herself forward to the wooden bridge. When she was near enough, a few of the sailors jumped onto the bridge and tossed over the mooring lines, fastening the ship to the wooden moorings of the bridge.

Lorist instructed, "Wilson, leave half of the crew on board to keep watch. Dulles, have your five ballista shooters stay back to defend the ship. I feel that something is off with Whitebird Town as there isn't a single soul on the port here. The others, follow me into the town to see what's going on."

It didn't take long until Lorist found out that it wasn't the case that the people of Whitebird Town had disappeared. Instead, they were all gathered in the central plaza, squeezing against one another tightly, with occasional waves of chatter and shouts of objection.

After tapping a man of forty or fifty years of age who was dressed like a sailor on the shoulder, Lorist asked, "Friend, can you tell me what is going on over here?"

That man didn't turn back and cursed out loudly with frustration. "What else? That son of a bitch Viscount Aslan is here to collect taxes again…"

"Collecting taxes?!" Lorist exclaimed. *Isn't Silowas Island the new dominion of the Norton Family? Why would somebody else be sent here to collect taxes?*

"Explain yourself! Who's here to collect taxes?!" When it came to money and taxes, Charade was the one who cared about it the most. He instantly burst out angrily as he thought, *this is the dominion of the Norton Family. Even though the family hasn't sent anyone here to set things in order for five years now, to think that someone would dare to collect taxes here… This is no longer a small matter of offending the Norton Family… This is basically slapping us in the face!* Charade grabbed the guy dressed like the sailor and pulled him right in front of him.

Even though the man had wanted to cry out in rage, when he saw the fully-armed guards standing around Lorist, he turned mute immediately. Anyone who had some experience in life would be able to recognize that the group was one that couldn't be trifled with. The man instantly lowered his head to beg for mercy and said that he would tell them everything he knew.

"It's like this… Today, Viscount Aslan brought a squad of soldiers here to collect taxes.

Even though our town mayor, Old Hugo, refused his unreasonable request, Viscount Aslan flipped out angrily and even wanted to cane him publicly here at the plaza 50 times. Even though the garrison force of Whitebird Town was mobilized, Viscount Aslan brought a Gold ranked knight along with him. While the garrison soldiers are quite numerous, not one of them could take on the knight and the two factions are now at a stalemate. We've come over because we heard of the news and hope that someone can save Old Hugo, quick…" explained the man quickly.

"Isn't this island the dominion of the Norton Family? On what grounds is Viscount Aslan collecting taxes on?" Howard asked.

The man didn't overlook Howard just because of his youth and said, "Viscount Aslan claimed that he was entrusted to collect taxes by the Second Highness of our kingdom."

"Entrusted?!" roared Charade angrily. "This is already the dominion of the Norton Family. Why the heck would the Second Highness send people here to collect taxes?"

"This… I'm not too clear about this. However, I've heard that five years ago when Viscount Aslan first came over, he only collected a 10 percent production tax. On the following year, he collected 20 percent and said that the Second Highness had raised their taxation rate and even stated that they would collect poll taxes. On the third year, he came over to collect 30 percent of our income as tax and said that it was because the Second Highness wanted to raise an army. And apart from the poll tax, he introduced an alcohol tax, a port tax, and so on. The taxes for the previous two years were 50 percent and it also came with property tax, transport tax, mountain-and-forest tax and a fishing boat tax with unifying and restoring the Krissen Empire as the excuse for the raise," recalled the man.

"Good Sol!" Charade was so mad that he would blow up at any moment at hearing the ridiculous taxes that even he had never dared to imagine, let alone enforce. What was the point of enfeoffing that dominion to the Norton Family if the tax rate was that high?

"Then what other tax did he say he wanted to collect today? And why did the mayor refuse it?" Lorist asked.

"Well, I'm not too sure about the specifics either. But I did hear some rumors saying that the Norton Family that haven't shown their faces even once also has another dominion apart from this island. It's said that since their dominion is too far away, the

taxes that should be levied on them are not given to the Second Highness. So, Viscount Aslan was sent over here to collect the taxes that the Norton Family owed the kingdom. If that were really the case, even if we handed over every single belonging of ours, that wouldn't be nearly enough and we would have to end up in debt! I heard that everyone would have to pay 3000 gold Fordes in order to be clear of that debt. That's why we're all gathered here with the intention of saving the mayor and also to express our objection to the ridiculous situation," said the sailor nervously.

"Hehe… Hahahaha…" Lorist was so mad that he was laughing uncontrollably. *I see, so they can even come up with ridiculous excuses like that… That has really expanded my horizons.* Usually, for an island like that which was thousands of kilometers away from the enemy nations with no close relation to the main kingdom itself, not only should the kingdom not collect any taxes, they should be subsidizing and supporting the folk of the island instead to make sure they stay loyal to the kingdom.

Lorist was incredibly enraged as he wasn't sure if Viscount Aslan truly was sent there by the Second Highness or if he did it on his own accord. In the beginning, Lorist had no intention on actually coming over to manage Silowas Island himself and there was no need for the Second Highness to send anyone over to collect taxes from the Norton Family either since he could just record the debt and claim it at another time as was usually practiced by most nobles. Lorist believed that it was possible that the Second Highness wasn't aware of this situation, meaning that Viscount Aslan would be in deep trouble.

"Blow our anthem and show our banners. I want to let everyone on Silowas Island know that the Norton Family, and their dominion lord, is here!" Lorist instructed as he turned back to face his subordinates.

"Yes, milord!"

Chapter 222
Arrival of the Dominion Lord

The sudden anthem blown from the horn resounded throughout the crowded plaza. There was one long note, 2 short ones, followed by another long one and that pattern repeated three times in total, signifying the arrival of the dominion lord. The people all turned to look and started chattering all over, all wanting to know what was going on.

As the crowd slowly stepped aside, they revealed a path straight to the center of the plaza. Faced with the fully-armed family guards, the crowd of people revealed looks of fear and automatically shirked to the sides to make some way as they understood that a person of high standing was present.

The battalion leader of the guards, Jim, and 9 other guards held up their spears, each with a swallowtail flag bearing the crest of the Norton Family upon it, and lined up into two rows, protecting Lorist and the others at their middle. Els and Patt stood in front of Lorist whereas Howard stood to his right, carrying a horn. Behind him were Charade, Josk, and Dulles. Freiyar on the other hand ordered the 10 other sailors to line up in four rows to follow the rest from behind.

"You, come over here," Lorist said to the sailor who was gradually stepping backwards. "What's your name?"

The sailor slumped to the ground limply and said, "Mi-milord… Please forgive me… I shouldn't have offended you…"

A shiny gold Forde was tossed in front of the sailor. Lorist waved to him and said, "This is your reward. You didn't offend me in the slightest. Stand up and lead the way."

Looking at the gold Forde beside him, the sailor was sent into a daze. However, he quickly snapped out of it and took the coin before taking a bite on it with his teeth out of habit. After that, he saw that the guards who were staring at him were trying hard not to laugh and hurriedly stood up before bowing towards Lorist. "Milord, I'm called Porter. It is my pleasure to be of service…"

Lorist didn't say anything and merely pointed to the front. Conscious of his role, Porter moved to the front of the troupe and began to call out loudly, "Scram, make way! The dominion lord is here!"

"Porter, what did you say?"

"Dominion lord? From where?"

"What did you say? Count Norton, our dominion lord, is here?"

The center of the plaza was surrounded by lots of people. Porter was waving his hands and saying something to a few other guards armed with pikes and shields but wearing no armor. Els stepped forward and called out, "Who are you people? Why are you blocking the way?"

Porter hurriedly said, "Sir, this is the garrison force of Whitebird Town…"

"Since they're the garrison force, step aside. The dominion lord is here, why aren't you getting in line to receive him?!"

The few unarmored garrison guards hurriedly stepped aside and bowed towards Lorist and the others who were passing by.

The center of the plaza that was surrounded by people wasn't that big and right in the middle was a wooden structure on which an old man looking to be around 60 with white hair was tied up naked. He had a rather well-built physique, but at that moment, three long bleeding whip lashes could be seen on his body. Beneath the wooden structure, around one hundred or so grey-armored soldiers equipped with pikes, swords and shields could be seen standing off against around 200 other armed members of the garrison force who didn't have a standardized uniform who stood in front of the rioting civilians with ten or so other garrison soldiers trying to maintain order.

"Eh? The garrison force here is not bad. They actually know enough to bother to maintain the order of the crowd," Lorist mused in a surprised tone.

Currently, everyone within the plaza had their eyes focused on Lorist and the rest's arrival.

Pointing at the old man who was tied up on the wooden structure, Lorist asked,

"Porter, is that man Mayor Hugo?"

Porter hurriedly nodded and said, "Yes, milord. Old Hugo is a fair and just person and every one of the townsfolk have deep trust in him. Five years ago when the Second Highness departed, he left behind a huge pile of trouble. It was all due to Old Hugo's efforts in leading the rest to rebuild Whitebird Town and restoring its order that the rest of us have somewhere to rely on. That's why everyone chose him to become the mayor…"

Lorist nodded and said, "Els, Patt, go and fetch Old Hugo over here."

"Yes, milord."

Els and Patt walked casually over to the wooden structure as if they couldn't see the people surrounding it, causing some of the intimidated armed guards to step aside gradually.

Patt slashed the ropes tying Old Hugo up with his sword, causing the old man to start falling. But Els stepped forward and caught him as he said, "Are you alright? Can you walk?"

Old Hugo said, "I'm fine for now. I just feel a little stiff after being tied up for so long, but it won't stop me from walking."

Patt said, "Come with me. Our lord wants to see you."

A few of the armed guards snapped out of their stupor and attempted to obstruct them. Els didn't even bother to look at them and shouted, "Scram! Those who block our path will die!"

"Those are big words coming from your mouth! Who are you people? Leave the old man here obediently!" said a knight who stood to the forward left direction of Els and Patt wearing green-colored armor. With a loud hum, he drew his sword and projected his golden blade glow onto it. He was actually a Gold ranked knight.

"Huh? Locke, isn't this the official armor of the Andinaq Royal Family's Local Defense Legion? So they really are sent here by the Second Highness?" Charade muttered.

"Joe," Lorist said, "Be careful. Don't hurt the bystanders."

The long arrow shot out like a bolt of green lightning and knocked straight onto the center of the golden blade glow of that knight. His sword snapped immediately with the arrow deflecting off it and burrowing itself into the ground not far away. The knight wearing the green armor stepped three steps back as if he had received a huge blow and spat out a mouthful of fresh blood all of a sudden. Never would he have imagined that a single arrow could be so mysterious and arcane to the point that it could snap the sword in his hand while sending a huge wave of Battle Force into his body at the same time, gravely injuring his internal organs.

The injury of the Gold ranked knight greatly startled the other soldiers and the men who obstructed Els and the others' way quickly dodged to the side, being able to do nothing but stare wide-mouthed as Els and the others returned to Lorist.

"Milord, I pay my respects to you. May I know who you are and why you have come to Whitebird Town?" Old Hugo said as he clasped his chest and lowered his head to Lorist.

"I am Count Norton, your dominion lord. Are you the mayor that was chosen by the people of Whitebird Town, Old Hugo?" Lorist said as he eyed the healthy and fit 60-year-old man.

Old Hugo revealed a look of surprise as he stared at Lorist and said, "Milord, are you really Count Norton? Forgive me for my insolence, but could you perhaps show me the proof of your rank and dominion?"

Howard kept the horn he was holding and took out the certificate Lorist received when he was entitled from a leather bag. As Old Hugo had learned to read, he inspected the documents and breathed a sigh of relief, before bowing to Lorist and saying, "I welcome your arrival, dominion lord. I am indeed the mayor that was elected by the folk of Whitebird Town, Hugo. I shall hand the right to rule Whitebird Town to you right now."

"There's no need for that. Continue to fulfill your role as the mayor of the town. I will adjust your position as I see fit after I understand more about the situation of the dominion," Lorist said, before turning to look at the garrison force. "Old Hugo, who's the regiment leader of this unit? I'd like to meet with him."

"Erm…" Old Hugo said as he turned to his back and looked at the garrison soldiers of Whitebird Town. "Victor, get your ass over here right now! Are you not going to greet

our dominion lord who has just arrived?"

A man wearing a set of torn, old leather armor limped forward from the group of soldiers and walked towards Lorist. He casually greeted the group as he said, "Leader of the Whitebird Town Garrison, Victor, reporting for duty, milord."

Lorist looked straight at the man called Victor, causing the latter to feel intimidated by Lorist's sharp gaze and lowering his head to avoid direct eye contact.

"You have done rather well and managed to remember to instruct your men to maintain the order of the situation despite facing off against the enemy. That is extremely praiseworthy," Lorist said.

"Milord, Victor used to be a military officer of the Fiercegale Legion. Had it not been for his injury that caused him to retire from that army, he would definitely qualify as a regiment leader," Old Hugo added.

"What about you, Old Hugo? You seem to have the look of a military man yourself," Lorist said with a smile.

"Milord, I used to be one of the logistics officers of the Whitelion Legion and I came back here after it was disbanded. Whitebird Town is my hometown and I have left it for 35 years to serve as a soldier. It's already incredibly fortunate for me to be able to survive and return here compared to my other comrades who died on the battlefield," Old Hugo said as he sighed.

"Oh, the Whitelion Legion, huh? It seems that you're no outsider, Old Hugo. A few of my family knights used to be part of the Whitelion Legion as well, like Potterfang, Lode Wales, and Malek. Do you know them?" Lorist said, with his interest piqued.

"Potterfang? Of course I know him. I heard that his hometown was somewhere in the Northlands. Even Loze has become your family knight too? Oh, that's right, he was good friends with Potterfang after all. But the truly surprising thing is how that iron-faced Malek also became one of your knights… He's always so emotionless and only cares for the regulations and doesn't bother about friendship or favors at all. I recall that there was once when Malek caught Loze when he was drunk and caned him 10 times personally. At that time, Loze cried out that Malek wasn't his friend, but Malek said that it was precisely because he considered himself a friend of Loze that he had to personally cane him to ensure that he remembers his lesson…" Old Hugo described

the three perfectly as if they were as familiar to him as his own family jewels.

"Milord, we have lots of time after this to talk. Let's settle the main issue first and disband the townsfolk for now. It's not like we can leave them here like that after all," Charade said as he interrupted Lorist and Old Hugo's conversation while pointing at the other soldiers wearing grey leather armor.

"Alright, Old Hugo. Let's talk later. I want to see what they have to say about coming to my dominion to collect taxes," said Lorist as he made his way forward directly towards the group of armed soldiers with the rest following behind him hurriedly.

"I am Count Norton. Have your leader step out to speak with me."

Even though the armed group numbered around a hundred, not one of them were bold enough to resist Lorist. Other things aside, the mere sight of Lorist's guards who were armed with silvery-grey metal armor had blinded their sights. Additionally, the Gold ranked knight that brought them on the mission was even gravely wounded by a single arrow, completely squashing the slightest remaining bit of their intention to resist. When Lorist said that he wanted to meet their leader, they instantly turned their heads to look at the fallen Gold ranked knight.

"He's your leader?" said Lorist, troubled. He thought that the soldiers were brought over by the so-called Viscount Aslan and didn't even consider that they were led there by the Gold ranked knight wearing the armor of the Royal Local Defense Legion.

Lorist walked towards the knight and asked, "Who are you and why have you brought your soldiers to the dominion of my family?"

The Gold ranked knight looked at Lorist and said, "A bloody count like you actually dared to ambush me? Do you know the consequences of your actions?!"

Lorist spit on the ground without a single care in the world and said, "Well, it's true that I don't know the consequences… All I know is that you have come to the dominion of my family with soldiers without any permission or invitation, and that, to me, is basically a declaration of war. I'll give you one more chance to tell me who you are and where these soldiers are from. Otherwise, I will hang all of you like I would bandits."

"Try it if you dare. Do you not fear the repercussions of incurring the rage of Second Highness Auguslo that will burn your family to ashes?" grumbled the Gold ranked knight stubbornly.

Whack! Lorist gave the Gold ranked knight a slap without warning and said, "The rage of the Second Highness? Hahaha… Wow, I'm so scared. Now that I've touched you, what will you do?"

The Gold ranked knight cried out in an angry frenzy before launching himself with both his hands stretched out. "I'll show you!"

"Ugh!" The Gold ranked knight suffered a blow to his abdomen at that moment and curled up like a cooked shrimp.

"Bffooo!" grunted the knight as his right face suffered another punch, before he spat out two of his teeth.

"Gah…" The knight suffered yet another strike on his chest, causing him to kneel on the ground. Even though he felt like puking, he couldn't do so with his face full of bloody tears.

Lorist stretched out his hand to grab the Gold ranked knight before giving him another seven to eight slaps on the face, causing the knight's head to swell up like a pig's head, before he was tossed to the ground unconscious.

"Discard your weapons. I will count to three and anyone who hasn't done so will be killed without question!" Lorist said as he turned to the black leather-armored soldiers. "One…"

Before he even said 'two', continuous clattering could be heard as the soldiers all cast their weapons to the ground. Given that the Gold ranked knight that was far superior than them was beaten around by the dominion lord like a sandbag, the soldiers knew that Lorist wasn't joking around. Of the hundred or so soldiers, the strongest one only had Iron ranked Battle Force. Anyone who resisted would only be causing trouble for themselves.

Lorist didn't expect that the soldiers would give up so easily and he said with a surprised tone, "You guys are rather wise. And to think I was ready to hang a few of you imbeciles… Can't you even let me release some stress? Tell me now, which one of you here is the squad leader?"

The rest of the soldiers thus turned to look at one man who was sweating profusely.

"Do you want to step forward yourself or do you need me to escort you here?" Lorist

said with a laugh.

The man with a fearful looked instantly kneeled before Lorist as he said, "Mi-milord… Please have mercy…"

Why are these soldiers so pathetic? Lorist didn't think that him beating up the Gold ranked knight would cause the rest of the soldiers to be so shocked.

"Tell me about you guys."

"Milord, I am the squad leader of the Andinaq Kingdom's First Legion, Third Division, First Regiment, Second Company's Seventh Squad. I'm called Sillit and our forces are stationed at Jillin Harbor. Gold ranked knight Fewermante is our division commander. That's him over there," said Sillit as he pointed at the Gold ranked knight who laid sprawling on the ground. "We have received orders from him to come assist Viscount Aslan to collect taxes on behalf of the Second Highness. Milord, please have mercy, we are just following orders…"

"Collect taxes? Then where is Viscount Aslan? Why hasn't he come here to meet me? I want to hear why the Second Highness sent him here to my dominion to collect taxes, Lorist said as he gave the rest of the soldiers a look and noting that not one of them seemed like they could be the viscount.

Wait, Viscount Aslan should be coming forward to receive me, the dominion lord. But despite that, the soldiers and the Gold ranked knight here didn't even consider that… Isn't that a little weird, thought some of the soldiers who turned to look around for the viscount. After a few moments, someone cried out, "That viscount has escaped! Curses… We were duped!"

The soldiers all began to cry out in anger.

"Escape? Where would he hide on Silowas Island? Jim, bring two guards and four sailors back to the port to keep watch and tell Wilson to not let a single person board any ship. Anyone who resists shall be sunk right away!"

"Yes, milord."

"Victor, as the garrison force leader of Whitebird Town, have your men lock these soldiers up for now, but don't treat them as prisoners of war yet. I believe that they are also the victims of fraud, so don't treat them badly. Prepare some food for them for

now to settle them down, understood?" Lorist instructed.

"But milord, we can't afford to feed them," Victor said.

Lorist laughed and said, "Howard, give this man 10 gold Fordes and have him give his men one small silver coin each as their reward for defending Whitebird Town. I believe the rest will be enough for the other soldiers to have a huge meal."

10 gold Fordes could be exchanged for 1000 small silver coins. With each garrison soldier receiving one, the rest would definitely be enough for everyone to have a huge meal for the next few days.

Victor finally lowered his head and bowed as he said, "Thank you, milord, for your gracious reward. I will settle these soldiers down for now."

"Alright. Old Hugo, disband the townsfolk here. I won't provide food to anyone who stays back."

Old Hugo clasped his chest to salute Lorist and said, "Understood, dominion lord."

Chapter 223
Tax Collector

The townsfolk all had deep respect for Old Hugo and it only took a few lines from him to disperse the crowd of up to 3000 people. Within less than half an hour, only tens of people remained at the plaza.

"Milord, please follow me back to the town hall for a seat," Old Hugo said as he pointed at a three-storey, brick-and-wood building not far away.

The town hall was rather old and simple with the first floor's main foyer having a few old and worn tables and an old sofa which had been patched up multiple times.

"Dominion lord, usually, we would be on the second floor as the first floor here is mainly used to manage the affairs between Whitebird Town and the nearby villages while the third is used as a storage warehouse. We store all the wealth we've gathered up over the past five years there and I will bring you the inventory to check right away," said Old Hugo.

"There's no rush for that, Old Hugo. First, tell me about the situation of Silowas Island during the past five years. I have to apologize to you here as the original dominion of my family is located at the very borders of the Northlands and it's incredibly inconvenient for us to travel over here. That's why we haven't bothered to visit our new dominion, Silowas Island, during that time. In a sense, it can be said that I didn't carry out my responsibilities as a dominion lord, and I am truly sorry for neglecting my subjects here," Lorist apologized as he sat down on a stool he found while inviting Old Hugo to do the same.

"Dominion lord, please don't say that. I have long been in the military and have heard about the impressive reputation of the Norton Family of the Raging Bear. The Northlands is thousands of kilometers from this place and between here and there is the enemy nation, the Madras Duchy, so the inconvenience of transport is definitely something that isn't within anyone's control. This is definitely not your fault," Old Hugo said as he waved his hands fervently.

"Right now, that's no longer the case. The family has managed to set up a port at the

Northlands and we have come by ship on this trip. In the future, it would only take one month to travel over here. Old Hugo, let's begin talking about the situation here."

"Alright, dominion lord," Old Hugo said before he began to recall. "I only returned to Whitebird Town after my retirement from the Whitelion Legion during the 3rd month of Year 1765. Back then, I was 53 years old and Silowas Island was still the principality of the Second Highness. I remember seeing the Second Highness looking in the direction of the imperial capital at the port often. Two years after I returned, a messenger suddenly came and according to him, the Second Highness managed to grasp power and influence over the affairs of the kingdom and enfeoffed Silowas Island to the Norton Family.

"Many of the Second Highness's men left the island after that and took with them almost everything. Even the garrison force was disbanded and their equipment taken away, leaving Silowas Island completely unattended to and sinking into chaos. One month passed just like that and Whitebird Town had completely become garbage with nobody overseeing it. Every day, somebody would get into fights and the inhabitants of the town could no longer continue to live like this.

"It was at that time that something happened. A small boat came to the island and its crew wanted to resupply themselves here. It was then when the sailors realized that nobody was in charge and began to lose all inhibition and go wild. Within only three days, they already killed seven townsfolk and even captured quite a number of women. At that time, I realized that three of the sailors breached into my neighbor's house and intended to rape his wife and daughter. So, I couldn't resist the urge anymore and killed those three bastards with my sword. And so, the townsfolk began to eliminate the sailors of that small boat with me and proceeded to elect me as the mayor of the town to take charge during the absence of the dominion lord.

"At that time, I felt that since I've returned to my hometown, I might as well do my part to contribute to it. That's why I rebuilt the garrison force of Whitebird Town and tried to restore order. At the same time, I elected multiple other officials like a security officer, a secretary, a tax collector and an accountant. These tables that you see are their usual workplace.

"When Silowas Island was still the principality of the Second Prince, the tax rate was at 50 percent. I don't know how much the usual tax levied by your family is and I didn't know where to ask, so I just used the old system set by the Second Highness and paid the officials with it. The records of all transactions are detailed in the accounts, so you

can inspect them at any time.

"Apart from that, when the Second Highness was still here, there were seven other different taxes, namely, a poll tax, an alcohol tax, a boat tax, a fishing tax, a leather tax, a salt tax and a trade tax. At that time, the yearly income generated by Whitebird Town only amounted to 2000 gold Fordes and the lives of the townsfolk was still decent and they wouldn't have to worry about food as long as they worked. When Viscount Aslan first came over to collect taxes, he was still reasonable and only took ten percent. But on the second and third years, he incremented the main tax by ten percent each year and even took over collecting the alcohol and poll taxes.

"Two years back, Viscount Aslan raised the main tax rate to 50 percent and not only did he take over collecting the 7 other taxes, he even introduced 6 new ones with the excuse being the restoration of the empire. I've made my objections heard before but Viscount Aslan said that I wasn't a person appointed by the dominion lord and was elected by the townsfolk, so I didn't hold any legitimacy. Having no other choice, I could only request him to detail the taxes we needed to pay in an invoice.

"Dominion lord, during the past two years, the whole of Silowas Island paid 5700 plus gold Fordes each year to Viscount Aslan, almost more than two times the original tax we had to pay…"

"Wait a second, Old Hugo, didn't you say that Whitebird Town only had a yearly output of 2000 plus gold Fordes? Then how did Viscount Aslan come up with a figure of 5700 gold Fordes?" Lorist asked.

"Oh, milord, in some sense, the Whitebird Town is the administration center of the whole island. Before the arrival of the Second Highness, the island only had three villages and one town. But after His Highness came, he brought along with him another 4000 or so people with half of them living in Whitebird Town and the others forming another village nearby.

"When the Second Highness left, he enfeoffed the island to you, milord, and more than half of the people that followed him here left the island with only around 1000 who refused to leave and wanted to continue living in that village. A few years later, quite a lot of immigrants came over again and the current population count of Silowas Island is at 12000 people. During the year before, the tax collected rose to 4000 gold Fordes and coupled with the extra miscellaneous taxes introduced by Viscount Aslan, the total amount levied is around 6000 gold Fordes. However, we were unable to

collect that much and if we continue to pay Viscount Aslan like that, we would be losing more than 700 gold Fordes every year," explained Old Hugo.

"Why was the total tax set at 6000 gold Fordes despite you being unable to collect that much in the first place? What is going on?" Charade interrupted and asked.

Old Hugo shook his head hopelessly and took out a map of Silowas Island. "Dominion lord, please take a look here. Not far east from Whitebird Town is Seaview Manor. That place is the most luxurious area on the whole of the island and every evening when the sun sets, the beach right in front of Seaview Manor will reflect golden beams of light. The beach's beauty can rival even that of the Platinum Beach in the Sidgler Province of the Madras Duchy. However, its area is much smaller. Even so, it's still a great place to spend summer and have fun near the ocean.

"That manor was the original residence of the Second Highness. But when he left, it was occupied by a few other nobles of the kingdom and they turned the whole manor into their own place for luxurious living and we aren't even allowed to approach it. Milord, you've probably seen those extravagant ships when you docked at the port, right? Those ships are the ones used by those nobles when they come here to have fun.

"Also, over here, half a day's travel from the town is Farama Village where the men of the Second Highness that remained behind stay. Even though the people there occupy one of the richest fields, they refuse to pay any taxes at all with the reason being that they are the men of the Second Highness and have served him through high and low and anyone who demands taxes from them is being disrespectful to the Second Highness himself. We've been unable to deal with those people.

"But Viscount Aslan doesn't care about these things and he puts all the taxes Seaview Manor and Farama Village owe on us. We're unable to do anything about it as none of our complaints are heard. After that, Hector came up with an idea for us to form a fishing team and sell the catch to merchants. That way, we were able to make up for the deficit and even have some extra funds for the garrison force's food…"

"Milord, that Viscount Aslan has been captured by us," Jim reported when he entered.

"Where did you catch him?" Charade asked.

"He brought two of his attendants and attempted to escape by ship, but their sailors

were all drunk at the town pub and were unable to set sail. When we came to the port, we notified Captain Wilson and some of his sailors said that they saw attempting to board. After we checked, we found and apprehend them," Jim said.

"Bring that dogshit viscount over here. I want to hear how he plans to explain this to me," Lorist instructed.

"I object! I'm a noble, you cannot treat me so rudely!" Jim only went out and came back in within a moment with a skinny man dressed in noble robes. Perhaps because he heard Lorist call him a dogshit viscount, he became incredibly mad. Jim had to drag him by his clothes all the way into the tent.

"Old Hugo, who's that Hector you just mentioned?" Lorist said as he ignored the loudly complaining Viscount Aslan and continued to chat with Old Hugo.

"Dominion lord, Hector is our head secretary and he graduated from the Mobor Academy of the empire and served as an apprentice instructor there before. But when the academy was ruined in the days of the civil war, he came back with the Second Highness to Whitebird Town with his family and took up a position as the official for the transport of goods. When the Second Highness decided to leave the island, he didn't want to follow and remained at Whitebird Town. I appointed him to be the head secretary of Whitebird Town as he is well-versed in writing official documents," Old Hugo replied.

"Oh, Old Hugo, you've all done well. I am very thankful for your presence on Silowas Island that stopped the situation here from sinking into chaos. As your dominion lord, I offer you my gratitude and respect for your hard work. The Norton Family will definitely not forget your efforts," Lorist said as he stood up and saluted Old Hugo. Charade, Els, Patt and Jim who were within the room did the same.

"This… this… Milord…" Old Hugo only stammered, not knowing how to react at all to the situation.

Lorist waved his hand to indicate that Old Hugo didn't have to keep up formalities before turning around and taking a look at the pale and frightened Viscount Aslan. He said with a warm smile, "Viscount Aslan? I've long heard of your great name. I am the dominion lord of Silowas Island, Norton Lorist, and I'm incredibly glad to finally be able to meet you."

Lorist's smile caused Viscount Aslan to develop a wrong impression. Perhaps thinking that Lorist was merely a man from the rural Northlands that hasn't had much real world experience, he felt that Lorist would be really easy to deal with. The skinny viscount straightened his robes and said in an arrogant tone, "So you're Count Norton who came from the Northlands? As a noble, you must apologize to me and reimburse me for that kind of treatment. Your family soldiers violated my status rudely and that is not an offense that a noble like me can overlook. You must punish your soldiers right here in front of me in order to obtain my forgiveness. Otherwise, I will definitely sue the Norton Family for violating the pride of nobles in the noble court and make your barbaric acts known to all the other nobles of the kingdom…"

"Oh no, how scary… I definitely cannot bear to have that happen…" Lorist said as he pretended to speak in a fearful voice. He turned to Jim and said, "Are you the one who offended Viscount Aslan? Come over here! I will punish you!"

With Jim in front of him, Lorist gave him two light slaps on the face and said, "You idiot, how could you force the noble and revered Viscount Aslan to appear before me in such proper fashion? Look at him, he's overstepping his bounds right now. You should've stripped him naked and covered his whole body with horse feces before dragging him over. Only then will he beg us to give him a torn rag to protect his noble pride with and not make such excessive demands of us."

Lorist lightly slapped Jim's face twice again and said, "Do you remember this lesson now? Remember the feeling of these slaps well. That is your punishment."

Jim laughed out loud and said, "I have learned my lesson, milord. I will never repeat this mistake again."

Lorist nodded and said, "Very well, stand to the side."

"Yes, milord!"

Everyone within the tent burst out in laughter with only Viscount Aslan staring wide-eyed with his mouth agape.

"Objection! I want to object!"

Lorist walked over and gave him a harsh slap on the face, causing the skinny viscount to turn 180 degrees and his face to swell up with his lip broken. He even spat out a few of his teeth and fresh blood could be seen flowing out of his mouth before he fell to his

butt onto the ground dizzily.

"Object my ass! Yours truly still hasn't even mentioned the debt you owe me and yet you dare to complain up front? Let's go over all your mistakes. First, I am a landed noble of the rank of a count and you're only an honorary viscount. Be it rank or status, I am far superior than you in either regard! You actually dared to put the blame on me in front of my face and ask me to give you respect and accuse me of violating your noble pride? Are you joking? You're pride is worthless! In my eyes, a viscount like you is nothing but a pile of crap!"

Stretching his right foot out to stomp of the viscount's face, Lorist said, "And you still dare to object! Are you challenging the honor and pride of the Norton Family? It has just been a few short years, yet the nobles have forgotten how the roar of the Raging Bear sounds like… How regrettable. I believe I must remind the nobles of the kingdom the consequences of incurring the rage of the Raging Bear."

Viscount Aslan flailed around and said, "AI emm the taksh kollectur uuf da Shekend Hainisss… I wuss orderrd tu komm hier…"

"You still dare to talk back?" Lorist couldn't understand what the viscount was spouting and increased the strength of his step, causing the viscount to let out cries of pain.

"Ah, where was I just now?" Lorist asked as he forgot what he was just talking about.

"Milord, you were going through the mistakes of the viscount with the first one being his lack of respect for you and his challenging of the Norton Family," Howard reminded.

"Ah, that's right. Second, on what grounds have you come to collect taxes on my dominion? From whom did you get the guts to do that? I will definitely hang all the members of your family for this…" Lorist rebuked.

The viscount suddenly turned quiet as he took out a small golden-threaded beastskin scroll from his robe and waved it in the air.

"What is this?" Charade said as he took the beastskin scroll and unrolled it. Clicking his tongue, he said, "Milord, this viscount was truly sent here to collect taxes. This is the appointment letter signed by the Second Highness.

Kicking the viscount away, Lorist said, "Get up. I have questions for you."

Taking the scroll Charade handed over to him, Lorist saw what the scroll stated. 'Viscount Aslan Robiossen shall collect taxes from the dominion of Count Norton and Jillin Harbor on behalf of the Andinaq Kingdom and carry out his duties with pure dedication to his utmost abilities and make his contribution to the restoration of the empire.'

The letter was signed 'Krissen Auguslo', the Second Highness's name, dated on the 23rd day of the 5th month of Year 1768 along with the private stamp of the regent of the Andinaq Kingdom belonging to the Second Highness.

"Ah, I didn't think that Viscount Aslan here was truly appointed by the Second Highness as a tax collector! And to think that I thought you were a conman!" Lorist said as he finally understood what the viscount was trying to say despite the stinging pain in his mouth.

"You… you actually dared to treat me like that! You Nortons better be ready for the rage of the Second Highness! He'll definitely turn your family to ash with his 300000-strong army!" Viscount Aslan cried out as he struggled to stand up and held his pained face while giving Lorist a hateful stare.

"300000-strong army? Hehe, I'm *so* afraid right now. Seems like a puny viscount like you is cared for so much by the Second Highness that he would mobilize the whole army for you… Is that why you've been raising the tax rate ridiculously? Speak!" Lorist shouted, causing Viscount Aslan to jump in fear.

"Didn't you read the appointment letter?" Viscount Aslan said stubbornly.

"Hehe, since you're a tax collector sent here by the Second Highness, why did you try to escape?"

"I wasn't escaping. I was just getting on my ship to get my appointment letter so that I can prove my identity. It's your family soldiers that offended me first."

"Is that so? Since you're still insisting that you're innocent, no worries. We'll find out after we head to the royal capital and bring you in front of the Second Highness. I'll see if he really did instruct you to increase the tax rate. We'll know by then… Els," Lorist called out.

"Milord, please give me your instructions," Els said as he stepped forward.

"Have Jim work with you to bring this dogshit viscount to the wooden structure outside. Strip him naked first and give him 30 canes. Since he dared to cane Old Hugo three times, we'll pay him back ten times as much! After that, cover his body with some glue and feathers. Don't forget how the folk of the Northlands treat fraudsters and liars," Lorist instructed lazily.

"Yes, milord. I know the custom of the northlanders well. Liars are covered with feathers and paraded around for everyone to see. We will definitely do so accordingly," Els replied.

"Understood, milord," Jim agreed casually.

After that, Viscount Aslan squealed out like a pig that was about to be slaughtered. "No! You can't do this! I am a noble! I'm the tax collector appointed by the Second Highness!…"

Chapter 224
Hector

"Mi-milord, Viscount Aslan is indeed the tax collector sent by the Second Highness…" Old Hugo muttered as he stared at Viscount Aslan being dragged out of the building. Not long after, cries of pain and ear-cracking whipping sounds could be heard, followed by the cheers of the onlookers.

He didn't understand why that young dominion lord, Count Norton, dared to treat the Second Highness's tax collector like that without any hesitation. Either he was inexperienced or he truly knew what he was doing and didn't have a single care for Second Highness Auguslo who was at the peak of his position and feared like a tiger by all the other nobles of the Andinaq Kingdom.

Either way, Old Hugo was worried that the young dominion lord would incur the wrath of the Second Highness and cause 'the innocent fish of the pond to perish along with the city fire'. Even though Grindia didn't have the exact saying per se, there were similar idioms that carried the same meaning. Old Hugo was worried that Count Norton would just run off and leave the people of Whitebird Town to suffer the consequences.

"Hehe, Old Hugo, don't worry. I have my own reasons and thoughts for treating Viscount Aslan like this," Lorist said with a smile to the old man. "As you have spent most of your life in the army, so you might not understand the traditions and customs between nobles and don't know the responsibilities of a tax collector. In actuality, as the mayor of a town within the Norton Family dominion, you have right to refuse unreasonable taxation unless you were specifically ordered otherwise by a dominion lord like me.

"A tax collection officer's responsibilities include collecting the taxes from the various areas under the jurisdiction of the royal family and stopping corruption and tax evasion. To dominion lords, their authority only concerns inspecting the economical situation of their dominions and collect any due taxes from us as a tribute for the royal family. They have no authority at all to increase tax rates and must definitely gain the approval of a dominion lord like me first before they do anything. As he dared to

introduce more taxes and increase the main tax of Whitebird Town, is he treating our dominion like the territory belonging to the royal family? That act of his has already infringed upon the honor of the Norton Family and that goes against the customs regarding the interaction between a senior and junior nobles. Even if I hang him, the royal family won't be able to do anything about it.

"In a few days, I will bring this viscount to the Second Highness and ask him whether his actions are carried out per his orders. I will make sure that the Second Highness personally orders this dogshit viscount to be hanged, and he will, unless he intends to offend all the other nobles by violating our sacred customs by protecting the viscount. No matter what, this viscount is definitely a goner.

"You might not understand the behavior of the nobles well enough, and I don't blame you for that since you only served in the army before. The more you tolerate their selfishness, the more ridiculous they will act. Like today, this viscount even dared to bring soldiers into Whitebird Town. Since he didn't gain permission from me to do so, that can be considered a declaration of war. That's why I definitely won't let this slide. Don't worry, if the sky falls, the Norton Family will be here to bear it for you.

"For now, just call your subordinates over here to make some introductions. This is the chief knight of our family, Charade. Everything concerning the administration of Silowas Island will be temporarily his responsibility."

"Alright, dominion lord. I will call them over right now." Since Lorist was so confident, Old Hugo could only keep his worries to himself and call the rest over.

In a few moments, Old Hugo returned with five other people.

"Dominion lord, this is Old Mike, my accountant. He had worked for 20 years for the Carey Merchant Guild in the imperial capital and only came back to his hometown here after it closed down."

Old Mike was an old man with balding white hair even though he only looked around 54. It was probably because he taxed his mind so often as an accountant that his hair fell that quickly.

The next person was a 49-year-old skinny, tall man. He stepped forward and introduced himself, "Dominion lord, I am Kriston, the security official of Whitebird Town."

Old Hugo added, "Dominion lord, Kriston here used to work as an undercover inspector for the security bureau of the former empire and he has handled all sorts of cases. His wife is a Whitebird Town local, so he settled here after the empire broke apart."

Lorist nodded and made a mental note on Kriston. Even though the family set up various patrol forces within the towns it controlled, the forces can at most handle small cases like drunk people getting into brawls and still lack the ability to properly investigate and crack criminal cases. As the dominion continues to develop, the population will increase as well and it will require a lot more people and procedures to maintain order.

The third man who stood forward was a red-faced old man. Old Hugo said, "Dominion lord, this here is Old Hart and he has been the tax collection official for Whitebird Town all this time. During his forty plus years on the post, he has gotten to know almost everyone on Silowas Island."

The fourth person was the limping garrison captain Victor and he reported, "Dominion lord, the soldiers are already settled down and I stationed a squad of garrison troops to keep watch on them."

The last person was a pale-faced youth who should be around five to six years older than Lorist. He stepped forward, bowed respectfully, and said, "Dominion lord, I am Hector, the main secretary of Whitebird Town. I'd like to add that your treatment of Viscount Aslan is a little rash. Are you not worried about the vengeance of the Aslan Family?"

"The vengeance of the Aslan Family?" Lorist said as he laughed out loud. "Well, tell me more about what you understand of the situation at hand."

"Dominion lord, even though Viscount Aslan is only an honorary noble, his brother Count Aslan is a proper landed noble. Additionally, the Aslan Family is one of the first to side with the Second Highness and they are well-trusted by him. Not only is Count Aslan a Gold ranked knight, he is also the commander who rebuilt the Royal Family's Second Local Defense Legion and his family holds great power and influence. This is why even though I knew clearly that Viscount Aslan's requests were excessive, I could only advise Old Hugo to endure it. After all, your family hasn't had any contact with us back then and I was worried that Old Hugo would be put to death if he dared to resist. In fact, a few other accusations could be made on Old Hugo for being a mayor picked

by the townsfolk without the official sanction of the ruling family…”

Hector paused for a while before he continued, "Dominion lord, I'm actually quite uninformed about the might of the Norton Family. But I've heard rumors that five years back, your family's northbound convoy helped the Second Highness out tons, but the original dominion of the Norton Family is really too far away. The Second Highness also holds a really high position in the kingdom nowadays and has built himself six legions with up to 300000 soldiers to prepare for the reunification of the former empire. At this crucial time, if you, dominion lord, think that you can rely on previous favors and friendship to avoid repercussion for your actions, I'm afraid that the Second Highness wouldn't be too pleased with this. I believe the case of Viscount Aslan's treatment should be given more serious consideration."

Charade laughed out loud and said, "Hector, I hope you can understand one thing. The Norton Family is not relying on anything like favor or friendship, but our own might. Milord has his own reasons for treating Viscount Aslan the way he did. However, I am interested in what you said about the Second Highness's six legions of 300000 soldiers. Can you tell me more about that in detail?"

"You are…?" Hector muttered as he gave Lorist a weird look. *That knight that just spoke up only wears a Silver ranked badge and isn't even a Gold ranked knight. How can he interject so casually like that?*

"This is Chief Knight Charade of our family. He will be in charge of all affairs concerning Silowas Island," introduced Lorist once more.

"Oh…” Hector said as he suppressed his curiosity and nodded in acknowledgement to Charade. "Sir Knight, I don't really know too much myself, but during these past two years when I dealt with the fish merchants, I heard a lot of rumors about the Second Highness. Five years back, after the Second Highness went to war with the Redlis Kingdom and the Madras Duchy, he reformed the various legions of the Royal Family's Local Defense Army. After disbanding the Fiercegale Legion, he organized the Local Defense Army into three separate units each with up to 56000 soldiers. After that, he formed three other Reserve Legions each with 42000 soldiers and another 5000-strong Royal Knight Brigade.

"According to my understanding, the taxes that all the nobles have to hand to the royal family has increased to 30 percent with the territory belonging to the royal family themselves charging up to 70 percent. All the wealth gained through the increased

taxes will go towards funding these six legions. The Second Highness even announced that he hopes that the people of the Krissen Empire whether they be nobles or commoners endure for the next few years, and promised that he would make up to them for it after unifying the empire…"

Lorist couldn't help but laugh out loud and pat on Howard's shoulder uncontrollably. "Howard, did you hear that?! This is the epitome of alpha-strike mentality! The Second Highness wants to replicate the achievements of the first Krissen Founding Emperor, Krissen I, and is ready to use his 300000 soldiers to unify the empire. But it's a shame that he forgot that times have changed. Right now, he's alone in his effort and if he fails, he will no longer be able to retaliate and the Andinaq Kingdom will end at that time."

"Milord, even you are doubtful of the chances of the Second Highness's war plans?" Hector asked.

"I'm not just doubtful. I am completely certain that the Second Highness's plan to unify the empire has zero chance of success. Putting other things aside, in the time of the first Krissen emperor, it was the warring-states period and each kingdom was akin to a modern-day barony. Krissen I's 300000-strong army naturally was able to sweep the floor with his enemies and even if tens of kingdoms unite together to resist, they wouldn't even stand a chance against the army's assault. It must be noted that at that time, the most elite force of a kingdom was lesser than 100 men, so how would they even stand a chance?

"But now? Even you were able to find out about the Second Highness's movements through mere rumors from merchants, so the nations at the border would definitely be keeping their guards up as well. Even if the Second Highness manages to conquer a few cities, he would suffer heavy casualties. And if he bumps against a foe that has a clear mind and is able to manipulate his enemies well and can stop the Second Highness's army from obtaining the necessary supplies, if the Second Highness continues to stubbornly persist in his struggle, how long can the poor commoners of the Andinaq Kingdom last? I suspect that the kingdom would collapse even before half of the 300000-strong army is eliminated…"

Howard looked to be in deep thought. Charade asked, "What I'm curious about is this… The Second Highness and the Redlis Kingdom as well as the Madras Duchy signed a ceasefire for 5 years, but it's already expired. Since he already has an army of 300000 prepared, why isn't he taking the opportunity to start the battle for unification right

away? Isn't he letting this chance go? The longer he waits, the more the Madras Duchy and the Redlis Kingdom will be able to build up their defenses…"

Hector said, "Perhaps, I know the reason to that. A while ago I heard the merchants say that the Third Prince's sickness is getting rather bad and he doesn't have much longer to live. The Second Highness might just be waiting for his father to pass on first before launching the battle of unification. I'm guessing that it's because he wants to be crowned the monarch after the unification. If the Third Prince doesn't die, the crown has little chance on falling on the Second Highness's head…"

"Hehe, he's blinded by his lust for power," Lorist commented.

At that moment, Jim and Els entered with smiles on their faces and said, "Milord, we have completed your orders and Viscount Aslan's body has been covered with fish glue and feathers. Right now, he looks completely like a weird bird being tied up on the wooden structure by us."

"Alright," Lorist said while nodding. "Old Hugo, how many people did you say are at Seaview Manor?"

"I'm not too sure about this myself, but judging by the number of guards there, I'd say around 100 or so is there," Old Hugo replied after giving it some thought.

"Josk, Freiyar, the two of you shall bring Els and the other guards and sailors for a trip there and bring everyone at the manor over here. Anyone who resists shall be killed without quest-- Actually, try your best to catch as many alive as possible. I suddenly feel that we will be needing more manpower over here for many things," Lorist said in a frustrated tone.

"Milord, will you be fine here after we leave?" Freiyar expressed his worries.

"It's alright. It's not like you guys don't know my abilities. It'll be enough for me to have Knight Charade and Howard here. Also, Victor, bring 100 men from your garrison force over there as well," Lorist instructed.

"Dominion lord, the Whitebird Town Garrison isn't equipped with even leather armor and are barely armed with only a pike each man. How can we even stand a chance against the fully-armed guards of the manor? We can't do anything about that," said Victor as he refused Lorist's order.

"I'm not asking you guys to go on a suicide mission and don't need the garrison soldiers to attack the manor. Just leave that to my family soldiers. The reason I asked you go there is because you know the terrain better and will be able to stop anyone from escaping. Other than that, you just need to bring along some rope to tie up the prisoners with. If the attack doesn't work out, I will allow the garrison soldiers to retreat first," Lorist said as he met Victor's gaze.

Convinced, Victor said, "Alright, dominion lord. I will gather my men right now. I hope our excursion will not be for naught."

"Milord," Freiyar said as he stepped forward. He pointed to the map of Silowas Island on the table and said, "After taking Seaview Manor, should we attack and conquer that Farama Village as well?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "There's no need. We are a little short on time, so all you have to do is to attack Seaview Manor and capture the nobles and others that are there. I will be waiting to deal with those insolent idiots tonight. As for Farama Village, I will bring you guys along with me there tomorrow. Nobody in our dominion will be allowed to go unpunished after challenging the Norton Family. They didn't pay their taxes for five whole years? Very well……"

"Alright, milord. Then we will leave right away," Freiyar said before bowing to Lorist with the rest and leaving the building.

"Dominion lord, if they really make that trip, then we won't only be offending the Aslan Family. You should know that after the Second Highness left the island, the ones who remained at Seaview Manor are the descendants of some of his noble attendants. They can at most be considered to be causing mischief like all youngsters do. If you really punish them seriously, then you will be considered to not be giving the Second Highness any face and will also be offending the other noble attendants of the Second Highness," Hector warned hurriedly.

"Hehe, he's quite an interesting fellow," said Lorist to Charade. "He doesn't understand that we only bother to give the Second Highness face because he is our senior noble and we've never once feared the might or power of the Second Highness. As long as others don't offend us, we won't cross them either. But since someone is knowingly causing trouble, then our only response will be blood and fire. Charade, this guy is a talented fellow. Don't let him continue working as a mere secretary, let him stay by your side to train instead."

"Yes, milord. I already know what to do with him," Charade replied.

"Good, then I'll leave this place to you. You should research more about the situation of Silowas Island, Whitebird Town and the other villages here and think of how we can develop this dominion. After our forces return in a few days, we will head straight for the imperial capital, so go get on with your work. Howard, let's go take a walk."

"Alright, milord!" said Howard gleefully.

Chapter 225
Whitebird Restaurant

There was once again hundreds of people gathered at the plaza, but this time around all of them were there to look at the feather-covered Viscount Aslan. Lorist didn't bother to join in the commotion and merely brought Howard to a small alley and looked at the sights of Whitebird Town in a casual manner.

The road they walked on was made up of huge rocks with cobblestones squeezed in between with various houses and buildings built from clay lining its sides. Even though the structures didn't have a uniform outlook, they looked rather clean and there wasn't any trash to be seen all around. The two sides of the alley were lined by the walls of the buildings and from time to time, fish racks could be seen with some fish placed upon it and left to dry. The breeze brought with it a slight fishy smell.

The alley was quiet and curvy. After a while of walking, they reached the end of the road and had to turn into another path within the town. That path was wider than the alley before it and could even allow carriages to pass through. On one side of the road was the tideland with some plants growing on it. The tide had already receded that time and tens of people carrying something on their backs and picking stuff up on the tideland could be seen. The adults walked barefoot with their pants rolled up and used the wooden sticks in their hands to poke around the muddy ground while the children ran around and played naked.

"Master, this place is so different from the Northlands. The sights here are so pretty," Howard said.

Lorist looked into the distance and replied, "This is an island after all and it is very different from the Northlands. The Northlands are mostly desolate with the skies high up and the clouds thin. But this place on the other hand is like a pearl in the middle of the sea with wide skies and blue seawater; it is indeed a great place. It's a shame that Second Highness Auguslo doesn't have an eye for these things and didn't know about the value of this place when he was here and even abandoned it to us for an incredibly low price. How laughable…"

Howard tilted his head in confusion and asked, "Master, why do you think so?

Transport to and from Silowas Island is inconvenient and its farmable area is also rather small. I feel that the Second Highness made the right choice to abandon this place and left for the imperial capital."

"It's about perspective, Howard. You must change yours. Farmable land is not the most important cornerstone of a nation or family's might. I've told you before that the main expenditure of war is manpower and resources. The present is really different from hundreds of years ago when one knight and his few attendants could dictate the tide of war. Battles on the scales of tens of thousands are no longer new on the continent of Grindia, and that's why I don't approve of the Second Highness's preparation to reunite the empire with his 300000 plus troops.

"The Andinaq Kingdom currently has six provinces and the Second Highness has used up almost one whole province to feed his soldiers. They're only barely hanging on just by relying on the local produce and you've also heard that the tax rate of the territory of the royal family has been raised to 70 percent, which can already be considered tyrannical. If this goes on, the commoners will definitely not be able to hold on. No matter what grand excuse the Second Highness uses, that doesn't change the fact that he's barely sitting still on the sides of the volcano.

"You'll understand it right away after looking at the map. Silowas Island is actually the central hub of this region of the sea and controlling this island is akin to controlling the thousands of kilometers of shores nearby. From an offensive standpoint, we can attack the Andinaq Kingdom as well as the Redlis Kingdom's coastal provinces. From a defensive standpoint, we only have to retreat back to Silowas Island and there's nothing the enemy can do about us. Naturally, our family will first require a strong fleet.

"That is only the military considerations. Howard, think, what will happen if we convert Silowas Island into a central trading hub?" Lorist asked.

Howard thought for a bit and replied, "Just like the offensive standpoint, our family can ship the salt we produce to the coastal provinces and trade it with money or other required resources. Even if we don't have enough farmland on this island, we can still trade for huge amounts of food for our use, is that right, master?"

"You're half correct. Our family still needs to form a strong fleet first. If we can have full dominion over the waters from this island to the Northlands, we can use Silowas Island as a starting point for our merchant vessels to travel to any other coastal city

on the continent of Grindia. As long as trading continues, money will continue to flow to us and our family's might will also increase. That's why I feel that the Second Highness made an idiotic decision to give up on this island. All he has in his mind are outdated ideas," Lorist insulted.

"Master, I feel that you've been getting more and more confident in the recent days. Just like Knight Josk said, you're starting to have a more domineering aura and is starting to feel more like an actual dominion lord," Howard praised.

Patting on his disciple's head, Lorist said, "Oh, your ass-kissing skills have improved… Howard, you must remember this well. Confidence must come from the might of the family. The stronger the family is, the more you can back your confidence up with. In the case of Viscount Aslan's treatment, we can afford to not give the Second Highness any face. While he can instill fear in other nobles with his 300000-strong army, it is useless against us because we understand that even if we end on pissing the Second Highness off, he can't do anything about us given our might.

"Think about it. A few years ago when we were still leading the convoy back to the dominion, could we have imagined that a day like this would come? At that time, don't even talk about the Second Highness's 300000-strong army, what about that Count Cor-something? His force of around 10000 soldiers was enough to make us jump with worry. But during the past few years we stayed put within the dominion to development it like a turtle withdrawing into its shell, the Duke of the Northlands, Duke Loggins, and the Second Prince thought that we've become a ripe persimmon that can be squeezed for juice. Right now however, Duke Loggins is already ill and bedridden and doesn't have long to live and the Second Prince just became our prisoner.

"The reason we don't use the same alpha-strike mentality is because even if we occupy huge amounts of territory, without developing them, they would not provide any benefit for us. Just like right now, even if our family forces were to be wiped out, the family can still form a second one, and perhaps even a third. It is because we have this foundation that we don't fear our enemies. Development is the only correct way, understood?"

"Development is the only correct way? Master, this saying is a little of a mouthful, but I guess it does make sense. When I heard that the Second Highness had a force of 300000 soldiers, I didn't even feel any dread at all. I guess you're right that our family's might allowed me to not be bothered at hearing about the 300000 troops," Howard

said as he nodded, before his stomach grumbled.

Lorist snickered and said, "Kid, you should've said so if you were hungry. Come on, let's find a place to grab something to eat. I already forgot about eating after we got off the ship and getting so busy…"

Past the corner ahead was a wooden, brown plaque which had a picture of a white bird with the words 'Whitebird Restaurant' engraved upon it.

"I didn't think that a small town like this would have a restaurant. I thought that sailors would usually frequent inns or taverns for food and drink. Let's go check it out," Lorist said.

The restaurant wasn't that big and it was obvious that the wall dividing the living hall and the dining hall was knocked down for more space. Six small square tables could be seen with each of them covered with a linen cloth with blue boxy patterns and had small baskets placed on them with bunches of wild flowers within. While the small restaurant was rather simple, it was unusually clean.

It was currently around three in the afternoon and only two tables by the walls were seated by other guests. One red-nosed, fat old man saw Lorist and Howard enter and was dumbstruck, before he said, "Hey, look who's here? Isn't that the dominion lord who just arrived at our Silowas Island? I didn't think that the dominion lord himself would come to a small restaurant like ours…"

The red-nosed man's whole face was slightly flushed red, probably because he had drunk quite a bit of alcohol. Lorist didn't mind his crude manner of speech and instead nodded to the other customers before smiling and saying, "Even though I am indeed the dominion lord, I have to eat and sleep too. Is there anything wrong with me coming to a restaurant when I'm hungry?"

After he said that, he found a table and sat down before waving for Howard to come over as he asked, "May I know how I can order food over here?"

That red-nosed man looked at Lorist for a good while before he shouted towards the stairwell, "Nataya, there's a customer here! You won't imagine it… The dominion lord is here for a meal! Also, don't let little Martha come downstairs… Dominion lords are all fiendish perverts and he'll definitely take Martha away if he sees her…"

Howard was enraged by that comment and was just about to thump on the table and

curse at the old man, but he saw Lorist smile and shake his head. Lorist said, "Don't you think that old man is rather cute? He made us aware of the presence of a pretty girl by asking her to stay upstairs…"

A stocky woman hurriedly came over and bowed to Lorist with respect before she asked, "Milord, what do you wish to order?"

"Is there something you can serve right away?"

"Milord, we have some steamed bread, meatballs, sausages, smoked fish and some grilled food along with seaweed soup, conches, crabs, breaded and fried small crabs, loaches, mashed potatoes, baked apples and seafood pie……"

"Then I'll have a seafood pie, meatballs, steamed bread, smoked fish and two servings of seaweed soup. And give me one of those breaded crabs or something. I'd like to give it a try. Also, what drinks do you serve here?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, we only have our self-brewed fruit wine here and it tastes rather good."

"Then I'll have that too, and some fresh fruit if you have some."

"Alright, milord. Please wait a while, I'll start serving the dishes right away," said the stocky middle-aged woman before she hurriedly left.

It didn't take long for Lorist and Howard to be able to take a look at the beauty Martha. She was only around 17 to 18 years of age and she had long, chestnut-brown hair with large, grey eyes and some freckles beside her nose, giving her a rather energetic and rowdy feel. Paired with her fair skin and slender figure, Lorist rated her 80 out of 100 points.

Martha was there to serve the dishes and she gave each of them a brief introduction. Lorist was surprised that the food served by a small restaurant like that would taste that good and focused on eating without caring much for staring at the beauty. In the end, the dish Lorist liked the most was the fried breaded small crabs. The crabs were first washed before being dipped into some batter and bread crumbs and deep fried until they become golden brown in color. Each bite off the crab let out a satisfying crunch and its brittle shell only served to enhance the mouthfeel. Paired with the sweet and sour fruit wine, the crab tasted magnificent and Lorist ordered two more servings after finishing the first until he was satisfied.

"The food you served were all really delicious. Sum it all up and tell me how much they cost," Lorist said to the beautiful Martha with a satisfied tone as he wiped his mouth with a white linen cloth.

"Milord, your presence here is already bestowing us an incredible honor. This meal's on the house as our welcoming treat to you, milord," said the bowing stocky woman from behind Martha.

"Hehe, forget it. I'm a dominion lord but I won't eat anything for free," Lorist said as he took out a large silver coin and paced it on the table. "Is this enough?"

"Oh, no, milord… This is too much. Your food didn't cost more than 3 small silvers…"

One gold Forde was worth 20 large silver and each large silver was equal to 5 small silvers.

"Keep the change as your tip. Howard, give them three more gold Fordes, we'll be ordering 70 people's worth of food later tonight. There's a ship called Flying Fish of Dawn at the port and I'll have you send over 21 meals there, with the remaining ones sent to the administration building of the town. If there's any money left over, I'll use it to buy some of your self-brewed wine. Also, after you finish cooking the meals, notify us at the administration building and I'll send some garrison soldiers to help you transport the food," Lorist instructed.

The stocky woman stared at the three gold Fordes and one large silver on the table in a daze before she nodded hesitantly. "Alright, milord. I will do as you say."

After filling up their stomachs, the two of them strolled about the town once more and quite a number of strangers bowed to Lorist when they recognized him and Lorist greeted them back with a warm and friendly smile.

It was only after his facial muscles were sore from all the smiling that he decided to head back to the administration building. The sky was already turning dark. Freiyar and the rest were back with the troops and a busy commotion could be seen right in front of the administration building. Apart from a huge group of onlookers, there were another 400 or so men and women who had both their hands tied behind their backs, kneeling on the ground.

"Milord, we've returned with the rest of the people from Seaview Manor and left only a squad of ten sailors there to watch the place," reported Freiyar who was standing at

the entrance of the building.

"How were the casualties?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, we didn't sustain any casualties, but some of the guards at the manor resisted capture and after we killed some of them, the rest attempted to escape, only to be stopped by Patt and Els. In the end, we killed 27 of their guards and not one of the eight nobles who occupied the manor managed to escape. They've all been captured by us."

"Who are these people tied up over here?"

"Milord, these are all the servants and maidservants of the manor. Didn't you ask us to bring everyone here? We've done just that," Freiyar replied.

"Ugh…" Lorist grunted as he patted his forehead. He didn't think that those nobles would actually treat the Seaview Manor as their own home and brought so many of their servants there.

"Why are the ones watching the place our sailors? What about the garrison soldiers?" Lorist asked as he wondered why he couldn't see even a single garrison soldier with them. *Did the 100 or so soldiers leave the moment a fight began?*

"Oh, they went back for dinner and said that they would switch out with another group after finishing," explained Els.

I guess that's fine, Lorist thought while stroking his chin.

"Milord, we've worked for the whole day and only had something at the Seaview Manor to fill up our stomachs. What do we do about dinner?" Patt said as he walked over with his armor still bloodied. It was said that the last resisting guard was cut into two halves by him.

"I've already ordered food from a restaurant nearby. I think it's about time they sent it over," Lorist said as he looked at the darkening sky.

"Milord, there's a woman who says that the food is done and is asking us to go collect it," reported a guard, right as the food was mentioned.

"Alright, I'll go. I'm already dying of hunger," Patt said as he turned and walked away.

After that, a loud shriek could be heard, startling everyone present.

When Lorist went over, he saw the beauty Martha sitting on the ground crying, with Patt troubled and not knowing what to do.

"What's going on?"

Seeing Lorist there, Martha suppressed her cries embarrassedly and explained in a stuttered voice that she was shocked by Patt's bloodied look and how he walked towards her with a fierce and murderous aura.

After resolving the misunderstanding, Lorist sent Patt with some other guards to follow Martha to collect the food and asked him to clean his armor off at the restaurant. After that, Lorist entered the administration building and heard a voice screaming out when he opened the door. "You actually dared to attack us… The Reid Family will definitely not forgive you for this! This is a declaration of war against our family!"

Lorist entered with a gloomy look and said, "What the heck are you doing? I heard that their families are rather strong? Heed my orders, have the loudest one caned 100 times with the rest given 50 canes and leave them hanging for one night. Remember to use more force. I don't mind even if they end up dying."

The few guards present quickly hauled the loudest brat outside before cries of agony and pain rang out.

"Knight Charade, did you become soft after staying in the family dominion for the past few years? The title you got at the Andinaq Kingdom, 'Charade the Demon', doesn't fit you at all!" said Lorist strictly.

"Milord, I only wanted to ask him who instructed them to occupy the manor in our dominion," said Charade while shrugging helplessly.

"Did you even need to ask? Seeing that they brought so many servants and guards with them, it's obvious that their family leader was the one who did all this. They took advantage of the fact that our dominion is far away and thought that we wouldn't be able to manage this place. It's enough if we know which family is behind it. We'll settle the bill with them when we reach the imperial capital.

"Also, Knight Charade, screen the rest of the people outside and we'll move into

Seaview Manor tomorrow before we bring some troops to give Farama Village a visit. We must squeeze the pus out of the wound to make it recover faster," Lorist said.

Chapter 226
Farama Village

Farama Village was located on top of a small mound by a small stream. By the time Lorist arrived with about a hundred others with him, the people of the village were already armed and prepared.

Patt rode forward on a donkey he found at Whitebird Town and shouted, "Open the gates! The dominion lord of Silowas Island, Count Norton, has arrived! Come out to receive him quick!"

Nobody in the village bothered to answer him and Patt repeated himself three whole times. In the end, a huge man appeared at the edges of the village fortifications with a raised longbow while calling out, "This is Farama Village, and we serve the Second Highness! This is not the territory of any dominion lord. Scram! Otherwise, I'll show you the might of my longbow!"

Even though Patt was pissed beyond measure, there was no way he could just charge towards the gate riding a mere donkey, so he rode down the mound angrily to report the villager's response to Lorist.

Lorist was currently seated in a luxurious carriage which was one of the spoils he got from conquering Seaview Manor yesterday. There were only three carriages and six horses within the whole of the manor and two of them were used for transport of goods while the last was for transporting people. Apart from the two horses that pulled Lorist's carriage, the other four were temporarily used by Josk, Freiyar and the rest.

"Milord, should we slaughter our way in then?" Freiyar asked.

Lorist merely shook his head. Farama Village was no Seaview Manor and he had already heard Hector speak in detail that the village here was originally called the Stream Village because it was located on a mound right next to a stream. When the Second Highness went to Silowas Island, his principality, the one thing he actually put effort into was the construction of that village.

Back then when the Second Highness first came to that island, most of the people that followed him were his trusted attendants and they brought their family members there with them, totalling up to around 4000 people. Quite a number of them had followed the Second Highness through many of his battles and perhaps because some of them were getting old or injured, they decided to settle down. So, Second Highness moved all the villagers of Stream Village to another location and ordered one of his subordinates who was skilled in construction, Farama, to build a place for the soldiers that had helped him greatly to settle down.

In actuality, the Second Highness had entrusted too menial a task for a talented man like Farama. At first, Farama even had building a whole citadel in mind and even ditched the original site at Stream Village because he felt that the terrain there would be hard to defend and moved the site up to the mound near the stream. After that, he began modeling the village after a citadel.

Had it not been for Second Highness Auguslo's whimsical visit to the site, he definitely wouldn't have realized that Farama intended to build a small castle that would take up to four years to complete. He questioned Farama angrily about who would man and defend the citadel and it was from that moment on that Farama was no longer regarded as a trusted aide of the Second Highness.

Farma thus left Silowas Island, but the construction work had already begun. As the Second Highness didn't want to waste the finished designs of the citadel, he continued building it accordingly but greatly decreased the work and resources required by changing stone walls into mud and wood walls and so on. By the time the construction was finished, the inhabitants asked the Second Highness to name the place and he called it Farama Village since that man was the one who first came up with the design.

And so, Farama Village became the place where Second Highness Auguslo settled his men down and eventually, the surrounding villages became absorbed into it as a result of continued development. The area the village occupied was the most suitable place to farm on the whole of Silowas Island and it covered around 5000 square meters of farmland. When the Second Highness left the island to fight for supremacy within the kingdom, there were over 400 households, roughly 1300 people, who wanted to stay behind at the village. Not only did they occupy almost all of the farmland, they even refused to pay their taxes.

Hector told Lorist that there were around 300 veteran soldiers who had experienced with the blood and gore of the battlefield. As they were veterans who had fought

during the civil war of the empire, most of them had awakened their Battle Force and up to 100 or so of them were Silver ranked in power. Had it not been for the fact that they were already 40 to 50 years old with their bodies starting to age, the Second Highness definitely wouldn't have left them there to retire and farm.

Lorist turned to look at the men he brought. There were Freiyar and Josk, two Gold ranked knights, Els, Patt, Jim and Dulles, all Silver ranked knights, and tens of other Iron ranked guards. As a squad of 10 sailors stationed at the manor among the 16 that left the ship, the other 6 only had one Iron rank among them with the rest being Bronze ranks. Additionally, he had Howard, a Bronze rank, by his side. Charade couldn't come along as he was busy researching with Old Hugo, Hector and the others back at the town to find out how best to develop this dominion.

Also following Lorist were the limping Victor and the 100 or so garrison soldiers who were armed with nothing but pikes with no armor at all. They were only there to cheer as they weren't even qualified to become attack fodder. There was no way that Lorist could bring them along to attack Farama Village.

While Lorist didn't doubt that he could easily obtain victory if he rushed forward with Josk and the rest, a victory like this wouldn't be good for anyone. Apart from having to pave a path of blood, he was afraid that his guards and sailors would sustain huge casualties. Lorist wanted to avoid pointless casualties from trivial conflicts like that as best as he could. After all, he had all the time he needed, so he felt that it was better for him to toy around with the residents of Farama Village and to teach Howard a lesson on tactics while he was at it.

He waved for Victor to come over, and he did so in his usual limping fashion.

"Victor, does Farama Village rely on that stream as its water source?" Lorist asked.

"That is the case, milord," replied Victor.

"Tell me more about the situation."

"Dominion lord, you will not be able to cut off their water source. Farama Village was originally designed and built as a citadel, so the stream near the mound is within the firing range of their bows. Also, there is also a well within the village that taps into a subterranean water channel that is connected with the stream with another reservoir in their village. So there's no way you can stop them from collecting water from the

river." Victor understood right away why Lorist asked those questions as he used to be a military officer in the Fiercegale Legion which used to be one of the three main armies of the empire, so he understood at least that much…

Lorist smiled and said, "Howard, ride back to Whitebird Town and have Charade release a notice to hire 1000 youths and have them bring some digging tools here. They will be paid one silver coin each day and their three meals will also be provided."

Victor looked at Lorist with shock and exclaimed, "Milord, are you going to trick those youths to become fodder for the attacks of Farama Village?"

Lorist clicked his tongue and said, "I'm not as cruel as you guys. The Norton Family will definitely not do something like that. Order your garrison soldiers to make preparations to set up camp. You'll understand what I plan to do when they come tomorrow."

Howard left for the village on horseback right after that.

Next day afternoon, a large group of youths rushed over under the lead of Old Hugo and Charade. To the residents of Whitebird Town, a small silver per day of work was rather good pay. If they could work like this for a year, they would earn up to four gold Fordes.

"Milord, what are you planning?" Charade asked.

"Look, I'm going to reroute the stream near the mound over there. The digging will start from that spot and circle around the mound to make a moat. I want to see what the idiots up there will do without water."

Even though Lorist made it sound easy, Victor who was right next to them almost fainted from hearing that. *The dominion lord is set on cutting off Farama Village's water source after all.* But as opposed to what he originally thought, Lorist didn't intend to do that by damming up the stream under the fire of Farama Village and instead chose to cut off the source of the stream even further away. That was a far larger undertaking and the combined cost of hiring 1000 youths for 1 small silver per day and providing food for them was at least 20 gold Fordes each day. Five days would mean that 100 gold Fordes would be spent. This was far too ridiculous as Lorist was basically forcing his enemy to kneel with the might of money.

For their freedom, the proud villagers of Farama Village still held onto their pride and

refused to bow down to their oppressor, Lorist. But after another ten days, around 1000 Norton Family soldiers armed with their gleaming armor arrived, causing the villagers to despair.

"Milord, Nors and 1000 other men from the Local Defense Brigade, reporting for duty," said Nors, standing completely straight as he saluted Lorist.

The two whaling ships they had each transported 500 men to Silowas Island and even though they left two days earlier than the Flying Fish of Dawn, they were ten days slower to arrive. The leader, Nors, was a familiar face and he had been one of the knights who defended Beastguard Town, the central town of the sixth sector of Felicitas Settlement, during the first magical beast wave and helped Lorist to build an ice wall there.

This time around, Lorist was hoping to form the Third Local Defense Brigade and the Second Navy Marine Brigade at Silowas Island. Nors had come with the 1000 soldiers who were mostly veterans and in another two months, the family would be sending over another 1000 new recruits. After that, a recruitment drive would be started on Silowas Island to recruit 1000 local youths and that would be enough for a third Local Defense Brigade.

"Was the trip smooth?" Lorist asked.

Nors laughed out and said, "Initially, many of them got seasick, but over the course of ten days, they got used to it. However, just this morning when we got off the ships, quite a lot of them collapsed right away and only recovered after two hours of rest."

"That's normal," Lorist said. "After staying for a long period at sea and going back to shore, the ground will feel like it's moving up and down," he said with a snicker.

"Milord, are you going to attack that village? Do you want us to participate?" Nors asked.

"It's fine. Just look at the grass near the mound; they're already wilting. The villagers will definitely not be able to last through the next few days. I also hope that our forces will not have to suffer unnecessary casualties and just play along with them for a bit. This will end soon, so you guys should rest up for a few days. After this, the safety of Silowas Island will be up to you."

"Understood, milord. Please be assured that the Third Local Defense Brigade will not

disappoint you," Nors said as he saluted.

Just when Lorist was relaxing after seeing his soldiers arrive safely, an atmosphere filled with sacrificial bloodlust built up within Farama Village. 128 men aged around 40 to 50 put on their old leather armor and took up their swords and pikes before drinking their last swig of strong liquor and heading towards the gates of the citadel in a neat row. Among them, there were even some old men who strode forward with walking sticks in hand. On the sides of the main path of the village were the sobbing family members who were looking at the old soldiers depart.

The 128 old soldiers were all the Silver ranked fighters Farama Village had and they shouted out Second Highness Auguslo's name before launching a suicidal charge at the forces of the Norton Family with the belief that their deaths would shock the newly-arrived Count Norton while also causing him to incur the rage of the Second Highness, thus allowing their family members to continue living their lives in peace.

The gates of the citadel opened as 128 old soldiers determined to die on the battlefield charged outward. *Ack, there's quite a lot of distance to reach them…* Indeed, the moat Lorist dug up was roughly 300 meters from the village, meaning that the brave old men had to first run a distance of 300 meters before they could charge into the formation of the Norton Family forces to fulfill their desire to die fighting on the battlefield. However, that was a little unfair to some old men who had to use walking sticks.

Naturally, the movements at the village alerted the Norton Family forces, but when Lorist saw the silver blade glow of the one who led the charge, he was elated and instantly ordered, "Family soldiers, retreat 100 meters backward. Knights above the Silver rank, I want all of you to come forward. Josk, hold your fire. Listen, I want them captured alive! These Silver ranked old men are perfect as laborers for mining! Not one of you guys is to hurt them too badly. Otherwise, you will take their place working at the mines!"

All of the soldiers laughed out after hearing that order. During the development of Blackmud Marsh, two of the cliffs at the Bladedge Mountains had to be shaved off. Back then, many Silver ranked fighters of the family had to toil hard there as it was far easier to cut rock with blade glows than pickaxes.

Given the age of the attackers, they had almost expended all their stamina after running up to 300 meters and jumping over the moat. They were so tired that many

of them collapsed on the ground right away, and Lorist himself knocked more than half of them unconscious. He was so impatient that he even leaped over the moat himself to greet the onslaught of the few tired old men with walking sticks before disarming them.

There was not the slightest hint of death and tragedy on the battlefield with most of the old men merely put together in a pile. Lorist even beckoned for his soldiers to quickly bring some water to the old soldiers to relieve their thirst as they were all very valuable in Lorist's eyes.

In the end, Farama Village surrendered by bringing out the commonly-used white flag. Every one of the villagers from young to old all left the village and made it their first priority to get something to drink.

After they drank enough water, their punishment was announced by Lorist as they listened, despairing and helpless. Since they didn't pay taxes for five whole years, all of the villagers had to serve for five years as punishment regardless of gender and age. After five years, they would be free to leave and go wherever they wanted.

One old man couldn't help but ask, "Dominion lord, are you not going to hang us or kill us off? You're not going to sell us off as slaves either?"

Lorist said in a solemn voice, "There is no place for slaves in the Norton Family and we do not involve ourselves in slave trade. The only punishment for crimes is to serve time as laborers. Unless the your crime is too severe or you have taken another person's life, you will not be hanged. As long as you work as laborers without causing trouble, we will not take your families apart. But you better remember that if you dare to slack off or resist, you will merely be doing your family members a disservice and they will also be punished with you."

After settling the matter of Farama Village, the journey to the imperial capital was up next. Lorist decided that he would have 500 soldiers of the Local Defense Brigade accompany him and left Charade on Silowas Island to work on the registration of the residents of the island, the formation of the Third Local Defense Brigade and the Second Navy Marine Brigade, as well as the development the island.

Originally, Lorist intended to have Jim become the leader of the Third Local Defense Brigade that was to be formed and stationed at Silowas Island as he felt that it was about time he let the man go his own way since he had spent so much time with him.

Nors on the other hand was considered by Lorist to be rather reliable and was assigned the position of the leader of the Second Navy Marine Brigade and would be in charge of recruiting more sailors on the island. What he didn't expect was that Patt didn't want to go to the imperial capital as he actually fell in love and was wooing the beauty, Martha, of Whitebird Restaurant, whom he had accidentally frightened to the point of tears not too long ago.

Lorist could only give Patt his blessings for him to one day return with a beauty in his hands and let him take Jim's position instead. Thus, Patt was made the leader of the Third Local Defense Brigade.

Chapter 227
Imperial Capital

Imperial Capital and Royal City, Taian, was built by Krissen II using near 100000 slave laborers and countless resources over a span of eight years. It was named as such in hopes that the empire would be mighty with its people living peaceful lives. However, as Taian was a word that was derived from the ancient language of fairies, when it was pronounced in the Grindian Common Language, it sounded almost like a word that meant 'goner', so the later Krissen Empire Emperors considered that word taboo and neglected using it. Even in official correspondence or documents, Taian City was simple referred to as the imperial capital. Eventually, after two to three hundred years, while many people would know what the imperial capital referred to, not many could recall its name.

The imperial capital was protected by three walls with the royal court located in the very middle. In the early days, the Royal City of Taian was comprised mainly of those three walls with the residence of the Krissen Emperor at its very center, which was recently used as the residence of the Andinaq Royal Family. Beyond the second city wall was where the heads of the various departments and high-ranking officials of the empire stayed and it was known as the inner city. Within the third wall was the where most of the citizens of the imperial capital lived.

When Krissen II designed the city, he didn't imagine that its population would multiply by ten times within a few hundred years. His initial designs only provided for 100000 citizens and the farmland that could sustain up to 100000 people was gradually turned into residential areas, prosperous business areas, horse-racing facilities, a stadium as well as academies and workshops.

In the golden age of the empire that spanned for 30 or so years during the reign of Krissen V and Krissen VI, the imperial capital was one of the largest cities on the whole of Grindia, boasting a population of up to 1 million. However, when the Forde Trade Union was formed, Morante City later came to don the mantle of the most prosperous and greatest city of the Grindia Continent and the imperial capital only continued to spiral downhill, especially with the 7-year-long civil war that further exacerbated the imperial capital's downfall.

The fatal blow to the imperial capital was dealt during the final days of the civil war when the First Prince sent half of his forces to one way and led the other half to attract the attention of the Third Prince's forces. As a result, the first half managed to raid the imperial capital and their men truly did their worst from plundering to killing. Even though the Second Highness sent reinforcements, he was entangled at the business area with the other forces and the battle even lasted for three whole months. By the time the Second Highness eliminated the enemies, the interior of the third wall of the imperial capital had already been razed to the ground with more than 200000 citizens perishing as a result of the conflict and the business area completely reduced to rubble.

Even after the civil war ended and the empire split into 3 kingdoms and 7 duchies, the population of the imperial capital continued to dwindle. The newly-arrived peace didn't provide the citizens a stable life. Instead, having lost the places that used to provide food supply for the imperial capital, an inevitable famine further deteriorated the city. The fact that the Third Prince offended the merchants from the Forde Trade Union only served to worsen the situation. Not only the imperial capital, the whole of the Andinaq Kingdom was embroiled in a storm of uncertainty.

By the time the Second Highness stabilized the situation of the kingdom using the forces of the Norton Family's northbound convoy and firmed his position within the kingdom, the population of the imperial capital was less than 70000, not even a tenth of what it used to be during the golden age of the empire. The Second Highness rebuilt the inner and outer cities and gave up on the residential and business areas outside the third wall and converted them back to farmland while greatly simplifying the bureaucratic procedures of the administration. After five years, the empire seemed to have a renewed chance for vitality.

On the 18th day of the 9th month, Lorist brought 500 soldiers from the Local Defense Brigade and some knights to the southern entrance of the imperial capital and heard some bad news. The Second Highness had gone to the frontlines to inspect his troops and he would only be able to return by the end of the 9th month or the start of the 10th. That way, Lorist had to wait for up to 10 or so days.

The City Defense Army's company leader politely declined Lorist's request to let his 500 or so soldiers enter the city to set up camp and said that the Second Highness explicitly ordered that the forces of nobles could only set up camp at the west side of the city and each noble could at most bring 10 guards with them into the city. That was a new regulation of the imperial city.

And so, Lorist brought the rest of his men to the west entrance and registered to occupy a small area there for a camp and changed the lookouts and their secret signals to each other.

As Lorist was figuring out what to do within the next ten days in his own room, Dulles walked in excitedly and said, "Milord, look who's here?"

Behind him was a man equipped with the armor of the Local Defense Force of the Royal Family. When Lorist saw him, he broke into laughter and stretched out both his arms for a hug. "Karitoke, long time no see! Are you doing well?"

Karitoke was one of the 36 Dawn Academy students that joined the convoy formed by Charade and Terman in the early days and he was also one of the elite members of the Swordsmanship Society with Battle Force of the Three Star Silver rank. But when the northbound convoy was held up at Nadegas City, he and many others believed that there was not much of a future for the convoy and were poached by the Second Highness in the end. He was one of the 7 academy ex-students who left the convoy to serve the Second Highness.

Even though those who left the convoy were cursed at quite harshly, when the people of the convoy realized that the Second Highness's forces suffered heavy casualties, they began to miss the ones that had left them. Back then when Second Highness Auguslo led his troops to encircle Lichtana Citadel, the soldiers that defended the citadel launched a surprise attack during the night. While the forces of the Second Highness managed to defend against the enemy's assault, many of the Silver ranked knights from the Dawnn Academy who had joined him perished in battle. Terman and the rest were even hugging the corpses of two of the ex-students of Dawn Academy after the battle while tearing up nonstop. It was truly a tragedic sight.

When Karitoke received Lorist's warm hug, he began to tear up as well and said, "Lord Locke, I miss you guys so much. If I only we could go back to the days of the convoy…"

Of the 7 Dawn Academy students and 19 Silver ranked knights from the convoy that sided with the Second Highness, only 14 of them remained. Just recently during the Second Highness's battle at Flowater Creek that brought him to fame, three ex-students of the academy and four Silver ranked knights from the convoy lost their lives. Coupled with the two ex-students and three Silver ranked knights that died at the battle at Lichtana Citadel, almost half of those who left the convoy had perished.

"Of the 7 students of the academy, only Sander and I are left. Even though we've managed to become the knights of the royal family, we don't feel happy at all. Right now, the Second Highness is already preparing for the battle to unify the empire… I don't know if I can live long enough to see ourselves victorious…"

Karitoke was completely demoralized as he briefly described the things that happened after they left the convoy.

"What position do you hold currently?" Dulles asked.

"I am the regiment leader of the First Local Defense Legion's Second Heavy Infantry Division's First Regiment. We're currently stationed at the west gate of the imperial capital and tasked with cleaning up the rubble of the business area. As I didn't have anything important to do, I rushed to the south gate because i heard that you, Count Norton, is here," replied Karitoke.

"Eh? Even though you were already a regiment leader back in the convoy, why are you still in the same position after joining the Second Highness?" Dulles asked straightforwardly.

Karitoke shook his head and said, "The ones the Second Highness truly trusts are the subordinates that has been by his side for a long time. Currently, the only ones who hold high positions over all six legions and 300000 soldiers are his old subordinates or the nobles who allied up with him. Common born knights like us should only heed our orders and be the ones to lead the charge. I already regret leaving the convoy right now…"

"You can always come back," Dulles said.

"I no longer have the honor to do so. As knights, we can't be that half-hearted. Since I chose this path for myself, I will persevere till I reach its end," Karitoke expressed his thoughts honestly.

"Karitoke, you mentioned just now that you were put in charge of cleaning up the wreckage at the business area? Isn't the Royal Family's First Local Defense Legion the main force of the kingdom? Why are you guys tasked with a menial job like that?" Lorist asked curiously.

"Hmph! You guys don't understand…" Karitoke exclaimed as he patted hard on his thigh. "There is a person called Marquis Reid by the Second Highness's side and he is

well-trusted by him. That person gave the Second Highness a suggestion. He said that even though the business area of the city is already reduced to rubble, many merchants stored their goods and resources in the basements. The Marquis said that the unearthed resources would greatly alleviate the burden to the treasury of the kingdom. That's why the Second Highness ordered us to secure the whole area and sent some others to start digging there. Just as Marquis Reid had predicted, we did find a number of those underground storehouses and the combined worth of those resources are as high as 100000 gold Fordes. Not only that, we have only excavated about a third of the business area so far."

"Isn't that a little unfair? These resources should belong to those merchants, right? How could they dig them up and claim them as their own?" Dulles commented.

"Marquis Reid argues that since the merchants didn't bother to clean up the rubble and reclaim their stuff so many years after the civil war ended, the Second Highness is perfectly in line to absorb them into the treasury. In actuality, when we began excavating, a few people claiming to be the descendants of those merchants who owned those stuff came up to us, but they were all given a fine for the fees incurred to clean up area as well as their neglect by leaving the rubble and trash occupying the business area for so long without bothering to clean them up. In the end, those people gave up on their claim to the stuff and left. After that, nobody bothered to show up to request for the return of their resources," Karitoke said.

Dulles sighed and said, "That is far too underhanded. It's all because of the royal family's incompetence in the first place for letting the enemy barge into the imperial capital and cause so much loss to the merchants and other residents. After that, not only did they not provide reimbursement of some sort to make up for the lost lives, they even dared to forcefully possess the things that belonged to the merchants. If they continue to do that, people would lose even more confidence in them!"

"That was what I thought too, but I was rebuked by the commander of my legion after saying a few words. The Second Highness doesn't care about the livelihood of his subjects at all. He only wants to reunite the empire. Don't let the knights who are busy discussing what to do during the unification war fool you. Actually, I understand that the soldiers don't wish to go to war at all and their morale is incredibly low.

"Even though the Royal Family's Local Defense Force absorbed the Fiercegale Legion and split into three separate legions, there are many others who are secretly opposed to the policies of the Second Highness. For example, some of the ex-generals of the

Fiercegale Legion believes that the Second Highness intentionally didn't send reinforcements and allowed the commander of the Fiercegale Legion, Gold ranked knight Nedram and 5000 other elite soldiers perish so that he could more easily absorb the Fiercegale Legion into his own force without much resistance," Karitoke nagged.

Lorist poured him a cup of tea and advised warmly, "Karitoke, Dulles, the two of you studied at Morante City just like me, so values like freedom, equality, and the sanctity of private property have heavily influenced our own worldview. But don't forget that we're now within the former Krissen Empire. I am a dominion lord, so I am confident that I can practice my values within my own dominion. As for the two of you who are just knights, it's understandable that you don't feel like you fit in with the other nobles of the empire.

"The nobles of the Krissen Empire have never considered the welfare of their people. Given their high status, they still think of themselves to be above the common man despite the collapse of the empire. The Second Highness himself only cares about his ambitions of being the sovereign who reunites the empire but doesn't consider the consequences should he fail in his endeavor and whether he can rise once again after that. Nobody likes a warmongering king. Right now, he is counting on the nobles, but they are far from a reliable bunch. Karitoke, I hope that you will be wiser. If you feel that things are bad, please leave right away and don't let yourself be dragged down into the quagmire. That is far too wasteful…"

In the end, Karitoke continued drinking with Lorist until he was dead drunk before he was sent back by the two guards Dulles brought over.

The next day, Lorist brought Howard with him to take a casual walk around the imperial capital. It didn't take long for him to realize that the cheapest things up for sale there were books, and most of them were those that were collected by noble families. After asking around, he found that those books that were valued highly during the times of peace had become useless piles of trash that took up space as it couldn't be consumed nor put to practical use. Back when Charade led the northbound convoy through the three provinces of the Andinaq Kingdom, over two-thirds of the nobles there were hanged and the residences of those nobles were later taken by the Second Highness as his own.

To gather enough funds to feed his army, the Second Highness began to auction away all the belongings and collections of those nobles. The best-selling items were armor

and weapons and they sold for the highest price. As the nobles' residences would usually have a study with more or less 100 books in them, those books were all put up to auction in one go, causing the sky-high price of books in the imperial capital to plummet almost instantly.

Lorist experienced a tumultuous wave of complicated emotions when he thought about how the books he purchased for one gold Forde could be bought for only two to three large silvers there. As he and Howard were both book-lovers, they spent many of their days among the book markets to fish up rare gems.

One day when Lorist returned to the campsite, he saw Dulles and Karitoke waiting for him at the entrance suspiciously.

Right after Lorist asked them what was going on, the two others pulled him into the building and shut the door.

Dulles said, "Milord, Karitoke is here to borrow some money…"

"How much?" Lorist asked curiously as he wondered, *why are you behaving like underworld criminals just to borrow money?*

"100 gold Fordes," Dulles replied.

Huh?! Lorist was slightly surprised as Karitoke was a regiment leader of the Royal Defense Force and his salary was only at a low 10 large silvers each month. His annual salary would only amount to 6 gold Fordes, so what in the world did he want to buy for 100 gold Fordes?

Dulles quickly explained, "Milord, Karitoke just received an invitation to an event and if he wants to attend, he has to dress up properly and purchase some suits or something. Originally, he only wanted to borrow 10 gold Fordes, but after I considered his request, I decided that he should borrow 100 gold Fordes from you, milord."

"Alright, I'll lend out the money," Lorist said. During this trip to the imperial capital, he brought around 10000 gold Fordes with him and had only spent around 2000 or so buying books during the past few days. Since he had so much left, he figured that it wouldn't hurt him to lend it out. However, his curiosity was piqued and he asked, "Can you tell me what kind of function costs so much to attend?"

Dulles laughed out loud and said, "Milord, since you're lending us the money, we'll

bring you along to experience it for yourself. Each person invited can bring along two others with them. We'll have Karitoke take us along with him."

Karitoke said, "It's like this… Milord, do you know about Princess Carey?"

"Princess Carey?" Lorist mused, before he shook his head and said, "Never heard of her."

"Princess Carey is the sole daughter of the late First Highness…"

"What did you say? The First Highness has passed away?" Lorist exclaimed in shock.

"That's right. Two years back when he was put under house arrest, he suddenly spit out a huge mouthful of blood and stopped breathing within an hour after that. It was said to be a sudden manifestation of the symptom of his disease, but many suspect the Second Highness had played a part in the First Highness's death. However, that's only speculation and nobody really knows the truth."

Lorist thought deeply before he said, "Go on. What's going on with that Princess Carey you mentioned?"

"Princess Carey is 25 years old this year and she possesses incredible beauty and is said to be one of the most beautiful women within the whole kingdom. However, she is extremely promiscuous and she has countless admirers. It's said that she believes in the Goddess of Desires and Pleasure, Mishla and even organizes a 'Paradise Gathering' participated by many other noblemen and noblewomen who believe in the same faith. Every month, she will organize that gathering and I've heard from some of my colleagues that one will get to experience the greatest pleasure should one be a part of it. Even though there isn't an explicit fee, participants must tip at least one gold Forde and most people aren't able to afford that kind of money. That's why I've come here to request your help, milord."

Dulles said, "Milord, can we go experience it for ourselves tomorrow? I haven't attended a function with nobles of the empire before. Let Karitoke bring us along to expand our horizons."

After Lorist considered it while stroking his chin, he said, "Alright then."

Chapter 228
Paradise Gathering

"Do I really have to dress so idiotically?" Lorist grumbled.

Even though it wasn't summer during the 9th month, it was still relatively hot and the bright sun in the sky made people want to undress entirely. Right now, Lorist was walking behind Dulles and Karitoke on a large street while wearing a hooded poncho. All three of them were dressed similarly in ponchos that didn't have good ventilation, causing Lorist to be full of sweat. Everyone who walked past them looked at them as if they were insane for wearing those things in that weather, making the experience even more unbearable.

It was all Dulles's fault for coming over with Karitoke far too soon. After finishing lunch together, they could no longer hold themselves back and wanted to walk all the way to the meeting spot as specified on the invitation with aiding digestion as the main reason.

"Milord, no, Locke, the invitation specified that we should be dressed like that so that others do not recognize our identities," Dulles replied. They had all agreed not to address Lorist as 'milord' during the excursion.

"Good Sol, we could've at least put this on after getting off a carriage! Nobody would be so stupid like you guys to walk all the way there! If word of this gets out tomorrow, we'll be complete laughing stocks!" Lorist said angrily.

"Then what do you say we do?"

"We stop a carriage and take a few spins around the imperial capital first. When the time's approaching, we'll head to the meeting point," Lorist said as he decided.

The three were only able to get a carriage after a good while. The coachman initially even thought that he was going to be robbed and screamed out for help. It was only after Lorist tossed him one gold Forde that he turned quiet. They strolled about the city until it was two in the afternoon before heading for the rendezvous.

At the address specified on the invitation was an old residential compound and upon entering it, an old man dressed like a butler checked their invitation before he said, "Respected guests, please follow me."

When they arrived at the run-down backyard, they saw tens of black-colored four-wheeled carriages with no identifiable markings. The old man walked to the nearest one and said, "Please board the carriage, respected guests. It will take some time before you arrive at the gathering location and this carriage will be taking you there."

The moment the three of them boarded the carriage, it set out for its destination right away. They later realized that the windows of the carriage were all painted black so that the riders within wouldn't be able to recognize the situation outside. When Lorist pushed on the carriage door, he found that it was indeed locked. Fortunately for them, the skylight of the carriage could be opened to let in some fresh air so that the interior of the carriage didn't feel too hot and musty.

"What's with the mystery of it all? Is there a need to go out of their way to do that?" Lorist mumbled.

After the carriage traveled for around 30 minutes, it stopped and the door was soon unlocked. A pleasing voice of a woman said, "Welcome, sirs, to paradise on the human realm. Please, leave your carriage."

Dulles was the first one to get off and he froze almost immediately. After that was Karitoke's turn and he was similarly dumbstruck when he stepped out of the carriage.

"What the heck are you guys doing? Make way, I'm still in here."

Pushing the two aside and getting off to take a look, Lorist was also flabbergasted by what he saw.

They were within an extremely spacious hall that was decorated to look like the richest palaces the world had ever seen. The coachman and carriage were nowhere to be seen and at that moment, in front of the three of them were a large group of beautiful women who seemed completely naked. Upon closer inspection, they were actually wearing a thin white veil that occasionally obscured their naked bodies, causing one to feel all the more tempted after taking a look.

Dulles was almost going to bleed out from his nose from all the excitement he felt while Karitoke didn't fare any better. On the other hand, Lorist managed to retain his

calm and tapped on the two's shoulders to snap them out of their stupor.

A voluptuous beauty approached them before she bowed deeply, making sure that the three of them were able to get a good look at the pair of 'energetic little bunnies' that were hidden beneath the veil around her chest. "Sirs, please follow me. The changing room is over there."

Dulles and Karitoke were instantly charmed as they followed the woman without a second thought.

"Three sirs, this here is your changing room. Please leave your clothes and weapons here. Participants of the Paradise Gathering are not allowed to remain dressed. However, you can tie a towel around your waist. Also, there are masks here that you can pick from. Male or female guests can use these masks to keep their identity hidden," said the voluptuous beauty as she handed over a silver platter with a number of masks on them.

Dulles picked an eyepatch mask before he asked, "Why are you guys not wearing masks then?"

The voluptuous beauty replied, "Sir, we are maidservants and there's no need for us to wear masks."

'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' Since they were attending the Paradise Gathering, they must follow the regulations set by the organizer. All three of them got naked and tied a towel around their waist before putting on their masks. Karitoke chose a white fox mask while Lorist picked one with a black bat motif.

The voluptuous maidservant then brought over three bracelets each with ten shiny beads that seemed to have some words engraved on them.

"Sirs, if you believe some of us served you well, you can also tip us one or two of these beads. However, each bead represents one gold Forde and you must settle the bill before you leave. If you run out of beads, you can have us bring you more."

All three of them put on the bracelets and Lorist realized that the beads on his bracelet had the characters 'white 10' engraved upon them while Dulles and Karitoke's were 'white 8' and 'white 9' respectively.

"Sirs, please follow me here. Let me give you a brief tour."

Dulles walked behind the voluptuous beauty and he had already copped a feel on her behind with his hand.

The voluptuous beauty turned around and eyed Dulles before she said, "Milord there are many rooms upstairs. If you're willing to give me one bead, I will be extremely happy to bring you there to rest and show you a good time."

Dulles broke into a smile and said, "Alright."

The voluptuous beauty waved towards the distance and a long-haired blonde woman with a curvy figure clad similarly in that flimsy veil walked over.

"Dosey, I will be bringing this guest here to rest, so please show the other two guests around," said the beauty before she brought Dulles to a stairwell nearby.

The blonde-haired beauty bowed and said, "Greetings to you, sirs. I am called Dosey. Please let me resume your tour of the place.

"This is the great bath hall and there's a swimming pool here as well as some smaller bathing pools. Next to the hall are small rooms with beds where you can rest when you're tired." The group arrived at the entrance of a small room. The room didn't have a door and was only covered with a beaded blinds. The space inside wasn't that wide and only a large bed could be seen within.

Karitoke could no longer hold it in and brought Dosey into the room before pressing her onto the bed…

Sol, you guys are far too impatient for that, Lorist thought as he took a look around. There were not many people around him and he could not spot another masked guest just like them. Perhaps they have arrived a little too early. Even the large bath hall was completely empty.

At the corner of the hall was a small bathing pool and Lorist was surprised when he entered it. It was practically a hot spring and he could pick up a hint of sulfurous smell from the water. Within the pool was a curved spot that was designed as a seat. Lorist tried to sit down and it was indeed like a leaning sitting spot. When he leaned all the way down, only his head and upper chest were visible above the water, and if he lied down, his whole body would be submerged within. It truly was a pleasing experience.

It was then when Lorist noticed a bell beside him. After giving it a slight shake, it let

out a clear ring before a maidservant quickly came to Lorist's side and asked, "Sir, is there anything you need?"

"Bring me some fruit wine and food. It would be great to have some fruit," Lorist said.

The things Lorist ordered were quickly brought to him and the maidservant opened the little wine barrel before she poured some of it into a silver cup.

"Sir, do you need me to stay and serve you?" she asked.

Lorist gave her a bead and said, "No need, I want some time alone."

"Thank you, sir."

Feasting on delicacies in a hot spring was a luxurious experience in itself. Roughly half an hour later, more masked guests could be seen and there were as many men as there were women. Some of the female guests could be seen in groups talking about something and there were also those who brought men into the rooms. One male guest approached one of the female guests and began to tease her so hard that she wasn't able to even close her mouth. In the end, he successfully carried her into a room nearby. There were also some who didn't succeed and were forced to pull a maidservant near them into the rooms to expel their pent-up desires.

Lorist merely remained submerged within the small pool and observed the people around him. In actuality, the masked female guests were all noble ladies and they didn't necessarily look more beautiful nor alluring than the maidservants standing beside them. However, the masks they wore added an air of mystery. Coupled with their status as nobles that made them further out of reach unlike the maidservants, the female guests did attract a fair share of the male guests' attention.

The female guests were dressed almost identically with the maidservants clad in translucent white veils save for their masks. They teased and flirted with the men but were usually unwilling to follow them into the rooms unless they were stimulated to the point they were no longer able to resist.

When Lorist saw Karitoke leaving the room with the blonde maidservant, the latter's attention was quickly captured by a few noble ladies with excellent figures in the pool not far away. Without a word, Karitoke began to swim towards them to strike up a conversation.

One petite girl wearing a butterfly mask and veil rushed over and she realized that Lorist was there when she arrived. She said, "Ah, apologies. I didn't see you here. Just now, I even ran over because I thought there was nobody here."

As the small pool was in the corner and the candlelight wasn't as bright as those at the large communal pool, it was hard for the girl to see Lorist's submerged figure there.

"If you don't mind my presence, you're free to enter as well. Even though this pool is rather small, it can definitely fit a few more people here," Lorist said as he raised his silver cup.

The young lady hesitated for a while, but she entered the pool nevertheless and submerged herself within it.

"I like the hot spring baths here quite a lot. The last few times I came here, I would always bathe at this spot," said the girl. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes. Good day, young lady. I'm called Locke," Lorist said while he nodded.

Pfft! The girl broke into a stifled laugh before she said, "Nobody here reveals their real names. You can call me Daisy, but that's not my real name either."

"Ah? I wasn't aware of such a rule," Lorist said.

"No worries. People would think that you are using an alias as well. However, you are a weird one. Since it's your first time here, aren't you going to go get acquainted with the other noble ladies over there or get a room with one of the maidservants? Instead, you're here in the pool snacking alone."

"Well, I'm just thinking of some peace and quiet," Lorist said.

"Who's this Quinn that you're thinking of?" asked the girl when she misheard.

"Urk," Lorist choked on the spot before he sat straight up. "Cough, cough… I meant that I wanted to spend some time alone for some peace and quiet."

The girl blushed when she realized her mistake, but her eyes gleamed when she said, "Wow, your physique is amazing. Look at those dreamy scars…"

When Lorist sat straight up, he revealed his upper torso and the scars on his chest and

back, which were inflicted upon him when he suffered Blademaster Zarinan's assassination attempt. Some of the maidservants who were present when he changed his clothes looked at his scars with a fearful expression, so Lorist didn't expect that girl in front of him to look so thrilled at seeing them.

The girl swam closer to Lorist's side hurriedly and said, "Are you not going to treat me to a drink?"

"I'll get the maidservant to bring another cup here," Lorist said.

"There's no need." She took Lorist's cup and took a few gulps right away. It didn't take long until the cup was emptied before she said, "Ah, that was refreshing."

The girl was brown-haired and her skin was smooth and fair. She had a slightly rounded chin and her face still had some traces of baby fat. Her collarbone looked really attractive, and while her breasts weren't large, they seemed rather firm and perky.

Despite seeing Lorist's gaze on her chest, the girl wasn't the slightest bit embarrassed and instead puffed her chest out. "Are they beautiful?"

Lorist nodded and asked, "Are you also a believer of Mishla?"

"Nope," the girl said as she stretched out her hand to feel Lorist's scars up. "Did you get these scars from your fights?"

Lorist kept quiet, so the girl made her guess. "You should be of rather low rank, maybe a company or regiment leader? That's why you still have to fight at the forefront."

Lorist looked at the girl before she pulled both of Lorist's hands and placed them on her breasts. "This is fine, right? Since you're mad that I felt up your scars, you can touch my breasts in return."

As Lorist felt up the soft peaks, he said, "You don't understand. Each scar represents a close encounter with death. That's why I don't like to recall how I got them."

The girl approached Lorist so that he could more easily feel her up. "I don't know why the princess invited so many military officers to the party this time. They are all so unrefined and always go for those busty noble ladies. I hate them, they don't seem nearly as cultured as you are."

Lorist asked, "How many times have you participated in the Paradise Gathering?"

"This is already my fifth time," said the girl as she traced a circle on Lorist's chest with her finger.

"Since you don't believe in the Goddess of Desires and Pleasure, Mishla, why did you attend this gathering? For excitement and stimulation?"

"Nope, I'm looking for protection," said the girl. "My dad died in battle and my little brother is still young. Even though he can inherit the dominion, he isn't capable of defending it. If I join the Paradise Gathering, the princess will protect my family and my brother will have all the time he needs to mature."

The girl then reached beyond Lorist's waist towel and her eyes beamed as she said, "Wow, how huge…"

Lorist attempted to stop her, but the girl said, "It's not that often that I take the initiative. Just lie down obediently and enjoy the experience…"

After that, she lowered her head and began…

Chapter 229
Davey and the Princess

The girl softened once again, but right now, they were within the small room near the small pool from before.

Lorist continued his assault and let it all out into the girl's body.

The both of them let out a large breath and basked in the afterglow of climax…

Propping herself up, the girl continued to feel up the scars on Lorist's chest. "When my father was still a Silver rank, he suffered his first heavy injury and had an even larger scar on his chest. Back then he managed to escape with his life from the lance of a Gold ranked knight. When I was young, I wasn't mature yet and I thought that scars were incredibly ugly. But my father said that scars were like badges of honor to men and a knight without any isn't a true man. It was only after he died that I understood the meaning of his words…"

"Your father wasn't wrong," Lorist said while nodding. "Can you tell me how he died?"

"It's been already seven to eight years… Back then, the empire suffered the attack of the enemy and my father went to the imperial capital with a few of his friends and attendants. In the beginning, all went well. My father and some other knights who got the news managed to put up a formidable resistance against the First Prince's army and eliminated the raiding teams that were all over the place and won quite a few battles. Later when the Second Highness arrived, he used people like my father as his shield to fight at the frontlines and my father perished after that," recalled the girl.

"I'm very sorry about your loss," Lorist said.

"It's fine. The past is already behind us. Right now, I'm incredibly happy after spending time with you," she said before giving Lorist's face a kiss before her hand started to tease his junior once more.

Just as Lorist got up and wanted to go for another round, she stopped him and said, "Can we go dip ourselves in the hot spring again?"

"Alright."

"Then, I want you to carry me there," said the girl with both her arms stretched out.

"Lower me down slightly," said the girl as she used one hand to position Lorist's junior and guided it into her body slowly and gently, connecting the two of them once more. After that, she wrapped both her arms around Lorist's shoulders and her legs around his waist. The petite girl currently seemed like a koala bear that was hanging on Lorist's body.

"Let's go there looking like that," she said while pressing her body tight against him before licking Lorist's chin.

"Don't mess around," said Lorist as he gave her bottom a soft slap. After that, he supported both her legs from the bottom and walked out from the room towards the small pool. However, with every step he took, the girl in his embrace would moan uncontrollably.

By the time he got into the pool, he could no longer hold on and pushed the girl against the wall before he started humping. It was not until she said she had enough and could no longer hold on that he stopped.

"You truly are a wild bull," said the girl while lying against Lorist's body with a glazed look.

Lying back on the sitting spot of the pool, Lorist opened his mouth and ate the blueberry the girl brought him.

All of a sudden, he heard a commotion not far away. Lorist asked, "What's going on?"

The girl took a look before saying, "The princess is here."

Princess? Lorist sat up and said, "That's Princess Carey?"

The girl pouted and glared at Lorist before she said, "What? You want to solicit her as well?"

"No way," he replied as he hugged and kissed her again. "As I have only heard of her fame, I'd like to see how the most beautiful woman in the Andinaq Kingdom looks like."

"Hmph, doesn't she have a nose and two eyes like the rest of us? What's there to witness in the first place?" she said, slightly jealous. "This spot is fine. I guarantee that you'll be able to see the princess making love with another man on the floor upstairs."

"Huh?" Lorist said, not sure if he had heard wrongly or not.

"Look, over there," said the girl as she pointed to a platform on the floor above. "That is the bed reserved for the princess herself every time she comes. She loves to receive her guests there. From time to time, she would reward victor of the competition or sometimes just plainly pick a man she likes and do him right in front of everyone. You'll soon get to see as much as you like."

Alright, I guess the princess is a pretty open-minded person after all for her to dare to perform such acts in front of everyone like that.

"What did you mean when you mentioned the competition?" Lorist asked curiously.

"Do you want to participate?" said the girl with a solemn look. "It's a competition to see who can do the most women. If you take part, perhaps you might just get first place. Then the next time, you'll get to mess around with the princess all you want."

"What are you saying? I have better things to do than that," Lorist refuted her immediately. "The best thing that's happened to me during this gathering is getting to know you. I won't go anywhere tonight and will spend my time accompanying you, alright?"

"You're not joking, are you?" said the girl as her anger melted into joy.

"Of course I'm not," Lorist said with a smile.

Blushing, she said, "I won't be able to handle you by myself. Since you're so nice, I'll give you a reward."

The girl looked around and called a maidservant over before the maidservant left after receiving some whispered instructions.

Lorist didn't mind and merely looked at the princess who was surrounded by a whole group of people.

Compared to Princess Sylvia, Princess Carey was like a ripe, delicious fruit that was

sexy and enchanting. Every gesture and smile of hers riled up the temptation of anyone who saw it. Her body was as polished and smooth as white jade with curves at the right places and her ivory-like legs only served to add to her charm. Just like the other women, she donned a translucent white veil and proudly showed off her body, especially the peaks on her chest that drew many eyes to her.

The princess's face wasn't covered and instead, her white fox mask was tied to the side of her hair, revealing her blushing and pretty face. Lorist couldn't help but praise the princess for her irresistible looks. Thinking back at the beauties he's met, apart from Princess Sylvia's fairy-like looks, nobody else could compete against Princess Carey in terms of seductive sexyness.

"Daisy, what did you need me for?" an alluring voice rang out nearby.

Lorist raised his head to look and saw a similarly petite woman wearing a spotted deer mask near the pool.

The girl in his embrace pointed to him and said, "Help me deal with this one."

That woman blushed and said, "Daisy, I'm your aunt. Don't be so rude…"

The girl didn't seem to care and said, "Don't bring up familial relations over here. Besides, you're only 6 years older than me. Let me tell you, you'll definitely regret if you miss out on him."

The woman said as she entered the pool and walked towards Lorist, "Is that so? He's that impressive?"

"You'll know after you give him a try. Either way, he's way better than Davey whom you admire so much," said the girl.

"Wait a second, what's your relationship with her?" Lorist asked.

"She's my aunt, but her cursed husband joined the Third Prince's army one week after their wedding and died in the battle at Kobo City, causing her to be a widow for 9 whole years. After the first time I participated the Paradise Gathering, I brought her along with me the next few times in hopes that I would find another person for her to marry, but it's a shame she didn't find one she liked. Just call her Chessy over here," said the girl without a single care.

"And what did you call her over for?"

"To reward you, of course. You said that you would spend the whole night with me, so I was worried that I alone wouldn't be enough to deal with you so I got her to come help out. You've truly struck gold this time, my aunt is quite the beauty too you know," said the girl as she tugged on Lorist's junior once more.

Not far away from the pool was much commotion. Daisy said, "Look, your dream guy has arrived."

Chessy blushed and said, "Cursed lass, don't make me tear your lips off."

The girl didn't bother with that remark and briefed Lorist about the situation. "Do you see that man over there? He's called Davey Copperfield. Even though he's wearing a black bull mask, almost everyone recognizes him based on his staggering height."

The man who just entered the hall was almost 2 meters tall and had a well-built figure that was even more impressive than those of greek statues from Lorist's previous life. As the bull mask he wore covered the upper half of his face, it was quite obvious that he was a rather good-looking man based on the finely chiseled nose and chin.

"Who's he? Is he famous?" Lorist asked.

The girl asked, "You don't know who he is?"

Lorist nodded and said, "I am from the Northlands and am a knight of the Norton Family. I came to the imperial capital because of some matters and Karitoke of the Royal Local Defense Force is one of my fellow students at the Dawn Academy. He received an invitation to this gathering and merely brought me along to expand my horizons."

"No wonder you've never heard of Davey before. He's actually the only son of the Second Highness's Blademaster, Davey Climonto and he's 30 years old and a One Star Gold rank this year. The Second Highness trusts him greatly and he's the vice leader of the guards; his future potential is almost limitless. It goes without saying that many of the noble ladies are charmed by his handsome looks. The last time he participated in that competition, he won and my aunt called for him so much that her throat went sore. But in the end, he chose to spend the night with two other noble ladies, much to her dismay," explained Daisy in great detail while teasing her aunt at the same time.

Both embarrassed and angry, Chessy grabbed Daisy's hand and said, "Stupid lass, see how I deal with you if you keep spouting crap…"

Lorist paid attention to the tall man on the upper floor called Davey as he approached the platform where the princes was lying on. After saying something, Davey climbed onto the bed and began caressing the princess while a few of the maidservants nearby began servicing Davey as well.

Everyone within the hall had their eyes fixed on the platform upstairs and there were some who envied Davey's opportunity. When Davey pushed his thing into Princess Carey, she let out an incredibly seductive cry and her continued moans only served to tickle the hearts of those present. A man wearing a wolf mask within the pool grunted and grabbed the woman beside him before pushing her against the sides of the pool, pushing her legs apart and humped nonstop, with the woman beginning to moan excitedly as well.

At that moment, it was as if the pool water began boiling all of a sudden. Almost all the men and women within it were pushed tightly against each other with a few maidservants even hugging and pleasing one another.

The mature woman beside Lorist was no longer able to hold on and leaned onto Lorist's body almost entirely. The young girl gave Lorist a light push as if she was saying, 'Aren't you gonna make your move?'

Turning Chessy around, Lorist began to enter her body from the back.

Chessy with her mouth agape muttered, "This… this is huge…"

As promised, Lorist didn't participate in the other activities within the Paradise Gathering and only spent the whole night screwing with the girl and her aunt, sometimes in the pool, and other times in the room. In the end, the three of them lost count of the time they've engaged in intercourse and went to sleep after they were completely exhausted.

The girl and her aunt were indeed beautiful and at some point they were doing it, they removed their masks. The girl told Lorist that her real name was Dina Arriotoli and her family's barony was at the west side of Jillin Harbor. She said that as she liked Lorist a lot, if Lorist wanted to take her as his wife, she would no longer participate in the Paradise Gathering. She also mentioned that she didn't need Lorist to give an

answer right away as she feared being rejected outright and mentioned that she would return to her dominion and wait for three years. If Lorist was interested, he should go there to ask for her hand in marriage there would be a surprise in store for him if he did so.

Lorist questioned her about the surprise, and the girl said that she had another sister of 19 years of age who was even prettier than herself that was also a virgin. If Lorist chose her, he would get to marry her sister too since that was better for the barony because that would decrease the amount of the dowry by half.

Lorist was incredibly tired and when he woke up, he realized that he was the only one who remained on the bed with Arriotoli and her aunt nowhere to be seen. A little saddened by their absence, Lorist went back to the pool to take another dip.

A maidservant came not long after, but this time around, she was fully-dressed. She respectfully told Lorist that the gathering had ended and that his friends were waiting for him to head back.

Lorist, Karitoke and Dulles all got back onto the black carriage that brought them there and during the way back, Dulles boasted that he managed to conquer seven noble ladies during the gathering. Karitoke, not wanting to lose out, said that he had engaged in the deepest interactions with 8 noble ladies. In the end, Lorist was so annoyed that he asked the both of them to shut up and reminded Karitoke that the princess was more than meets the eye and seemed to be planning something in secret. He warned Karitoke to be careful should he attend the Paradise Gathering alone the next time so that he doesn't get caught in anybody's ploys.

By the time they arrived at the camp, it was already the evening. The one who received Lorist and the other two were Freiyar, Josk and Els, all with angry looks on their faces. Freiyar and Josk were the maddest because Lorist, the family leader, merely left a note saying that he would be off to play without saying where he went and didn't even return during the night. That behavior of his was a little excessive and caused the whole group to worry the whole night for his safety.

It must be noted that the situation at the imperial capital wasn't exactly peaceful, and they had even imprisoned and brought Viscount Aslan and the descendants of 8 other noble families there all the way from Silowas Island. Even though that matter was kept secret, if someone managed to find out about it, Lorist would definitely be considered to be an obstacle. It was incredibly irrational of him to leave without any guards, so

Lorist was forbidden from traveling alone.

Lorist accepted their opinions and mentioned that he would definitely be more aware of his safety and said that he wanted to wrap this matter up since he returned safely after all. Given that he was the dominion lord, Freiyar and Josk could only accept that response to give him some face. But Els was a little mad that Lorist didn't bring him along for some fun.

As for Dulles, Freiyar ordered him to be caned 50 times as a punishment, but Lorist managed to talk it down to only 20. Dulles could only leave with a sobbing look.

Karitoke was surprised by what he witnessed the scene and asked Lorist why he was so powerless against his own knights even though he was the dominion lord.

Lorist replied that since Freiyar was the leader of this trip, he was in charge of military discipline, logistics, distribution of soldiers as well as security, and nobody could be exempt from the rules. Only during battle would the right to command be passed to Lorist and other then that, he couldn't do anything about the punishment Freiyar hands out.

In the end, Freiyar said, "Milord, I just got news that the Second Highness will be back in another two days."

Chapter 230
Face-smacking

When Second Highness Auguslo received word of Count Norton's visit, he was in a rather good mood. Five years back, he used the northbound convoy to regain his power and influence and later even tossed the burdensome vagabonds to them. He had also used the convoy to raid the nobles that didn't listen to his summons and managed to build up his own Royal Family's Local Defense Force with the resources he gained. In the end, with the cooperation of the Nortons, he managed to establish an impressive track record of victorious battles, causing his name to spread far and wide and establishing a firm foundation for the mighty Andinaq Kingdom.

Nowadays the Second Highness was no longer the poor little bug that had to rely on the northbound convoy's forces. He had 300000 soldiers under his command and the slightest move made by him would be able to profoundly affect the situation on the continent. All the nobles within the kingdom were already under his control and incredibly obedient. That goes without saying that he felt that the Norton Family that was located far in the north should do the same as well.

But after feeling good about himself for a bit, he recalled the scene of destruction wrought by the forces of the Norton Family convoy and knew that for a noble family like them with such a strong force to submit to him, he must first earn their respect.

That was especially the case when he received word some time back about the conflict between the nobles of the Northlands and those of the Iblia Kingdom as well as their battles. However, information was hard to come by in the Madras Duchy and the news he heard from the Melein Duchy was not that detailed. So, he felt that Count Norton's visit was a good opportunity for him to better increase his chances for the war of unification.

Thus, Second Highness Auguslo organized a grand banquet to celebrate Count Norton's visit to signify that he valued the Norton Family a lot and he hoped to unite the intentions of the nobles that attended the banquet to join forces under his leadership to unite the empire.

The Second Highness believed that Count Norton would definitely submit to his will

and be willing to fight at the forefront of the war to contribute to the unification of the empire.

And if the Second Highness did manage to ally up with the Norton Family, many more unexpected strategies and tactics would be made available to him. He would use the forces of the Norton Family as shock troops to barge into enemy lines and attract their attention. After that, he would be able to use that opportunity to encircle the enemies with his troops and have the Norton Family crush the enemy from the inside while he stopped the enemy from escaping outside, effectively crumbling the main force of the enemy in one go and gain victory with the smallest sacrifice.

Naturally, the Second Highness didn't even bother to consider the casualties of the Norton Family forces as he felt that dominion lords of the Andinaq Royal Family must have the self-consciousness of their due obeisance to the royal family and that it was their duty and responsibility to serve the royal family.

With his 'script' completely drafted, the Second Highness didn't expect that Lorist would not play according to his lines. To put it in a more direct manner, Lorist was visiting to ruin his plans altogether.

The banquet was held in one of the halls of the royal court and the grand and luxurious decorations belied the sour and heavy atmosphere within. The impressive columns within the hall were a reminder of the glory days of the empire which was now in shambles, causing one to feel much pity and shame from viewing them.

The Second Highness introduced the various nobles that attended to Lorist in the friendliest manner possible as well as his trusted subordinates and generals, many of whom Lorist had already seen before such as the handsome Davey, and the delicate flower, Princess Carey, who carried an overbearing aura that couldn't be violated in the slightest. Naturally, both of them were clothed this time around. There were also some military officers that Lorist could recognize from the Paradise Gathering based on their physique and movement.

Having seen many of them stark naked before, Lorist almost felt like laughing out when he saw them dressed so properly. Even he wore a bright smile, he merely nodded to the people the Second Highness introduced to him without regard at all to their status or power. Even when the Second Highness introduced Princess Carey to Lorist, he pretended that he didn't see the princess's outstretched hand for a hand-kiss and merely nodded towards her before turning away to mind his own business.

Lorist's behavior shocked many of the nobles present and they were appalled at how rude he was even though he was merely a count from the rural Northlands. Even the princess was so enraged that her face flushed red as she had never experienced something so awkward all her life. Thankfully, Davey reacted quickly enough and kissed her hand lightly, saving her from the shame of having to take her hand back because nobody bothered to kiss it.

The Second Highness on the other hand didn't take note of that as he was chatting with some other nobles and only saw Lorist move further away to appreciate the murals within the hall. Those murals depicted the might and achievements of the founding Krissen Emperor, with most of them being scenes of him triumphing over his foes or commanding his troops.

The Second Highness hurriedly said, "What's up? You're interested in these murals? It won't take long until we succeed in our own endeavor that's every bit as impressive as those of the founding emperor. I will definitely have the warriors who have contributed greatly to the effort painted on a mural as a memento too."

Lorist laughed and said, "Your Highness, after seeing this mural, it reminded me of this saying. 'For a general to become renowned, thousands of bones will have to crumble'…"

Huh? What does that saying mean? As the Second Highness was pondering over it, a manager of the palace came to report that the banquet is already ready and that the Second Highness should be the first to head in.

Within the hall wasn't the kind of long table that nobles would usually use to receive their guests, but instead many smaller ones that could seat two people each. For example, if a noble brought along his spouse, the couple would occupy one table for themselves. Naturally, for single nobles like Lorist, another noble lady would be arranged to be his partner.

As the Second Highness wanted to express his goodwill toward Lorist, a guest who had come from far away, Lorist's seat was arranged right next to his. What surprised Lorist however was that the female partner the Second Highness arranged for him was not his cousin sister Glacia but rather, the cold and fuming Princess Carey.

What's going on? Lorist wondered with surprise, but he didn't let it show on his face. After slightly bowing to the princess, Lorist sat down without a care in the world and

heard a dissatisfied humph.

At that moment, the musicians started playing a relaxing tune to lighten up the banquet's mood. The Second Highness proceeded to raise his golden cup and began to praise the heavens and the founding emperor before he began a long-winded speech about his hopes for the near future. Lorist merely shook his head slightly and thought that no matter how nice the Second Highness made it sound, he didn't bother to pay the slightest attention to the present. The Second Highness didn't even know that Lorist was about to blow up like a volcano even though he was right in front of him, so he had no right to speculate about the future.

“…In the not so distant future, during our struggle to unite the empire, I have high expectations for all of you to rake in some great achievements. The royal family will definitely not be stingy in giving ranks and land as rewards, so the future of your families will depend on your own performance," said the Second Highness as he finished his unnecessarily long and nonsensical speech before the seated audience called out 'Long live the Andinaq Kingdom!' loudly three times. There were some of them who called out 'Long live Auguslo!'. After that, everyone began to gulp down the wine in their cups and the banquet formally began.

Hmm, this mutton sausage made by the royal family looks rather good. I was just getting a little hungry from following the Second Highness around all day just now, thought Lorist as he took up his fork and brought a piece of sausage into his mouth, but before he did, he heard Princess Carey's bell-like voice resound beside him.

"Count Norton, when His Highness was giving his speech just now, I saw you shaking your head disapprovingly. Do you have any thoughts or objections to His Highness's speech just now?"

"Ack…” Lorist almost choked and he thought, *in the end, women have the potential to be the most dangerous…* He had only chosen to not give the promiscuous princess due respect because he had already lost all respect he could have for her after seeing her perform those carnal acts completely naked in front of everyone else. Also, he didn't feel like kissing the hand that has probably touched more than a couple other men's manhoods. He didn't think that the princess would hold that gesture against him and start causing trouble for him just when the banquet was beginning.

When the princess started speaking, everyone cleared their ears to hear what she had to say. At that moment, Lorist felt that he had been thrust into the center of attention.

Sigh, there's no such thing as a good banquet… Lorist stood up without giving the princess so much as the slightest glance and walked to the center of the path before bowing towards the Second Highness. "Your Highness, I have come on this trip for two reasons. First, it's to express the loyalty of the Norton Family to you and the royal family. Additionally, I have a few questions for you, Second Highness…"

"Tell me, what questions do you have?" The Second Highness was a little annoyed and wondered, *what does he intend for me to address in public in front of everyone else? What's important right now is to see how I can get the Norton Family to agree to participate in the unification war…*

"Your Highness, I've apprehended a few people and I need to bring them for you to see. Only after that can I punish them," Lorist said.

With his curiosity piqued, the Second Highness nodded and said, "Bring them in then."

Freiyar and two other guards then proceeded to escort the descendants of the nobles they captured from Seaview Manor. During the past few days, they have suffered quite a bit. Not only did they have to endure that night of caning, after that, they only had black bread and vegetable soup for food and if their behavior was the slightest bit poor, they would be pummeled to the point that their faces bruised up. The moment they entered the room and saw their family, they began to sob and cry out daddy and mommy as loudly as they could.

Great, the banquet is completely ruined now, thought the Second Highness with a grim expression. "Count Norton, could you please explain to me what is going on?"

"Your Highness, may I ask you whether Silowas Island is considered the dominion of the Norton Family?" Lorist asked.

The Second Highness froze before he said, "Of course it's the dominion of the Norton Family. There is no doubt about that."

"But these eight descendants of noble families occupied the Seaview Manor of the island for five whole years and even chased away the supervisors sent by my family to manage the manor, forcing me to have to go there personally to settle the issue. I would like to question these eight families involved about whether they are declaring war against the Norton Family. My family forces are already prepared to repeat what happened when our convoy crossed the three provinces of the Andinaq Kingdom,"

Lorist declared without the slightest hesitation.

The Second Highness's rage instantly soared as he thought, *Count Norton, are you here just to cause trouble? Even if you are in the right, you can't be so forthright about this. Why can't you just talk it out properly? Is it because you think that the Andinaq Royal Family is still as weak as it was a few years prior? Even if your convoy forces from before come again, faced with my 300000-strong army, do you think you'll be able to run around unabated?*

Beside them, an old man stood up and said, "Count Norton, I understand that our young ones hasn't been well-taught by us and even went to your dominion on their own accord to cause you much trouble. I hope that you can consider their immature age and forgive them just this once. Right now, His Highness is preparing to unite the empire with his forces and as nobles of the kingdom, we shouldn't be causing any unnecessary trouble. We must all stand united and play our part to contribute to the unification of the empire…"

Second Highness Auguslo almost praised that noble's speech out loud. *Listen to his sensible words! He has made it incredibly clear that it isn't that we fear your forces. We're only too busy with preparing to unite the empire and can't be bothered to deal with you! Look at how reasonable he's being…*

"May I inquire who you are?" Lorist asked.

"I am Marquis Reid and that young child over there is the unbecoming member of our family. I hope that Lord Count, you, can be merciful and spare them this once," said the old man.

"Your Highness, what do you think of this matter?" Lorist said as he turned back to the Second Highness.

Second Highness Auguslo said with an expressionless look, "Taking their young age into account, I believe that they're only causing trouble because they're not mature enough. I hope that you won't fuss with them about this matter."

"Very well, I'll release them with respect to Your Highness's wishes," Lorist said magnanimously before instructing Freiyar to release them.

And so, the eight foolish noble descendants ran back to their family members and began complaining about the treatment they've received and even asked their family

members to set matters right for them.

Blind idiots, won't you even consider the situation? Do you still think that you are the precious members of our family? As expected, there were a few of them who were instantly rebuked and lectured by their parents and were escorted back to be grounded to have them reflect on their mistakes.

As the Second Highness attempted to say something to warm up the atmosphere again, he heard Lorist yell, "Bring him in!"

There's more? Everyone widened their eyes to see which unlucky fellow was next.

This time around, Els came in with two other guards who were escorting the captured Gold ranked knight Ferwemant.

"Your Highness, this is your subordinate, the commander of the Third Division of the First Royal Local Defense Legion, Gold ranked knight Ferwemant. He brought around 100 soldiers to Whitebird Town of Silowas Island and tied up the mayor to threaten the townsfolk for wealth and was captured by us. I want to ask Your Highness whether he acted personally on his own accord or per your orders."

Bam! Second Highness Auguslo thumped on the table harshly and stood right up. "Very well, Ferwemant. The First Legion had already reported your disappearance for days… So you were actually at the dominion of the Norton Family being a bandit! My men, come over here and drag Ferwemant out for 100 canes! He will be instantly stripped of his position as division commander and serve within the third division until he makes up for his crimes!" The Second Highness acted quickly and came up with a way to deal with the matter without giving Lorist any chance to react.

Sol, how ridiculous, Lorist cursed in his thoughts. Even though the punishment sounded harsh, it was actually already extremely forgiving. Lorist was really dissatisfied that he had no choice but to let the knight go off scot-free. *Very well, if you deal with Viscount Aslan in the same matter, I will flip out in your face right away…*

"Bring in the next one!" yelled Lorist with rage.

The Second Highness gasped and thought, *there's still more?!*

Viscount Aslan was brought into the hall by Jim and two other guards, causing chatters and murmurs to break out right away. *Is that feather-covered monster actually a*

person? It took them quite some time before they recognized him as the tax collection official appointed by Second Highness Auguslo himself, Viscount Aslan.

When the Second Highness recognized the kneeling man, he could no longer hold his rage and roared, "Count Norton, on what grounds are you treating a noble like him like this? He's even the tax collection official I personally appointed! Are you looking down on the Andinaq Royal Family?!"

"Your Highness, I just confirmed with you before that Silowas Island was the dominion of my family. You should be well aware of the income your own principality generates, right? It's 2000 gold Fordes each year, am I wrong? And you said that this man here is the tax collection official sent by you? I even thought that he was the dominion lord you appointed for Silowas Island. On what grounds was he collecting 6000 gold Fordes' worth of taxes for three consecutive years? Not only did he increase the taxes on his own accord, he almost caused the residents to revolt! This is definitely an infringement of the honor of the Norton Family!

"I would really like to know why he wanted to collect the taxes that included that of our original dominion from that island. Is that per Your Highness's orders as well? He even threatened that if they don't pay up, you will bring your 300000 soldiers to wash the island with blood. Is is true that Your Highness is going to punish my family? It's precisely because he claimed to be appointed by Your Highness that I brought him to you like this. Otherwise, I would've long hanged him back on the island," Lorist talked back with full force, not the slightest bit intimidated by the anger the Second Highness displayed.

It was at that moment when Second Highness Auguslo understood that Lorist was not there to cause trouble and was instead there to give him a harsh smack in the face. However, he thought, *what a piece of talent… Viscount Aslan is actually able to squeeze 6000 gold Fordes out of the poor islanders even though I only received a third of the official sum of 2000 gold Fordes, only around 600… I must definitely punish this fellow harshly and make him cough up all the gold Fordes he put into his own pocket. After this, I'll let him be in charge of tax collection elsewhere, then I'll no longer have to worry about military funds.*

But now, he had to think of a way to convince Lorist to let Viscount Aslan go. After all, the viscount had indeed been overly excessive in his actions and had violated the honor of the Norton Family. The Second Highness was well aware that if he hanged the viscount, he would be able to make up to the Norton Family. But the issue was that he

wanted to preserve Viscount Aslan's life.

A sudden shout reverberated within the hall at that instant. "You actually dare to humiliate my brother like that… The Aslan Family will definitely not forgive the Norton Family no matter what!"

Chapter 231
Flipping Out

A huge man with the back of a tiger and the waist of a bear stood up from one of the seats at the back row, drew his sword and marched forward without regard to the others that attempted to stop him.

Lorist gave the man a cold stare and said, "Count Aslan? Haha, don't think it's just you who doesn't want to work together. The Norton Family will not let this matter slide either. I believe that you were aware of the actions of your own brother. Since the Aslan Family dares to challenge the honor of the Norton Family, you should be anticipating the vengeance of the Raging Bear.

"Your Highness, how do you think I should deal with Viscount Aslan here?" Lorist said as he turned back once again and passed the baton to the Second Highness.

The Second Highness looked incredibly grim and after staying silent for a few moments, he finally opened his mouth and said, "Count Norton, let me first apologize to you. The things that have happened at your dominion were definitely not a result of my intentions. As the senior noble of the Norton Family, I was too busy minding my own matters that I wasn't able to notice and straighten out small conflicts like that, and that is definitely neglect on my part.

"But Viscount Aslan is indeed the tax collection official appointed by the kingdom and even if he has committed a crime, he must be punished in accordance to the regulations of the kingdom's court. Additionally, he is still a person of noble status and your humiliating treatment of him is grossly unfit with the way of the nobles. Despite that, I can understand your rage since Viscount Aslan did infringe upon the honor of the Norton Family. That's why, I hope you can hand him to me and I will deal with him aptly. Let's end this matter here."

The Second Highness thought that he had managed to settle upon a perfect arrangement with his words even leaving some room for Lorist to step down the podium by stressing unity among nobles and trivializing the matter of the viscount.

But he didn't expect that his words would cause the atmosphere within the hall to chill

all of a sudden. Everyone within the hall gave him a weird look.

Lorist's laughter resounded throughout the hall, carrying with it a sharp sting of arrogance.

"Your Highness, have you forgotten that the authority of us nobles is sacred and cannot be violated? If Viscount Aslan is to be let off so lightly after committing an act like this, does that mean that the royal family can do the same thing again to mess with the other dominion lords? I have brought Viscount Aslan here because he is the official you have appointed, but that doesn't mean you have the right to decide his fate…"

Lorist made his intentions known in a straightforward matter. In essence, he was saying, 'since you're my senior noble, I'm giving you face by bringing him here. Even though Viscount Aslan is the tax collection official appointed by you, as he has trampled upon the violation of the Norton Family, he must receive due punishment. If you intend to accept the responsibility but are unwilling to do anything about it, then we'll all flip out entirely and become lifelong enemies. Otherwise, no matter how Viscount Aslan is dealt with, that is a matter of the Norton Family and you, the Second Highness, can only offer your suggestion but have no right to make any decisions about it'.

The Second Highness was so embarrassed to the point of anger because he had uttered something wrong. Even though the nobles appeared quite subservient to him, his previous statement had touched upon the baseline that those nobles were willing to tolerate. The ideal scenario for Viscount Aslan currently was for him to be hanged by a dominion lord. If a senior noble was able to do as he liked when the true dominion lord was not within the dominion, then all the nobles there would refuse the senior noble's call to arms and stay within the dominion without heading out.

There were some things that could be done but couldn't be loudly proclaimed. As Lorist had just said, the authority of nobles is sacred and cannot ever be violated. That was common knowledge for all the nobles on the Grindia Continent.

As a senior noble, the Second Highness could use military might to force the nobles to mobilize their forces., just like the Duke of the Northlands who used the Northland Army to take advantage of the other nobles of the Northlands to gain more wealth for himself, or the Second Prince who forced the nobles' private forces heed his orders. But these methods could only be employed in secret and in the world where the strong devoured the weak, the ones who were taken advantage of could only blame their own

misfortune.

But for a statement that the Second Highness had proclaimed in public in front of every other noble, it was as if he had the intention of sticking his hands into the dominions of other nobles and to take a huge bite out for himself. For these nobles, oppressing their subjects and fighting among themselves were private matters. But the Second Highness's decision about Viscount Aslan would set a precedent for them all.

If the Second Highness earnestly apologized and pleaded Lorist to hand Viscount Aslan to him while promising that he would definitely handle the matter according to the Norton Family's wishes, then Lorist would probably do as he said and give him the viscount. After that, he could contact Lorist privately and have the Aslan Family pay out a huge sum to make up for the wrongs of the viscount as well as to ransom him out to get the forgiveness of the Norton Family and spare Viscount Aslan's life. After all, nobody would fuss so much over money and the Second Highness's face would also have to be considered as well. After that, the matter would be wrapped up without problems and everyone would praise the Second Highness's wisdom and wit.

But refusing to accept any of his errors and fueled with the feeling of dominating power from having 300000 soldiers in his possession, the Second Highness began to see the Norton Family like the other small noble families that would cower before him and didn't think twice before he had uttered what he said just now. The situation he caused was grim as not only did his statement imply that he would further extend his influence into the lands under the jurisdiction of other nobles, causing them to start to be wary of him, they also forced the Norton Family to the absolute tipping point.

Lorist had already stated very clearly that he had brought the viscount to him only because he wanted to give the Second Highness some face. But since he wanted to protect the viscount, Lorist decided that he wouldn't hold back.

"Then, what do you intend to do? Count Norton…" The Second Highness forced those words out of his mouth syllable by syllable and felt incredibly hateful as he did so.

"It's simple. Since Your Highness's suggested way of handling the viscount is not to our satisfaction, we can only settle this according to the Norton Family's own regulations," said Lorist before he made a cutthroat gesture. Freiyar then drew his sword and gave a light swing, separating Viscount Aslan's head from his body.

The whole hall fell into complete silence.

Not one of them expected that Lorist would order for Viscount Aslan to be beheaded on the spot, during a banquet that was hosted to welcome Lorist himself no less.

Shrieks of terror could be heard as a few of the noble ladies fainted from the sight of gore and blood.

Clang! The sword in Count Aslan's sword fell to the ground as he struggled to find his footing while looking at his decapitated little brother, before he turned to Lorist with a hateful stare and said, "Very well… You better expect the vengeance of the Aslan Family!"

After he said that, Count Aslan left the hall right away.

The golden cup in the Second Highness's hand was already dented from his grip. He felt that he had been smacked in the face in public! Lorist's act of ordering for the decapitation of the viscount didn't leave the Second Highness with any due respect. The Second Highness currently felt a boiling tinge on his face and was shuddering from the anger, with his rage ready to burst out at any moment.

"Madman! Are the people of the Norton Family all madmen?!" commented Marquis Reid, echoing the thoughts of most of the other nobles as well.

"Wow, you really don't waste any words. I like it…" That one who uttered that was Princess Carey. At that moment, her eyes were a little watery.

Bam! Second Highness Auguslo smashed the gold cup in his hand against the table before he stood up and said, "Count Norton, how dare you kill Viscount Aslan right before me… Are you disregarding the existence of the Andinaq Royal Family? Do you still consider yourself a noble of the kingdom?"

WIthout showing any weakness, Lorist stepped forward two steps to look the Second Highness in the eye and said, "The Norton Family has pledged our allegiance to the Krissen Imperial Family and has never shirked on our responsibilities. As the empire is already now in shambles, taking into account that the Andinaq Royal Family is the rightful heir to the legacy of the Krissen Imperial Family, we have also accepted your entitlement and enfeoffment. But when we were facing off against the Duke of the Northlands and the Second Prince, did the Andinaq Royal Family offer us any aid?

"And after traveling so far to our new dominion, we noticed it plagued with small fries causing trouble here and there. Was it because we weren't present at the dominion? Don't forget, Second Highness, about the children of those noble families that occupied the Seaview Manor unrightfully. Since you said that it's just an incident of unruly children messing around, I've already released them and took your will into consideration. Additionally, your subordinate's attempt at extorting the townsfolk by holding the town mayor hostage will be dealt with according to the military regulations of your family, as per your will, since you said that he acted on his own accord.

"But right now, this tax collection official that you appointed took the chance when we were absent from Silowas Island and treated it like his own dominion and even oppressed the residents so much that they almost revolted. Yet, you still seek to cover for him. Then let me ask you, Second Highness, do you even consider us, the Norton Family, as a noble family of the kingdom? What is your intention when you objected at my sacred right as the dominion lord?"

The Second Highness was completely flabbergasted and speechless. It was true that Lorist had already gave him a lot of face and abided by his decisions when it came to the children of the noble families and the Gold ranked knight Ferwemant. Additionally, the now-dead Viscount Aslan's transgressions were far worse those of the former two cases and Lorist truly didn't have a choice when it came to letting the matter go. If Lorist really compromised with the Second Highness again, then the Norton Family would no longer be able to hold their faces up high among the other nobles. That was a matter that concerned the honor and pride of the family, so it was no wonder that Lorist was willing to go all out.

But at that moment, the Second Highness's anger continued to build up as he thought, *so you defended the honor of the Norton Family, what of mine then?* He continued to glare angrily at Lorist with the latter looking right back, as if bolts of lightning could be seen between their gazes.

One figure suddenly stepped in front of the Second Highness. That man looked to be around 50 years of age and was dressed extravagantly while also boasting a huge build. He slowly drew his sword and said, "Lord Count, I don't wish to be a part of your dispute with His Highness, nor do I wish to comment on who was right or wrong. But I will definitely not allow you to hurt others in front of His Highness. Please step aside, I must let your family knights know what humility, manners and regulations are…"

"Who are you?" Lorist said while turning his gaze to the old man.

The old man gave Lorist a slight glance and said, "Please step aside, Lord Count. It is not my wish to hurt you. I am a Blademaster of the Royal Family, Davey Climonto."

After he reported his identity, the old man puffed out his chest as if he was waiting for Lorist to show a look of surprise before trying to appease himself in a panicked manner.

Oh, so this is the father of that handsome guy? Don't the old ones usually come after their young are hurt? Why did you jump out when I didn't touch your son?

Lorist glanced at the Second Highness and saw that he had relaxed and sat down with a smile.

Bastard... So you're trying to teach me a lesson, are you? Alright, let's see who has the last laugh, cursed Lorist in his mind as he drew his ceremonial sword.

"You think you're invincible just because you're a Blademaster? If you want to teach my knight a lesson, you have to go through me first." Lorist then spat out right in front of the old man.

With his face reddened with anger, the Blademaster said, "Kid, you dare to be rude to me?!"

Spitting in front of someone was considered a gross insult and the old man really didn't understand why a twerp that wasn't even at the Silver rank dared to disrespect a Blademaster like himself. However, that didn't stop him from teaching that arrogant count a lesson he would never forget.

"Old man, come at me. Don't be all bark and no bite," Lorist provoked.

The old man cursed as he swung the flat of the blade of his sword horizontally towards Lorist's left cheek, intent of giving Lorist a harsh smack in the face. If that strike connected, not only would his face be swollen to no end, at least half of his teeth would fall off.

Even though Lorist wasn't too used to wielding the ceremonial sword that was markedly different from his custom made sword, it was more than enough for him to face off against a rank 1 Blademaster, especially when the old man was attacking while

underestimating Lorist's abilities.

The Second Highness then sat down calmly and thought, *good, Locke… As you had the high ground just now, I couldn't do anything against you. But now, i can crush you and make you submit with my power. Do you think that your family is so mighty just because you have a handful of Gold ranked knights? Just like a frog in a well, you've not the slightest idea how many Gold ranked knights I have. Additionally, I have a Blademaster as well…*

I will use my Blademaster to teach your knights a lesson and make you understand that you have no right to be so domineering in front of me. Forget my 300000 soldiers, even you are not able to match against me in terms of personal strength. The present is different from five years ago and at that time, your family's force was indeed impressive. But you're only a small family while I have a kingdom under me. To think that you would find trouble for yourself and fight against a Blademaster, you really don't know your bounds. Blademasters can wipe the floor with you whenever they please.

But soon after, the Second Highness stood straight up with surprise, with the other nobles present all letting out gasps of shock. It was apparent to them that the one being pushed back was Blademaster Climonto instead. He was sweating heavily while barely parrying Lorist's lightning-fast strikes. Faced with Lorist who was fighting like a frenzied tiger, it was apparent that the Blademaster was at a disadvantage and would soon lose.

Standing in the middle were Freiyar, Els, Jim and a few other guards who looked at the Blademaster sympathetically. While it was normal for him to show off to others usually, acting high and mighty in front of their family leader, Lorist, was only looking for trouble. Even Viscount Kristoph, a rank 1 Blademaster, was eventually scared from sparring against Lorist all the time. While he was able to withstand around 100 or so strikes in the beginning, as they continued to spar, the Blademaster was no longer able to last more than 40 strikes, causing him to curse at Lorist for being a complete freak.

Clang! The two swords intersected once again and the Blademaster's own longsword was knocked flying before it landed in front of the Second Highness. Lorist then tapped onto the old man's face with the flat side of his ceremonial sword and said, "A Blademaster, huh? Haha, did you think you could teach my knights humility with your level of ability? Come to me for a rematch when you reach the level of Blademaster Zarinan."

"You've fought against Zarinan before?" said the old man, stunned. Blademaster Zarinan was well known as a quasi-Sword Saint and was considered to be the only Blademaster that stood a good chance to become a Sword Saint during the days of the former empire.

"He's been killed by the forces of my family," Lorist said casually. "After we defeated the 100000-strong army of the Second Prince and killed Blademaster Louinse, the Second Prince escaped back to his dominion and sent Blademaster Zarinan to assassinate me, only for him to end up dead from my family force."

"That's impossible!" cried out the Second Highness with shock as the other nobles began to chatter incessantly. While defeating the Second Prince's 100000 soldiers was a plausible feat, killing two of his Blademasters was incredibly hard to believe. Everyone knew that Blademasters wouldn't be that idiotic to stand still and be swarmed by a whole army and would escape once the situation was grim.

It's already almost been one year and you guys still haven't received the news? Color me impressed. You think that you can unite the empire with only 300000 soldiers? In your dreams, Lorist thought.

"What's so impossible about that? I even put Blademaster Zarinan's corpse up on display, but most of him is rotted now, leaving behind only a few bones," Lorist said as he turned back. "Bring in our proof! This is also our gift to the royal family. Let everyone see, who really is the one loyally working to serve the kingdom!"

Chapter 232
Leaving

The one who brought the Second Prince into the hall was Josk. Four other guards also came in with a huge chest in their hands.

At that moment, the Second Prince was wearing a black head sack. Coupled with the black cloth draped around his cubic prison when he was transported to the hall, the guards of the hall were guessing who that mysterious figure within was moments before. Now that the secret was out, the Second Prince's head sack was removed and a few of the nobles let out gasps of surprise.

"It's the Second Prince…"

"It's Iblia!"

Lorist used his sword to push aside the latch of the chest and kicked its cover open. Within it, a crown, scepter, and a set of royal robes could be seen.

"Your Highness, I believe that you should be familiar with him, the renowned Second Prince and King of the Iblia Kingdom. My family forces breached Windbury City and managed to capture him. However, his fate and judgment is a matter of the Krissen Imperial Family, so I could only bring him to the imperial capital so that Your Highness can deal with this matter," Lorist said with his finger pointed at the Second Prince.

"And these," Lorist said while kicking the chest on the ground. "The whole set of royal regalia of the Iblia Kingdom. This is the gift from the Norton Family to the Andinaq Royal Family to express our loyalty and service."

However, the Second Highness wasn't paying attention to what Lorist was saying and only looked at the Second Prince before he asked, "Has the Norton Family took over the Iblia Kingdom?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "No. After eliminating the 100000-strong force of the Second Prince, we also suffered immense casualties. We then used guerilla tactics to occupy Windbury City and captured the Second Prince before we were chased out

again by the forces of Duke Fisablen. So far, we can only stay within the Northlands to defend ourselves and the Iblia Kingdom is currently ruled by their queen."

Lorist lied without batting an eye so that he would be spared from being used as the Second Highness's spear. Since the Southern Province and the Winston Province that the Iblia Kingdom controlled was a total mess, it was not a threat at all to the Norton Family. The Southern Province had already become a wasteland, whereas the Winston Province nobles and the nobles of the Southern Province, who were hiding within the royal capital, were at war with each other. The queen, on the other hand, merely hid within the Rose Palace to enjoy her life as much as possible. Even Duke Fisablen had given up on taking any action and left the Iblia Kingdom on the verge of collapse.

As expected, when Second Highness Auguslo heard Lorist's reply, he breathed a sigh of relief while also feeling a little dissatisfied. He was relieved to hear Lorist say that his forces had suffered immense casualties. It was only to be expected after a battle with the 100000 soldiers of the Second Prince. Even if he won, some amount of lost vitality was to be expected. He also believed that after occupying Windbury City and catching the Second Prince, the forces of Duke Fisablen that attempted to take the Second Prince back must have also caused the Norton Family troops to pay a hefty price.

But the Second Highness was also aware that he wouldn't be able to use the Norton Family's force to achieve his plans. With a great achievement like sending the Second Prince straight to him, Lorist would definitely say that the Norton Family has already did their best to play their part and have his family forces rest to recuperate and rebuild. The Second Highness who had prepared to watch his plans unfold by the sidelines was incredibly dissatisfied and felt as if he his full-force punch had landed on nothing but air.

However, the Second Highness no longer paid attention to Lorist since the unmasked Second Prince had just realized where he was. The confused Second Prince had already regained his calm and adopted his usual elegant facade and began loudly greeting the nobles he recognized regardless of whether they were willing to pay any attention to him.

"Aha! Aren't you my second nephew? Long time no see. Second Uncle here misses you so much! Is my brother not here?" The Second Prince had noticed the presence of the Second Prince and began to bring up their familial relations.

The Second Highness merely gave the cheerful Second Prince a hateful stare infused with killing intent. The three people the Second Highness hated the most included the First Prince, the Second Prince and Duke Madras. Even though the First Prince was the first to raise the banner of rebellion, the empire reacted quickly enough and mobilized its forces to slowly push the First Prince into the corner.

But the Second Prince, who saw an opportunity amidst the chaos and confusion, stabbed the empire in the back and rebelled at Winston Province, forcing Duke Melein to bring his forces back and allowing the First Prince to jump out of his predicament. Ever since then, the three princes fought for the throne of the empire and the once strong empire fell into disarray and conflict.

Just when the empire was about to gain some advantage, with victory in sight, thanks to the foundation of their strength -- which had been lain over hundreds of years -- Duke Madras suddenly seceded from the empire and caused the advantageous situation to evaporate in no time. The civil war continued for another three years before the empire fragmented into the many kingdoms and duchies it was in the present.

Now, with one of the main instigators in his hands, Second Highness Auguslo looked coldly at the Second Prince. It was as if he was staring at an animal waiting to be slaughtered.

"Hehe… Hehehe… My little Auguslo, what's up with you? Are you not happy about Second Uncle's visit?" asked the Second Prince, forcing himself to continue smiling despite the cold gaze the Second Highness was giving him.

"I don't see any Second Uncle of mine. I only see a traitor of the empire before me. Right now, I'm thinking of how I should put you to death to teach the rest of the defectors of the empire a deep lesson they'll never forget," said the Second Highness after a long pause. However, his statement made the Second Prince pale instantly.

"I-I'm your Second Uncle, you know. Do you intend to bear the stigma of killing one of your own seniors?" said the Second Prince in a last-ditch attempt.

"I don't mind taking a page out of Krissen IV's book to deal with a traitor of the imperial family like you," said the Second Highness coldly, causing the Second Prince to slump to the ground weakly.

Krissen IV was one of the longest ruling emperors of the Krissen Empire. During his 70th birthday, he put to death 7 of his sons, 4 of his daughters, over 20 of his grandchildren as well as more than 4000 others, all for attempting to usurp the throne. At that time, more than 100 noble families were involved in that incident.

That was one of the most well-known incidents in the history of the Krissen Empire. It caused Krissen IV to come to be known as the Ironheart Emperor. The reason it happened was simple: Krissen IV had been on the throne for far too long. His whole ruling term was a staggering 84 years. Even the three sons of his that were made crown prince didn't live as long as he did. In the end, the few remaining sons of his who yearned to be emperor decided to send their father on a premature journey from the world, but they were exposed and dealt with in the end.

The Second Highness had brought up the tale to imply that he would hold no regard for any familial ties, causing the Second Prince to crumble entirely. The Andinaq Kingdom was perfectly in line to deal with Second Prince and it was already inconceivable for him to die a swift death, being the traitor he was.

"Take him away and lock him up for now," the Second Highness said. *Now that I have one of the biggest troublemakers in my hands, it won't take long until the other two's turns. When my father passes on, I will become Auguslo I and lead my 300000 soldiers to conquer the various lands and rebuild the empire to its former strength.*

"Ah, Count Norton, you looked so handsome when you defeated Blademaster Climonto just now! Given that your swordsmanship is so amazing, do I have the honor to ask for a bit of guidance from you? We have a manor in the imperial capital which boasts an amazing view. Nobody will bother us over there…" said Princess Carey with a coquettish tone. She no longer put up the arrogant and cold front towards Lorist. Instead, she radiated an air of anticipation as she made that request, and looked at Lorist with wide puppy-dog eyes.

Ugh, Princess Carey… Putting aside your age of 25, your physique is not suitable for sword-fighting… But it would no doubt be incredibly compatible for pole-dancing. Forget giving you any pointers, I don't want to end up in your bed halfway through the lesson. 'Boons don't come without effort, and calamities happen for a reason'. Thinking back at how the First Highness died in the middle of the night after coughing out a mouthful of blood, Lorist was not the least interested in involving himself in the drama of the Andinaq Kingdom and desired to stay as far from the imperial capital as possible. *Handing the Second Prince to the Andinaq Royal Family is already an*

irrefutable achievement on my part, so better give the other nobles a chance to contribute during your unification war.

"I deeply apologize, Your Highness," Lorist said as he took two steps back to distance himself from Princess Carey before bowing slightly. "It's rather unfortunate, but I'm rather busy with my duties as a dominion lord. Silowas Island is still not completely peaceful and there's a lot I have to do, so I really cannot afford to spare any time to guide you in swordsmanship. And to be honest, there isn't much I can teach either. To me, there are only two secrets when it comes to practicing the sword, and those are diligence and low regard for one's own life. If Your Highness can work on these two points, I believe your swordsmanship will definitely improve greatly."

Princess Carey stomped on the ground angrily at Lorist's crudeness, but she still smiled shyly and said, "Then, Count Norton, I've heard that the sights at Seaview Manor at Silowas Island is not bad. I wonder if I am fortunate enough to make a trip there?"

Oh no, don't tell me that this lass is smitten with me… Just tell me which part of me you like and I'll definitely change it right away, thought Lorist irresistibly. But he still smiled and nodded as he said, "Of course you can, Your Highness. The Norton Family will always be honored to host your visit to Seaview Manor. I will have my subordinates receive you there. But as I will be moving around a lot personally, if I am not present on the island when Your Highness arrives, I hope you will forgive me for my inability to tend to you."

It was at that moment when the Second Highness came over and said with a praiseworthy tone, "It seems the two of you are having a good time. Locke, this niece of mine is one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom and has always set her sights incredibly high and doesn't mingle with others easily given her cold personality. I didn't think that she would get along so well with you, Locke. This must be fate. Locke, you must definitely grasp this opportunity…"

Princess Carey curled up in embarrassment and said, "Uncle…"

Lorist was tempted to roll his eyes as he thought, *which one of your eyes saw me enjoying my conversation with the princess? Sheesh, one spouting crap with their eyes wide open after another… She may indeed be the most beautiful within the kingdom, but -- forget about her having a cold personality -- I've already seen her performing enthusiastically in front of everyone else butt-naked… Not only did she put up a great*

show herself, she even caused the people around her to start humping passionately…

"Your Highness, since the Second Prince is already in your hands, I will take my leave now," Lorist said to cut the conversation short as he decided to leave the imperial capital as soon as possible.

"Oh…" mumbled the Second Highness, surprised. "What's going on? Are you unhappy with our hospitality? Locke, you and I go way back and to be honest, I hope that you will be able to contribute even more during the unification war. As for the things that just happened, I admit that it was lack of consideration on my part for neglecting the reputation and honor of the Norton Family. I express my sincerest apologies to you."

Lorist waved his hand and said, "Your Highness, there's no need to dwell on such things. I truly believe in your sincerity and understand that you've always been focused on working towards rebuilding the empire, so it's completely understandable that you would let small things like this slip by since such things are usually unpredictable. However, after taking on the 100000 soldiers and ambushing Windbury City, the Norton Family force is already incredibly weakened. It's already uncertain whether I'll be able to protect myself and I've only sent the Second Prince here as a precaution. Duke Fisablen is definitely not an easy person to deal with and I must even keep one eye open when I sleep in my dominion to stay alert…"

Since Duke Fisablen was busy gathering all the livestock to exchange for military equipment, Lorist didn't bother too much and dumped all the blame on him. Additionally, as the Second Prince's father-in-law, the duke was supposed to be the enemy of the Second Highness in the first place. Given his moniker as the war god of the plains, the Second Highness would only believe in Lorist's description of the situation of the Norton Family if he inflated the might of Duke Fisablen.

"That's why I still have to rush back to the Northlands to rebuild my family forces. Initially, I thought that I would be able to gain some resources from Silowas Island to aid in the recovery of my dominion in the Northlands but I didn't think that the island would be ravaged so badly. Your Highness, please forgive me for not being able to partake in the unification war. It is beyond my ability to do so no matter how much I wish it were. All I can do here is to wish you all the best in your efforts and hope that I will be able to come here again to congratulate Your Highness when you succeed."

Since Lorist was insistent on leaving, the Second Highness didn't do too much to stop him. Given the achievement of capturing and bringing over the Second Prince, it would

be troublesome for him to force Lorist to stay. If anything were to happen to the Norton Family dominion as a result of that, there's no doubt that Lorist would hate the Second Highness to the bone, so Second Highness Auguslo felt that it was better to let him go back to fight with Duke Fisablen since he had originally intended to use the Norton Family forces to hold back those of Duke FIsablen anyway.

Having finally obtained permission to leave, Lorist departed immediately without looking back.

After exiting the capital, Josk laughed and said, "Milord, why weren't you moved even the slightest when that beautiful princess approached you? She tried so hard to get close to you that I thought she had glued herself to you."

Lorist laughed bitterly and said, "Joe, that woman is not as simple as she seems. If it were another woman, I would be more than happy to encourage you to court her. After all, it's not every day that you praise a woman for her looks. However, I can't help but feel that this princess seems to be plotting something. 'Empire-ruining beauties' are used to describe those kinds of women. Coupled with the mysterious circumstances surrounding her father, the First Highness's death, I feel that interacting with Princess Carey will bring us even greater trouble, so I believed that it would be best for us to stay far away from her. I don't want to be in embroiled in yet another incredibly complicated situation."

At that moment, Freiyar came forward and asked, "Milord, what's the plan for the rest of our trip?"

"After leaving the city walls and arriving at our camp, we will set out immediately. I am afraid that the Second Highness will change his mind and have us stay at the imperial capital. I didn't think about it too much when I decided to bring a whole regiment of Local Defense Force soldiers with me, and the Second Highness hasn't seen how well-armed they are yet. If he does, he'll definitely realize that I've been lying to him. These 500 soldiers are far more elite and well-disciplined than the royal guards stationed at the hall just now," Lorist said while furrowing his brow.

Josk nodded in agreement and said, "That's right, milord. When I was waiting for my turn to bring the Second Prince into the hall, the guards there were talking about how impressive our guards' equipment were with some of them even coming close to take a look while praising their quality. It looked as if they were about to strip our guards naked right then and there. When the Second Highness has more time, the guards will

definitely report to him about it and I believe that the he will start to pine for our equipment not long after."

"Sigh, so many things to worry about. Leaving early is for the best," Lorist said.

Chapter 233
Breaching Five Camps in the Night

"Sigh, we couldn't buy any horses… I didn't think they would be in such short supply in the imperial capital. Over the last couple of days we only managed to buy a few dozen horses. We had to pay double the market price for them, and they are all being used by milord to pull the carriages," grumbled Freiyar as he prepared the bonfire.

Josk said, "We didn't plan well enough. We thought that we would be able to buy some mounts when we came here, but we forgot that the imperial capital doesn't breed horses at all. Add to that the fact that the Second Highness's six legions require lots of horses, a shortage is unavoidable. I didn't think that we would actually have to walk back…"

"We've only traveled around fifteen kilometers, even after walking for the whole day. I estimate that we can move another 30 or so kilometers tomorrow. That's rather bad for us. Since we're used to traveling around the Northlands on horseback, this pace feels slower than a snail's by comparison. Milord, should we head to the nearby residents of the nobles to buy some horses and carriages to travel faster? Since Silowas Island still needs to be developed, I think these carriages will be useful for transportation," Els suggested.

The group had left the capital and traveled for half a day when Freiyar instructed them to set up camp. The order came just as the sky began to darken. Thanks to the extensive training they had received, the 500 or so soldiers from the Local Defense Brigade settled down quickly. Surprisingly, the ones to complain were among the knights. Els, Jim and the others were used to traveling on horseback rather than marching. They grumbled while sitting by the bonfire. They had been able to sit in the carriage on the way to the imperial capital while escorting the Second Prince, but now they had to travel back by foot.

It was mainly because Lorist had bought a few thousand books in the imperial capital and intended to transport them back. Even though they had around 20 carriages, apart from the ones transporting food, all of them were filled with books. There wasn't even a horse to spare for Lorist; he, too, had to travel by foot.

"Very well, we'll take a detour tomorrow and head towards Doni River. From there, it will only take another day of walking for us to arrive at Dasanba Town. Over there is the main jetty of the Doni River where we can take a boat to travel along the river to the shores of Domesger City. From there, we'll only need to travel another two days to reach Jillin Harbor and get on our ship back to Silowas Island," Lorist announced after he took a look at the map.

"Then, do we still need to purchase carriages when we pass by the other dominions?" Els asked.

"Forget about carriages. It's fine to just get some horses that your subordinates can use to scout ahead so they can alert us if there's any danger," Lorist said.

"Hah, milord, with our force of 500, which dominion lord in the whole of the Andinaq Kingdom will have the guts and might to provoke us?"

Everyone laughed out loud at the comment.

It was true. The nobles of the Andinaq Kingdom had already been made incredibly subservient by the Second Highness. Most of their family forces had already been drafted into the reserve army. It would already be impressive if they managed to have more than 100 soldiers garrisoning their dominions. As Karitoke had mentioned, as long as they didn't encounter the Second Highness's army, Lorist would be able to go anywhere within the kingdom with his force of 500 Local Defense Brigade troops without fear of being obstructed.

"Milord, why can't we sell the horses we have in the Northlands over here? I feel it's a good idea. There's obviously a market for it," Howard said.

"Hehe…" Lorist laughed as he stroked Howard's hair, "It's not bad that you managed to come up with that idea. Under normal circumstances, that idea of yours would be a good one. But you forgot to consider one extremely important factor: who are we to do business with? Even though the Second Highness requires a huge number of mounts for his army, he doesn't have the ability to pay for them. The 300000 soldiers have already stretched his finances to the limit. He definitely doesn't have any gold coins remaining to pay for the horses. If we were to bring horses from the Northlands here, we would only get an empty promise from him. Something along the lines of reimbursing us after he reunites the empire…"

"Alright guys, let's take a rest a little earlier. Howard, heat some water up for us to soak our feet in. There's still a long way to travel tomorrow," Lorist said.

The night passed rather uneventfully. On the next day, they continued their travels almost immediately and only managed to obtain 7 mounts after traveling through four dominions along the way. Among these were old horses that were around 15 to 16 years old.

Els had laughed bitterly as he said, "Milord, are we buying these horses for them to spend their retirement back at our dominion?"

During the evening, they managed to arrive at Dasanba Town, which was within the dominion of Count Santos. It was rumored that the count was currently the legion commander of the Local Defense Army's Third Legion, and was at the border of the Redlis Kingdom. The one in charge of Dasanba Town was one of his trusted aides, Old Sunny.

Supervisor Sunny was incredibly respectful to Lorist. Any count with an escort of 500 fully-armed soldiers was definitely deserving of such respect. According to him, Dasanba Town was one of the most important river crossings within the Andinaq Kingdom. Mainly because it served to transport huge amounts of supplies and resources along the river to the frontlines at the border of the Redlis Kingdom. It greatly decreased the expenditure of manpower and pack animals on the task.

That's why Lorist was able to obtain the supplies he needed there. He was also able to purchase a carriage. As for the boat towards Domesger City, Old Sunny said that he could help Lorist with one of his connections -- a regiment captain in charge of the supply lines -- and ask him whether he could help out.

When he heard that Lorist was willing to pay 800 gold Fordes for the transport of his escort soldiers and the 20 carriages, Regiment Captain Holson was more than willing to help out. He even ordered the supplies that had just been loaded onto the ships be moved back onto the shore. In total, around 10 boats were emptied for Lorist to use for the trip to Domesger City.

When Lorist asked Holson whether that would affect the transport of supplies to the frontlines, the captain replied without a care in the world, "No worries. It's extremely common for delays upwards of a few dozen days to occur and traveling to Domesger City and back only takes around 8. Additionally, we can also transport some supplies

from there to here, so nobody would complain about it."

When the captain heard Els complain that they weren't able to purchase any horses along the way, he laughed and told Lorist and Els that it was because they didn't have the right connections. He brought the two of them to the transportation convoy's camp. He quickly closed a deal with the person in charge of the convoy for the purchase of around 120 mounts for only 1000 gold Fordes. Even though they were not good war horses, they were more than fit for the task of pulling carriages.

Captain Holson's efforts were not in vain. He pocketed an additional 200 gold Fordes from the transaction. However, he would have to provide four more empty boats for the transportation of those horses.

Els asked him curiously, "How would you explain the disappearance of so many horses from the convoy to your superiors?"

Captain Holson laughed and said, "There are plenty of excuses we can use ranging from sickness, drowning, ill-fitting conditions, startled horses, and more. Any of these reasons would be enough to quell any suspicions people might have. The matter will be forgotten in a month. As for the lack of horses, they can just report it and ask for replacements. Naturally, that 1000 gold Fordes would have to be split up to quite a few people as well…"

Els contemplated what he heard solemnly. When he returned to their camp, he told Lorist, "Locke, I finally understand why you don't think that the Second Highness can unite the empire with only 300000 soldiers. Given the way his subordinates act, he wouldn't be able to do it even if he had twice the number of troops."

After another four days, Lorist and the rest arrived at Domesger City. Having paid the remaining 500 gold Fordes, Lorist parted with Captain Holson with a handshake and a face full of smiles. Soon after, he entered the city to go on a shopping spree. After another day spent resting, the group departed for Jillin Harbor. It would be only another day or two before they could to head out to sea.

In the evening hours, Jim, and two other guards who had been scouting, reported, "Milord, a dust cloud has built up behind us and it seemed like a regiment of troops are heading our way. There is an estimated 3000 soldiers and they will reach us in another ten minutes or so. Should we make way for them to pass?"

Lorist looked in the direction Jim mentioned. Not far from them he could see a dust cloud approaching.

Freiyar rushed over and said, "Milord, the troops are coming for us. Looking at how quickly the dust cloud built up, they must be engaging in a full-on charge. There isn't anyone apart from us on this path; there's no doubt that we are the targets of those soldiers."

Lorist hurriedly pointed at a small mound on one side of the main highway, and said, "Get the carriages up there first and build a defensive perimeter immediately!"

The mound wasn't that high. It was only about 30 meters tall, and dotted by a random assortment of trees. By the time Lorist and the rest got on top of the mound, the soldiers in the distance had arrived. Indeed, they had come for Lorist's troupe. Upon seeing Lorist and the rest heading up the mound, they slowed down and encircled it, seemingly intent on keeping Lorist and the rest up there.

Dulles used his sword to chop down a few of the trees, which was then carried away by a couple of the soldiers to be made into wooden barricades. Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Dulles asked Lorist -- who was also chopping trees beside him, "Milord, the soldiers beneath the mound are equipped with the Royal Family's Local Defense Force's equipment. Did the Second Highness send them here to hold us hostage?"

Lorist laughed bitterly as he shook his head, and said, "I am not too sure about it either. The Second Highness can be considered to be a formidable person and should not do something this irrational. I've already defeated a Blademaster right before his eyes, so he must be aware that cavalry troops like this wouldn't be able to stop me. Even if they managed to kill you guys, they'll still have a hard time getting their hands on me. And the moment I return to the family, I'll definitely mobilize my troops to avenge you. Should that happen, he'll have to forget about reuniting the empire entirely. It'll already be his good fortune just to be able to resist our assault. I don't understand what it is that made him take this move."

Freiyar and Josk approached and the former said, "Milord, we have surveyed the terrain of the mound. The slope that connects to the main road is the easiest to scale. We're currently stationing the carriages in rows in that direction to set up a defense line. After that, we'll install the barricades and dig some trenches. That should be enough to defend against the assault of the cavalry.

"Over there to the left is a cliff roughly 10 meters high. It'll be impossible for the cavalry or infantry to scale, so we don't have to station anyone there for now. On the right is an uneven slope which is difficult for cavalry to surmount but possible for infantry troops to traverse. I've already stationed around a company of 100 men there, so there shouldn't be a problem."

"Behind us is this small forest. We're currently felling the trees to clear up the landscape so we can aim and shoot. We'll use the logs to build a few defensive walls, as well as prevent the enemy from using the forest as cover to attack us. However, one bit of bad news is that there is no water source in the area, and the water supply we have remaining will only last us two days at most. If the enemy decides to attack with fire, we will definitely be smoked to death," Freiyar said in a serious tone.

Josk added, "Milord, I made a rough estimate just now and found that the enemy has around one regiment of cavalry. The regiment should be around 2500 strong. Apart from some who are stationed at the cliff at the left side of the mound, the remaining ones have formed a semicircle around the front of the mound with the intention of stranding us up here. I suspect that they are waiting for more reinforcements to arrive before they start their assault. I suggest that milord breach the encirclement first and leave us here to defend against the enemy. As long as milord is able to make it back to the dominion, then the enemy's plans will definitely fail."

Lorist shook his head and said, "Since I brought you guys here, I will definitely bring you back with me. I do not have the guts to return to the dominion alone. Els, when it gets dark, bring Jim along with you to the cliff off to the left. Capture one of them alive for some questioning."

"Yes, milord," Els replied.

Under the starlit night sky, a number of light sources could be seen illuminating the area around the mound. Both the Norton Family soldiers and the cavalry of the Royal Family's Local Defense Force had some bonfires lit to alert them of any sudden movements or assaults by the other.

It wasn't a hindrance to Jim and Els, however. They managed to sneak into the enemy's ranks when they weren't paying attention, and soon returned with a prisoner.

Els carved a thick wooden branch into a chopstick with his dagger in front of everyone else, and threatened the prisoner with a similar fate if he didn't start talking.

The frightened soldier quickly spat out everything he knew.

"What?! You said that you came on the orders of Count Aslan to keep us here? So, he'll be leading two regiments of infantry troops over and will arrive in another two days?"

The situation was now clear. Gold ranked knight, and general of the Local Defense Force, Count Aslan, the elder brother of Viscount Aslan, whom Lorist had ordered to be beheaded, had personally mobilized his troops to kill Lorist. It was fortunate that Lorist took a detour and traveled to Domesger City by boat, causing Count Aslan to head to the wrong location. Otherwise, Lorist would have encountered them three days earlier. A fight to the death would have been raging already.

Currently, the orders the regiment of cavalry troops had, was for them to hold Lorist and the rest in place until Count Aslan arrives with his two regiments, totaling around 5000 soldiers, before beginning their assault. Count Aslan had left the banquet early, so he wasn't aware of Lorist beating Blademaster Climonto. He believed that his three regiments -- totaling around 7500 troops -- would have no trouble preventing the escape of even a single soldier.

Lorist spat out the grass stalk in his mouth, and said, "Since he wants to play around, I'll make sure to give him a good time."

Even though the sky was still rather dark, dawn was just on the horizon. It signaled the beginning of yet another day.

The troops patrolling at the foot of the mound looked upwards and managed to see the blurry silhouettes of the Norton Family soldiers as well as their gleaming spearheads illuminated by the torches.

"Alright, let's head back. It's time for our shift change," said the squad leader.

Behind him, sounds of water sprinkling on the ground rang out. The squad leader didn't mind and merely commented, "Can't you dismount if you want to pee? Lazy ass…"

Following that, he caught a whiff of blood in the air. Noticing that something was amiss, he turned back immediately, only to see a blade entering his line of sight…

Everyone was shocked when they saw Lorist kill off the whole patrol troupe with only one strike. The enemy didn't even have a chance to cry out. Following that, Lorist

mounted one of the horses, and pulled his sword out of the body. He tossed the corpse to Jim and Els who were behind him. They laid the body down quietly and the three began their slaughter. The most shocking part of it was that the enemy wasn't aware of this attack at all. Not even a single one of them uttered a cry when they were killed. The speed, accuracy, and ferocity of Lorist's strikes caused the ones hiding in ambush to shudder.

That was the fourth patrol troupe, and they had gathered up to 80 war horses already.

"Alright, everyone. Mount up immediately. Those who still don't have a horse should continue to hide in ambush. We've already made preparations to kill our way into the enemy camp. Don't forget to light a fire. Freiyar will make his move when he sees the flames."

The cavalry regiment had set up five camps around the three sides of the mound. Each camp had around 500 soldiers. The patrol groups of 20 that circled the mound didn't expect that Lorist and the rest would slip down from the side of the cliff to begin their counterattack.

"Kill!" Lorist roared as he charged head-first into the first enemy camp. He was followed by Josk, Els, and the rest, who worked hard to carry out Lorist's plans. They set the fire, captured mounts, and killed the enemy.

Following the consecutive deaths of two Silver ranked knights at the spearpoint of Lorist's pike, the soldiers of the first camp completely crumbled. They ran with all their might towards the second camp with their equipment and hair all messed up. Lorist and the rest followed behind them and began their slaughter once more when they reached the second camp.

At that moment, the third to fifth camps were already alerted and began to react. A hundred and twenty cavalry could be seen charging towards the second camp to reinforce it. However, they didn't expect that halfway in the middle of their charge, sounds of killing would ring out behind them. Freiyar lead 400 Local Defense Brigade troops into the fifth camp. The cavalry troops that were not mounted were not able to defend themselves in the slightest, and the fifth camp crumbled almost right away.

By then, the second camp had already been breached. Lorist continued chasing the few hundred bare-footed soldiers towards the third camp. Freiyar, opposite him, was already succeeding in his assault on the fourth.

The sky soon brightened, and Freiyar rode to Lorist's side excitedly, and said, "Milord, it's our win! Victory! Milord, we breached five camps in one night and not a single enemy escaped. The surviving soldiers have all been captured. We also got most of their war horses."

"Are our casualties bad?"

"Around half of the Local Defense Brigade troops were incapacitated, with 147 of them dead and another 120 or so injured. The losses were suffered mainly during the final confrontation when the last of the cavalry managed to band together and launch a counterattack. After all, the Local Defense Brigade troops are only used to fighting defensively. Assaults like these are not their forte," Freiyar explained.

"Let's clear up the battlefield for now, we still have some work to do. Why don't we give Count Aslan a meeting gift?" Lorist said hatefully.

Chapter 234
Investigation

Twelve days later, Second Highness Auguslo brought a regiment of soldiers to that unnamed mound.

The corpse of the grandiosely dressed Count Aslan was laid before him. If one paid closer attention to it, one would realize that the head was separated from the rest of the body. The corpse had been left as it was for ten days; naturally it had begun to smell.

The Second Highness waved one hand repeatedly in front of his nose in a futile attempt to disperse the odor, before he said, "Alright. Carry it away."

Even though his voice was soft, the ones present at the scene understood the Second Highness's temperament well. They could tell that the Second Highness was at his boiling point. His rage was ready to explode at any moment.

Two guards lightly moved the corpse of Count Aslan and brought it out of the large tent.

"Marquis Reid, tell us the results of your investigation," instructed the Second Highness.

"Yes, Your Highness," said Marquis Reid. He stood up and stopped at the center of the tent with a large stack of beastskin documents in his arms.

Marquis Reid was one of the first to arrive at the scene. He was in charge of accommodating deserters, investigating the reasons for defeats, and burying the corpses of the dead.

He flipped open his documents, and began his report. "This time around, Count Aslan mobilized three regiments of troops, numbering 7500 soldiers in total, on this long-distance excursion of his own accord. He reported it as a long-distance training drill… In actuality, he had intended to catch up to Count Norton's troupe to avenge his little brother, Viscount Aslan.

"However, it ended in the most tragic manner possible: with Count Aslan's death. More than 1600 casualties were suffered by the cavalry regiment; 800 are dead, and another 600 are missing in action. There are also another 200 or so deserters from that battle who later returned to us. Additionally, they lost most of their mounts as well.

"The two infantry regiments with 5000 soldiers suffered around 1400 casualties, with another 2000 or so missing, and a further 1500 who fled the battlefield, and have mostly returned. It's worth noting that they were only faced with the 500 men brought along by Count Norton. The battle commanded by Count Aslan can be considered to be a tragic loss indeed."

Thump! The Second Highness threw his fist on the table and said, "7500 soldiers… Let's forget about the fact that Count Aslan acted on his own accord for now. They only faced an enemy of 500; they outnumbered their enemy 15 to 1! And yet, they still lost. Is that an indication of the incompetence of the Royal Family's Local Defense Force? How will I be able to reunite the empire with troops like these?! Is this really my army?! They're nothing but helpless sheep!"

The tent was completely quiet. Everyone within had their heads lowered while they listened to Second Highness Auguslo's complaints.

After venting his anger for a good while, he finally calmed down.

He said to Marquis Reid, "Please continue. Let others hear how in the world this battle was lost so that they may learn from this incident."

"Understood," Marquis Reid said as he flipped open another file, "According to my investigations, when Count Aslan heard that Count Norton would be leaving the imperial capital, he brought three regiments of troops to set up an ambush further ahead. But he didn't expect that Count Norton would suddenly change course and head to Dasanba Town to take a boat towards Domesger City."

"Based on the testimonies of the two company leaders from the cavalry regiment that had escaped, it is confirmed that the order Count Aslan gave them was to hold Count Norton's troupe back until the count himself caught up with the other two infantry regiments. Only after that would they launch the main attack.

"From a tactical perspective, Count Aslan's subordinates were rather serious and didn't have any intention of underestimating the enemy. However, Count Aslan feared

that he might alert Count Norton to his intentions, so he didn't send anyone to keep an eye on the latter's forces. It was a grave mistake that caused him to be unaware of Count Norton's detour, causing his efforts of mobilizing his three regiments to hide there in ambush to go to waste.

"When he realized that Count Norton had traveled by the river, there was already a distance between them that would take two days of travel to make up. Count Aslan was forced to order his cavalry regiment to go to obstruct them ahead of the rest of the troops. This is one of the more traditional military approaches."

"But Count Norton was incredibly alert. The moment he discovered the cavalry regiment, he ordered his troops to back up onto a mound nearby. We can still see the many defensive fortifications the Norton Family forces made over here. However, he didn't think that the cavalry regiment wouldn't attack him and instead set up camp beneath the mound since they were only sent there to stall him.

"According to the cavalrymen that fled the battlefield, they set up five camps. Each contained one company of 500 men. Apart from the side of the mound with a cliff, they set up camps all around it to semi-circular formation, and sent out smaller groups to patrol the perimeter to ensure that the Norton Family forces wouldn't launch a surprise attack at night.

"The cavalry regiment was correct to take those actions. But they didn't expect the Norton Family forces to use that unguarded cliff to descend and sneak into their campgrounds, take out their patrol troops, and launch their attack during dawn on the two flanking camps before eliminating those in the middle. The resting soldiers were caught completely off-guard and couldn't resist at all. In the end, the cavalry regiment, without any mounts, eventually crumbled.

"After defeating the cavalry regiment, Count Norton did not let up just there. He used the time when Count Aslan was traveling to the mound with his infantry regiments to head to Jillin Harbor and the nearby dominions to purchase up to a thousand cows and mules to deal with the infantry regiments when they arrive."

Marquis Reid then took out a few more documents. "These are the testimonies of one regiment captain and a few other company leaders. They said that by the time they arrived here, it was already the afternoon. They did meet a few of the deserters and already knew about the defeat of the cavalry regiment. At that time, Count Aslan was in a rather sour mood. He ordered the deserters to be given 50 canes because he

thought that they were the main reason for the defeat of the regiment."

"At that time, everyone including Count Aslan believed that the Norton Family forces had already escaped. They set up camp without paying much attention to their defenses, only to suffer an ambush by Count Norton in the middle of the night.

"This time around, Count Norton had the cows and mules they purchased doused with oil and covered their eyes up with grass. Additionally, he had short swords and daggers fastened to the bodies of the animals before setting them aflame and sending them into Count Aslan's camp. The infantry troops that were stunned awake were shocked to be greeted with the sight of flaming bulls and mules running wildly towards them. They instantly crumbled.

"Initially, Count Aslan had wanted to gather what remained of his troops to form a defensive line, but Count Norton didn't give him any chance to do so during the assault. One of the escaped soldiers mentioned seeing Count Norton himself rush over and behead Count Aslan after trading only two blows. After which the soldiers Count Aslan had gathered either kneeled and begged for mercy, or ran for their lives.

"I have to say, I am impressed. Count Norton's use of those flaming animals to crush a camp 5000 soldiers is a stroke of genius. He managed to gain victory with the smallest possible casualties. After that, he brought the head of Count Aslan with him but didn't enter Jillin Harbor. Instead, he got onto a ship at the coast around ten kilometers away from Jillin Harbor. He left Count Aslan's head on a branch somewhere near the beach.

"When the First Reserve Legion, stationed at Jillin Harbor, received news of the battle and sent out a regiment of troops to the coast, it was already too late. Count Norton and his men had long set sail. According to some of the tracks left at the coast, I believe the missing soldiers from the cavalry and infantry regiments must've become captives of Count Norton, and are being transported to Silowas Island."

After finishing his report, Marquis Reid placed the stack of documents in his hands on the table right in front of the Second Highness, and headed back to his seat.

The Second Highness proceeded to inspect the documents. Marquis Reid's work was very thorough; not only did he get the testimonies of the soldiers who had been fortunate enough to survive, he even drew a map that detailed the terrain of the mound and marked locations where the Norton Family forces and the cavalry regiment were stationed, as well as the route the Nortons took to breach the five

camps of the cavalry regiment. Count Aslan's and his two infantry regiments' route was also shown on it. The map allowed one to grasp the situation clearly at a glance.

Having seen the documents, the Second Highness stayed silent and tapped the table with his finger repeatedly.

Everyone within the tent felt as if their hearts were beating according to the rhythm of the Second Highness's finger tapping. They all understood that the tapping meant that the Second Highness had already made his decision and no one would be able to change his mind.

The tapping sound sped up gradually, until it suddenly stopped. The tent was permeated by a still air of quietness. The others waited with puffed out chests and solemn expressions.

"Davey Copperfield!"

"Yes, Your Highness… What is your will?" asked the handsome man that appeared before Second Highness Auguslo.

As the vice captain of the Second Highness's personal guard, he would follow his lord along every time there was an excursion.

"Bring one group of the guards back to the imperial capital and pass on my orders. Have the Royal Local Defense Force's First Legion send out a regiment of troops with you as the commander to thrash the Aslan Family dominion and completely exterminate their family. The men of the Aslan Family shall be sent to join the suicide corps and given a chance to atone for their crimes with their achievements. The women shall serve as prostitutes for the soldiers at the military brothels," announced the Second Highness coldly.

The people within the tent broke into chatter. They were all shocked at the Second Highness's ruthless decision, despite the fact that Count Aslan used to be one of the most-favored generals of the Second Highness.

"Your Highness…"

Quite a number of nobles stood up and begged for mercy on the Aslan Family's behalf.

"Sit back down!" roared Second Highness Auguslo all of a sudden, "Viscount Aslan had

committed serious transgressions. He was a tax collection officer I had appointed, and yet he kept me in the dark about his corruption. He had been executed before my eyes, so I pitied him and decided to put the matter behind me. Who would have known that a general like his elder brother, Count Aslan, would mobilize the troops to exact his personal vengeance and cause us to suffer so many casualties… Is he treating my soldiers as those of his family?!"

"These actions are the reason why I have stripped Count Aslan of his title and taken back his county. I will not allow something like this to happen again. Do you guys have anything to say about it?" asked the Second Highness domineeringly, "If he had won that battle, I probably wouldn't have held him responsible. But look at this… What kind of battle is this? 7500 men, all from my main army, defeated by a mere 500 of the Norton Family! This is the epitome of incompetence and idiocy! Perhaps I should even thank Count Norton! He was the one who spared me the future failures of Count Aslan in the war to reunite the empire…"

"Davey, I have given you the role of eradicating the Aslan Family because the kingdom's treasury is in a financial pinch and is unable to provide funds to replenish the Second Legion that Count Aslan has irrevocably crippled. Go carry out your mission. After that, you will take Count Aslan's place as commander of the legion and reorganize it. I will send you more men and horses from the reserve legion to make up for the ones we lost.

"Understood, Your Highness! Please be assured that I will definitely not let you down," said Davey before he bowed and left in high spirits.

"The rest of you can leave. Glacia, please stay back for a bit," said the Second Highness, waving his hand.

He patted on his forehead as if it was hurting really badly.

Once everyone had left the tent, only Lorist's elder cousin, Gold ranked knight Glacia, and Second Highness Auguslo remained. When Lorist arrived at the imperial capital, Glacia, who had been made the captain of the newly-formed knight brigade, had been training with her knights outside the city, so she had missed her chance to meet Lorist.

Glacia walked to the back of the Second Highness and began to massage his temples.

"Aug… You're worn out. You should take better care of your own body, you know…" she

said.

As the Second Highness's lover, Glacia understood what he was worried about the most. However, it wasn't appropriate for her to say much given her status as one of the Norton Family. On the one hand, she had her cousin, Lorist, on the other, she had her lover, Auguslo. Her unique position put her in quite an awkward situation.

The Second Highness held the hand that was massaging him, and pulled the woman into his arms.

"Glacia, head to Silowas Island on my behalf and meet your cousin, Locke. Help me explain to him that this incident was definitely not what I had intended, and that Count Aslan acted on his own accord. Also, tell him about the judgment I passed on the Aslan Family. I hope that will be enough to quell his anger."

"My father's health is already at its limits, and when he passes away, we will have to begin the effort to reunite the empire. I hope that Locke can come over to give me a hand in that. After all, he's quite adept at coming up with unexpected tactics. I've realized that no one can compete with him in that regard. If he's not willing to do so, at least get him to promise that he will keep Duke Fisablen's army in check so that the old guy doesn't leave the grasslands to cause me trouble.

"Also, I'm sure you've heard Marquis Reid mention that it's possible that the missing soldiers have been captured by Locke and transported to Silowas Island. Help me see if we can get those soldiers back. Given the state of the treasury, we won't be able to afford their ransom, so I can only make it up to him after reuniting the empire…

Glacia stretched out her hand, and stroked the slender face of her lover.

"Alright, I will make my way to Jillin Harbor and get a ride to Silowas Island as soon as possible. I will do my best to do your bidding, so make sure you watch out for your own health as well," she said.

……

The decision to use the flaming animals to attack the camp was a result of a flash of inspiration from Lorist. Back then, he recalled one of the stories his grandfather from his past life told him. It was about the 'Fire Cattle Columns' tactic devised by Tian Dan during the Warring States period[1].

It was a shame that the cows and mules Lorist purchased for a high price didn't even amount to a thousand. It forced Lorist to pick out 500 war horses that were in better condition than the rest, and have the other horses made into fodder alongside the cows and mules.

Fortunately, when he arrived at the mound, Count Aslan believed that Lorist had escaped with his troops. It meant that he didn't pay attention to his camp's defenses and only set them up half-heartedly. As a result of the shabbiness of the defenses, the 2000 plus flaming animals simply crashed through in a frenzied stampede. They crippled the two 2500 soldier regiments almost instantly.

Lorist brought only 200 men with him to follow the animals into the camp. Apart from Lorist's killing of Count Aslan, the other soldiers didn't have to fight at all. Most of the two infantry regiments' casualties were caused by the stampeding animals. There were even five or six of the Norton family's soldiers who got injured when they tried to help the enemy soldiers out.

After obtaining victory, Lorist sent Els and the rest to book a few ships in advance at Jillin Harbor and have them stop at the coast around 10 kilometers away from the harbor. He would load up the 2000 prisoners there. Before leaving, Lorist realized that the head of Count Aslan was still hung at the front of his mount. He felt it wouldn't be of any use even if he took it with him, so he casually found a tree branch and impaled the head on it. It was left there just like that.

Upon returning to Silowas Island, Lorist found a plot of land there to build a graveyard for the soldiers who had bravely sacrificed themselves, and arranged for a burial ceremony to be carried out. Afterwards, he would have to wait for the ships from the Northlands to transport huge amounts of supplies over.

During the time Lorist was at the imperial capital, Charade -- with the aid of Old Hugo and Hector -- had already completed most of the development plan for Silowas Island. All that was left was for Lorist to approve the plan.

However, when Charade heard about Lorist's ploy involving the flaming animals, he was so pissed that he nagged Lorist about it non-stop. 2000 cows, mules and horses cost roughly 20000 gold Fordes. Charade criticized Lorist for acting like a spoiled rich kid by using 20000 gold Fordes to eliminate only 5000 enemies. It truly was wasteful beyond measure. He even mentioned that Lorist should've bribed the enemy soldiers with 4 gold Fordes per person. That way, they would no doubt tie Count Aslan up

themselves and bring him before Lorist.

As Lorist was bickering with Charade about the matter while going through the development plan together, Jim entered the room and reported, "Milord, your elder cousin, Glacia, is here…"

Chapter 235
Discussion

Lorist did not currently live at Whitebird Town. According to the development plan Charade drafted, the whole of Whitebird Town would be shifted 1000 or so meters to the east. The original location of the town would be further developed into a proper port,true defensive walls. At the moment, Whitebird Town was far too close to the jetty for the Norton family's plans. They wanted to turn the place into a central maritime transfer point. It would, however, require that the port be expanded. The temporary wooden jetty also had to be exchanged for a stone one.

Charade's plan involved building up the residential and business areas of the new Whitebird Town, before moving the townsfolk over, after which the old houses would be demolished. These steps had to be completed before the expansion of the port could proceed, including the construction of the walls and defensive fortifications. As a result, Lorist could only stay within a temporary log house located at an ad-hoc army camp near the town.

"Agh… That hurts! Let go, Glacia! I'm Count Norton, the leader of the family! I order you to let go!"

The moment Lorist returned to his room, his ear was given a harsh pinch by Glacia.

"I'm currently educating you as your cousin. That has nothing to do with your status as count or family leader," Glacia said.

How does that even work?!

Lorist looked around, stunned, before he shouted, "You guys, scram! What are you looking at? Don't tell me you've never seen an elder sister teaching her little brother a lesson? Howard, you stay. Make my beloved cousin a pot of macks."

After that, Els, Josk and the rest left the house, chuckling. It was not everyday that they got to see Lorist get the short end of the stick. The matter would almost undoubtedly be spread around the grapevine of the soldiers who had nothing better to do in their free time.

"That's enough, sis. It's about time you let go. Sheesh, you didn't give me any face at all even though I was in front of my knights… I'm already an adult, and you're also not the snotty blonde lass from before. Act your age," Lorist said.

"You were the snotty brat, not me. Let's not forget that you were quite the crybaby too. I still remember that you would cry out almost instantly whenever I pinched you like that," Glacia said as she loosened her pinch on Lorist's ear, "Even though the family dominion was within the desolate Northlands, the days when we lived at the bastide was fun. I still remember that I would visit the family dominion every summer with my parents. My mom definitely wasn't too keen on those trips. The distance we had to travel was too great. Each trip would take us at least two months…"

"Well, it's definitely much better right now; we've built a port at the family dominion. It'll only take around ten days for us to travel from there to Silowas Island," Lorist said.

"Tell me, Locke… What have you done after you took the position of family leader? What changes have there been in the dominion?" Glacia asked.

Lorist began to describe the occurrences and changes within the family dominion of the past few years, such as the new family mausoleum at Whitedeer Mound, the resistance the family put up against the magical beast wave, the construction of Firmrock Castle, the development of the Felicitas and Salus settlements, the defeat of the Second Prince, as well as the alliance formed between the Nortons and the other three great families within the Northlands.

Glacia looked a little down as she muttered, "I really want to go back to the dominion to take a look… A dozen of years have passed just like that…"

"The family will always welcome you, Glacia. Oh, I almost forgot about the main issue. Tell me frankly, is the Second Highness going to deal with the Norton family next?" Lorist asked as he poured a cup of macks and handed it to Glacia.

Glacia glanced at Lorist from the corner of her eyes and said, "Why, aren't you a bold one… The moment I returned to the imperial capital, I heard of your heroic exploits… From beheading Viscount Aslan to defeating Blademaster Climonto at the banquet His Highness had organized for your sake… You truly didn't even bother to consider his standing, did you? Had it not been for the fact that you brought the Second Prince before him, greatly contributing to the kingdom, His Highness would've turned on you right away.

"ANd before I'd even had enough time to digest what I heard, I heard about your defeat of 7500 elite soldier from the Royal family's Local defense Force. And that with only 500 family soldier no less! You even managed to kill Count Aslan, and left his head impaled on a branch at the coast as a show of might to us. You're really over the top… I already don't know what I should say to you, my little cousin. You're too different a person from what you used to be in your childhood…"

Lorist snickered before he said humbly, "People always change. That aside, I'm no way as mighty as you have praised me to be…"

Glacia stretched out her hand to pinch Lorist again. "Which one of my statements did you mistake for praise? I only know that you're becoming wilder and wilder. Locke, the way you handled this matter was too audacious. It will easily put our family at the center of the storm. The other nobles will start to see us as a threat…"

"Glacia, it's fine. You don't have to worry. The family is strong enough now, so we don't have to fear anyone," Lorist interjected.

Glacia breathed a long sigh and said, "Locke, since you're so confident about it, there isn't much that I can say. His Highness did not mean to blame you for this matter. He told me to notify you about how he dealt with the Aslan family as well as his hopes that you will give him a hand by helping him to strategize during the unification war."

After hearing Glacia explain the actions Second Highness Auguslo took against the Aslan family, Lorist gasped.

"Isn't that a little too harsh? The Aslan family will never have a chance to rebuild themselves ever again. No, wait… Glacia, why do I have a feeling that the true purpose the Second Highness eliminated the Aslan family was to take their wealth for his own use?"

Glacia nodded helplessly when she heard that.

"No way… Are the kingdom's finances that bad? Then why is the Second Highness so hell-bent on reuniting the empire? Can't he focus on ruling the Andinaq Kingdom properly first? He should settle the commoners down and strengthen the kingdom before trying unification again." Lorist said, expressing his shock and confusion of the Second Highness's intentions.

"Glacia, I really don't understand why he's in such a rush to reunite the empire. Having

300000 soldiers under his command was already a big enough mistake. There is no way that the six provinces of the kingdom can afford to sustain that many soldiers. I believe that the Second Highness should've emptied the savings of the royal family on those troops… And the costs will only rise even further when the war starts. How will the Second Highness deal with the logistics issues, as well as the pension and reimbursement for the dead soldiers?"

Seeing Glacia shrug, Lorist widened his eyes in realization, "No way, is he counting on raiding the territories he conquers for resupplication?"

Glacia nodded helplessly once again and said, "Locke, I know all this sounds ridiculous to you. But the kingdom truly has no better option to pick. What would you think if I told you that in actuality, the kingdom cannot even sustain one legion of soldiers?"

Lorist shook his head and said, "Impossible. There are six provinces within the kingdom. How is it possible for the kingdom to not be able to sustain even one legion of troops?"

Glacia said with a solemn expression, "It's like this… There hasn't been any trade between the Andinaq Kingdom and other territories since its founding almost a decade ago. As the nation that bears the legitimate legacy of the Krissen Imperial family, the kingdom has been put under embargos, both publicly and secretly, by the Forde Trade Union. The products we managed to sell using our smuggling channels would also have their prices forcefully lowered greatly, and smuggled imports of the kingdom cost more than ten times the market price.

"Without trade, there is naturally no profit. The tax the kingdom collects is also incredibly limited, with most of it being paid in goods rather than gold. Also, at the Great Andalou Plains where the kingdom is located, even though it used to be the trading center of the empire, a vagabond crisis has emerged after the civil war. Everyone there lives in extreme poverty now. It was only after our family convoy brought those vagabonds away, and cleared out the nobles of the original three provinces of the kingdom five years back, that the Second Highness was able to stabilize the kingdom.

"After that, he emerged victorious from the First Prince's assault and forced him to hand two provinces over to the kingdom, as well as Yungechandler Province from the Madras Duchy. Even though the kingdom now controls six provinces, it's completely drained of resource. The past few years could be considered rather peaceful, but the

tax we collected was only in the form of food. What the kingdom actually needs are war horses and iron ores.

"Not one of the seven iron mines of the empire falls within the borders of our kingdom. The Redlis Kingdom and the Iblia Kingdom each have two of those mines. Of the four great duchies, the Farkel Duchy owns two while the Handra Duchy owns only one. With the embargoes in place, we aren't able to trade our own produce for the other resources we need. Agricultural development requires huge numbers of metal farming tools. The kingdom has been forced to make do with wooden ones instead, despite the greatly inferior productivity.

"It's not that the Second Highness doesn't want to rule the kingdom properly; as things stand now, he just can't. During the past few years, the First Prince, king of the Redlis Kingdom, drove up to 400000 vagabonds over our borders. Coupled with the trouble-making deserters and the armed vagabonds, the Second Highness had no choice but to recruit them into the army to ensure the peace of the kingdom.

"Take, for instance, the Fiercegale Legion. Even though it was considered one of the three main armies of the empire, they had begun to become more independent after being outside of the Second Highness's jurisdiction for such a long time. The Second Highness was forced to disband them and absorb those troops into the Local Defense Force to prevent unforeseen changes from surfacing. Unfortunately the move was misunderstood by others.

"As the reorganizations progressed, the number of soldiers only grew. If the army is disbanded and the troops are let loose within the kingdom, there would be no doubt that it would fall into a state of chaos and confusion. We must give the 300000-strong army a goal, something to fight for. That is why the Second Highness brought out the unification war: to raise the morale of the troops.

"In actuality, he is only targeting the Redlis Kingdom this time around. As long as the kingdom can absorb the Redlis Kingdom, then many of our problems would be solved in one go. Not only would the Andinaq Kingdom be able to obtain some much-needed resource, the Second Highness would also be able to take the first steps to building up our own market and economy so that we would no longer be affected by the embargoes of the other powers. As for the other duchies, the Second Highness thinks that there's no need to mobilize the troops against them. He believes that the dukes will submit themselves to him once the Andinaq Kingdom gains a stable footing. Once they do, the reunification of the empire will truly be something that is within our

means to achieve.

"Locke, the First Prince is undoubtedly the Norton family's enemy. Had it not been for his rebellion, my father, our Third Uncle and the First Young Master wouldn't have died. The deaths of our loved ones are inextricably linked to the First Prince. The Second Highness intends to make the First Prince pay, and I think you should give him a hand with that. He really admires you and even said that your tactics and strategies somehow always manage to catch the enemy off-guard and bring you victory. It was like that five years ago, and it still is today," Glacia said, giving Lorist a pleading gaze.

Shaking his head, Lorist said, "Glacia, since His Highness has already finished reorganizing his 300000-strong army, why didn't he launch the attack immediately? Instead, he's put the matter aside for almost a whole year now. This delay has allowed the Madras Duchy and the Redlis Kingdom to make more than enough preparations at their respective borders to defend against him. Tell me, why is that so?"

"Sigh… Isn't it because the Third Prince hasn't passed on yet? Even though he's been in a critical condition a number of times, he still manages to live on. If the Second Highness engages in his expedition now, given how far from the imperial capital he would have to go, he would inevitably lose his control and influence. If the Third Prince suddenly regains consciousness and does something against the Second Highness's favor, it would be too late and he will lose everything…"

"Haha," Lorist laughed. "Even though you're in the loop, an outsider like me is able to have a clearer view of the situation. Glacia, you trust the Second Highness way too much. That's why you believed the excuse he gave you. It would cost at least fifty to sixty thousand gold Fordes each year to sustain a 300000-strong army. With a huge spending like that, why can't he just form a standing army? If we take into account the cost to supply 300000 soldiers with weapons and equipment, the Second Highness has invested at least 1 million gold Fordes already. It's too big of a waste to spend that amount of money on military forces alone. With that kind of money, what's stopping him from developing the kingdom properly?"

"But, I've already seen the tax records of the kingdom. Each year, we collect less than 40000 in trade taxes, while sustaining an elite standard legion would cost more than 100000 gold Fordes," argued Glacia stubbornly.

"Glacia, if the Great Andalou Plains was only good for agriculture, there is no way that the imperial capital would be situated there. If you read more, you'll find that the Great

Andalou Plains used to produce a good amount of gold nuggets. It's even known as the 'home of gold nuggets'. It's able to produce tens of thousands of gold Fordes' worth of them each year. In actuality, the embargo is nothing but a joke. Merchants crave profits, and if an opportunity is profitable enough, they would definitely carry it out even if it would cost them their heads. The kingdom would definitely be able to get the resources it wants if it tried. If it really couldn't, how is the Second Highness able to supply the 300000 troops with weapons and equipment?

"I believe that His Highness is actually just going with the flow and utilizing the advantageous standing he has now. He's always been incredibly ambitious. The reunification of the empire is his ultimate goal. Just compare our family dominion with the kingdom. Which do you think has it worse? Despite that, our family put our priorities on development, and within a mere five years, the dominion changed radically. Our family might increased to the point that we were able to defeat the Second Princes 100000-strong army in one fell swoop. That's why development is the only correct path to grow one's might. Having a strong force is but a means to an end," Lorist said.

"Forget it, Locke. I don't want to argue with you about this. His Highness doesn't intend to force you into this either. If you don't want to help him, then at the very least, the family forces at the Northlands should pay attention to Duke Fisablen. He will definitely pose a threat in the unification war, so you can do at least that, right?" Glacia said, switching to plan B.

After circling around in the room for a few moments, Lorist agreed to the request begrudgingly.

"Another thing. Hand the soldiers of the Royal family's Local Defense Force back to me. You better not have any plans for them," Glacia said.

"Fine, you can bring them away," Lorist said reluctantly. "But I will need you to compensate for that. You have to pay at least 100000 gold Fordes for their ransom."

Glacia glared at Lorist and said, "Dream on. I don't even have a copper coin for you."

"Then I won't be able to explain this to my knights. I originally planned to use them as laborers after bringing them here to Silowas Island," Lorist said as he shrugged.

Enraged, Glacia grumbled, "They are the soldiers we've taken so long to train… And

you plan to use them as mere laborers?! No way. I will be bringing them back. If you need manpower, go find some yourself. There are tons of vagabonds at the southern and eastern provinces."

"Will the Second Highness agree to that?"

"Of course. In fact, he would be more than glad for you to take the vagabonds away."

"How about this, Glacia… I will agree to let you bring the prisoners away, but you must promise me that our recruitment of the vagabonds will not be obstructed in any way. Also, ask the Second Highness to let us recruit some administrative officials from the imperial capital. The family dominion needs more talent," Lorist said.

"Deal!" Glacia agreed without the slightest hesitation.

Glacia was in a rush to return despite having spent only one night on the island. However, there were only three small ships at Silowas Island, so transporting the 2000 or so prisoners back would take quite a few trips.

After sending Glacia off, Lorist said to Charade, "I will have to make a trip to Morante City."

"For what?"

"I want to buy boats and order a huge amount of food," Lorist replied.

Chapter 236
Heading to Morante City

"How many ships do you intend to buy?" Charade asked.

Since the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay could only produce seven ships a year, they had no choice but to buy more ships to meet their needs. Currently, there were two whaling boats and one three-masted sail-powered warship -- which had Lorist designed -- under construction. Lorist wanted a dedicating whaling and fishing fleet that could provide seafood products for the family. The fleet would consist of around seven whaling ships. The Northlands' coasts had yet to be developed, so the ocean there was still rich with all sorts of resources. It was easily one of the most important locations for the family.

In addition to the whaling and fishing fleet, the family would also require a strong armada to keep the coast safe. There hadn't been any sightings of pirates or other potential threats, but the family dominion had to be reinforced to keep it safe. Lorist planned to test the three-masted warship's range and offensive capabilities once it was completed. He planned to build a further five warships over the following three years. He wanted to use this small fleet to police the coastal area and keep it safe for further development and transportation.

This meant that the shipyard's schedule was already full. The construction of another shipyard at Silowas Island was planned, but it would only be capable of building smaller fishing and transportation vessels. At best it would be able to do maintenance and repair work on the larger family ships. It would only be finished in two years, anyway.

Lorist had obtained six whips during his initial excursion to Silowas Island. Most of the ships had belonged to the youths of the noble families that had occupied Seaview Manor. One of the ships had belonged to Viscount Aslan. All of them had been taken by Lorist as his spoils of battle. The two smaller vessels would be used as ferries from Silowas Island to Jillin Harbor. The four survey ships and two whaling ships would form a small convoy to ship cargo from Silowas Island to Bullhorn Harbor.

Since the development of Silwoas Island required huge amounts of support from the

main family dominion, there was a need for a large maritime convoy. Given that the family only had one shipyard, at Bullhorn Harbor, Lorist could only purchase more transportation vessels. Given the prevalence of shipyards at Hidegold Bay near Morante City, they would definitely be able to get some ships there.

"I'm not too sure myself. I'll decide once I've checked out the prices over there," Lorist replied.

"This will definitely be a huge expenditure… The family administors won't be too happy about it!" Charade exclaimed.

As the former chief supervisor of the Norton family, Charade was well aware of the financial situation of the family and the status of its administration. Thanks to the raids and skirmishes conducted by the convoy during their travels, in addition to the complete sweeping of the duke's dominion, the family's finances had once peaked at more than 4 million gold Fordes. It was a staggering figure that could even rival the treasury of a kingdom. It was enough to allow Lorist and his knights to abandon their duties, and bask in hedonistic pleasures, for more than 200 years.

However, Lorist had spent much of that sum on the development of the dominion and the improvement of the family's military strength. The elimination of the magical beast wave, the settling of the vagabonds, and the development of the Felicitas and Salus settlements cost up to 1 million gold Fordes. In addition to that, the development of Blackmud Marsh was estimated to cost the family another million. There was also the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay, the refinery at Bladedge Mountains, the ballista workshop, and the military arms production plant. Together, they easily cost over 500000 gold Fordes.

As for the development of Silowas Island, after some discussion, Lorist approved the plan and allocated up to 800000 gold Fordes to Charade. Lorist's intention to purchase more ships would also cost him quite a lot. One ship would easily cost up to 5000 gold Fordes. The family would be left with only 500000 gold Fordes, 300000 of which would be spent on the military and administration. For that, Charade grew incredibly worried.

"There's no need to worry about our finances," Lorist consoled with a smile. "Right now, the development of the Felicitas and Salus settlement is nearing its end. Based on the estimated amount of tax we will collect this year, the family would be able to pay off our military and administrative costs and still have some left over. The factories

that were started not long ago are also starting to turn a profit, with the family gaining a few thousand gold Fordes from that alone in the previous year. It's estimated that the figure will grow up to 20000 gold Fordes this year. It will greatly alleviate the family's burden.

"In terms of investment, the area of Blackmud Marsh near our family dominion is already within our control. What we will have to focus on later is the construction of the levee along the river and the port city, the cost of which has already been accounted for during the planning stages. As for the workshops we have at Bladedge Mountains, the family has already profited quite a bit from them, and they don't cost much to maintain. They only need around 30000 gold Fordes each year for research and development.

"Our investment in the salt merchant committee with the other three families of the Northlands also brings us tens of thousands of gold Fordes annually. The military investments the family made during the recent years also only went into the formation of our own Local Defense Brigade and Navy Marine Brigade. The rest of our forces are fully-equipped already. We only have to pay their salaries. On that front, the military costs of the family will decrease by at least 100000 gold Fordes. I predict that the earnings from the two settlements alone will be enough to cover our military and administrative costs in the future."

"That's impossible," Charade said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Even if we deduct 100000 from the cost, the expenditure on our military and administration costs at least 200000 gold Fordes. The family dominion's income won't even come close."

Lorist laughed out and said, "How is it impossible? The citizens on Silowas Island alone number more than 12000, and they were able to pay 5000 gold Fordes per year during the past few years when the tax rate was 50 percent. Almost every one of them paid half a gold Forde as tax. Now consider the settlements in our dominion which have a combined population of more than 800000. If each person paid a quarter of a gold Forde as tax, it would easily add up to 200000. Not to mention that we will get even more the year after that.

"Also, it's not like we're spending our money without getting anything back. Even though the purchase of ships at Morante City will cost a huge sum, as long as we are able to sell off the furs we've collected over the years from exterminating the magical beasts there, there's no doubt that we'll be able to gain another million gold Fordes in profit. We also have some smoked magical beast jerky and whale meat, both of which

are hot-selling products. It won't take long for us to get the money we spent back."

"Oh, why did I forget that we can engage in trade?" Charade said, smacking his forehead with his palm, "Even so, Locke, your release of the captured Local Defense Force troops will cause our hands to be tied when it comes to developing the island. We will definitely require a lot of manpower. Are we really going to recruit vagabonds? What if the Second Highness doesn't agree?"

"He should be happy to let us do so. Glacia herself said that the Second Highness is also troubled by the vagabonds. He has to spend lots of food to keep them fed every month. Since our recruitment of the vagabonds will relieve him of that burden, there's no way he will stop us from doing so. In another two days, Glacia will come over with a proper permit, so don't worry," Lorist said after giving it some thought.

"According to our estimations, if we want to complete the initial development of Silowas Island within two years, it will require more than 30000 able-bodied workers. So far, we have to work on the move of Whitebird Town, the expansion of the port, the construction of the walls and defensive fortifications, the renovations of Seaview Manor, the reconstruction and agricultural development of the seven villages, the construction of the citadel for the Third Local Defense Brigade, and the construction of the levees along the coast will require an immense amount of manpower…" Charade said.

After shaking his head, he continued, "The development of Silowas Island is too big an investment. According to our vagabond recruiting principles, we will have to take in the family members of the laborers as well. Bringing the whole family over will only increase the expenditure of money and food on our part. Locke, you will have to buy enough food during your trip to Morante City as well. Soon, the produce of the island will no longer be able to sustain the people here…"

Lorist thought for a while, before he said, "I forgot to ask Glacia the last time about something. I heard her mention that the harvests of the Andinaq Kingdom are rather good during the past few years. As most of the taxes had been paid in food and other local produce, the Second Highness has a huge amount of it. I will see if I can buy some from him. I'm sure he'll be glad to oblige us. Even with that, we will still require a lot more food, as much as possible."

"Why's that so?" Charade asked.

"It's simple. Right now, the Second Highness is just waiting for the Third Prince to pass away. According to Glacia, it seems that the Third Prince will not live for another three months. The moment he dies, the Second Highness will launch the unification war. If something unforeseen happens, it will greatly destabilize the Andinaq Kingdom. If the war continues for a long time, I'm afraid that it'll be a repeat of the civil war of the Krissen Empire. The kingdom's subjects will be unable to farm in peace. When that happens, our stockpiles can be used to feed the refugees."

"Do you really hold the Second Highness in such low regard? If you ask me, with 300000 soldiers, even if he can't reunite the empire, it should still be enough for him to sweep over half of it. People's opinion of the Second Highness will change and his reputation will soar. There won't be anyone capable of resisting his assault," Charade said.

He couldn't understand why Lorist belittled the Second Highness so much.

"I don't know how to put it into words… It's more like my intuition is telling me that he will not be able to succeed. I'm not too sure why I feel like this myself. Whatever. Let's not talk about these matters anymore. If the Second Highness agrees to let us recruit talent at the imperial capital as well as some vagabond workers, who will you delegate this task to?" Lorist asked.

"There will be a ship arriving from the family dominion soon, and Supervisors Kedan and Hansk will be on board. I plan to have Supervisor Hansk stay on the island to help me out and send Kedan along with Hector to the imperial capital. They will be able to handle it with Glacia and Karitoke's help. As for the recruitment of vagabonds, perhaps I may go to the eastern and southern provinces for a look myself," Charade said.

"Is that so… Then I will have the 500 guards that are on the way report to Jim. They'll take care of your safety. I will travel on the Flying Fish of Dawn with Josk, Els and Dulles, as well as ten guards, to Morante City. The matters on Silowas Island will be left in your charge.

"Also, you should talk with the Second Highness about the food purchase. Grandmaster Sid's eldest son will also be coming over to survey Silowas Island for mineral resources. It's already the 11th month, so don't let him travel too deep into the mountains, lest any dangers befall him. Make sure he stays put throughout the winter, and only allow him to begin surveying with some guards next year after winter."

As Lorist patted on Charade's shoulder, he suddenly recalled something, "Ah, don't forget to write your father a letter. I will bring it to him."

"For what?" Charade asked.

"To order glass, of course. Isn't your father the distributor of glass? If we purchase them in bulk from him and transport them back to the dominion by sea, that would save us lots in shiping costs. You should know that a sheet of green glass that sells for a few coppers in Morante City will cost one large silver in the Northlands. Right now, many of the people within our dominion are still using wood for windows. I've decided that the first thing we will import after the formation of the trading fleet, will be glass," Lorist explained convincingly.

Charade laughed and said, "Alright, I will give the letter to you tonight. When are you leaving?"

"Perhaps in another two days. At any rate, I will still have to wait for the ships to arrive here at Silowas Island first. They will be bringing over 500000 gold Fordes and some sample magical beast furs during this trip. I will take 100000 gold Fordes with me to purchase the ships and other stuff. The rest will be left here for you," Lorist said.

……

Three days later, the Flying Fish of Dawn spread its sails and headed for the distant south.

On the way there, it encountered many other ships of various sizes, ranging from fishing boats to some smaller merchant vessels.

According to Captain Wilson, the former Krissen Empire didn't prioritise the sea, nor did they form any sort of proper fleet, mainly because the coastlines along the north weren't suited for port construction. Jillin Harbor was already the northernmost port of the empire, and it couldn't support the docking of larger warships or merchant vessels. The coast was just too shallow. It didn't help that the other harbors within the territory of the empire were owned wholly by the dominion lords, who relied on them to increase their own personal wealth.

Lorist recalled Tim, whom he had met a few years back during the northbound journey. He wondered how the man of illegitimate birth, whom he had made into Viscount Tebri, was doing. But Lorist remembered that Charade mentioned that they

had managed to get the Peterson Merchant Guild to cooperate with Viscount Tebri before leaving with the convoy, and even helped them build a garrison regiment. Lorist felt that Tim should be doing quite well and realized that he could also ask him about some news on the Peterson Merchant Guild. Lorist would definitely require the assistance of the Peterson Merchant Guild on this excursion of his to Morante City.

"Head to the dominion of Viscount Tebri," Lorist instructed.

A week later, the Flying Fish of Dawn appeared near the coasts of Viscount Tebri's dominion. Dulles and Els had been there a number of times with Charade. They recognized the port of the dominion quickly and even saw the castle in the distance on a hill that flew the flag of the Tebri Family.

Only two small supply boats could be seen at the port. No ships belonging to the Peterson Merchant Guild could be seen. Wilson instructed his crew to approach the port before stopping entirely.

In the distance, the blowing of horns could be heard. After a few moments, a squad of garrison soldiers arrived, led by an old, white-haired knight.

"Ah, it's Old Gemors! We've dealt with him before," cheered Dulles and Els.

Lorist had heard Tim say that Old Gemors was the only surviving knight of the Tebri Family. However, he hadn't personally met the old knight before and only saw him now that he was around 60 years old.

Despite his age, Knight Gemors's vision was still in a good condition. He recognized Dulles and Els right away, and dismounted to give the two a hearty hug, before saluting Lorist formally. But after he heard that Lorist wished to meet Tim, he apologized and said that the viscount and his wife had left with their three children on the Peterson Merchant Guild's convoy for Morante City to spend the winter there.

What? Tim already has three children? thought Lorist with surprise.

Old Knight Gemors expressed his gratitude for Tim's marriage which was arranged by Lorist years prior. The couple got along really well and birthed two sons and one daughter within the span of six years. Currently, the wife of the viscount was pregnant yet again. Because of the successful dealings with the Peterson Merchant guild, Tim earned quite a bit of money as well, and managed to get the Peterson Merchant Guild to buy him a house in Morante City on his behalf.

Because of his wife's fondness of Morante City, the couple basically spent more than half of the year there. They would only return to the viscounty during summer and head out for Morante City again when winter came.

Lorist said, "Then forget it. We were just about to head to Morante City anyway. Give me the address of the viscount. I will pay him a visit once I'm there."

Old Knight Gemors wrote down the address and handed it to Lorist. After noticing the swallowtail flag of the Andinaq Kingdom being flown on the Flying Fish of Dawn, Gemors asked, "Lord Count, are you a noble of the Andinaq Kingdom right now?"

Lorist nodded. Upon seeing the awkward expression on the old knight's face, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Please forgive my rudeness, Lord Count. It's better if you fly the flag of your own family, or even the Tebri Family's. But it's best if you don't head to Morante City with the flag of the Andinaq Kingdom. The folk there don't really like it when ships of the Andinaq Kingdom enter Hidegold Bay," said Old Knight Gemors.

"Oh…" Lorist mused, before he sunk into deep thought.

Chapter 237
At Sea

The number of ships the group encountered grew as they got closer to Hidegold Bay.

"Milord, we should arrive at Hidegold Bay in three days. We'll have to keep our guard up for the rest of the journey," Captain Wilson said.

"What's wrong?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, this part of the sea is called the Sea of Grief. It is well known as one of the areas where pirates are most active. It is better, even for fishing vessels, not to approach it. This part of the sea is not within the patrol area of the Forde Trade Union's Invincible Fleet; so acts of slaughter and robbery are as common as the clouds. It could take mere moments for someone that had just asked for help to turn into the coldest and most savage pirate that could kill without batting an eye. There have even been some captains and crews that would sink to carrying out robberies here to make up for fruitless ventures elsewhere.

"When I used to work as a captain for a transport vessel, it was here where I suffered a huge loss. I remember that I had once seen a half-sunken transport vessel with several women on board shouting for help. I didn't suspect for even a moment that they might actually be pirates. I thought I could profit some from salvaging the cargo, and headed over. It wasn't until I had brought the ship in close that I saw up to a hundred pirates waiting to ambush me. Thankfully, I didn't resist. I surrendered quickly, and was spared by the pirates," Wilson described in detail.

"Sea of Grief? Does that grief refer to the merchants' grief?" Lorist asked.

"Precisely so. This sea can be considered to be one of the three main forks. To the west, this leads out to the Hanayabarta Kingdom and Shyarsia Kingdom. Those two kingdoms are both island-based. The Shyarsia Kingdom is the top producer of spices, and the Hanayabarta Kingdom thrives off the slave trade. Port Nupite has one of the largest slave markets in the world. To the south of this area is Hidegold Bay. And to the east is Armatrin Harbor of the Lormo Duchy, which used to be where people smuggled goods into the Krissen Empire. Currently, the Sea of Grief also connects to our family's

sea route further north," Captain Wilson said after he had scoured his memory about the area.

"If this area is such a crucial location, why didn't the Forde Trade Union's Invincible Fleet place it under their jurisdiction?" Lorist asked.

"Milord, the Invincible Fleet isn't too suited to venturing too far. Given the poor wind-resisting capabilities of their ships, they will easily flip over and sink given the wind speeds over here. Actually, the Invincible Fleet's main objective is the protection of Hidegold Bay from the pirates as well as the Golden Trade Route that leads to the Golden Coast of the Romon Empire. The winds there aren'st as strong as they are here, so they allow the Invincible Fleet to operate to their full potential," Captain Wilson said.

"Then, are there any strong or influential pirate bands over here?" Lorist asked again.

"No, Milord. This is the truly laughable part of the Sea of Grief," Captain Wilson said as he chuckled, "Whilst the Sunny Seas has nearly a thousand variably sized islands, the Sea of Grief has no such places for pirates to make their hideouts. There was once a band of pirates, known as the Seadragon Pirates, that attempted to take control of the area and divide it up into various territories. It didn't take long for them to get chased off by the Forde Trade Union, the Hanayabarta Kingdom, and the Shyarsia Kingdom's fleets. They would definitely not allow anyone to establish dominion over the waters here.

"That's why they ignore the smaller-scale activities of the pirates here. The ones sustaining losses are those smaller merchant guilds or owners of smuggling ships. The moment the large merchant guilds' convoys' safety is threatened, the authorities will intervene and wipe out the pirates.

"As for the captains that venture into the Sea of Grief, apart from being wary of pirates, there are some that would take up piracy themselves when they see a fitting target. The Sea of Grief is a place where countless crimes and sinful deeds can be committed, with the evidence of such deeds easily buried within the depths of the ocean…"

"Whoa…"

After listening to Captain Wilson's description, Dulles gasped, before letting out a long sigh.

"Wilson, you're not joking with me, right? The seas here look really calm. Look at those ships over there that are traveling without causing any trouble. It's completely different from the chaotic mess you described earlier. Aren't they doing perfectly fine over there?"

"Hehe," Old Jack, the quartermaster, laughed, "Sir Dulles, it's precisely because they are traveling in a large group that they aren't praying on, or being preyed on by, others. If they were any fewer, they would've launched their attacks long ago. The captain of that fleet over there is no idiot. He's worried that if he attacks other people's ships, his fleet would sustain casualties and fall prey to others. That's why, the more ships you have traveling together, the safer it will be. You may not know it, but quite a number of ships had been on our tail just now. We've managed to shake them all off, however."

"There were people eyeing us?!" Lorist exclaimed, "Why didn't I realize it at all?"

"Milord, look at the cargo vessel roughly 100 meters to our left. There's no doubt that the crew there has malicious intentions. If we were traveling in a straight line, you'd notice that the vessel is constantly turning on an intercept course. If we were on a similar cargo vessel we would have to slow down if they were in front of us or turn away. They would easily board and rob us otherwise. However, this baby of ours won't be so easily dealt with…"

After Old Jack rotated the ship's wheel, the Flying Fish of Dawn swiftly traveled in a semi-circular arc, easily circling past the cargo vessel that attempted to cross their path and leaving them far behind not long after.

Cries and curse rang out from the cargo vessel behind them.

Old Jack laughed and said, "Milord, this ship that you designed is magnificent. It's able to travel so fast despite its size, giving it a speed easily double that of any normal cargo vessel. Others can only dream of catching us."

The moment Old Jack finished, Els patted on the mast harshly and said, "Old Jack, you shouldn't have avoided them like that. If they plan to rob us, let them come and see who's the one who gets robbed instead!"

Josk nodded in agreement.

Lorist laughed and said, "It's not a matter of who raids who, Els. Even if we managed to take control of their ship, we don't have anyone we can assign to control that vessel.

If anything, it would do nothing but delay our journey. Forget it, we'll let them off this time. We'll teach them a lesson if we have a chance in the future."

On the 16th day of the 11th month the skies were cloudy with the winds blowing strong.

Thanks to the fins that stretched three meters deep into the sea at the bottom of the ship, the Flying Fish of Dawn didn't sway about in the waves like the other cargo vessels. Her sharp bow easily cut through one wave after another. She swam through the water like an agile fish. Given her fully extended sails, she truly seemed like a swift arrow traveling across the surface of the ocean.

The winds of the 11th month were incredibly chilling. One would feel as if blades were cutting across one's face when exposed to the winds without any covering. Lorist had Howard stay within the cabin while he stood at the helm and learned how to steer from Old Jack.

A cry from the lookout at the top of one of the masts could be heard as noon approached.

"A fleet has appeared 600 meters ahead!"

It was at moments like this that Lorist regretted not bringing spyglasses. It was an indispensable tool to sailors. It helped one detect enemies far earlier, and in doing so allowed one to react much faster to sudden developments. Instead, a lookout could only spot things happening 1 kilometer away at most. It was already quite formidable of the lookout to have been able to see the fleet 600 meters away given the cloudy weather.[1]

After a few moments, the lookout shouted again, "400 meters away, a large merchant fleet with 18 large transport vessels and 20 middle-sized transport vessels are heading south at half-sail."

Captain Wilson breathed a sigh of relief and said, "It's nothing serious. Normally, merchant fleets of that size belong to one of the seven great merchant guilds of the trade union. Given that they're traveling south, they should have the same destination as us -- Hidegold Bay. However, it's hard to identify what flag they're flying given the weather now. It'll take us another 30 minutes to approach them close enough to find out which merchant guild it is."

"200 meters ahead, a large merchant vessel flying a flag with a sword-impaled wine barrel, encased in a circular frame," the lookout reported after a while.

"The Chikdor Merchant Guild?" exclaimed Captain Wilson, "Old Jack, change course and overtake them by circling around them. Don't pass between their ships."

"What's wrong? Why do we have to take a large detour like that?" Els asked, displeased.

Captain Wilson laughed bitterly and said, "Milord, you should know about the Chikdor Merchant Guild, right?"

Lorist patted on Els's shoulder and said, "I know they are one of the seven largest merchant guilds of the Forde Trade Union. Initially, they were known as the Sword and Barrel. Their name only changed after Chairman Chikdor took control of the guild because he felt that it didn't sound too good. They are rather low-profile within Morante City, and not many would know that they are one of the seven largest merchant guilds."

"Milord, you are right. The Chikdor Merchant Guild is one of the hegemons on the ocean, having up to 100 large merchant vessels and countless middle-class cargo vessels as well as seven or eight shipyards. They have huge influence over the Invincible Fleet. They also engage mostly in purchasing loads of goods and dumping them in other lands. They mostly deal in wholesale distribution, so not many are aware of them.

"At sea, they control the routes that head to the Shyarsia Kingdom and Hanayabarta Kingdom. The Chikdor Merchant Guild purchases most of the spice produced by the Shyarsia Kingdom annually. The Hanayabarta Kingdom, on the other hand, use their immense profits from the slave trade to purchase luxury goods and daily necessities from the guild. The guild's formed four large merchant fleets that rotate every three months. They trade along the coast between Hidegold Bay and the Golden Coast."

Captain Wilson wet his lips with his tongue before continuing.

"Even though the Chikdor Merchant Guild doesn't grab much attention on land, they are incredibly domineering at sea. There have been instances where they caused trouble for smaller merchant guilds or individual ship owners. If it were the fleet of any other merchant guild, they might let us sail through their fleet. But this guild's

fleets will only let you in to attack you once you're inside. They'll always leave the crew of the ships they attack right there, floating in the middle of the ocean."

"That's the reason why you had Old Jack sail around them?" Lorist laughed and said, "Alright, I trust in your judgment. Since our ship travels fast, we can easily lose them after circling around."

……

Within a lavishly-decorated cabin of the largest merchant vessel in the fleet, Chikdor Moribak sat down in troubled thought. The fleet had encountered a stroke of misfortune just before they could arrive at their home; they had gotten caught in a storm. While he wasn't worried that any accidents would happen, he was incredibly annoyed that the storm had delayed his return.

As the third-in-line for the position of the successor of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, he frequently found himself pondering on ways he could undermine his two brothers and gain his father's favor. For that, he even laboriously brought the fleet to the Shyarsia Kingdom to purchase spice. The old king had passed away in the first half of the year, and his successor wasn't too keen to let the guild continue holding a monopoly on the spice trade. The guild had no choice but to send someone with plenipotentiary powers to settle the matter.

Chikdor Moribak easily solved that problem. The newly ascended king suddenly fell sick and died, leaving his little eight-year-old brother to take the throne. The uncle of the king, who had profitable ties with the guild, was made regent, and the spice trade continued as usual.

Moribak believed that he had done pretty well and would definitely be praised by his father when he returned. However, he didn't expect that the days spent at sea would be so unbearable. The trip took three whole months. Each day at sea felt like a year to him. He couldn't eat or sleep well for a single day. Had it not been for the four trained slave girls he purchased at the Hanayabarta Kingdom, Moribak really wouldn't know what to do with all the time he had on board.

As if the delay caused by the storm wasn't bad enough, the fleet's ships were far shakier than ever. Just when Moribak wanted to relieve himself with the slave girls he purchased, he found that all four of them had become seasick and puked to no end. Moribak could do nothing but curse at the slave trader for lying to him.

Even though he claimed that they were trained, they still got seasick?! Ridiculous!

"Young Master, please be patient. We will arrive at Hidegold Bay tomorrow night. Just wait for one more day," the old servant advised.

All of a sudden, a commotion could be heard outside the cabin.

"What the hell is wrong with these noisy bastards?! Are they hungry for my whip?!" Moribak cursed before he exited the cabin.

"Young Master… Look! That ship is incredibly weird… It's traveling so quickly!" exclaimed one of the sailors as he pointed to the distance with a look of awe.

Moribak turned to look and was flabbergasted. All he could see was a weird-looking ship that swerved past them at a distance of roughly 60 meters. It quickly overtook the various ships in the fleet and approached the frontmost one.

"Young Master, that ship is traveling faster than 14 knots. This is the fastest ship I've ever seen," the merchant vessel's captain said. He had already served as a captain for the guild for more than 20 years.

"No way…" mused Moribak with shock, "Is it really that fast?"

"It is, Young Master. Please trust my observation. They are even able to travel at full-sail with the wind blowing so strong. That ship must have great wind-resistance capabilities as well as an incredibly sturdy build. Even though the ship's size is rather narrow, it can cruise incredibly stably, unlike our ships which will sway with the waves. The designer of that ship must be nothing short of genius. He has designed a magnificent horse that can race about at sea," said the captain.

Moribak didn't have a single doubt for the words of the captain. He trusted that the captain was a loyal man. Since that was the case, he felt that he should definitely obtain the ship for his personal use. As long as he could get his hands on that ship, he could bring it to the shipyards of his family. He could then determine what made it so fast, and use it to improve his family's ships. If he managed to accomplish that, his father would definitely be impressed.

At that moment, Moribak felt a burst of excitement build up in his heart, before he instructed his men to blow the horn and use flag signals to express his wishes to see the owner of that ship and ask the ship to approach his fleet.

However, after long moments of trying, the weird-looking ship didn't respond to their signals and went its own way. In a few moments, it shrinked into a small, blurry, dot before disappearing from sight altogether.

Moribak felt as if he had been smacked squarely in the face. He was incredibly furious. Never had he felt such humiliation before. There was actually someone who dared to refuse his well-intentioned invitation.

Very well, it seems that the ship is also heading for Hidegold Bay, Moribak thought, *When I arrive, I will definitely seek you out and show you the 'warm hospitality' of the Chikdor Merchant Guild!*

Chapter 238
Matters Back at Home

On the 17th day of the 11th month, the Flying Fish of Dawn arrived at Hidegold Bay.

The weather was still rather bad. Hidegold Bay was usually a very busy port, but on this day it was relatively empty. Apart from a few transport ships leaving the port hurriedly, only the fishermen dared sail in such weather. They didn't have much of a choice if they wanted to make ends meet.

Masts of varying heights lined the coast of the bay. Ships of all sizes were anchored against the coast. Many of the port's guides cursed the weather, attempting to relieve their frustrations, but when they received a large tip from Howard, the glum and frustrated expression vanished from their faces, replaced by beaming smiles. They quickly guided the ship to a spot where they could anchor.

A problem arose, however, when they tried to anchor. The Flying Fish of Dawn, at about 30 meters, was considered a middle-class ship, despite its narrow design. The spot given to her was about five to six meters deep. This was a fine depth for normal ships of her size, but she had a three-meter-long keel beneath the main body of the ship. She couldn't anchor at the spot she was given. When the tide recedes, she would embed her keel in to ground, and be stranded. The only solution was for the ship to be anchored further away, at a spot normally reserved for larger vessels.

Lorist stroked his chin in thought. It was true that the keel could help stabilize the ship, which meant that she would sail in far windier conditions than others, but Lorist had completely forgotten what a pain it would be to dock the ship.

Perhaps I can shorten the keel by about two meters. It doesn't need to be that long, anyway. It might even increase the maximum sailing speed of the ship.

Howard tugged on Lorist's shirt, shaking his mind back into reality.

"What's up?"

"Milord, look over there," Howard advised.

A few large-class ships could be seen docking in the deeper, emptier part of the port in the distance. The flags the ships flew depicted a wheel.

"We'll stop there then!" Lorist exclaimed joyfully.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," the guide said, troubled, "That area is reserved for the Peterson Merchant Guild."

"That won't be an issue. We are actually on friendly terms with the Peterson Merchant Guild and can be considered their partners," Lorist said, "Howard, show him the medal given to us by President Peterson."

That medal actually belonged to Charade. Back when he was at the Redlis Kingdom, he introduced Tim to the Peterson Merchant Guild and managed to close a cooperative deal between the two parties. The deal allowed Peterson Merchant Guild to extend their sphere of influence into the southwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom. In exchange, President Peterson gave Charade a medal that could be used to request the guild's aid, or for special treatment and benefits. For example, they could get a 20 percent discount for purchases, and could even buy on credit if they didn't have enough money.

This medal should be more than enough to get docking space there, right? Lorist thought.

As expected, the moment the guide saw the medal, he stopped making a fuss, and even complained to Lorist that he should have brought out the medal earlier. That way, he could have just guided the ship to the Peterson Merchant Guild's docking space right away instead of troubling themselves with figuring out how to dock the Flying Fish of Dawn.

The moment the medal was shown to the harbormaster of the merchant guild's docking space, the Flying Fish of Dawn was given a spot to anchor at. Lorist tipped the guide with one gold Forde. The man couldn't stop showing his teeth afterward.

When the harbormaster suggested that Lorist pay an immediate visit to President Peters, he politely declined.

"I will visit him later in the day," Lorist said.

He would discuss the furs he brought along for sale then. He wanted to head to the

Red Grace Inn first.

The two carriages reserved for the transportation of the guild's guests weren't enough, so the harbormaster arranged for another two carriages to join the small convoy. Lorist brought Howard, Josk, Els, Dulles, and another 10 guards, who were carrying two chests filled to the brim with gold Fordes, off the ship and left on the carriages to the Red Grace Inn.

As for Captain Wilson, he brought Old Jack, the other sailors, as well as the shooters of the Carroballista Division with him to a sailor's tavern nearby. They had to arrange for different sailors to be on shift to look after the Flying Fish of Dawn.

The arrival of Lorist and the rest at the Red Grace Inn gave Old Charlando and his wife, Louise, a great surprise.

Charlando knocked Els's head with the large spoon he used to scoop alcohol with, and said, "So you've learned to run away from home, eh? You left nothing but a note and abandoned all your brothers and sisters here… Are you really their boss? And to think that you didn't send so much as a single word during your seven years of absence… Do you know how worried all of us were about you? We didn't know whether you had died on a battlefield or at a dark alley somewhere…"

Els used his arms to fend off most of the hits. Eventually Louise interceded and stopped Charlando. Lorist noticed that Louise had become far more plump over the seven years he hadn't seen her. She had given birth to two sons already. He quickly congratulated them, much to the old man's delight. It seemed that his body was still in prime condition.

Lorist presented the couple with three gifts: three magic wolf pelts, four magic goat and magic deer pelts, and one red-colored bloodfox pelt. Those were the staple products of the Northlands, especially the bloodfox pelt, which was obtained by Els himself from a hunt. Back then, he already said that he wanted to make it into a scarf for old Charlando. Louise was incredibly impressed with the gifts, and, while Charlando said that he didn't really need a bloodfox scarf, he held onto the pelt without any intention of letting it go.

The most obvious change to the inn in the past seven years was the maidservants there. Louise explained that the last maidservant of the previous generation to leave was Molly, who had left three years prior, after marrying. The stingy Old Hope, who

was a cobbler and a regular customer of the inn, had passed away. Two years ago when he got drunk on a winter's night, he decided to walk home to save the carriage fare. In the end, he collapsed unconscious in the middle of the snow-covered road. Old Hope was only found the next morning, after having froze to death.

There was also the red-nosed Old Mike who often sang in the inn. He had woken up one day three years ago from an alcohol-induced slumber, and said that he missed his hometown. Everyone thought he was just joking, and poured him two more cups. But, no one could find him the next day. It was believed that he left for his hometown early that morning. Nobody knew where his hometown was, however, and no word had been heard from him since.

The most depressing story was of Old Tom, the retired postman. He had drowned himself in the ocean. Old Tom had always intended to spend his retirement living relaxedly on the money he had saved up over the years, but his three sons and daughter never gave him any peace.His eldest son suffered a huge loss in his business, and kidnapped his business partner in a fit of desperation in hopes of being able to obtain a ransom. After receiving payment, he killed his hostage. As a result, that eldest son was eventually captured and hanged, with his wife and child punished with slavery.

Old Tom spent a huge sum buying the two back, only to have his second son disappear. The latter had incurred a huge debt with some loan sharks thanks to his excessive gambling. As if that wasn't bad enough, his youngest daughter, the most beloved of his children, was caught committing adultery. The angry, cuckolded husband brought the matter before a court, was granted a divorce, and banished her from the household. He didn't return even a single copper coin of the near 1000-gold-Forde dowry.

Old Tom couldn't bear the continuous upheavals and misfortunes. In the end, after drinking a cup of ale at the inn and bidding everyone one final, polite goodbye, he vanished. It was said that he jumped into the ocean while carrying a huge rock. By the time someone noticed and hauled him onto shore, he had already passed on.

As for the three Blackbear brothers, they had obtained a rusty old piece of metal during one of their missions. That piece of metal was later appraised to be a relic of the Magic Civilization, possibly a piece of a cauldron used during those times. They sold it for over a thousand gold Fordes, bought a plot of farmland, got married, and left the mercenary business altogether.

Lorist wolfed down the meal McDuffin had cooked for him and listened to the stories of his old acquaintances. Breathing a long sigh, he lamented the unpredictable nature of the human condition. Despite his lamentations, he felt very relaxed. It was as if he had returned to the days, seven years prior, when he was still just an instructor at the Dawn Academy, the days when he didn't have to worry about the matters of the family.

Lorist booked eight rooms on the third floor of the inn. He finished his meal, washed up, and got a new change of clothes, after which he brought Howard with him to meet President Peterson. Josk and four other guards would be in charge of guarding the two chests filled with gold Fordes in the inn. As for Els, he had gone out to check on his brothers and sisters within the syndicate.

First, Lorist headed to the port and brought a few of the rolled-up furs with him as well as a package filled with preserved magic beast jerky and whale meat, before calling a carriage and heading to the Peterson Merchant Guild's office.

As one of the seven largest merchant guilds in the Forde Trade Union, the guild's headquarters was located in the inner section of Morante City, and occupied a large area that encompassed almost one whole street. President Peterson was also really courteous. He had long been waiting to receive Lorist personally.

After a round of pleasantries, President Peterson invited Lorist into the guest hall for further conversation. After tea was served, Lorist started talking about the aims of his visit. He said that he intended to strike up a deal with the merchant guild and mentioned that he had lots of magic beast furs obtained from the hunting activities in his dominion, and wondered if he could get a good price for them. Additionally, he said that he wanted to order some large-class merchant vessels, as well as purchase a huge amount of food from the merchant guild.

As the Peterson Merchant Guild had built itself up by dealing furs with long distance carriages, they were easily able to get a few fur appraisers. All of them rated the furs Lorist brought with him highly, much to the delight of the president, who asked Lorist how much stock he had and said that he would buy all of them.

Lorist then stretched out five fingers.

President Peterson agreed immediately, saying, "Five thousand pieces? No problem, we'll buy all of them."

Lorist laughed bitterly and said, "President, if I only had 5000 pieces, I wouldn't come all the way here to trouble you. Actually, I have a total of 500000 furs for sale, with most of them being magic bull pelts."

Thunk! The silver cup in President Peterson's hand was dropped onto the table. "You… What did you say? 500000… magic beast furs?"

Lorist nodded and explained, "My family dominion is incredibly close to the wildlands, and every winter magic beasts there would travel to my dominion to look for food. We've been hunting these beasts for the past couple of years. That's why we were able to stockpile so much furs. We only managed to complete a port on our coast this year, so we've come here to sell off the furs. We want to use the money to buy ships and food."

Upon hearing Lorist's explanation, the president revealed a look of understanding and said, "How about this… If the quality of your magic bull furs are as good as the ones you brought here… Given the market price of 2 gold Fordes and 12 large silvers per piece… I'll pay 3 gold Fordes for each of your furs. You're free to go ask around. I'm sure there isn't anyone else who can offer a better price than I can. The main reason I decided to purchase those furs is because you've brought them in bulk. I can fashion them into leather for all sorts of equipment. Naturally, for the furs of other beasts, I'll purchase them at 1.2 times the market price. Is that alright with you?"

"Alright, you can call the shots, president. It's decided then," Lorist agreed straightforwardly.

President Peterson laughed out heartily, obviously satisfied with Lorist's casual style.

"As for food. Don't worry. I will definitely be able to meet your demand. You can purchase as much as you want. As for ships… I can help you ask around if there are any large merchant vessels for sale. After all, we only have six ships ourselves, two large-class long distance merchant vessels and four middle-class merchant vessels. We mainly use those to transport our own stock, but we don't control any trading route.

"Had it not been for Knight Charade and the deal he struck with Viscount Tebri, we wouldn't even have a proper sea trade route. The business isn't big right now, but it's far more convenient than transporting things by land."

Lorist raised his cup and made a toast even though they were only having tea.

"Then I'll be counting on you, president."

Since Viscount Tebri's dominion was mentioned, Lorist asked the president for Tim's address in Morante City. He planned to drop by for a visit when he had the time.

President Peterson couldn't stress enough how fortunate Tim was to meet Lorist.

"Ever since he managed to strike a deal with our guild, he used our reputation to gain proper certification documents for his title, and ownership over the viscounty, from the First Prince. He is now a proper landed noble."

President Peterson described two embarrassing incidents that happened after Tim officially became a noble. But after a while, the president suddenly quieted down. Lorist asked him why he sighed, to which the president replied,

"It's all because that son of mine… He's always making me worry. I'm so disappointed in him."

"Did he get fat again?" Lorist asked.

President Peterson shook his head and said, "No. It's the opposite of that. My beloved son is now a training freak and spends all his time doing nothing but that. He's already broken through to the One Star Silver rank. He's also incredibly lustful for women. During the past seven years, he got himself 17 wives and already has 23 children…"

Despite his incredible shock, Lorist congratulated the president. Having many descendants was a good thing. It was very unlike the president, who only had one son to put his hopes on. As for his daughters-in-law, Lorist said that the Peterson clan could definitely afford to sustain them. Heck, his son could even afford to have 70 wives if he wanted to.

President Peterson said that what worried him was not that, but the fact that his son had no intention at all to take up the family business. It worried the president greatly. He didn't know who he could entrust the business he built up to. After seeing how Tim, an illegitimate son of a noble, could become a full-fledged landed noble, he lamented his son's lack of ambition even more.

Lorist smiled and consoled President Peterson and said that even if his son wasn't

interested in business, he still had many grandchildren to pick from. Given that a Gold ranked swordsman could easily live past his hundreds, President Peterson had at least 50 years ahead of him. With that amount of time, he could easily raise another successor among his grandchildren, so Lorist said that there wasn't a need to focus only on his son.

President Peterson livened up at the comment. It was true! If his son didn't have any interest in the business, he'll just pass him over and train one of his grandchildren! Drunk with joy, he invited Lorist to stay and have dinner with him. No matter how Lorist attempted to refuse the offer, the president still insisted that he stayed. After drinking two more cups of wine, Lorist saw a person scramble before the president.

"Master, it's horrible! The Third Young Master of the Chikdor clan is causing trouble at our port! He's insisting that he wants to take away the ship that this guest of ours left there…"

Chapter 239
Port Troubles

President Peterson was incredibly furious. That area of the port was set aside for his clan's exclusive use, and Lorist was his guest. If Lorist's ship was really forcefully taken away there, it would definitely destroy the Peterson Merchant Guild's reputation if anyone found out. The mere mention of trying to take away Lorist's ship was an act that tried the guild's patience. What in the world was going on? Did the Chikdor Merchant Guild intend to start a full-on conflict with the Peterson Merchant Guild?

Lorist was also quite surprised. He didn't even know the third young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, nor could he recall if he had offended such a person before. Heck, he didn't even have the slightest interaction with the Chikdor Merchant Guild. Why, then, did the third young master want to take away his ship?

When the two arrived at the port, they noticed that they were dealing with a fumbling drunk.

Two groups of people were standing opposite one another. One group was the Peterson Merchant Guild and the sailors and marines of Lorist, including Captain Wilson and the others, and the other was a horrible drunk that screamed something along the lines of the owner of the Flying Fish of Dawn not giving the Chikdor clan any face. He insisted that they would take the ship away to teach the owner a lesson.

Even though many others stood behind the drunk Third Young Master, all of them knew that he was acting rather excessively. They had tried to persuade him to stop, to no avail, and could only stand behind him quietly without actually heeding his order to forcefully take the ship.

"What is going on?" asked President Peterson in a deep voice.

"Master…" the harbormaster greeted as he bowed, "I'm not too sure either. One hour ago, the fleet of the Chikdor Merchant Guild stopped at this area of the port. Initially, I thought they were only going to be here temporarily to borrow some space, so I didn't mind it. This kind of occurrence is actually quite common and we would allow it if it wasn't inconvenient for us. I didn't know that the third young master would barge into

Lord Norton's ship. After he was stopped, he ordered his men to take action, and I quickly came forward to stop it, only to end up like this…"

The harbormaster then showed the beaming red palm mark visible on his face.

"Who did that?" asked President Peterson with a low voice.

The harbormaster looked at the third young master, who was having a drunk fit.

The third young master continued to clamor around, refusing to stop causing trouble.

"You actually dared… to offend us… The Chikdor Merchant guild… Are you tired of… living? I… I'm giving you a chance… by taking your ship away… Yet… yet you dare to stop m-m-me… I… I will exterminate… you lot…"

Lorist was enraged as he thought, *You're only a young master of a merchant guild, yet you dare to be so audacious? Do you think that you're second to none but the heavens?*

Lorist took a few steps forward, and looked at the people standing behind the drunk man.

"I am Count Norton, the owner of this ship," he said, "I don't think that I've had any interaction before with the Chikdor Merchant Guild. So, who can explain to me how House Norton has ever offended your guild? Why is your young master trying to take my ship away?"

An old man dressed like a supervisor stepped forward, out of the crowd, and said, "Apologies, Count Norton. Yesterday morning when your ship overtook our fleet, our young master ordered us to signal you to stop because he wanted to meet up with you. He even had the tune of invitation blown. But you ignored his invitation and continued on your way. That's why our young master is enraged. He thinks you are looking down on him and the Chikdor Merchant Guild… When we arrived, he saw your ship docked here. Coupled with his bad mood after drinking, he began to act up…"

Lorist looked at the old man with a dumbstruck face, and said, "Oh, so you're the merchant fleet that we overtook yesterday? Is your young master sound in the head? We'd already zipped past your fleet and were more than 100 meters in front of you. Would we be able to see or hear your signals from there? Also, given the strong winds, would we have been able to turn back to accept your invitation even if we did receive your signal? So you think you can take my ship because of this small issue? My, isn't

the Chikdor Merchant Guild domineering!"

Lorist laughed coldly, and continued, "Hehe, so you want to take my ship? Very well. But are you prepared to pay the price?"

That old supervisor had misheard Lorist's tone and thought that he had been frightened by the reputation of the Chikdor Merchant Guild.

"Lord Count, your ship travels incredibly fast. She would definitely be of great use to the Chikdor Merchant Guild. If you hand that ship to us, you will gain the favor of the Chikdor Merchant Guild…"

Before he finished, Lorist spat out audibly, and said, "Forget your favors. If you want my ship, it's easy. You just have to defeat House Norton. If you can walk over my dead body, I'll give you my ship."

President Peterson stepped in front of Lorist to stop him. He already had a rough grasp of the situation.

"Since your third young master is drunk, then as the owner of this part of the port, I will bring your young master back with me to sober him up. You can leave now. Don't forget to tell your president to come collect his son," said President Peterson.

The president's statement implied that he intended to hold the drunk, trouble-making third young master back so that the president of the Chikdor Merchant Guild could come collect him after making up for the trouble caused. That way, the parties would not be on bad terms with one another. However, if they insisted on bringing their third young master back with them, they would have to fight for it with the Peterson Merchant Guild. The consequence of that conflict would not be something any single person could bear.

President Peterson waved his hand and called out two guards from his back to hoist the drunk third young master into the carriage behind them. Even though the people of the Chikdor Merchant Guild broke into a commotion, none of them stood up to stop the two guards.

The old supervisor bowed towards President Peterson, and said, "Then, we'll have to trouble you, sir, to take care of our third young master. We are incredibly sorry for tonight's incident. I will definitely relay this situation to our president as well. We will excuse ourselves now."

In a few short moments, the crowd at the port dispersed. Lorist was a little stunned at what had just happened and thought, *That's not right, if there's anything I learned from reading all those novels, it's that the people of the Chikdor Merchant Guild would definitely stand their ground to support their third young master. They should be ignoring President Peterson, and rushing over to take the young master back. That should've been where I get to show off my skills by beating them all down, right? After the scrubs are taken care of, the boss character would show up, causing the conflict to gain even more traction. This should've ended with me helping the Peterson Merchant Guild defeat their rival, and be the catalyst that reinforces the relationship between House Norton and the Peterson Merchant Guild!*

Why were the people of the Chikdor Merchant Guild so rational? Why were they able to leave their young master here just like that to avoid causing a commotion? How ridiculous... They don't even act like one of the seven largest merchant guilds at all... They should've at least left after spouting a few hatred-fueled lines to save themselves some face...

"Locke, there's no more trouble. Let's head back for some more wine," said President Peterson.

"We're still going to drink?"

Lorist really couldn't understand what President Peterson intended to achieve, so he could only cease his wild fantasies and instruct Captain Wilson and the rest to pay attention to the security of the ship, before leaving on the carriage with the president.

"Even though the Chikdor Merchant Guild has the highest number of ships at sea, they will still have to rely on our long distance carriages on land. Otherwise, they won't be able to gather so much resources and supplies that secretively. Tomorrow, President Chikdor will come to meet us and come up with a settlement since this incident was caused by their third young master to begin with. If he wishes to avoid conflict with us, then he'll definitely make it up to us properly," said President Peterson apologetically.

"Then, I'll be counting on you, president. However, I really didn't expect that the third young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild would be so brainless and reckless. He doesn't look that young to me, yet he behaves like a rowdy child. Perhaps he's intentionally trying to cause conflict between your guild and theirs? Then again, I also think that the excuse I gave for not accepting their invitation to be rather lacking...

Nobody would truly believe that," said Lorist.

President Peterson laughed heartily, and said, "Worry not, Brother Locke, this matter is not as complicated as you're trying to make it sound. In fact, I know why the third young master would get so drunk and cause a fit in the first place. Everyone in Morante City knows what President Chikdor is most troubled about. Even though all three of his sons are blessed with rather keen business senses that far exceed my own useless son by leaps and bounds, President Chikdor still hasn't named a proper successor. It has naturally resulted in the three young masters forming their own factions, each trying to get a lead over the others.

"But during the first half of this year, President Chikdor finally came up with a way to resolve this, and gave each of his three sons a huge task. The one who completes the task first would be able to receive proper guidance and inherit the merchant guild. That's also the reason for the third young master's rampant drinking. The deadline for his task was yesterday, but he only managed to make it back today, meaning that he had lost his right to succession by default. That's why he was throwing a drunk fit at our port. The people of their guild didn't even say a word when we wanted to bring him away either."

President Peterson paused in thought before he continued, "Just stay at my home for the night. Don't worry, President Chikdor will personally come over and offer you his apologies. In the meantime, we can discuss when you intend to hand us the furs you stockpiled."

Oh, I almost forgot about that, Lorist thought.

"I've come here to purchase ships precisely for the purpose of transporting these furs. Why don't we meet up at Silowas Island and carry out the trade there? The island is also a dominion of my House."

"Silowas Island?" muttered the president, "I seem to have heard of that place before…"

Lorist elaborated, "Silowas Island belongs to the Andinaq Kingdom and is roughly 100 kilometers away from Jillin Harbor. It is the largest island of the former empire."

"Wait, Brother Locke, isn't your dominion in the Northlands? Since when has Silowas Island become yours?" asked President Peterson.

Lorist then detailed his exploits and experiences to the president briefly.

With a solemn look on his face, President Peterson said, "Wait, then does that mean that House Norton is one of the noble houses of the Andinaq Kingdom? In other words, you're a count of the Andinaq Kingdom?"

"That's right. What's wrong, president? Will there be a problem?" asked Lorist.

President Peterson let out a sigh and said, "It's a rather huge one. I'm sure you've heard that the trade union enforced an embargo on the Andinaq Kingdom, right? It's completely true. It's all because the Andinaq Kingdom bears the legacy of the Krissen Empire, which was the sworn enemy of the trade union for the past 200 years. Even though the empire is already gone, the legacy is still there. The Andinaq Kingdom is considered an enemy to the trade union and is therefore under an embargo. This matter is one that us merchants rally up in solidarity for."

Troubled, Lorist said, "That can't be… I didn't expect that the grudges between the nations ran that deep. Even though there has already been roughly 30 years of peace, and the fact that the empire has already disintegrated, the people of the trade union still hold that grudge? Isn't that a little excessive? Wasn't there a saying about how there are no eternal enemies, only eternal profits? Shouldn't chasing profits be the core of a merchant's being?"

"Excessive?" President Peterson laughed and continued, "You're right. There are no eternal enemies, only eternal profits. Chasing profits is the core of a merchant's being. Actually, the hate for the Andinaq Kingdom is intentionally built up by others. The ones who are actively opposing the Andinaq Kingdom are the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, the Mayflower Merchant Guild, and the Wessia Merchant Guild. The Peterson Merchant Guild is only cooperating with them and carrying out our basic obligations.

"However, when it comes to the embargo on the Andinaq Kingdom, we must definitely play our part too. Brother Locke, since you are a noble of the Andinaq Kingdom, then this fur trade will be very inconvenient for us to carry out. If we are found out by others, the Peterson Merchant Guild will quickly be isolated and attacked by the other merchant guilds…"

Lorist laughed and said, "How about this, president… House Norton will not fly the flag of the Andinaq Kingdom and only use the Raging Bear Flag of our own. Nobody would know that we're nobles of the Andinaq Kingdom then. Even if others find out about your deal with us, you still have a bunch of excuses to use. It is common knowledge that there aren't any magic beasts within the Andinaq Kingdom. As for the

trade, we can carry it out at Viscount Tebri's dominion. We'll ship our goods to him, and you can fetch it there. That way, you can also say that you bought the furs from Viscount Tebri and have nothing to do with us."

"Alright, that's a sound plan. We'll do just that," said President Peterson with a tone of certainty.

Having dealt with the problems regarding the deal, Lorist breathed a sigh of relief. The sale of 500000 magic beast furs would net them 2 million gold Fordes, and that was enough for the house to invest in development and stockpiles for the next couple of years. It was something that the stability and prosperity of the Norton House was dependent on.

Even though he had closed the deal with President Peterson, he couldn't trouble him with the salt, magic beast jerky and whale meat he brought over. The guild didn't deal with those goods, and they didn't sell for much anyway. Lorist felt that it was better to look for other ways to deal with those items. Even if he couldn't sell them, the dominion would definitely be able to consume them.

After sending a few guards ahead to the Red Grace Inn to notify Josk, he spent an uneventful night at the Peterson Merchant Guild with the others.

At around 10 in the morning the next day, the men of the Chikdor Merchant Guild came over. President Chikdor came personally and greeted President Peterson intimately, as if they got along very well. The sober third young master was also brought over. He stood by his father with a sour face while the latter expressed his thanks to President Peterson for taking care of his drunk son, and for keeping him from causing more trouble for others.

President Peterson was also very courteous and stressed that the seven main merchant guilds of the trade union were like family. It was completely natural for them to watch each other's backs. However, he advised the third young master to take this lesson to heart and not lose hope after a small shortcoming and resort to drinking as an escape, even to the point of causing others trouble. He marked that behavior as uncultured and uncivilized, and said it was not something befitting a candidate for inheritance of a large merchant guild.

After lecturing the third young master of the Chikdor clan, President Peterson introduced Lorist to President Chikdor as the family leader of the House of the Raging

Bear from the Northlands, Count Norton.

It was apparent that President Chikdor had never heard of House Norton before, since he had never paid attention to noble houses situated at the far borderlands. What he was interested in, however, was Lorist's oddly-shaped ship. He was shocked to hear that it could travel at 14 knots in strong wind. Even the fastest sail-powered warship of the newest design could only travel at a maximum of 11 knots.

Lorist shrugged and told President Chikdor that his ship was not good for much apart from her speed. Because of the Cursed Coasts of the north, he had to make his ship much narrower. Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to navigate the reefs there. And given the ship's narrowness, it couldn't carry much cargo. It could only be used to transport people.

As for the her resistance to strong winds, Lorist explained that he had simply added a 3-meter-long keel under the ship so that she wouldn't flip over easily while in transit. It was something a common shipwright would understand after taking only one look at the ship. Additionally, he said that the keel's main usage was to prevent the ship from being damaged by the reef at shallow waters. When the keel hit something, there would still be enough time for the ship to turn back and find another way.

Upon listening to Lorist's explanation, President Chikdor lost interest in the ship. He mainly wanted a fast ship that could carry large amounts of cargo. Just like Lorist had said, his ship was only good for speed and not much else. He wasn't worried that Lorist would make up an explanation to fool him since he could easily send a master shipwright to check out the design of the ship. That way, he would be able to know whether Lorist was telling the truth about the ship.

To express his regret for Lorist's troubles because of his son, President Chikdor brought Lorist a gift. It was an exquisitely decorated wooden box that was roughly 50 centimeters wide. Even though Lorist tried to refuse out of politeness, he still accepted it in the end and opened the box at the insistence of President Peterson.

The moment Lorist opened and looked into the box, he was dumbstruck.

Within it lay a golden, gleaming firearm…

Chapter 240
The Secret of Gunpowder

There was a firearm roughly 40 centimeters long within the wooden box. It had an exquisite design. Both the stock and barrel were decorated with intricate, gold laden carvings. However, the firearm looked a little weird. Besides the fact that its barrel was shaped like a trumpet, the hammer behind it was simply ridiculous. It was the shape of a two-winged dragon baring its fangs. It looked positively imposing.

The firearm took up half the space within the box. The bottom of the box was filled with rows of small lead pellets. Each pellet also had a cylindrical container. There was a total of 20 pellets and cylinders respectively.

Lorist was incredibly moved, and thought, *If the pellets are the projectiles, then the cylinders must contain gunpowder! This must be the gunpowder variant of Grindia!*

"This is a gun made by the dwarves of the Tedanini Kingdom. Last year, when the trade union came to an agreement with the dwarven kingdom, they were invited to set up a management office and a shop for dwarven merchants at Rotary Street, here in Morante City. I happened to be there, and purchased one of these guns. It seems that you like it a lot, Lord Count."

President Chikdor laughed heartily and looked at President Peterson, who merely nodded.

President Chikdor said to the guard beside him, "Demonstrate how that gun is used to Count Norton."

That guard came forward, saluted, and received the box.

"Lord Count, the gun is the traditional weapon of the dwarves. There are variations with different barrel lengths. Short-barreled guns can fire up to a distance of 30 meters, and they are rather similar to our own ballistic ranged weaponry. The range of these guns is rather low and is not worth much mention. However, one thing is for sure: the shots are very powerful. One would require at least 100 bowmen to pose a threat to a Blademaster, but one gun by itself will be enough to threaten a Blademaster

within its 30-metre range. A Blademaster can deflect arrows with his sword, but not these bullets."

The guard then slipped the black cylinder into the barrel before using a fine metal rod to push it deeper in. He loaded the pellet into the barrel in a similar fashion. In the end, he said, "This gun is one of the newest models within the dwarven kingdom. They don't need a fuse, lifting this dragon here is enough. After that, firing is as simple as pulling the trigger down here. However, due to the physical differences between humans and dwarves, we humans had to strain to pull trigger because the force required to do so is rather great."

The guard then aimed the gun in his hand towards a wall around 20 meters away, and pulled hard on the trigger. Bam! Lorist was startled by the shot. He hadn't expected the gun to be that loud. Despite this, he was immediately pleased to notice a faint smell of burnt gunpowder. It was indeed the smell that a gunpowder propellant would produce. This only served to baffle Lorist; he didn't understand why his experiments before failed, even more so now that he had confirmed that gunpowder did indeed exist, and work.

"Look, Lord Count. The force is rather good, isn't it?" asked the guard.

He pointed at the hole on the wall not far away. A dented pellet could be seen embedded within it.

Lorist snapped out of his thoughts and looked at the hole. He noticed that the hole made on the wall was almost 1 meter away from where the guard had aimed.

With a margin of error like that, can it really be considered good?

At that moment, Lorist's mind was occupied with nothing but gunpowder. He was incredibly impatient and couldn't wait to go back and restart his research. As for the short gun made by the dwarves, he was only impressed with the intricate carvings on it, everything else dissatisfied him.

Look at that trumpet-shaped opening… If it's the slightest bit wider, the pellet would slip outward. And that beautifully carved wooden frame… it does nothing but increase the weight of the gun. Then there's that beak-shaped handle… Is that even nice to hold? And it doesn't even have sights… One can only aim this gun based on intuition… And the ridiculous dragon hammer that is far too forceful… Sigh, it's not good at all. Also, that

trigger that requires so much force to pull... How can one aim steadily when pulling a trigger already swerves the gun around so much?

Lorist was confident that as long as he discovered the secret of the dwarves' gunpowder, he could definitely design a much better gun. Even his prototype would be far better than the decorated gun made by the dwarves.

But it was at that moment when he realized that his deep-thinking had made the others present think that he was merely a count from the rural areas of Grindia who had never seen much of the world. A look of disdain flashed past the guard's eyes as he put the gun back into the box and handed it to Lorist. "Lord Count, this is your gun, so keep it well."

Lorist received the box and hurriedly thanked President Chikdor.

President Chikdor laughed and said, "Since the Lord Count likes this gift so much, it was definitely worth it. Only by doing this can I properly express my sincerity to make up for my son's blunder. Also, forgive me for asking, since your dominion is in the distant Northlands, how did you come to know President Peterson? I also wonder if there's anything the Chikdor Merchant Guild can help you out with during this trip of yours to Morante City?"

Lorist also laughed and replied, "President Chikdor, I studied here in Morante City for a decade in my formative years. I got to know President Peterson, and received a lot of help from him, during that time. I had to return to the Northlands to inherit my title and the House's dominion. Six or seven years have flown by since then. I have come on this trip to pay a visit to President Peterson."

President Peterson smiled and nodded in agreement. He was quite pleased with Lorist for not revealing any important information.

"Oh, so that's the case. I thought you were preparing to secure a sea trade route. To be frank, Lord Count, since you are able to build a ship that is capable of traversing reefy areas, are you interested in establishing a sea trade route? If you're willing, you can let the Chikdor Merchant Guild handle the sea transportation for you. As the merchant guild with the most fleets, we can definitely guarantee that we won't disappoint you," said President Chikdor, staring Lorist directly in the eye.

Lorist revealed a look of joy, before his expression changed from to one of hesitation,

then to helplessness. In the end, he even looked rather regretful.

After seemingly contemplating something deeply for a long while, he replied, "President Chikdor, while I'm incredibly interested in your proposal, my family dominion is situated in the far north and doesn't produce much unique local goods. There also isn't anything worthwhile we can offer up for trade. To be honest, we are only barely able to sustain ourselves with the food we produce."

"I am definitely interested in establishing a trade route by sea, but I know that I will be wasting goodwill if I have you make a pointless trip. Take, for instance, my dominion. It only produced around 6000 gold Fordes during the seven years I was there. Additionally, the only reason I'm able to come here to Morante City to have a good time is purely the graciousness of President Peterson."

President Chikdor didn't mind Lorist's rejection at all. He smiled and said to President Peterson, "I didn't expect that your friend, the Lord Count here, would be so honest. He's very unlike the other shallow nobles. They will stop at nothing to promote their dominions the moment they hear about establishing a trade route, when, in fact, they have nothing much to offer us. This is definitely a good characteristic of his."

President Peterson agreed and said, "The reason I stuck with my friend, Locke, here is because of his honest demeanor. He doesn't bear the usual shortcomings of other nobles, and speaks only the truth. No more, no less. His dominion is indeed rather rural, however. Even I can't help with that, despite my best intentions."

The two chatted for a few more moments before President Chikdor took his leave, bringing the guard and his third son with him. Lorist didn't notice the venomous glance the third young master gave him before turning to follow his father.

Lorist was still preoccupied with thinking about gunpowder. After discussing with President Peterson a little longer, deciding on the date when the furs would be delivered to the dominion of Viscount Tebri, and asking the Peterson Merchant Guild to purchase some large-class cargo vessels on his behalf, he left and returned to his lodging.

The moment he arrived at the Red Grace Inn, Lorist instructed Dulles and Howard to bring some magic beast jerky and whale meat to Louise, and ask her whether the food fit the taste of the citizens of Morante City. Other than that, he gave McDuffin some salt for him to try it out. He wanted to find out what difference it had with the rock salt

usually used in Morante City.

Following that, Lorist cooped himself up in his room and began to inspect the remaining 19 cylinders of gunpowder included with the gun he received. He stayed within his room for three whole days without leaving. Josk and Howard secretly opened the door of his room to check out what he was up to on the third day.

The table was filled with various glass test tubes and experimental apparatuses used by herbalists. Lorist was thankful that he decided to take up herbalism during his days at the academy. The set of skills he had learned from those studies now allowed him to separate most of the compounds present in liquid. Doing this would allow him to easily determine the mixture used by the dwarves to make the gunpowder.

The mixture contained within each cylinder made by the dwarves was composed of seven different substances including sulfur, saltpeter, and powdered charcoal. They were the most common ingredients used to make gunpowder. The other four substances were rosin powder, puerarin starch, egg white and a kind of mysterious white-colored powder.

After more experimentation, Lorist came to understand that the only active components within the dwarven gunpowder were the familiar sulfur, saltpeter, and powdered charcoal, along with the mysterious white powder and rosin powder. Puerarin starch wasn't of much use, and the egg white was mainly used to solidify the powder into a cylindrical shape.

The thing that caught Lorist's attention was the mysterious white powder he had no information about. Without it, the gunpowder would be completely ineffective. Just as Lorist intended to ask someone else what the powder was by showing them a sample, he realized that he had used up all 19 of the gunpowder cylinders he had.

After giving it some thought, he called Howard upstairs. He had him instruct the maidservants of the inn to prepare him a warm bath, before ordering a huge meal. Following his bath and hearty meal, he took the box with the gun inside, and left with Howard for Rotary Street on a rented carriage.

Lorist had taken note when President Chikdor mentioned that the dwarves established a shop-office at Rotary Street. The carriage quickly sent Lorist and Howard to their destination. Upon getting off the carriage, Lorist could see a large, weird building that was stacked up with huge stone slabs. It looked like a small hill.

While it was weird for a 'mountain' to be in the middle of Morante City's busiest street, it wasn't that out of place; the ones who built it were dwarves, after all. The dwarves of the Tedanini Mountains were accustomed to living within caverns and they would feel insecure if they were not living within one.

After passing through the entrance, which was shaped like the entrance to a cavern, a dark stairwell could be seen. It was then that Lorist realized that the 'building' constructed by the dwarves wasn't that big. In fact, the main office and shop was situated in a large space beneath the ground. Many customers were visible inside, despite the bad lighting.

Lorist walked up to a barrel-shaped counter, and put the box on it.

A red-bearded dwarf looked at Lorist, and asked in a weird tone, "Good sir, is there anything I can help you with?"

Lorist looked curiously at the dwarf before him. It was a humanoid creature with an almost square-like build. Despite their similar appearance, the dwarves in Grindia had a different reputation from their fictional counterparts in Lorist's previous life. The two had similar behaviors: they both had great strength, dug caves, forged metal, fashioned equipment, and drank incessantly. However, the dwarves of Grindia were rumored to be shrewd businessmen. The merchants said that one should always be attentive and on one's guard when dealing with a dwarf. Otherwise, one would easily get tricked. That trait of theirs stood in stark contrast to their reputation for being honest and loyal in the fictional works of Lorist's world.

"Good day. I would like to know if I can purchase the powder used to fire this gun," said Lorist as he opened the box and brought out the gun and a few of the small lead pellets.

"Well, my son treated this gun like a toy and accidentally dumped the gunpowder into water… That's why when I realized it, it had already become like this," said Lorist while feigning a troubled look.

The red-bearded dwarf made a mocking expression and said, "Sir, we've heard others use the same excuse almost a hundred times during the month. In actuality, we don't really care if you discover the secrets of gunpowder. If you want to buy them, we have them for sale here. However, each cylinder costs 1 gold Forde."

What? It's that expensive? Lorist pointed to a similar box and said, "Apologies, did I mishear? A box like that with a short-barreled gun costs 35 gold Fordes. Why would the gunpowder itself cost so much?"

"That's because only dwarves can make gunpowder. You humans aren't able to make it. If there's no gunpowder, the gun would be nothing but an expensive toy for children, just like you said. Buy it, or not; it's your choice. We dwarves couldn't care less," said the dwarf, with his beard slightly swaying.

It was then when Lorist knew that there was no way the dwarves would tell him about what the mysterious white powder was. Having no other choice, he took out 20 gold Fordes and purchased 20 units of gunpowder. The dwarf even gave him an extra lead pellet to replace the one that was fired during the demonstration.

After leaving the shop of the dwarves, Howard said with a troubled tone, "Milord, you've been so occupied studying gunpowder for the past three days that you've forgotten about the original reason we came to Morante City…"

Lorist understood Howard's intention with this kind reminder, and patted his head.

"You don't understand, Howard. The dwarves' gunpowder is a great discovery. As long as we can crack its secrets, the House will no longer have anything to worry about in the future and never be defeated…" said he.

"Isn't the gunpowder only used for these guns? I don't think that the gun is any good," Howard complained, before his eyes flashed, "Milord, look! That shop over there has a gun hanging and it's even bigger than the dwarven one!"

Lorist turned his head to look and saw Howard pointing at a weapons shop. A huge gun could be seen hanging within. It looked a little like a mounted jingal.[1]

"Come, let's go check it out," said Lorist.

"Welcome, sir," greeted the sharp-eyed shopkeeper.

He realized Lorist's status as a noble almost instantly.

"Sir, we here at Starlight Weapons pride ourselves in the quality and elegance of our products. Whether you're buying a weapon as a gift, or for your own use, we can satisfy your needs," started the shopkeeper.

Lorist stopped in his tracks before the huge gun, and asked, "Is this for sale?"

The shopkeeper looked stunned, before he noticed the box Howard carried in his hand and realized what it was about. "Sir, this gun is a well-known weapon, 700 years ago, the renowned noble hero, Jinrock, used this very gun to strike down the demonic twin-headed dragon, Chimera. However, despite surviving for all these years, the weapon no longer has any value."

Lorist pursed his lips and thought, *Who do you think you're trying to fool? If it really were a 700-hundred-year-old relic, the barrel would've rusted long ago! Not to mention the rotting of the wooden frame.*

It was obvious that the gun was a forgery used to attract customers to the shop.

Howard, on the other hand, asked curiously, "Why would you say that a divine weapon like that is worthless?"

"Because there's no gunpowder!" the shopkeeper exclaimed, "It was because the dominion lord hero had a dwarven friend that crafted this gun for him and provided him with three units of gunpowder that he was able to use this gun all those years ago. Without any gunpowder, the gun is useless. It can't even compare to a flaming stick."

"That dwarf is far too stingy… Why can't he continue to provide gunpowder? Is he afraid that we would find out how to make them as well?" Howard questioned angrily.

The shopkeeper laughed and said, "In actuality, we already know what the gunpowder is made of. It's a mixture of sulfur, charcoal powder, starch, rosin, fire crystal powder and egg white. The dwarves are still as stubborn today as they were hundreds of years ago, so the formula hasn't changed one bit. It's a shame that the information isn't useful to us at all. There are no saltpeter mines in the human realm. Saltpeter can only be found hundreds of meters beneath the ground, and only the dwarves are able to mine that deep. Without it, there's no way we can make gunpowder…"

Lorist was shocked to hear the shopkeeper say that they lacked saltpeter to make gunpowder. He recalled that during his failed experiments, he collected naturally efflorescing saltpeter off the corners of his walls. Lorist suddenly recalled that the Northlanders had a habit of collecting saltpeter off of walls, but they mainly purified it in water before using it to treat leather. Nobody knew that the solution could be dried and used to make gunpowder.

But right now, what Lorist was interested in was the fire crystal powder that the shopkeeper mentioned. "Could you tell me more about fire crystal powder?" asked Lorist.

The shopkeeper replied, "Milord, fire crystals are commonly used by smiths to increase the temperature of their forges. Let me think… Two days ago, we purchased a sack of them from some adventurers. I'll see if I can find them…"

The shopkeeper vanished for a few short moments, before returning with an old leather sack. He took out a few of the crimson finger-sized fire crystals.

"Sir, these are fire crystals, and they are usually only found among the ashes at the opening of a volcano. These are treasures to smiths, who will powder them up and use them to raise the forge temperature while they work. Only if the temperature is raised greatly will the forging be successful."

"Oh, thank you. It's the first time I've seen these," said Lorist as he inspected the crimson crystalline object in his hand.

The shopkeeper smiled and said, "Sir, these are only useful to smiths, so it's not a surprise that you've never seen them before."

"So these are present within the gunpowder made by the dwarves?" Loirst asked.

"That's right. This has long been proven by Professor Balbo of the Venus Academy. Powdered fire crystal accounts for about ten percent of the volume of gunpowder. The main problem with making gunpowder is that over 50 percent of it needs to be saltpeter. I recall that when Professor Balbo published his findings last year, the citizens of Morante City were greatly shocked," said the shopkeeper who had a great memory.

Lorist took out a few gold Fordes and gave one to the shopkeeper. "This is payment for your stellar service, I'm incredibly satisfied. However, can I purchase a few of these fire crystals from you?"

"Naturally, sir. This sack contains around 30 of them. It will only cost you 2 gold Fordes," replied the shopkeeper politely.

Chapter 241
Glassmith

15 percent sulfur, 15 percent charcoal powder, 50 percent saltpeter, 10 percent fire crystal powder, 5 percent rosin, 5 percent starch, add a little egg white and mix evenly. After that, the mixture should be placed in a mould and dried to form the gunpowder cylinder to be used with the dwarven firearms.

Lorist brought Howard to the public library in Morante City and spent only 1 large silver to get the librarian to help him search for the article published last year in the Morante Daily, one of the city's newspapers, by Professor Balbo of the Venus Academy.

What was interesting about the article was that Professor Balbo actually said the there was much room for improvement in the dwarves' formula. Unfortunately, he couldn't continue his research; there just wasn't enough saltpeter available for him to use.

The journalists of the Morante Daily even interviewed the dwarves, who, back then, had set up their shop for less than a month, about the room for improvement that Professor Balbo claimed there was. The dwarves said the formula was a result of the sacred, toiling effort of their ancestors. It was perfect and didn't require any modifications. The dwarves even thought that Professor Balbo made such a claim as a ploy to procure more saltpeter from the dwarves, and their response was none other than: scram!

Lorist felt a little embarrassed. He had initially thought that he could keep gunpowder a secret. It seemed he was one lagging behind instead. The many academies and experienced professors had long decoded the secrets of gunpowder. The only fortunate thing was that the saltpeter used by the dwarves had been extracted from ores that could only be mined deep underground. Additionally, the professors still had yet to realize that the nitric acid used to treat leather could be instead be used on saltpeter ore.

In ancient China, gunpowder was discovered only after centuries of experimentation. But the scholars of Grindia didn't know that the white crystals that appeared on wall corners were actually one of the core components of gunpowder. All they knew was that it could be used to make nitric acid for leather processing. Lorist considered that

to be his fortune. He would one day be able to make far more effective gunpowder than those made by dwarves.

"Howard, bring two guards that can read to the library tomorrow and have them read through the newspapers and academic publications released during the past few years. If you think that anything is noteworthy, mark it down and hand the list to me. The family will be prioritizing development into our dominion and seafaring, so please take note on anything in those fields," Lorist instructed his disciple.

"Alright, Master. I will be looking out for them," Howard said happily. He had always been the type who loved to read.

After dealing with the matter of gunpowder, Lorist returned to the Red Grace Inn gleefully to carry out some more pressing matters.

Josk and four other guards had been spending the whole time at the inn to look after the 100000 gold Fordes Lorist brought along with him.

On the other hand, Els had been fuddled drunk by his mates of the syndicate he used to be a part of.

Dulles on the other hand went looking for his friends and classmates at the Dawn Academy and also returned dead drunk each day.

Lorist thought that it was about time he visited some of his old friends as well.

The following days saw Lorist being really busy, with him leaving early in the morning with two guards and only returning late at night. Mainly, he went to meet with the professors and instructors of the Dawn Academy, including Academy Head Levins and Blademaster Claude and his wife. After seven years, the Dawn Academy stayed mostly the same, but many of the people there had changed. There were quite a few of Lorist's acquaintances amongst the instructors that had already left the academy. However, the bronze statue of Lorist, erected when he obtained a 3000 win streak against Silver ranked opponents despite being an Iron rank himself, looked as domineering as ever, to the point that it was a renowned legend in the academy.

Academy Head Levins had aged a lot over these 7 years. The gift Lorist brought him was an undamaged magic tiger pelt. It would be a great help to alleviate the pains of his rheumatic condition. As for Blademaster Claude, he just received a great shock. When he first met with Lorist, he boasted confidently that he wanted to give Lorist

some pointers in swordsmanship, only to lose in less than a hundred exchanges with Lorist in a fight.

Dulles, on the other hand, brought Lorist some good news. There were quite a number of academy alumni that were really impressed with Lorist's experiences and were hoping that they could also follow Lorist and join House Norton.

After giving it some thought, Lorist decided to accept them, but only after the risks and dangers were clearly laid out to them. The house needed more talented people, and the alumni of the academy were definitely more than qualified. Since they were his acquaintances and were willing to follow him, Lorist really couldn't think of a good reason to refuse them.

Upon receiving Lorist's permission, Dulles happily raised his hoe and began digging into the staff of the Dawn Academy.[1] During the seven years that had passed, many of Lorist's acquaintances had already become the core staff of the Dawn Academy. If all of them really joined Lorist, Academy Head Levins would have a huge headache coming for him.

Other than that, Lorist also went to visit Tim. The couple were living in a gothic, four-storey building not far away from the academy sector. The Peterson Merchant Guild had played a huge part in their purchase of the building, and they only had to spend up to 3000 gold Fordes for a building that was easily worth four to five thousand gold Fordes.

The Tebri couple were pleasantly surprised at Lorist's visit. Both of them were incredibly thankful for Lorist's efforts. Tim was saved by Lorist from a huge predicament with Count Cobry, and was also made into the rightful heir of Viscount Tebri as a result. Additionally, he had been introduced to his wife by Lorist. In some way, the blissful days he spent now was only gained after experiencing a fair share of troubles.

Tim was a rather well-known noble among the high society of Morante City. He complained to Lorist that before he became a noble, he was incredibly envious of them. But he understood their troubles now that he had joined their ranks. He had to put up a front all day long when he interacted with the other nobles, which he found incredibly tiring, and he began to feel that nobles were incredibly shallow creatures.

Lorist laughed at hearing Tim's complaints. During their casual conversation, Tim

revealed a piece of incredibly crucial information: there was a chance that the Forde Trade Union would begin to implement a nobility system. However, unlike Lorist's noble title which was given to him by the royal family, the titles of the Forde Trade Union would be given out by their high council.

Lorist also told Tim about his arrangement with the Peterson Merchant Guild, and relayed to Tim his intentions of carrying out the trade at his dominion. Lorist added that he would definitely pay the necessary taxes. Tim expressed his willingness to help as well as his joy for being able to be of some use to Lorist, and assured that he would instruct Old Knight Gemors who was stationed at the manor at the viscounty to give his support.

When he returned to the Red Grace Inn, Lorist realized that Els and his good friend, Jindoz, were awaiting his return. Ever since Els left home to become Lorist's knight, Jindoz had taken over as the boss of the syndicate. It was quite apparent that he was far more reliable than Els; within the short seven years since Els's departure, Jindoz's syndicate had already become one of the largest syndicates within Morante City, and they already have control over at least half of the streets there. More than 4000 people worked for them.

Jindoz handed Lorist more than 50 gold Forde notes worth 100 gold Fordes each, but Lorist merely gave him a questioning look, not sure what it was about. Els then explained that the money was the rent that was collected over seven years from a building Lorist purchased at Rose Street before he left. Before he left, Els had left the unit under Jindoz's management, and he would collect 30 percent of the profits. The 5000 or so gold Fordes were Lorist's share.

After the explanation, Lorist recalled that he did in fact purchase a building back then. However, he recalled mortgaging it to Els for 5000 gold Fordes to raise funds for the northbound journey. However, that sum was already paid back in full during the journey. He didn't expect that his investment of 5400 gold Fordes back then would break even within a short seven years.

Jindoz laughed and said that it was only possible because the price of property within Morante City had been rising in recent years, causing rent to increase multiple times over. Otherwise, the profits wouldn't be that high. However, he said that he didn't come to meet Lorist just because he wanted to give him the collected rent. He said that he would like to acquire the magic beast jerky, whale meat, and salt for sale.

Jindoz laughed bitterly. He explained that he had no other choice, there were just too many people working under him. We was forced to look for other ways to earn some money. Nowadays, the syndicate had already taken control of half the shops around the streets of the city, so he felt that it would be rather convenient for Lorist's goods to be sold there.

Lorist agreed to Jindoz's request right away, but also said that he required his help for two things. First, he wanted Jindoz to find out about the situation of Professor Balbo. He hoped that he could recruit the man to carry out further gunpowder research for him. Additionally, he had Jindoz instruct the members of the syndicate to keep an eye out for some talented people who were only lacking a good opportunity. Lorist realized that the house required talented people in many areas, so he had to be on the lookout for them whenever he could.

After settling the matter with Jindoz, Lorist was prepared to head to the glass-producing Teribo Kingdom. Charade's father had started a glass distribution company there and Lorist intended to order the glass he needed from Charade's father exclusively. After all, he was a partner, and he had to deliver Charade's letter to him as well.

Charade's father was a successful merchant. It was said that the Teribo Kingdom's royal family even owned some shares in his firm, hence his benefits when it came to dealing in glass. He welcomed Lorist and the others warmly. As Charade had said, his father had yearned all his life to become a landed noble, so when he treated a person of such caliber, he presented himself with an incredibly respectful attitude.

"Uncle, you don't have to be so courteous, really. Even though Charade is my family knight, he's also my trusted friend and partner. As you're his father, you are considered my senior as well. Just leave these kinds of things to your servants. You didn't have to go about doing all this personally. If you do, I will feel incredibly troubled," Lorist said, not knowing how to react to the hospitality he was given.

After reading Charade's letter, he understood that Lorist was a legitimate landed noble. And when he realized that his own son was serving such a person, he went out of his way to make sure that all of Lorist's needs were met. That was especially the case when Lorist assured Charade's father that after another three years when Charade served for a full 10 years' term, he would give Charade peerage as a baron, and enfeoff a barony to him. When Charade's father heard that, he teared up in joy immediately and thanked Lorist unceasingly.

From that day onwards, Lorist realized that the treatment he received improved even further, to the point that Charade's father would accompany his servant for the smallest things. Even when the servant merely brought Lorist refreshment, Charade's father would be his shadow. That kind of hospitality greatly shocked Lorist. It made him feel rather uneasy. He decided to leave as soon as possible, he would be on his way the moment he had finished his matters.

As for the glass products required by the dominion, Charade's father promised confidently, even thumping his chest, that he would be able to supply as much glass as the Norton House needed, and even assured that there won't be any problems. Not only that, he didn't even require Lorist to pay a single copper coin as deposit. Lorist refused the kind gesture. Even though Charade's father was a rich and successful merchant, the order he made was easily worth 20000 gold Fordes. If some unexpected accident really happened, that would affect Charade's family. So, Lorist insisted that the deal be carried out as per usual practice, with the reason that official and private matters should not be conflated.

As for the letter Charade sent two years earlier, after Lorist failed in his experiments, to ask his father to find out what materials were used to make glass, Charade's father said that he hadn't managed to procure much information. It was mainly due to the degree of secrecy and care on the Teribo Kingdom's part to keep both the ingredients and the process of glass production secret.

However, he recommended Lorist go meet a person who had worked in the glass production plants for 32 years. The man, Mancheny, had followed in his father's footsteps, and took a position at the production plants. He eventually became a full-fledged glassmith, despite initially working a common laborer. He should have a complete grasp on how glass was made. Charade's father had first gotten to know him professionally, but the two had since become friends.

Charade's father mentioned that he had heard Master Mancheny complain about his fellow glassmiths. They were dumb as blocks of wood, and only knew how to do what they were told without bothering about experimentation and improvement. Charade's father, being the sensible merchant that he was, began to take note of Master Mancheny.

Master Mancheny was quite troubled these days. He and his wife only had one daughter, whom they treasured and loved with all their life. Now that their daughter had matured, they had started to trouble themselves over her marriage. Unfortunately,

during the 36th day of the 9th month that year, on the harvest celebration, the couple and their daughter encountered Viscount Sirwa.

Viscount Sirwa had quite a reputation in Feyers City, the capital city of the Teribo Kingdom. The reputation wasn't a pleasant one. He was the nephew of the queen, and as fat as a pig and as lustful as a turkey. He had been implicated in the kidnapping of womenfolk within the capital on several occasions. Each had caused considerable commotion amongst the people. His antics had been toned down somewhat after a harsh punishment by the queen, however.

That very viscount had set his eyes on the daughter of Mancheny. While he didn't dare to take her away in public like he used to, he didn't hold anything back when it came to harassing the family. He intended to take the poor girl as his 26th concubine.

Given how much the couple treasured their daughter, it was no surprise that they had refused the viscount's demand without any hesitation. They greatly feared his retribution, and hid their daughter within one of the glass production plant's residences. They hoped they could avoid the viscount's claws by doing so.

While Viscount Sirwa wasn't able to interfere with the strictly-monitored glass production plant, he manage to bribe the plant's managers to drive Mancheny and his family out. It wouldn't take much effort to chase the Mancheny family out of the plant, and they could gain the favour of the viscount by doing so, so naturally the managers didn't hesitate. They accepted the bribe and began to cause trouble for Mancheny.

It didn't take long for them to issue Mancheny an ultimatum: since his wife and daughter were not part of the plant's workforce, it was illegal for them to be at the plant. But, considering Mancheny's 32 years of service, they would be willing to overlook the matter if he sent his wife and daughter out of the plant within three days. Otherwise, he would be punished for putting confidential information at risk.

Master Mancheny was incredibly troubled. He had spent his entire life working for the production plant. Now, in his last few years, he had been forced into such a difficult position. The most laughable part was that, being one of the people who knew the deepest secrets of glass production, Mancheny had two Silver ranked swordsmen by his side at all times. The two weren't there to work as his bodyguards, they were tasked with monitoring him to ensure that what he knew didn't get leaked out. They didn't bother to take any action on Master Mancheny's behalf, they simply waited for the drama to start.

Charade's father said that Master Mancheny's family had just been driven out from the production plant. Viscount Sirwa would forcefully marry the master's daughter in three days. Currently, Master Mancheny could do nothing about it. Charade's father said that if Lorist was willing to give a hand at a time like this, Master Mancheny would no doubt pledge his loyalty to the House, giving it access to glass production techniques.

That's not a bad idea, Lorist thought as he began to stroke his chin in deep thought.

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[1] In Chinese, poaching can be literally translated as digging away at a corner. The author humorously made a play on words and described Dulles's action as literal digging.

Chapter 242
The Curious Case of Luxcrimson Winery

Viscount Sirwa rode atop his horse gleefully. Thankfully, his zeno horse mount was strong enough to carry a person of his weight, which was easily double that of a normal person's.

Two silver-armored guards held a banner bearing a crest of a golden cup in their hands. It was the crest of House Sirwa. Beneath the golden cup was an intricate network of vines that circled around the cup to form a circular shape. A pure-white, seven-petaled flower could be seen all around the vines. They were the national flower of the Teribo Kingdom, the Turan Flower. The presence of that flower on a noble house's crest signified their close affiliation with the Teribo Kingdom's royal family.

The western wall garrison's soldiers got into formation to welcome Viscount Sirwa's escort after receiving instructions from their squad leader. The troupe was headed for Luxcrimson Winery, which was roughly 15 kilometers away from the city. The winery belonged to Viscount Sirwa, and was well-known for a century of fine wine produce. It was one of the main sources of income for the viscount.

Viscount Sirwa was in a rather good mood. Seeing Master Mancheny and his family leaving the city gates with glum expressions, the viscount couldn't help but crack into a smile. *Hehe, so what if you're a glassmith? Did you think you could get away from the influence of a viscount like me? Did you think that you would be safe at the glass production plant? Hmph, even if a viscount like me can't enter it, I can still have them drive you out. You have no choice but to bring your daughter to me obediently.*

That night, faced with Viscount Sirwa's underhanded request for his daughter's hand in marriage, Master Mancheny had no choice but to accept the request to let his daughter become the concubine of the viscount. However, he made three demands himself. First, he demanded that the viscount treat his daughter well in the future. Second, the viscount had to give an expensive betrothal gift. Lastly, their marriage ceremony should be carried out outside the city to attract as little attention as possible. Master Mancheny felt that having his daughter marry Viscount Sirwa was an incredibly embarrassing affair, so he wanted as few people to know about it as

possible. If the viscount were to go fetch his bride with a whole parade, that would cause the glassmith and his wife to lose all ability to stand proudly amongst their neighbours.

That last demand was actually quite a reasonable one. Even though Viscount Sirwa was slightly displeased by it, he was no idiot and knew that his reputation was not a good one. There was little difference between a high and low profile marriage ceremony to him. Either way he would only be able to invite a few of his friends, friends that were just as bad as him. He decided to hold the ceremony at Luxcrimson Winery. It was one of his favorite spots outside the capital. It was relatively rural and quiet.

Viscount Sirwa and his 10 or so guards spent more than 2 hours completing the 15-kilometer journey. Luxcrimson Winery's gates were wide open, but Viscount Sirwa didn't really mind and dismounted when he arrived at the courtyard.

Usually, there would be a lot of servants coming up to him to serve him, tend to the horses, and bring some water or towels, or perhaps even tea. They would completely surround Viscount Sirwa. But for some reason, not a single soul showed up this time.

Angered, Viscount Sirwa yelled, "Where are they? Have they all died somewhere I don't know of? Why isn't there a single person here?! You two, go check where those lazy bums have gone!"

The two guards obeyed. They headed to the main hall, opened its doors, and entered, only to be flabbergasted. After a few moments, they snapped out of their stupor and returned. "Milord, look! They're all here…"

"Then why aren't you calling them to get their asses here to me?!" roared Viscount Sirwa as he headed towards the hall. The moment he arrived at the entrance, a gust of wind carrying a concentrated alcoholic smell wafted over the viscount. He fell to the ground dizzily.

When he entered the hall to take a look, he was stunned as well. Within it, many people could be seen sprawling across the floor. It was possible that everyone working at the winery was there, completely unconscious. They were so drunk they weren't even aware of what was happening. Empty barrels of wine could be seen all over the floor and tables. Some of the barrels still had crimson wine dripping from their openings.

"Hahaha…" The hodgepodge group of friends that had accompanied Viscount Sirwa to his wedding laughed so hard after looking at the scene that they had trouble stopping.

"Sirwa, that's too funny! So your servants actually party and drink when you're not around! Had it not been for the fact that you just decided to hold your marriage here yesterday and didn't send anyone to notify them of your arrival, you would never have found out about how they've been deceiving you the whole time! It seems that I have to carry out some random checks for my family's own winery as well… I wonder if those lowly servants dare to deceive me," said an oily-haired noble youth as he laughed.

"Ridiculous!" Viscount Sirwa was so mad that it seemed like smoke was billowing out of his orifices. It was obvious that he would become a laughingstock among the noble circle thanks to the disobedience of his servants. They dared to party when he wasn't around!

"I will definitely hang all of these pathetic dogs!"

As the viscount began to throw his fit, he waved the horsewhip in his hand and began striking his servants. It was a shame that all of them were dead drunk. Not a single one of them reacted to the whip as it crashed on their bodies. After lashing out a dozen times, the viscount was already out of energy and breath. His stocky body wasn't suited to strenuous activities.

The viscount raised his head, and saw the manager of the winery sitting on his golden-laced chair in the innermost corner of the hall -- the chair reserved for his personal use -- holding onto a large wine barrel.

Viscount Sirwa burst into rage again.

"Haul that pathetic wreck over here! How… How dare he sit on my chair?!"

Two of the guards walked towards the manager domineeringly. All the guards and the viscount's friends had already entered the hall. Even the two Silver ranked swordsmen watching over Master Mancheny went to check out the commotion.

All of a sudden, the two doors to the hall shut. The inside of the hall was plunged into utter, all-consuming darkness.

"Who… Who closed the doors?! Open it, quick!" roared the viscount.

The two nearest the doors stretched out their hands to open them, but after trying incredibly hard to do so, they stopped helplessly and said, "Someone has locked us in…"

"Who is it?! Who would play such a prank on me…" shouted the viscount as everyone else within the hall began to fall into disarray.

"Let's light a torch first. Did anyone bring a piece of flint?" someone asked.

Fwing! The sounds of swords being unsheathed could be heard. Five silver blade glows lit up in the darkness of the hall. The swords belonged to the three Silver ranked guards of the viscount as well as the two Silver ranked swordsmen that came with Master Mancheny. Even though blade glows were not ideal for illumination, it still allowed one to see, barely, the others at the front.

Fwoom! A flame could be seen at the innermost part of the hall, before more sounds of fires starting could be heard. High up in the air, two intersecting lines of hanging lamps were lit in succession. The upright candle holders by the sides of the hall followed suit. Soon the hall was lit completely.

The ones in the hall stared at the scene in stupor. The sight before them was too surreal, almost like a magical phenomenon that they had heard about in the legends.

"Revered Lord Viscount Sirwa, and all the other respected noble guests, I express my warmest welcome to you all," resounded a coarse voice throughout the hall.

In that instant some realized that another person was seated in the prized seat of Viscount Sirwa. The manager of the winery, who was there before, had been pushed to the floor a man dressed in a black shirt, black pants, and black leather boots replaced him. He wore a black cloth around his hair and a black mask on his eyes. Only the lower portion of his face, below his nose, was uncovered.

When he smiled, his shiny white teeth gleamed under the illumination of the candlelight. The man in black was sitting lazily in the chair and regarding the viscount and the rest with an unconvincing smile.

"You… Wh-who are you?" asked Viscount Sirwa in a panicked voice.

"Me? Well, you can call me Zollo[1], I guess," the man said without a single care in the world, "I have long heard about the generous and just Lord Viscount Sirwa of the

Teribo Kingdom, and about the magnanimous deeds you did without batting even an eye. So, I decided to pop in and pay you a visit, and perhaps, help you, Lord Viscount, to spend some of your riches on a good cause. I suppose you wouldn't mind that, would you, Lord Viscount?"

Viscount Sirwa, upon hearing about his 'impressive' reputation, gleefully said, "No, no… I won't mind it at all!"

At the same moment the last words left his mouth, he received a powerful kick.

One of his noble friends glared at him angrily and said, "Idiot, don't you understand sarcasm? He's here to rob us! He's a bandit!"

The viscount finally realised his predicament.

In a fit of rage, he waved his arm and ordered, "Capture him! I want him hanged!"

The two guards, who had only moments earlier been instructed to carry the old manager away, were the closest to the seat, so they drew their swords and rushed forward. The man in the seat only twirled about twice, before the guards collapsed. They lay on the ground, unmoving.

"All of you, go!" roared the viscount.

All three of his Silver ranked guards rushed forward, along with a dozen of others of Iron and Bronze rank. A few short moments later they all accompanied the two original sacrifices on the ground.

The scene was completely out of this world. The man who called himself 'Zollo' was unarmed, and his figure merely shifted a few times before all the guards were knocked out. A couple of nobles recalled the fires being lit by no-one whatsoever, and their faces paled right away. "He's… He's a magus!"

The sound of trickling water could be heard as a few of the spineless noble youths wet their pants.

The magi were described as cold-blooded killers in the legends. It was said that they would carry out experiments with human subjects regularly, often stripping them of their skin or muscles, and even taking their bones out to perform revival experiments. The notion was only further supported by the prevalence of novels that depicted brave

knights saving princesses from the grasps of evil magi or dragons.

Viscount Sirwa's pants were also completely drenched. He knew that he was no brave knight, nor was he a pretty princess. The logical conclusion that popped into his mind was that he would be one of the experimental subjects for the magus before him to vent his frustration.

The man in black, Zollo, began to cackle insidiously before he said, "Oh, naughty naughty… I see that I will have to brand your bodies after all…"

As Zollo continued to make his way closer, more than half of the remaining 20 or so people collapsed on the ground, shivering in fear.

All of a sudden, two swords flashed out of nowhere. The two Silver ranked swordsmen that followed Master Mancheny around attacked together in a pincer formation. The tips of their swords pierced directly towards the man's torso. As if he was caught off-guard, the man in black stared with shock at the swordsmen.

"Great, we're saved… Ugh…" One noble youth that thought that Zollo would be cut into pieces by the two swords quieted down and sank into despair, right after expressing his cheer of joy and hope.

The man called Zollo stood without any harm, but the two Silver ranked swordsmen that crossed his figure were not moving in the slightest on the ground.

"Hehehe, are you glad?" Zollo asked before he cackled once more, "Strip them naked!"

The noble youths suddenly found themselves surrounded by six huge men, also clad in black, and wearing skull masks. Even though they moved about silently, their strength was unparalleled. After one noble was caught, his clothes were ripped off him directly, before he was brought in front of Zollo.

Zollo revealed an evil smile as he stretched out a finger. His fingertip glowed as he traced it across the naked noble's body. After that, a large bloody 'Z' appeared on his chest. The 'branded' noble youth fainted from the pain right away.

Another day passed before the drunk workers of the winery awoke. Even though they suffered a bad hangover, it was nothing serious. They would be fine after drinking some more fluids.

The manager of the winery shook his groggy head. He felt as if he had dreamt up that encounter with the bandits. In his dream the bandits breached their winery, but didn't want money or women. All they demanded was for the workers of the winery to drink, and those who resisted would be force-fed wine until all of them were dead drunk. Even after the manager was made drunk, he was still forced to drink for a whole lot longer. Since the wine produced by the Luxcrimson Winery was of rather high quality, the manager couldn't avoid getting drunk despite his above average tolerance to alcohol.

Are there really bandits like that in this world? wondered the manager, before an errand boy of the winery came over and dragged him outside.

The manager noticed the carriages and mounts left in the courtyard by the viscount.

Where's the Lord Viscount? wondered he.

After searching through the whole winery, they still didn't locate the viscount or his guards.

Impossible, the viscount must be somewhere in the area… There's no way he would be able to make it out of the winery with that flabby figure of his! And he couldn't possibly travel on foot and leave all his mounts here! We must keep looking!

The manager began to feel enraged. He suspected that the bandits had been planning something against the viscount.

In the end, they finally found Viscount Sirwa and the rest at the deepest corner of the wine cellars. The workers hauled the naked men hugging each other to conserve heat and stave of the freezing cold out of the cellar.

In actuality, the viscount and the rest had already regained consciousness for a good while. When they realized that they were trapped in a wine cellar, they cried out for help to no avail. They had been dumped in the deepest corner of the cellar -- deep underground -- and there were lots of things piled up at the entrance. Not a peep could escape the cellar. Even if their cries of help escaped the cellar, the rest of the workers of the winery remained dead drunk throughout the day in the hall.

By the time midnight came along, every one of them had sore throats. Hungry and cold, they could only huddle up to conserve some heat. The weather of the 11th month and the fact that they were underground caused them to feel extreme cold. Had it not

been for the workers that found it weird for there to be so much junk piled up at the cellar, Viscount Sirwa and the rest of his guards and his other companions might have died from the cold without anyone noticing.

It didn't take long for the police force of the capital to rush to Luxcrimson Winery. Word of Viscount Sirwa's encounter quickly spread throughout the royal capital, and soon rumors of the magus Zollo who could summon skeleton soldiers that left a mysterious 'Z' mark on the bodies of the ones involved, greatly befuddled all who heard about the incident.

The testimonies of the manager of the winery and the rest of the workers about how the six or seven bandits that only forced them to drink didn't help at all.

After two confused days, the Silver ranked swordsmen who had their jaws broken finally remembered something that was on their mind: Master Mancheny's family of three had disappeared without a trace. Things were definitely getting out of hand, given that a master glassmith like him vanished all of a sudden.

"How could this Master Mancheny leave the royal capital with his whole family?" questioned the king of the Teribo Kingdom, Teribo VII, as he stood before the security officials of the capital.

As a glassmith, while they could enjoy preferential treatment and riches, they would lose their personal freedoms. Apart from the glass production plant and the royal capital, they didn't have any right to go anywhere else. If it were any other way, the secret of glass production wouldn't have stayed within the Teribo Kingdom for hundreds of years.

So, when the facts were brought before the king…

"Hang that Viscount Sirwa at the plaza in front of the palace right away! Have the guards at the western city gates hanged as well! Their greatest crime is not inspecting the ones who left the city! As for the two Silver ranked swordsmen tasked to watch the master, eradicate their families! To think they would neglect their most important duty. They must protect the glassmith they're assigned, or kill him if that need arises. Whatever they do, they must ensure that the secret of glass production stays within the kingdom! Their task is far more than just keeping an eye out for the glassmith!

"Also, for the ones at the production plant that have accepted the bribe of Viscount

Sira… Have them all beheaded. If they were daring enough to chase a glassmith that knows the ins and outs of glass production out of the plant, if they were offered an even higher price, who knows when they'll smuggle a glassmith out to another nation?!

"All that crap about the magus and skeleton soldiers… That's just all a ruse to distract us from noticing the disappearance of Mancheny's family! Don't let the nobles who were involved in that incident off! And make sure to get to the bottom of this case and have those who played a part in it pay. Have someone investigate who it was that planned this whole thing! Be it some noble house or a whole nation… As long as we have a lead, I don't mind mobilizing all the Blademasters of the kingdom to ensure that the secret of glass production is kept!"

As Teribo VII raged on, a storm of blood and chaos began to brew in the Teribo Kingdom…

Chapter 243
Unforeseen Changes

Come on, Zollo's a sword-wielding hero… When did he become a magus? thought Lorist with dissatisfaction.

He had forgotten that he didn't use his sword even once while he was dressed as Zollo. The mysterious self-lighting flames and his arcane unarmed combat techniques naturally led others to assume that he was a magus instead.

Lorist was having breakfast. The Morante Daily, just delivered to the Red Grace Inn, was in his hands. The main headline read: The Mysterious Case of the Magus of Luxcrimson Winery!

Six days had already passed since the incident. Word had been passed to the journalists of the Morante Daily from the Teribo Kingdom, whom promptly exaggerated almost every detail about the story. Not Zollo, the magus, not the mysterious lights, not the weird techniques used to incapacitate the guards, nor the Z left on their chests escaped the treatment.

The article even included an interview near the end with one noble youth who had been there in person when the incident happened. According to the interview, the 'Z' mark on his chest would hurt slightly every time midnight arrived. He said that he felt as if there was a mysterious power calling out to his soul, and that he would expend lots of mental energy combating the urge to head the power's call so that his soul wouldn't be dragged into the hellish abyss of the magus.

This journalist could probably start writing a long-running fantasy novel series… Perhaps he used to work as one? Lorist guessed the truth unwittingly.

That particular 'journalist' of the Morante Daily had never actually met Viscount Sirwa. The count was rotting on the gallows in front of the palace by the time the journalist finally made his way there. He had even wondered who the unlucky fool was, obviously he had angered or displeased the king.

As for news about the missing glassmith, the Teribo Kingdom had restricted the

spread of the information. It was only after visiting multiple inns that the journalist managed to approach one of the noble youths involved in the case. Upon hearing his testimony, the journalist felt a spark of inspiration and began fashioning his own fantasized version of the account. Thus was born the tale eventually published in the Morante Daily.

Lorist put newspaper down and began to read the Falik Weekly. In that paper, the report on the Luxcrimson Winery case was far more reliable. As opposed to the fantasized account written by the journalist from the Morante Daily, the journalist of the Falik Weekly, who wrote the report, gave clearer sources, they ranged from the winery's workers he interviewed, to the investigators of the case, and even included the security official of the Teribo Kingdom that was put in charge of the case.

The headline of the Falik Weekly read: Zollo - Magus or Magician? After some thorough investigation, the journalist realized that Zollo was not really a magus but merely a daring bandit who knew a couple of magic tricks and theatrics. For instance, the investigator of the case noticed that the mysterious ignition of the candles within the hall was merely a magic trick. In actuality, it was rather simple. An oil-soaked rope was lined across the wicks of multiple candles, so when one end of the rope was lit, the other candles would follow suit.

As for the unconscious guards, the journalist believed that the bandit called Zollo was actually a Gold ranked unarmed fighter. The shattered jaws of the two Silver ranked swordsmen was testament of that. In fact, there were signs that the guards were actually struck down by brute force, rather than being rendered unconscious by magic.

The journalist was of the opinion that the bandit troupe had merely intended to rob the winery. By making the servants drunk, they would erase much of the traces of them being there. The arrival of Viscount Sirwa and his mates was merely coincidental, and they ended up being the unlucky sacrificial lambs.

Zollo, the bandit, then turned his sights on the viscount and the others, as evidenced by them having been robbed clean and even deprived of their clothes. However, the journalist found it weird that four days after the case, Viscount Sirwa, his guards and some of his friends, were hanged by the gallows by the order of Teribo VII for unknown reasons.

The journalist felt that there was a far bigger conspiracy behind the case of

Luxcrimson Winery. Even if the ones involved wouldn't divulge anything, the journalist was confident that he could expose the truth.

Good luck to that brave journalist, thought Lorist.

He understood that Viscount Sirwa had been hanged the moment the Teribo Kingdom was aware of the disappearance of Master Mancheny. It seemed that the kingdom was intent on keeping the news under wraps while they investigated the disappearance in secret. Despite that, Lorist wasn't the slightest bit worried. After he finished dealing with some other matters, he would bring Master Mancheny and his family along with him back to the dominion. He believed that the Teribo Kingdom wouldn't even begin to suspect that a glass factory would start in the Northlands.

Currently, Master Mancheny and his family were in one of the rooms on the third floor which had been reserved by Lorist, and was having breakfast as well. There was no way that the Teribo Kingdom's agents would be able to find any trace of them. Lorist had at least that amount of confidence. When Lorist brought them into Morante City, he had them disguised as the family members of some of his guards, and entered the city just like the thousands of other servants going in and out of the city daily. They gathered at Red Grace Inn after making their way through the city gates without attracting the slightest bit of attention.

The only problem was that something seemed to have happened between Els and the lovely daughter of Master Mancheny when they pretended to be siblings during their entry to the city. From time to time, they would give each other yearning glances, which Lorist happened to notice. Even though Els was 16 years older than the girl, it didn't stop the two from feeling attracted to one another. Lorist could only hope that his brother's dreams would come true one day.

Lorist put the matters of the Teribo Kingdom at the back of his mind, and continued to read the other reports in the newspapers while enjoying his hearty breakfast.

Ahh, in the end, I'm still much more accustomed to the life here at Morante City.

The largest disparity between being at Morante City and being in the dominion was the flow of information. In Morante City, it wouldn't take long for one to find out about the recent happenings on Grindia. Even though the reports might be delayed by a few days or even a month, it was still better than not getting to know anything at all. Thanks to the wide influence of the trade union, journalists from Morante City could

visit many places to collect information without worrying about their safety.

As for the dominion of the house, even though it had undergone several developments during the past few years, and seemed to be on the road to prosperity, the flow of information there was as stunted as ever. Lorist remembered how he was blind to the happenings on Grindia a few years back when he spent all his time at the Northlands. He only got the occasional news from Count Kenmays, but most of them were just about the conflicts between the nobles at the royal court. He would at best have some rumors about the other things happening outside the Iblia Kingdom.

As a person who came from another world, Lorist understood the importance of information and intelligence. He intended to set up an intelligence network so that the house could grasp the changes of the status quo in the outside world. However, the largest difficulty in carrying that out was ensuring the safety of the intelligence agents. It was something that Lorist wasn't able to do just yet. Lorist thought back to how some of his messengers had been captured and enslaved by other dominion lords a few years prior, he couldn't afford the loss of agents like that.

However, now that he had access to Silowas Island, and the maritime transport it enabled, an avenue for interacting with the world outside the Northlands was finally open to him. Lorist resolved himself to put Lundmorde to good use when he returned. That fellow had been forced to marry seven wives, and he had already sired over ten children in just three years. Most of the time, he had to stay at home to tend to the whims of his wives and children.

Rumor had it that Lundmorde was slaving away for his wives and children. He even got the moniker of a saint when it came to treating women and children. His reputation in those fields was such that it was said that the moment he applied the salve, the sickness would disappear right away.

Once, when he met up with some of his fellow alumni, he cried out after drinking a lot and regretted not being careful with his lower body, ending up in the situation he found himself in now. Before he finished complaining, he was hauled back home to reflect on his mistakes by two of his wives. His fellow mates could only mourn for his suffering in silence.

He was a knight of the House after all, he couldn't afford to waste away like that. All seven of his wives had awakened their battleforce as well, and even had potential to be the leaders of the female unit. They were actually quite talented and able. Lorist

decided to have Lundmorde head to Morante City to start a herbalist clinic that would double as a base of operations for House Norton with a few of his wives. That way, he could gather information about the happenings all around Grindia, and even recruit much-needed talent for the house to stay ahead in terms of technology.

Lorist sighed as he wondered how long it would take for the dominion to achieve the level of prosperity Morante City had. It was definitely a daunting undertaking that would take a long time to achieve. Compared to the dominions of other noble houses, the dominion of House Norton was already better and more prosperous than most. For instance, Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin and Baron Felim all envied the dominion of the Nortons, given their understanding of their dominion. They were impressed that Lorist was so willing to invest so many gold Fordes in the development of the dominion and the improvement of his subjects' lives.

But to Lorist, the apparent prosperity of his dominion was only skin-deep. If it didn't persist in his efforts, then, over five or six generations, the dominion would return to its former state. He had many plans; establishing basic education to improve the skills of the folks in the dominion and increase their loyalty to the house was just one of them. He was also considering decreasing taxes. The Norton family had no need to oppress and exploit its subjects, unlike other noble families. There were many ways the family could prosper, and Lorist could use a number of tricks he learned from his past life to do so at any time he chose. However, to achieve his goal, he would have to put in much more effort.

Lorist laughed bitterly. Many of his plans wouldn't be able to be executed because of practical restrictions. In the case of education, if the family wasn't able to come up with a breakthrough to make paper, given the high price of beastskins, there was no way that the family would be able to sustain an education system. If he managed to obtain cheap paper like what he had in his past life, the house could not only improve the educational standard, they could also start their own newspapers. They would then be able to control public discourse, and instill in the peasantry a sense of pride in being the subjects of House Norton.

Lorist didn't notice Howard's arrival, given his state of deep thought.

"Milord, milord…" Howard called out.

"Oh, it's you. Why didn't you go to the library today?" asked Lorist after he snapped out of his thoughts.

Rolling his eyes, Howard said, "Milord, we've been to the library for the past few days and got to know what we need. It was you who told me that we don't have to go there anymore yesterday."

Lorist said apologetically, "Sorry, Howard. I was lost in thought just now. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"Milord, the person in charge of the shipyard you visited yesterday, Mister Millinor, is here. He said that he had to meet you to discuss something," said Howard.

"Oh, is there a problem with the ship I ordered? Have him come to the third floor, and tell Els not to let him see the Mancheny family," instructed Lorist.

"Understood, milord," said Howard as he left.

On the day before, Lorist had headed to the Wedeley Shipyard and struck an agreement with Millinor to have a large-class merchant vessel constructed at a price of 6500 gold Fordes. Lorist had paid 1000 gold Fordes as deposit. The construction of the ship would take four months. He also had to pay another 3000 gold Fordes after the main keel was laid down. The rest of the fees would be paid on the ship's completion.

In a few quick moments, Millinor arrived before Lorist.

"Welcome, Mister Millinor. I wonder what is so urgent that you have to see me in person so soon?" asked Lorist.

"My deepest apologies, Sir… Due to some factors out of our control, the Weledey Shipyard is unable to complete your order. This is your deposit and the payment for the voided agreement. I hope you forgive us, we have no choice but to cancel the agreement," said Millinor in a rushed manner, before he left without negotiating the possible reinstatement of the agreement at all.

Ten gold Forde notes each worth 100 gold Fordes were laid on the table. That was the deposit Lorist had paid. There was another sack filled with coins, 100 gold Fordes in total, ten percent of the deposit, paid as the compensation for the voided agreement. According to the order contract, if the shipyard was unable to carry out the agreement within ten days, the deposit would have to be returned with ten percent interest.

Within only three days, Lorist had gained an extra 100 gold Fordes. If Lorist was still

the same instructor working at Dawn Academy, he would've been so glad that he would lose sleep over it. However, he no longer regarded 100 gold Fordes with the weight a normal person would. He had come to Morante City to spend money, not to earn it.

With 100000 gold Fordes, Lorist had planned to purchase or order 12 large-class merchant vessels to form a trading fleet. However, he didn't expect that the first shipyard he contracted would default on the agreement.

Just as Lorist was pondering the 'uncontrollable factors' Millinor had mentioned, Howard knocked on the door to his room again and reported, "Milord three of the people in charge of other shipyards are here…"

After a few moments, the eight private shipyards with which Lorist placed his orders during the past six days after returning from the Teribo Kingdom all rejected it, with the same nonsensical reason. All of them paid the deposit back with an interest of 100 gold Fordes. After Lorist's intense questioning, one of the shipyards revealed a slight hint: "Your people have got on the bad side of a person we can't afford to offend."

Lorist wore a solemn expression as he thought, *who is behind all this? Who's this person that even the skilled shipwrights and laborers of the shipyards along Hidegold Bay didn't dare to offend?*

Lorist really couldn't recall anyone of note that he could've crossed.

"Els, go see Jindoz and ask him to look into this and find out who is acting against us. We need some kind of lead. As for the rest, don't leave the inn without a good reason. We have to keep our guard up right now," instructed Lorist.

A day later, Jindoz arrived at the Red Grace Inn. According to his investigation, it was the Chikdor Merchant guild that forced the shipyards to return Lorist's deposit to revoke the order. The person in charge of one of the shipyards was right. The Chikdor Merchant Guild was indeed someone they couldn't afford to offend.

The Chikdor Merchant Guild? Why would they want to interfere with my purchase of large-class merchant vessels? Didn't their president come to apologize to me already? Why would they act against me now, given that I'm backed by the Peterson Merchant Guild?

Lorist continued to think with his brow furrowed. He must've missed out on some key

variable. At that moment, Howard came over and reported, "Milord, President Peterson sent someone over to inform you to meet him at the guild headquarters. He has something urgent he needs to discuss with you."

Chapter 244
Shocking Developments

"Two days ago, the seven largest merchant guilds of the trade union had a discussion about implementing the nobility system. In principle, the guilds shouldn't be against it as presidents of the seven largest guilds like me will be entitled as dukes. The only problem was the enfeoffment of land.

"The original plan concerned the Falik Plains which had eight cities in total. Apart from Morante City, each of the seven other cities on the plains will be enfeoffed to one of the seven dukes. However, that territory was a little too small, and the Forde Merchant Guild which thrives on agriculture objected vehemently to that and even threatened to leave the trade union. That's why we had to abandon that plan.

"Even though the trade union had a wide sphere of influence, the only other place under its rule apart from the Falik Plains are the Calisto Mountains. In the end, it was decided that the Falik Plains and Morante City would be left untouched as they were the core of the trade union which the citizens depended on for emotional stability. Calisto Mountains would then be divided into 50 different dominions and enfeoffed to those of the rank of viscount and below. As for ranks above the count, they can only expand their land through their own efforts."

When Lorist arrived at the headquarters of the Peterson Merchant Guild, President Peterson didn't tell him anything about the matter regarding the cancelled ship orders. Instead, he began to talk about the seemingly unrelated nobility system that was pending implementation by the trade union. However, Lorist believed that President Peterson told him that for a good reason, so he resigned himself to pay attention.

"For example, Duke Lormo, of the Lormo Duchy, has been interested in joining the trade union ever since the dissolution of the Krissen Empire. I believe that the trade union will give him a chance this time around, on the condition that he revokes his dominion's independence, and his own sovereignty, and put the two provinces, the Yiwas and Puljas Provinces, under the trade union's jurisdiction. Only after that will Duke Lormo be made a duke of the trade union with Yiwas Province as his enfeoffed

land.

"As for the Puljas Province which borders the Falik Plains, it would become the dominion of Duke Forde. Mainly because the founder of the Forde Merchant Guild, Duke Forde Morante, and the six other heads of the largest merchant guilds, are credited with the formation of the merchant guild, it stands to reason that his descendants be given some benefits.

"As for the six other largest merchant guilds -- with the exception of the Riwald Merchant Guild, who have their sights on the weak Mobia Duchy, which is near the Calisto Mountains -- the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, the Mayflower Merchant Guild, the Wessia Merchant Guild, the Chikdor Merchant Guild, and us, the Peterson Merchant Guild, will be targeting the lands of the former Krissen Empire. The Peterson Merchant Guild is prepared to take over the northwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom and set up our dominion there.

"Yesterday, I have invited Mister Tim over for a discussion. He said that he would be willing to aid the guild by convincing the nobles of the northwestern area of the kingdom to take me as their senior noble after the formation of the dominion. After that, the nobles there, including House Tebri will become part of the nobility of the trade union."

Holy crap, the trade union is actually going to change the policies they have abided by for more than 100 years... Now that they're powerful enough, they've spread their wings and bared their fangs towards the territories formerly belonging to the empire, and are prepared to swallow as much as their appetite allows...

Even Tim, who had been made a noble through Lorist's efforts, had changed sides and joined the trade union without so much as a notification. It was apparent that he was already completely committed to his new cause, neglecting all the favors he had owed in a naked act of betrayal.

At that moment, Lorist's mind was in turmoil. He felt as if there were ten thousand horses stampeding right in front of him. His hand holding the teacup shook slightly. This wasn't a small change, but rather a history-defining development!

The implementation of the nobility system by the trade union had changed them, the harmless bunny, into a bloodthirsty tiger with its mouth agape. Even though their current targets used to be part of the Krissen Empire, which had been their sworn

enemies for the past century, it only applied to the seven largest merchant guilds of the union. As President Peterson had said, anyone who wanted titles would have to fight and conquer their own territory. So, what of the second to third-rate merchant guilds? Who would they target next?

With the implementation of the nobility system, Grindia would no longer know peace. Even though the trade union wasn't an empire, it was possibly more powerful than one. Whether it be wealth, population, or influence, they surpassed the Krissen Empire in all regards. They were not unlike a gigantic, invincible titan.

Lorist suddenly thought of the ambitious Second Highness. The man was filled with confidence in his 300000 troops. He was only waiting for his father's passing to engage in the effort to reunite the empire.

Poor Second Highness, it seems that you've missed the opportune time to reunite the empire, and wasted a year of your time. 300000 soldiers… Haha, what a joke…

Trying hard to keep his shock in check, Lorist asked calmly, "President Peterson, was Duke Lormo willing to accept the conditions of the trade union? After all, he is the head of a duchy…"

President Peterson laughed and said, "Sometimes, situations are beyond the control of man. He doesn't have a choice but to accept our conditions. In fact, several influential nobles within the Lormo Duchy were already on bad terms with the duke. Had it not been for our mediation, civil war would have broken out long ago. Even though the trade union accepts his participation, and he would lose his status as the head of the duchy, it will be a kind of release for him.

"Additionally, the conditions we are offering him benefit him quite a lot. Not only did we give him a loan of 5 million gold Fordes that's interest free for up to ten years, we even sent someone to help him form his own merchant guild so that he can gain observer status in the high council. As long as he pays back the loan, he will also be able to be one of the core members of the council, and his merchant guild will be the eighth largest in the union."

Darn, that's a new milestone for betraying one's own country for power!

Everyone would feel that Duke Lormo got a good deal for selling away his duchy. The trade union was incredibly sincere and generous with its conditions. To Duke Lormo,

becoming the head of the eighth merchant guild in the high council of the trade union was nothing short of a boost in status. Similarly, that was also the ambition of many of the lesser merchant guilds within the union.

No, wait. This is all a ruse, realized Lorist. *Duke Lormo is a goner. The loan of 5 million gold Fordes is truly an alluring trap. If he doesn't pay it back within ten years, Duke Lormo would have to liquidate his assets to pay back the loan according to the regulations of the trade union. In other words, he would be declared bankrupt and his dreams of becoming the eighth member of the high council would be dashed.*

There was no way that the seven largest merchant guilds would be willing to further divide their benefits to be given to someone else. Otherwise, there would've been a merchant guild or two that would attain the same status as the big seven over the course of almost 200 years. When Lorist was studying at Dawn Academy, he had heard a rumor about how a merchant guild would be secretly assaulted and ruined upon expanding their businesses beyond the scope of those of the seven largest guilds. Most of the smart ones within the trade union understood that 'rule'.

Thankfully, my dominion is within the Northlands and on Silowas Island. I won't have to worry about interacting with these sly hegemons anytime soon, cheered Lorist secretly.

But what President Peterson said next almost caused him to jump in shock.

"Apart from us, the Peterson Merchant Guild, the others including the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, the Mayflower Merchant Guild, and the Wessia Merchant Guild will be aiming to conquer the Redlis Kingdom for territory. That's because the union understands that the Redlis Kingdom is near its point of collapse after the incessant attacks of the Andinaq Kingdom's Second Highness. To prevent another nation like the Krissen Empire from being formed and threatening our own safety, the trade union has decided to intervene in that conflict to ruin the Second Highness's plan to reunite the empire.

"The following will be related to you, Brother Locke. The Chikdor Merchant Guild is intent on taking your dominion at Silowas Island, and their plan is supported by the rest within the union. As long as they have Silowas Island, the Chikdor Merchant Guild will be able to control the sea trading routes all the way from Hidegold Bay to the northern coasts. They will become the true rulers of the sea. Even though I knew that the island was your dominion, I wasn't able to object to it. The circumstances didn't permit my objection.

"The Chikdor Merchant Guild is already aware of your true identity, and they have even suggested to make you give them the island by force. I have vehemently objected to their methods. Even if we can't be considered friends, you are still my guest. Additionally, the trade union's reputation would be sullied if such a thing was carried out. The other merchant guilds agreed with me, and advised the Chikdor Merchant Guild against starting a conflict with you in Morante City.

"So far, your safety within the city is guaranteed. However, the moment you depart, I suspect the Chikdor Merchant Guild will attack you at sea. Brother Locke, I suggest that you abandon your ship and travel on land. It's safer that way. The strength of the Chikdor Merchant Guild is most pronounced at sea, but they're rather weak on land. Given your skills, you'll definitely have an easier time escaping.

"Please understand that I am unable to help you, Brother Locke. This is the decision of the union. Other than that, the Chikdor Merchant Guild will be giving control of the trade route from Hidegold Bay to the dominion of Viscount Tebri to the Peterson Merchant Guild, and promised that they wouldn't interfere with that. In exchange, we must take a neutral stance between you and them and won't aid any side. Being able to inform you of this news is already the best I can do."

Lorist wanted to curse out loud when he heard all that.

'When trouble strikes, there's nowhere to hide'. The Chikdor Merchant Guild must have realized the strategic location of Silowas Island. It's no surprise that some sharp minds out there have realized the same things I did.

Controlling Silowas Island would be akin to controlling everything from Hidegold Bay to the northern seas. It was no joke to say that whoever controlled Silowas Island was the ruler of the northern seas.

"Brother Locke, if you don't mind, I can help you negotiate with the Chikdor Merchant Guild. That way, you can take a page from Duke Lormo's book and sell the island to the Chikdor Merchant Guild. We'll definitely make sure that you won't lose out on that deal. Also, I think that's the ideal way for you to avoid conflict. After all, the dominion of your house is located in the Northlands, and through selling Silowas Island for a good price, you can gain the favor of the trade union as well as develop your dominion with those funds," advised President Peterson.

Lorist shook his head calmly and said, "Thank you for your kind intentions, president.

However, House Norton prides itself in its military background. We are not afraid of the threat of war. Let's forget about selling the island as well. If the Chikdor Merchant Guild intends to take Silowas Island, the dominion of my house, then they better be ready to pay for it with tens of thousands of lives. House Norton will definitely make them aware of the consequences of provoking the Raging Bear of the Northlands."

Silowas Island was crucial in Lorist's plans for the house's future. Losing it would cut the family off from its prosperous future, this is what drove Lorist to be completely unwilling to compromise.

Since the trade union is going to implement a nobility system and involve House Norton in its troubles, then bring it on. The one thing my house doesn't fear is war.

"Brother Locke, I hope you consider this thoroughly. The Chikdor Merchant Guild is one of the strongest forces at sea. For the other guilds like us, even though we have fleets, the scale of those fleets can't possibly compare to those of the Chikdor Merchant Guild. Not only do they have seven large-scale long distance merchant fleets, including near a thousand warships, and more than ten thousand sailors, they also have great influence over the trade union's Invincible Fleet, as well as the navy of the Hanayabarta and Shyarsia kingdoms. Silowas Island is in the middle of the ocean. I'm afraid your conflict with the Chikdor Merchant Guild will end in your defeat…"

President Peterson felt that Lorist was just being stubborn as a result of his youth and inexperience. Compared with the Chikdor Merchant Guild, Lorist didn't even have a single large-class merchant vessel for show. He was like an infant that challenged a giant to a one-on-one battle, and the result of it was all too predictable. To him, Lorist's futile resistance would only bring unnecessary casualties to House Norton.

But little did he know that the naval superiority of the Chikdor Merchant Guild made Lorist even more resolved. Lorist realized that as long as he was able to trump the Chikdor Merchant Guild, House Norton would become the new ruler of the sea. Perhaps, he would have a far easier time dealing with the other merchant guilds at sea than on land.

"President, when will the trade union execute the nobility system?" asked Lorist.

"It will be done after winter on the 18th day of the 3rd month next year. That is the 175th anniversary for the formation of the Forde Trade Union. Duke Lormo will also become part of the trade union on that day, and will be given title then. At the same

time, over a hundred people who have contributed to the trade union will be given their titles and enfeoffed their lands," replied President Peterson.

"President, the various duchies and kingdoms neighboring the trade union have always been part of the alliance with the trade union and can be considered to be under their influence. During the past century, they've also provided lots of help to resist the invasion of the Krissen Empire, thus ensuring the union's victory.

"Now that the trade union is going to implement a nobility system, apart from the largest merchant guilds who have their sights on the Redlis Kingdom, what of the territories of the other lesser merchant guilds who will be similarly given titles? Won't their conquest for territory cause turmoil and unrest among the other kingdoms and duchies neighboring the trade union?" asked Lorist.

The president nodded and said, "The nobility system has been used all over Grindia for more than a millennium. This kind of system has long been engraved within the hearts of Grindians, and gaining a piece of hereditary land for one's descendants has always been one of the greatest dreams one can have. Even though the trade union is second to none on the continent when trading and dealing with the nobles of the duchies and kingdoms, there is an unspoken feeling of inferiority inflicted upon us. It's one of the main reasons the trade union is implementing the nobility system.

"The most troubling part of that would be the enfeoffment of land. Without land, the titles one holds would be only honorary ones. Actually, some have expressed their desires to absorb the smaller nations two years back as the foundation for the new nobility system. However, the high council felt that it would affect the union's reputation too badly. They would become the public enemy named alongside the Krissen Empire. The proposal was denied in the end.

"This time, the high council has declared that those who wish to conquer their own territory must do so only within the Redlis and Andinaq kingdoms, since there's more than enough land over there. It would also extinguish any chances of the Krissen Empire reuniting and rising again, thus allowing the trade union to no longer worry about anything. The neighboring nations won't be too worried about their own safety following the implementation of the trade union's nobility system either.

"As a result, the land all the way from the Great Andalou Plains to the Redlis Kingdom would become the territory to be enfeoffed by the trade union. That's also one of the factors the Chikdor Merchant Guild wants your Silowas Island. Predictably, the trade

union will not allow Silowas Island, which can pose a threat to the coasts of the Great Andalou Plains, to be out of the union's control."

Finally, President Peterson sincerely said to Lorist, "Brother Locke, don't think that just because it's only the end of the 11th month that everything will only begin in 3 or so months. Actually, a lot of preparatory work will have to be done during the months leading up to the aforementioned date. In a few days, Duke Lormo will be signing the agreement to accept the conditions of the trade union and relinquish the independence of his duchy.

"The Riwald Merchant Guild also hopes that they'll be able to take the Mobia Kingdom into the trade union just like the Lormo Duchy. The rest, including the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, the Wessia Merchant Guild, and the Mayflower Merchant Guild will be building up the military force of the Redlis Kingdom one way or another. As long as they can fight the 300000 soldiers of the Second Highness and cause immense damage to both sides, the various merchant guilds of the trade union can swoop in for the spoils of battle and begin conquering their territory.

"I think that when one's might can't compare to one's foe, one must endure and compromise, lest one make the irrational choice that will devastate one's own house. Brother Locke, please reconsider my suggestion. It is not my wish to start conflict easily. Additionally, sea battles are very different from land battles, and the Chikdor Merchant Guild is no stranger to the former, with their great experience and advantage in numbers. The cancellation of your ship orders during the past few days is also one of the tactics used by the Chikdor Merchant Guild to apply pressure to you."

Lorist replied solemnly, "Alright, president. I will definitely consider this matter seriously."

Chapter 245
Two Letters

When he returned from the Peterson Merchant Guild, Lorist locked himself in the room and burned the midnight oil.

When Howard opened the door the next morning, he saw Lorist with his eyes slightly red, wearing a pale look of fatigue.

"Milord…" mumbled Howard worriedly.

Howard and Els had accompanied Lorist to the Peterson Merchant Guild the day before. Even though they stood guard outside, they were roughly able to hear about how the Chikdor Merchant Guild had goals towards getting Silowas Island, which belonged to House Norton. When they paid attention, they also heard President Peterson advising Lorist not to start an all-out conflict with the guild for the sake of honor, and said that the best option was to sell the island to them.

When they returned, all of the guards, including Josk, got to hear the news. They were all emotionally charged. It was as though they had been insulted themselves. A merchant guild will never be allowed to strongarm House Norton. They all expressed that they'd rather die than let the dominion of the house be sold out.

Lorist, on the other hand, wore a dark expression. He asked for the maps of Morante City, the Forde Trade Union, as well as those of the neighboring nations. He locked himself in his room after receiving them, and only emerged the next day.

"Don't worry, Howard. Since I'm taller than you, if the sky falls, I'll be the first one to bear the burden. This is no big deal. Get me a basin of water to wash my face with," said Lorist, smiling as he stroked Howard's hair.

As the ice-cold linen cloth was wrapped around his face, Lorist shivered and felt the fatigue that had built up during the night drain away in an instant.

The implementation of the nobility system has nothing to do with me. But they shouldn't have set their sights on me. I only want to continue farming and developing the dominion

without offending anyone, but those fools just keep knocking at my door one after another. 'A tame horse will be mounted, and a gentle man will be bullied.' The idioms of my past life truly make sense. Since that's the case, bring it. So, what if they have seven large-class merchant vessels, thousands of armed ships, and 10000 plus sailors? To me, all of them are merely small fry!

"Actually, some have expressed their desires to absorb the smaller nations two years back as the foundation for the new nobility system."

The words uttered by President Peterson yesterday echoed in Lorist's head.

He revealed an insulting smile.

So, the trade union intends to turn the sights of those they entitle to the lands of the Redlis and Andinaq Kingdoms… Do they really think it will be that simple? Merchants are still merchants at the end of the day. And it is in their nature to avoid losses to gain profit. There's no way that they'll ignore the delicious cake right next to them and go all the way to an unfamiliar land to bite on bones… Do they think that everyone within the union are as far-sighted as the seven big guilds?

I guess I'll give you guys a small push and let you know what a situation beyond man's control is like. I refuse to believe that you won't take a bite when I bring that delicacy straight to your mouth…

"Howard, have Master Mancheny come to my room," instructed Lorist.

At noon, after lunch, Lorist headed to the Dawn Academy and bid farewell to all the instructors and professors he knew. He said that he would be leaving Morante City in two days and also went to bid Academy Head Levins farewell.

When Lorist left, Levins and Blademaster Claude looked at the two letters left on the table as their faces wrinkled, giving off a troubled look. Those letters were like Pandora's boxes, ready to unleash chaos upon the world.

There was only one good way to deal with the letters, and that was to burn them and forget that they ever existed. However, upon considering the potential profit of possibly up to a million gold Fordes, Academy Head Levins made his decision. "This is not something that our academy alone can bear. Have the other academy heads invited over here. We'll split the profit and divide the risks among ourselves…"

Two days later, a piece of shocking news rocked the whole of Morante City and spread throughout Falik Plains, eventually reaching the various nations neighboring the union.

The headline of the most distributed publication, Morante Daily, read: **The Truth!**

The report began referring back to the case of Luxcrimson Winery which transpired within the Teribo Kingdom, as well as true reason behind the execution of Viscount Sirwa, and some others on the order of Teribo VII in front of the palace. The report stated that a glassmith called Mancheny had been kidnapped by the bandits because of Viscount Sirwa's error. That meant that the secret of glass production which the Teribo Kingdom had labored to keep for over two centuries had already been leaked.

The report also stated that a few students from various academies within Morante City managed to rescue a heavily-injured man, who turned out to be Master Mancheny who managed to escape from the bandits that captured him. Due to his injuries, Mancheny had perished despite the emergency medical treatment he had been given.

However, Master Mancheny loathed the Teribo Kingdom greatly. He said that he had worked hard for 32 years in glass-working for the kingdom, yet he wasn't able to receive its protection, causing his family to fall into ruin. It was through his testimony that the rest got to know about how the glassmith was forced to marry off his daughter to the viscount, which led to his eventual kidnapping in the first place.

Given that his daughter was in the hands of the bandits, Master Mancheny no longer felt any will to live. Before his death, he penned two letters, one of which contained the ingredients and procedures for green glass production, and another for oil glass. He hoped that the letters would cause the secret of glass production to be spread throughout Grindia. This would complete his revenge against Viscount Sirwa for forcing his hand, and the Teribo Kingdom for its cruel indifference to his plight.

Naturally, Master Mancheny wasn't aware of the hanging of Viscount Sirwa by Teribo VII. The letters he wrote troubled the students greatly. They eventually decided to bring the letters back to their academies to let them handle the matter.

After some deliberation, the heads of the academies of Morante City had come to the decision to auction off the letters. They would use the profits gained from the auction to reward the adventurous students, and make a fund in Master Mancheny's name for studious students who lacked the opportunity to further their studies because of their

poor family background. This would allow the academies to honour the tragedy that befell the Mancheny family.

The report also stated that the Mayflower Merchant Guild would be hosting the auction for the two letters on the 5th day of the 12th month. The starting bid for each letter would be a million gold Fordes.

The Morante Daily article shocked the merchant guilds, and the trade union's neighboring countries, into a stupor. Every one of them was well aware that the Teribo Kingdom was the richest nation after the Forde Trade Union. They made more than 3 million gold Fordes annually from their glass exports alone. The country's royal family was said to be the richest on the whole of the Grindian continent.

With the glass production process leaked, should one nation be able to obtain either letter, the profit they would enjoy would no doubt increase by at least one million gold Fordes annually. To the various nations and merchant guilds, this was an incredible opportunity to make a huge profit. There were less than eight days until the 5th day of the 12th month, and many people flocked to Morante City as the date approached.

The whole of the Forde Trade Union had been embroiled in turmoil as a result of those two letters. Morante City was the eye of the storm. The Mayflower Merchant Guild was even more troubled. They were the hosts of the auction, and became everyone else's target.

Had it been any weaker power, the guild's heads would have taken the letter for themselves and kept it a secret. The profit they could gain from it was not something to scoff at.

But the people that had come to them with this proposal were the heads of eight of the ten greatest academies on the whole of the continent. No matter how brave the heads of the Mayflower Merchant Guild were, they wouldn't dare to take the letters for themselves. This would still be the case even if the eight academies had not each sent a blademaster to watch over the letters. Protecting the letter was only a pretense, of course, they were actually there to guard against any untoward action by the Mayflower Merchant Guild.

Academy Head Levins had said to the seven other academy heads, "There's no way we can begin producing glass ourselves. If we do, we'll definitely become the target of others. We can only profit off this once. I trust that both these letters are worth more

than 8 million gold Fordes. This kind of sum is not one that the Dawn Academy can swallow alone. We have no choice but to find conspirators that will join in. After the auction, each academy will receive a million gold Fordes. Are you guys in or not?"

While one academy alone wouldn't be able to go against the seven largest merchant guilds in the trade union, a coalition of eight academies would be left untouched. Even though those academies were ranked among the top ten in Grindia, it was already an incredible feat for them to make a profit of tens of thousands of gold Fordes per year. Sometimes, they would even operate at a loss.

Academy Head Levins had once described the accounts of the academy to Lorist. The most of the Dawn Academy's income came from accepting donations. That was why the academy head wanted Lorist to help with the battleforce awakening of the son of President Peterson no matter what, even though that seemed an almost impossible task at first.

This auction, however, gave them the opportunity to gain a million gold Fordes in one go. The other seven academy heads were unanimous in their decision. For them to be able to make it to their current positions, they had to be at least as sly as Academy Head Levins. They were well aware that they would only be able to make it out of this matter unscathed if they united. Thus, each academy sent out one Blademaster. A unit of eight Blademasters was not one that could be scoffed at. It was almost guaranteed that nobody would be able to do anything to those letters.

When the Morante Daily's article was delivered to the king of the Teribo Kingdom, the king flipped out in anger and smashed whatever he could get his hands on. After that, he summoned his officials and came up with three countermeasures after four hours of discussion.

First, the kingdom would send their envoys to the Forde Trade Union to have them hand over the two letters.

Second, the kingdom would mobilize its 50000-strong army to the borders to let the trade union witness the lengths to which the Teribo Kingdom would go to maintain control of the glass production.

Third, the kingdom would send seven Blademasters with 10 million gold Fordes to Morante City to see whether the Mayflower Merchant Guild was willing to sell the letters for that amount of money.

If they weren't willing to sell them, Teribo VII said, "If we are unable to get those two letters back, we must do all we can to destroy them. Glass production is how the kingdom was able to build itself up. I will definitely not allow any other nation, house or merchant guild to grasp its secrets…"

As everyone's attention was focused on the two letters in the hands of the Mayflower Merchant Guild, on the night of the 34th day of the 11th month, Lorist headed to the port of the Peterson Merchant Guild with his guards, Josk, Howard, Dulles, and Master Mancheny's family, using four carriages.

A black-colored carriage could be seen waiting at the port. Upon noticing Lorist and the rest's arrival, Els and two other guards hopped out of the carriage with two linen sacks, before they carefully loaded the sacks onto the Flying Fish of Dawn.

The sacks appeared to contain people. The guild's guards wanted to investigate, but were stopped by the person in charge of the port.

"We didn't see anything, understood?" said he solemnly.

Lorist then bid Dulles farewell, "Dulles, there are three reasons for you to remain here at Morante City. First, take note of the effects of the two letters, and try to secretly escalate the problem. Second, recruit talented people and head to the dominion of Viscount Tebri on the ships of the Peterson Merchant Guild when the time comes. We will pick you up over there. Third, begin to collect intelligence on the Chikdor Merchant Guild. They will soon become an enemy we will have to face."

"Understood, milord. I will execute your will accordingly," Dulles answered with his chest puffed out, "Milord, please be careful on your way back."

Lorist patted Dulles's shoulder before heading towards the person in charge of the port. He took out a huge sack of coins and handed it to him. "This is my thanks for your tolerating the troubles we caused over here. Also, help us bid our farewells to the president. As the matters of my dominion are incredibly urgent, I won't have time to go thank him myself."

The person in charge was stunned when he got hold of the sack. Based on the weight, he surmised that there was at least 100 gold Fordes within. He couldn't quite hear what Lorist was saying due to his shock and could only mumble 'yes' nonstop. When the Flying Fish of Dawn departed, he was waving his hands nonstop to bid them

farewell.

As the skies brightened, Young Master Moribak of the Chikdor Merchant Guild threw a fit of rage.

"What did you say?! Count Norton left Hidegold Bay around two in the morning?! What the hell is going on with our lookout?! You said he fell asleep? Very well, then he shall not wake for the rest of his life. Have the bird-breeders release some sea swallows immediately to notify the second and third interception fleets of this news. Have the first interception fleet begin pursuit. No matter what, we must have that ship! Count Norton must be brought before me! What are you waiting for?! Scram!"

"Understood, third young master."

Chapter 246
Blockade at Sea

The purplish tint of dawn covered the whole sky. The endless seas turned red under it. The Flying Fish of Dawn was cruising at full sail, riding the winds and waves.

"Milord, Professor Balbo and his maidservant are awake. Right now, they're feeling rather confused and agitated," reported Howard as he got onto the deck.

Els and the guards had brought Professor Balbo -- the man who had cracked open the secrets of dwarven gunpowder -- and his maidservant, Swila, onboard the previous night in two sacks.

They had learned that the professor had no children, and had yet to build a family through Els's mate and current head of the syndicate, Jindoz. He did, however, have a young widow by his side. She had served as his personal maidservant for more than 20 years.

According to Jindoz, the relationship between Professor Balbo and Swila was a little ambiguous. Perhaps the difference in their status made the professor hesitate to take her as his wife. Despite this possible hesitation, they were quite close, to the point that the professor gave Swila his entire salary and let her manage his life.

Venus Academy ranked rather low when compared to other academies within Morante City. They were around 21st on the rankings. Professor Balbo's salary was also merely 3 gold Fordes a month. Coupled with the professor's tendency to research weird things, which cost him quite a bit, he didn't live a lavish life. Additionally, the professor didn't really like his job at the academy. He had expressed a desire to change his occupation more than once.

Initially, Lorist thought that it would be a piece of cake for him to recruit Professor Balbo. Little did he know that the professor was actually an advocate of liberty, and hated nobles to the bone. Lorist was even harshly condemned when he made a personal visit, and was chased out of the house by the professor with a broom.

Even though Lorist didn't know what grievances the professor might have with nobles,

the limited amount of time he had didn't allow him to play around with the professor. He ordered Els to take a few men and knock the professor and his maidservant out cold. By the time they woke up, they would already be onboard and far out to sea. They would have no choice but to follow Lorist then.

"Alright, I'll go check on him and try to calm him down," said Lorist.

He didn't notice how Howard was rolling his eyes out of his sight.

The professor wasn't just agitated, he was on the verge of panicking! That was especially the case when he saw Lorist and realised why he was at sea. In a fit of rage, he uttered all the expletives he knew, much to the awe of those present, who found it hard to believe that a learned professor of an academy would act the way he did.

When the professor stopped to take a breath, Lorist said, "Professor Balbo, I didn't bear any ill intentions when I invited you here. I just want…"

"Forget it. I won't do as you wish. No matter what you do to me, I won't agree to your demands, you damned…"

The professor was not in the mood to hear what Lorist had to say. After that, he continued his cursing and even resorted to attacking Lorist personally by comparing his intelligence to that of a mule.

Lorist merely pretended he didn't hear all that, and let the professor continue. He looked at the maidservant Swila, and found that she was a little seasick. He quickly instructed Howard, who was standing outside the cabin, to bring some medicine from his cabin. He also had him make some tea for the professor to moisten his dry throat.

The professor was greatly annoyed at Lorist's thick skin. He had thought that he could anger Lorist to the point that he would give him a beating. The beating would give him the chance to prove his resolve. But Lorist simply ignored him completely, and even began to tend to his seasick maidservant.

"What in the world do you want, a ransom? I'm just a poor professor and I don't have much. Or is it knowledge? There are so many professors in Morante City who are far more accomplished than me for that. And didn't you hear about my misgivings with the academy? In the eyes of other professors, I'm just a weird, stubborn guy, who puts his efforts in researching oddities instead of proper fields of studies," said the professor after he took a few sips of his tea.

This time around, he didn't curse, and only held great suspicion of Lorist's intentions.

Lorist smiled. He was happy to finally have a chance to communicate with the professor.

"Professor Balbo, the reason I've looked for you is for the sake of gunpowder," said he.

"The dwarven gunpowder?" Professor Balbo muttered with suspicion, "That project of mine has long been completed. It was published in the journal last year. Didn't the Morante Daily write an article about it? You should be able to find it in a library. Everything's reported in the article and nothing was kept from them."

"No, professor, what I'm interested in is what you said about there being room for improvement. What I want is the perfected form of it."

The professor shrugged and said, "Then you should go look for the dwarves and get a ton of saltpeter from them. Only then can experiments be performed to refine the formula to perfection. The problem is that there is no saltpeter ore to be found in the human realm. Those shorties are also unwilling to sell any to us…"

After that, the professor cursed a few more times. But this time around, the target for his profanity were the dwarves.

"Professor, I don't have any saltpeter either. But I will be able to provide huge amounts of the nitrite you'll need for the experiments. That's the reason why I invited you to come with me," said Lorist.

"That's impossible!" the professor exclaimed in shock, "How are you able to procure so much nitrite? If you could, you should've told me that the first time you came to see me…"

Lorist smiled and shook his head before he said, "Professor, you must understand that gunpowder is an incredibly destructive substance and even has the potential to overturn the battleforce-driven world of Grindia. I don't want to become an eyesore for those involved. Nature on the other hand, is full of wonders. Even though saltpeter ore cannot be found in the human realm, I have a method that I can use to gather the nitrite that's found within saltpeter. So far, only I have noticed that method. If you're patient, you will be told the method when you arrive at the dominion of my house."

"Can't you just tell me about it here?" asked the professor impatiently.

Lorist shook his head.

The professor glared hatefully at Lorist, but he merely smiled in return.

"Fine, I'll trust you just this once. You better not be lying," said the professor in resignation.

There wasn't much he could do anyway, since they had already set sail. There was nowhere for him to run to.

"Ships sighted up ahead, battlestations!" shouted the lookout.

"Professor Balbo, Miss Swila, please rest well for a few days on the ship and enjoy the view. When we reach the dominion, I trust that you'll come to understand that not all nobles are that darned. If you have anything you need, just notify the guards here. I will satisfy your demands to the best of my ability. Well, I'll have to take my leave for now," Lorist said as he lowered his head and rushed out onto the ship's deck.

"There are two large-class, three-masted merchant vessels, four middle-class, two-masted merchant vessels, and six middle-class, two-masted armed ships heading our way in a fan formation! They seem to bear hostile intent! No, wait, they're flying the sword and barrel flag! They're the fleet of the Chikdor Merchant Guild! They're the enemy!"

As the lookout continued to shout at the top of his voice, the ships appeared clearer and clearer in his vision.

Lorist got onto the deck quickly, and saw Old Jack mumbling while using a weirdly-shaped ruler to measure a rope that was left flying freely on one mast.

"Captain!" Old Jack called out, "We're traveling against the winds at only eight knots while those bastards over there are traveling with the wind. Half of them are fast-sailing ships and they're almost traveling at ten knots! Based on that, there's no way we'll be able to carry out huge turns as evasive maneuvers. They'll be right on our tail in ten minutes or so."

"What's going on?" Lorist shouted.

"Milord, it's obvious that those Chikdor ships over there aren't coming in peace. Their commander of the fleet is also really experienced. They've laid their formation in

preparation to capture us. No matter which direction we rush towards, we'll end up being sandwiched by their ships. The moment they destroy our sails with their ranged weapons, this ship will no longer be able to unleash its potential in speed, and we'll be at their mercy. I had wanted to turn tail to escape, but the keel of our ship is too deep in the water, which means that we'll have to make a huge turn to change direction. By then, the enemy will already be next to us," explained Captain Wilson.

"Evade the two large ships first. Travel in a Z-shaped path and pass between the two ships on our left. Josk, shoot down the sails of those two ships. Els, use fire bolts with the ballistae, and have them fire at will against those ships," decided Lorist after giving it some thought.

Josk stood at the bow of the ship with his green longbow curved into a full moon. A thunderous twang rang out as a bolt of green was let loose from Josk's hand. In a flash, the two-masted ship sailing at breakneck speeds towards them roughly 60 meters away seemed to have been hit by an invisible fist. The mast at the back of the ship wobbled twice before it collapsed forward.

Josk had broken a ship's mast with only one arrow. The middle-class ship slowed down after that, and even began to twirl around in the sea in circles, causing a mess to break out on board. It opened a gap in the formation that Lorist's ship could use to pass through.

As Josk began aiming at the next ship, it began to move evasively, zig-zagging back and forth. Some of the crew even gathered at the front of the ship and began to fire their own arrows in an attempt to distract Josk's aiming.

Josk calmed himself and treated the arrows that were flying at him as if they weren't there. However, his second arrow only brushed past the mast he was aiming at without causing it any damage. The crew cheered at his failure. The distance between the two ships had decreased to less than 40 meters. Lorist was already able to see the crew of the enemy ships loading their large ballistae and lighting their flaming projectiles clearly. They were preparing to destroy the sails.

Josk took a deep breath before his bow twanged again. The crew of his target ship was sent into another fit of terror. Four to five of the sailors at the front of the ship, who were firing with their bows, clutched their throats before collapsing lifelessly. Not one of the sailors at the front of the ship remained standing. Feeling the sudden emptiness left by their collapsed comrades, the remaining sailors looked for a place to hide

hurriedly. They hadn't expected the enemy's Gold ranked marksman to be this powerful. The skill he showed could almost be considered divine and out of reach of mortal men.

A loud cry of terror rang out as two of the lower sails of the two-masted ship began to contort when the wind blew against it. The four arrows Josk just fired had broken the knot holding them in place. The sails fell on the tub containing the flaming balls, and caught fire. Smoke began to billow from the approaching ship. The lookout in the crow's nest stared at the flames for a moment before jumping into the ocean, desperate to escape his fiery fate.

Captain Wilson turned the wheel hurriedly, and directed the Flying Fish of Dawn past the flaming ship. They had successfully broken out of the Chikdor Merchant Guild's blockade. By the time the other ships turned around against the wind to give chase, the Flying Fish of Dawn would have long left them in the dust.

"Release!" Roughly 100 meters away at the deck of one of the large-class, three-masted ship, five balls of fire were launched from the boat. The ballistae didn't have the range, though; the balls splashed into the water a dozen meters short of the Flying Fish of Dawn.

A brutish, purple-faced man looked to the Flying Fish of Dawn in the distance and calmly said, "Don't fire any more fireballs, it's a waste if they're not in range. Send out the sea swallows to inform the third young master of our failure. Also, inform the third interception fleet and have them be careful of the impressive Gold ranked marksman. It was due to that marksman alone that they were able to break through our blockade and cause us to lose a ship. Leave one ship behind to save the survivors. As for the rest, turn around and tail them. I hope the third interception fleet will not disappoint us."

"Understood, Admiral," said a shipmate before he hurried to relay the orders.

Nearby, another huge man asked, "Elder brother, that ship is incredibly weird, just like a loach. It's too swift and sneaky and will be hard for us to catch up to."

"No worries, we'll just do what we can. The third young master was unable to forget his desire to possess that ship precisely because of its speed. Had the ship stopped and agreed to ferry the third young master to Morante City, he wouldn't have been eliminated as a candidate for succession. The third interception fleet has Blademaster Kumori with them, and their admiral is also incredibly experienced. If they receive our

report, they will know how to deal with that ship. And if it turns back in an attempt to escape, we'll be right behind it. It's impossible for them to escape."

Sounds of cheering echoed on the empty sea from the Flying Fish of Dawn. The marines and guards were elated that they were able to evade their enemy without a single casualty, and were incredibly spirited.

Lorist looked at the flaming balls that fell into the ocean behind them and furrowed his brow as he asked, "What are those?"

Captain Wilson turned back and was just in time to see the last ball fall into the ocean. "Oh, that's a fireball, milord. It's the main ranged weapon used at sea. It's a bunch of mixed clay, fine sand, some hemp, and fuel. It's held together by wine glue. It's set aflame before being placed on a large ballista and fired. Its range is roughly 100 meters.

"It's usually fine if those things don't hit us. But if they do, it'll be really troublesome. The flames can't be put out simply by dousing it with water and it'll roll all over the place on the ship. Sometimes a single lucky shot will be able to set a whole ship on fire. I've asked in the past why our ships weren't outfitted with those, but the response I received was that those are too old-fashioned and that we have even better and more advanced ranged weaponry."

Just as Lorist was about to say something, he could hear Els curse as he walked out onto the deck.

"Milord, these steel ballistae are not of much use at all," said Els.

"What's going on? Is there a problem?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, even though we can shoot far with the ballistae, we aren't able to aim accurately. We're not on land and the ship frequently heaves up and down. Also, our targets aren't soldier formations which we can easily hit by roughly aiming in that direction. Ships at 200 or so meters away are only as large as a palm, and they're located quite far from each other, making them incredibly hard to hit. Of the ten shots I made, only 2 hit their targets. One of them merely landed on the ship without causing much damage while the other pierced a hole through their sail and is nowhere to be seen," complained Els.

Lorist realized with shock that he had taken the whole thing too lightly. He understood

now that the ballistae used on carriages were unfit for use at sea, and were even inferior to the flaming balls used by the Chikdor Merchant Guild's fleet.

"Milord, the ideal combat distance at sea is around 30 to 50 meters. Beyond that, half of the shots fired will have to depend on luck alone. After all, we're all in the ocean and moving nonstop. A long firing distance does not offer much advantage. The most common mode of combat at sea is boarding and fighting up close. If the enemy has advantage in numbers, ranged attacks won't help us much either," added Captain Wilson.

Lorist nodded and said, "Thank you for your pointers, captain. When we arrive home, let's have another discussion about which armaments are best suited for our ships…"

Before he even finished, the lookout shouted, "Ahead… There's another fleet up ahead!"

Chapter 247
Bathing in Blood

"It's the enemy! That's the fleet of the Chikdor Merchant Guild!" shouted the lookout after he identified the flags the ships were flying.

However, by then, they were already less than 200 meters apart.

"There are two large-class, three-masted merchant vessels, six middle-class, twin-masted, fast-sailing merchant vessels, and eight middle-class armed merchant vessels. Ugh, milord, what did you do to the Chikdor Merchant Guild for them to send so many ships, this one's larger than the previous fleet… It seems that they're fixated on holding us back," said Els jokingly.

At that moment, the people on the deck could tell the types of ships that were sailing towards them apart clearly. Lorist laughed as he shrugged and said, "How would I know? The Chikdor Merchant Guild just bit on us like a mad dog. To think that they'd send wave after wave of ships to stop us… Will this ever end? I think their main goal is to capture me and force me to hand Silowas Island to them…"

"In their dreams!" Josk exclaimed, to which Howard, Els and the rest nodded in response.

Captain Wilson asked, "Milord, what do we do? Do you want us to turn back and circle around them? We still have enough time and distance between us for that…"

Lorist shook his head and said, "No. If the fleet that we just escaped is behind us, then we'll be walking straight into the trap they set for us. It'll be even more troublesome if we're surrounded by both fleets. We'll just try to break through them like this. Joe, do you have any strength left?"

Josk wore a serious expression without saying anything. All he did was wave the green bow about in his hand, indicating that he was fine and that the rest could leave it to him. As long as he had his bow, nobody would be able to stop their voyage home.

As Josk made his preparations at the bow of the ship, he waited for the distance

between the two parties to close. It didn't take long until the distance was around 100 meters. All of a sudden, the lookout on the crow's nest called out, "Be careful! The enemy has laid chains between their ships! There's no way we'll be able to rush through their ranks…"

Lorist staggered and almost struck against the railings of the deck. *Good Sol, what's going on with his eyes? To think that he'd only notice the chains when we're this close…* Now that the Flying Fish of Dawn was traveling at full speed, there was no way she could evade the chains. Even if Josk were able to break the masts of the two ships they were heading towards, they would still be hampered by the chains on the ships, allowing the other enemy ships to surround them. By then, the Flying Fish of Dawn would no longer be able to escape.

When I get back, I bet my ass off that I'll get myself binoculars! Heck, even a telescope would do! Now that I have Master Mancheny, glass production should no longer be a problem. The transparent oil-glass can be molded into concave lens pieces which I can fit to an iron tube to make a simple telescope.

Lorist felt that it was incredibly disadvantageous for them to not have a telescope at sea. Even if the lookout had better eyesight, they would only be able to see ships as small dots from 500 meters away and would be unable to tell friend from foe. Only until they were 200 meters away was the lookout able to see the flag the ships were flying. That would leave far too little time for them to respond. For instance, the chains between the enemy ships were also discovered too late.

Currently, the two parties were less than 80 meters apart.

"Milord, what do we do?" asked Captain Wilson hurriedly. That scenario was not one that any of them had envisioned.

Revealing a gaze of savagery filled with seething killing intent, Lorist shouted, "Head towards that ship at the right! Since they have a death wish, I will grant it. I will head to the bow of the ship. Els, order the ballista shooters to fire when we are close enough against people, not the ships. Provide suppressive fire against the enemy. Howard, head to the cabin and lock the door. I will leave Mister Mancheny and Professor Balbo in your care. Wilson, instruct the marines to prepare for battle. Since we're unable to rush past them, we'll fight our way out of this!"

The ship and the fleet were already less than 50 meters apart, but given that the enemy

wanted to capture the Flying Fish of Dawn, they didn't use their fireballs to attack and only employed anti-personnel ranged weaponry such as bows and crossbows. Even so, most of the projectiles didn't hit their targets, and the ones that did find their way towards Lorist and the rest were easily deflected.

Lorist finally understood what Els said about the unreliability of ballistae at sea. He had stood beside one of the steel ballistae and saw six successive shots. Apart from a lucky shot that managed to skewer two unlucky bastards on the enemy ship, the rest grossly missed their targets.

Some flew too high and didn't hit anything, while others landed on the deck of the enemy ships.

Lorist couldn't help but sigh at the miss rate despite being only 60 meters away from the enemy. After all, not everyone had the talent for archery like Josk. Given the undulation of the ship, even if one aimed properly, one could still miss at the very next moment. Unless there were enough ballistae to fire in huge waves to suppress the enemy, they wouldn't be a threat to the enemy at all in small numbers.

It was apparent that the enemy marines also had the same thought; they were not the least dispirited despite the loss of two of their comrades. They howled as they waved the weapons in their hands around, prepared to jump and board the Flying Fish of Dawn once she was close enough.

"Joe, I'll leave the left ship to you. I will take care of the right one," said Lorist, who turned back and made a hand signal to captain Wilson at the helm.

Josk merely nodded.

It was then when the Flying Fish of Dawn swerved to the right suddenly, changing their trajectory to point towards the right middle-class, fast-sailing merchant vessel. Originally, the Flying Fish of Dawn would've collided straight against the chains, but with that sudden turn, it would crash against the ship at the right instead.

To the captain of the right ship, having the Flying Fish of Dawn's razor-sharp bow ramming against his own vessel was definitely undesirable. The collision might even incapacitate his ship. He definitely did not wish for his own ship to be the victim of the Flying Fish of Dawn's suicide attack. It would be a huge blow to his career and his future with the merchant guild.

A flurry of orders from the ship at the right to lower the sails and change direction could be heard. The sailors aboard that ship began to work busily and gave up on shooting at the Flying Fish of Dawn. The ship to the right's speed quickly decreased and its bow began to align with the Flying Fish of Dawn's, causing them to only brush past without fully colliding against each other.

"Turn the sails forward!" ordered Captain Wilson. A few of the marines pulled on the ropes and angled the sails to face the front of the ship.

The Flying Fish of Daw had originally been traveling against the direction of the wind. The front-facing sails now caused the ship to decrease in speed greatly, as if she had turned from a strong, athletic runner into an old, trotting lady. That sudden change was greatly out of the expectations of the crews of the two enemy ships, with the left ship wasting a huge wave of arrows and bolts that landed in the ocean directly in front of the Flying Fish of Dawn.

Thunderous twangs rang out again from Josk's bow, causing cries of terror to resound from the enemy ship at the left. As the ship to the left was kept occupied, Lorist turned his attention to the other ship to the right. The distance between them decreased incredibly slowly. It was taking too long.

The middle-class, twin-masted, fast-sailing merchant vessel was 35 meters in length, with its front being narrow and its back being broad. The bow of the ship was 1 meter long and was equipped with a long ram. The middle part of the ship to its back had a rough width of 7 meters and the two masts supported four rectangular sails in total, with another four triangular sails by the sides. The fastest the ship could travel windward was 10 knots, with her being able to transport a maximum of 88 people and a minimum of 34. 2.7 meters of the ship was submerged with the other 3.5 meters of it above the surface of the ocean. She had double-layered cabins which could transport loads weighing up to 24000 kilograms and was hailed to be one of the most amazing middle-class ships on the whole of Grindia, being the ideal choice for long distance voyages.

Even though the Flying Fish of Dawn traveled slowly against the wind with full sail, given the momentum built up from its previous charge and the relative velocity of the approaching ship, the two ships were naught but 4 meters away by the time Lorist finished recalling the information about the ship he had read before.

With a loud cry, Lorist leaped straight towards the opposite ship. Before he even

landed, the enemy sailors had already managed to react and flung their javelins and throwing axes towards Lorist in response.

Lorist swung his sword mid-air and deflected both waves before landing haggardly on the deck of the ship. Lorist didn't think he would land flat on his face, but the momentum of his leap was just too much. The sailors made use of the opportunity to rush straight at him.

Swords flashed, and blood splattered through the air with severed limbs flying all over the place. 20 plus sailors had their bodies cut into discrete pieces without being given the slightest chance to cry out.

Rubbing his nose as he stood back up, Lorist thought, *gah, that fall just now saw my nose landing directly against the deck, it's even bleeding… And the enemy even tried to swarm me when they witnessed my unfortunate landing…*

When Lorist stretched out his left leg to prepare for the landing, his leg ended up amidst a pile of rolled up rope. One sailor saw the chance and gave the rope a pull, causing Lorist to trip over without being able to react and fall straight onto the deck. Had it not been for his quick reaction, he might've lost his life just then.

Wilson was right… The most important thing when it comes to fighting at sea is to pay attention to footwork. This is not land. I must be more careful with how my foot lands and find a perfect balance between heavy and light steps, all the while paying attention to the messy deck. With the fighting space so constrained, when there is a large number of enemies, even an Iron rank will be able to give a critical strike to take down a Silver or Gold ranked fighter…

Bam! The Flying Fish of Dawn that was rubbing against the enemy ship Lorist boarded collided into the chains, causing both ships to rub against each other even more tightly. Those who weren't paying attention collapsed after losing their balance.

Lorist took a horse stance to stabilize himself on the deck and pointed at the helm of the ship with his sword, saying, "Discard your weapons and surrender. Those who enter the cabin will have their lives spared…"

In Grindian naval warfare, the most important thing was to conquer the deck. As long as the deck of a ship was conquered, the enemy would be finished. That was because the most important things such as the helm, the rudder and the mast were all there.

The entry into the lower cabin of an enemy in an act of surrender was akin to leaving their lives in the hands of the winning side, since if the cabin entries from the deck was locked up, the fate of the people within would be out of their own hands. A single torch was all that was needed to roast the people in the cabin below alive.

One heavily-bearded man held onto the railings as he stood up and drew his sword, infusing it with his silver blade glow. "You think too highly of your abilities. Everyone, attack him all at once…"

This time around, throwing axes, javelins and all sorts of other thrown weapons flew in Lorist's direction, some of the sailors even tried to lasso Lorist with ropes.

Since you all have death wishes, I'll gladly grant them.

Lorist slaughtered his way from the bow of the ship all the way to its end. Bathed in blood, he seemed like a frenzied killing demon that had emerged from a sea of blood. The bearded man called out in despair, mumbling, 'demon… demon!' until he was finally ended by Lorist's sword.

Fresh corpses that continued to bleed out littered the deck. Lorist didn't keep a count on how many he killed and was only aware that no one on the ship was left alive. He headed to the left side of the ship where two thick beams were. The chains that obstructed the way of the Flying Fish of Dawn were tied onto the beams.

With a slash, Lorist cut the wooden beams apart. But by now, the two ships were already fast against each other. Even though the beams binding the chains had been removed, the ships didn't drift apart.

Just as Lorist was about to leap back to the Flying Fish of Dawn, he suddenly felt the ship shake harshly. Losing his footing due to the slippery, blood-covered flooring, Lorist managed to stabilize himself half-kneeling. After hearing a couple of cries from his side, he turned his head to look and was enraged to the brim.

Surprisingly, the ship at the left Josk was targeting and one of the large-class ships that used to be roughly 50 meters away had approached all of a sudden. Just as the large-class, three-masted ship was pushing against the middle-class ship towards the Flying Fish of Dawn, countless people appeared all of a sudden around the side of the ship, using their higher elevation as advantage to rain arrows and bolts towards the Flying Fish of Dawn. A dozen of Lorist's marines collapsed on deck right away. The one who

had it worst was the lookout who was practically indistinguishable from a porcupine.

Following that, dozens of men leaped from the large-class ship and boarded the middle-class ship adjacent to the Flying Fish of Dawn and kept on approaching.

Josk's longbow kept firing, causing streaks of green one after another to shoot towards the enemy like lightning bolts. But right after only two of the enemy troops were struck, a brown-clad old man stepped out of their ranks and easily deflected Josk's arrows.

"A Blademaster?!" said Lorist with surprise.

He didn't think that the fleet of the Chikdor Merchant Guild actually brought with it a Blademaster. At that moment, he made an urgent leap and landed beside Josk.

"You deal with the rest a the back. Let me tussle with that old guy."

After that, he made his way to the middle-class ship on the left and stood in front of the old brown-clad man.

The old man raised his sword in front of him, appearing incredibly cold and fearsome as he bellowed, "You're still not going to surren-"

"In your dreams! Go to hell!" said Lorist without bothering to listen to the Blademaster's ramblings, rushing forward instantly with his sword.

Clang clang clang! Echoes of clashing swords resounded. The old man in brown had already lost his first-strike advantage and was pushed back by Lorist's stream of attacks ever so gradually. As he parried the incoming strikes coming from his left and right, he began to swerve his body to dodge the following ones haggardly.

"Come here and give me some help!"

The old Blademaster was no longer able to hold on and asked for reinforcements without giving the slightest care about his reputation.

Two ignorant sailors rushed forward, right into the trajectory of Lorist's strikes.

After a few deafening sounds of clashing, the two sailors were both cut apart all the way from their left shoulders to their right hips. Even the axe and sword in their hands

had been broken into pieces by Lorist's strikes.

But by then, the old man in brown had already turned tail to escape.

"Fool, I'll see where you can run to when we're at sea," Lorist said, unleashing his killing frenzy.

Since the Chikdor Merchant Guild was willing to spend so much resources for his capture, he figured that the loss of a Blademaster would hurt them even more.

No matter what, I have to make sure that old guy dies, thought Lorist as he gave chase.

The small fries barring his way were cut down like vegetables one after another as the brown-clad man began climbing back onto the three-masted merchant vessel.

Lorist was so agile that he seemed to be flying. With but a few steps here and there, he made his way up to that large-class merchant vessel and was greeted by countless blades and spears. A swarm of men rushed towards Lorist quickly while roaring at the top of their lungs.

It was at that moment when Lorist suddenly felt that his vision was turning redder and redder. It was as if he had entered a world that couldn't be adequately described with words. Everything that was happening on the large-class, three-masted merchant vessel was within Lorist's awareness, with not the slightest movement escaping his crystal-clear attention.

The red silhouettes he saw rushing towards him were moving at a laughably slow speed, allowing Lorist to evade the weapons that were swung at him easily. He put his sword through the throats and chests of the red silhouettes lightly, causing one after another to collapse on the deck of the ship in quick succession.

After a few moments, the number of red silhouettes on the deck had already decreased greatly. The remaining ones did not rush forward and instead tried their best to hide from Lorist, but it was a futile effort. In the end, only the brown-clad old man remained.

The Blademaster seemed to have broken while watching Lorist. He mumbled continuously.

"Sword Saint… Sain… Domain."

Do you think you can scare me by bringing up Sword Saints?! Lorist swung his sword, lopping the head of the man off cleanly. He stretched his free hand out and caught the flying head in mid-air. Raising the decapitated head up high, Lorist began to laugh out maniacally, with each echo of his laughter bringing with it a wave of bone-chilling bloodlust across the sea.

"Milord! Milord! Milord! Snap out of it!"

The cackling Lorist heard somebody call out urgently to him. Finally, he began to regain his senses and the tint of red faded from his irises, returning them to their former black color.

Wait, did I do all this?

Corpses could be seen piled up all over the three-masted merchant vessel with the deck awash with fresh, flowing blood.

"Why did you shout at me from so far away?"

Els, who called out to Lorist from the deck of the middle-class, twin-masted merchant vessel heard Lorist's query and replied, "Milord, did you think I would be brave enough to go there? Look around you! You killed the whole crew of their ship like a rampaging demon in less than 30 minutes! There was no less than 300 people there!"

"Ah? Was I really that amazing?" mused Lorist as he looked at the head in his hands.

Ugh, why am I holding this shit? thought Lorist before he threw the head away casually.

"Milord, the ships have separated. We're waiting for you to board right now," shouted Els.

"Alright, I'll come right awa--" Just as Lorist was about to head back, he felt an abrupt dizzy spell that drained him of every shred of energy he had left. As his vision turned black, he collapsed.

Chapter 248
Escape

Lorist felt as if he was afloat in the sky, free and unrestrained. He was a light and swift feather floating in the wind…

The ground was right in front of him and it seemed rather familiar, just like the maps he had pondered upon in the past.

Lorist quickly realized something and thought, *isn't this the Northlands?*

The land before him moved quickly. It didn't take long for him to arrive at the dominion of his family. There was the Salus Settlement, Firmrock Castle, Felicitas Settlement, and the various small factories and workshops, as well as the black iron refinery base which he named the Ironforge Castle, and Windstorm City, the main military equipment production base within the dominion.

At that moment, it was as if Lorist had turned into a bird, flying high in the skies and looking down at his own dominion. He traveled along the Bladedge Mountains and could see the Nico Academy, which was still under construction. Telesti could be seen inspecting some blueprints with her maidservant, Vinny, hugging little Olijess and humming her a relaxing tune. Lorist later passed above Maplewoods Bastide and saw his chubby and energetic son Lysecott naughtily playing hide-and-seek with Irina.

After that, Lorist passed by Poplar Town and Blackmud Marsh, managing to take a look at the busily working soldiers, as well as the hectic shipyard. Be it the navy camp, the port, the endless seas -- which raged with fierce waves -- or a small fleet of six whaling boats that were riding the winds, Lorist could see it all.

It didn't take long before Lorist realized that he was back in the skies above Silowas Island. The mist of dawn that covered the island made it seem ever so calm and peaceful. The island was no doubt a precious treasure that the oceans had to offer.

This island is part of my family dominion. I will not allow anyone to take it away.

What made Lorist wonder was, no matter where he flew, there would always be a

small, red dot following him on the ground. The dot sped up and slowed down in lockstep with him. In the end, Lorist could no longer resist his curiosity and decided to fly to the ground to check out what that red dot was.

The ground enlarged as he approached it. He landed on the ground lightly and eyed the little red mark. It was almost as big as a basketball. It wasn't the least bit eye-catching, and seemed like nothing but a small bloodstain.

Lorist stretched his leg and put it into the red mark. All of a sudden, nothing but red flashed before his eyes until the whole world around him seemed tinted with the familiar blood-red color. The blood-red color expanded around him at breakneck speed. Anything the color touched became part of the blood-red world he was in.

Within that blood-colored world Lorist felt like a fish in water; he was free to swim around as he pleased. Not a single being in that blood-colored world, be it the hibernating snakes, the burrowing rats, the hard-working ants that were moving food, or any plant, down to the smallest stalk of grass, not a single one of them nor their movements could escape Lorist's awareness.

A sickly-sweet stench permeated the air around him…

Lorist breathed in deeply, and could tell that the scent was one that he would detect when he was slaughtering away. The cries and curses of the slaughtered enemies crescendoed into a symphony of war. The hum of the song that rang out eternally within the blood-colored world made one's blood boil.

In this blood-colored world, I am sovereign! thought Lorist excitedly.

At the same time, he felt incredibly fatigued. After a while, the blood-colored world began to fade. The blood-colored tint receded around him gradually, until it gathered up into a basketball-sized blob around Lorist's feet. Eventually it fused with Lorist himself.

……

Lorist opened his eyes. He found himself in his cabin on the Flying Fish of Dawn. He turned to look at the right side of the cabin and saw that Howard wasn't on his bed. The light of dawn that shone through the round window of the cabin indicated that the sky was already brightening.

After he ascertained that nothing was out of place, Lorist closed his eyes and began circulating his internal energy to inspect his internal condition. When he finished a minor cycle, he found that his body's condition was normal. He felt incredibly invigorated; in fact, he felt far more energetic than usual.

Lorist put both his hands behind his head and laid down to feel the light swaying of the ship caused by the waves as he began to recount what had happened to him.

It was as if he had entered a frenzied, demonic state, when he boarded the three large-class three-masted merchant vessels and killed everyone there. Even the old blademaster dressed in brown was no exception. In the end, he was awakened by Els's shouting. But when he attempted to return, he lost consciousness.

Given that he was on the Flying Fish of Dawn, it was apparent that Els, or someone else, had hauled him back on board. Lorist could hear the familiar sounds of the marines, guards and Captain Wilson above the cabin. He could tell that the Flying Fish of Dawn had already escaped from the encirclement of the other ships and was heading for Silowas Island. However, he didn't know how long he had passed out for.

What intrigued Lorist was how he entered that berserk state in the first place when he got onto the three-masted merchant vessel. It was as if the whole world around him had turned blood red. In that world, he couldn't see the faces of others clearly. All he saw was fumbling red humanoid figures that moved around in a laughably obvious and slow manner, just like puppets that were suspended on strings.

Due to Lorist's dynamic vision ability, he had always been able to see each move of his enemy clearly. When Lorist was in the blood-colored world, the enemy had moved just as slow. However, what differed from usual was how he felt that he had entered a completely different realm. The world had turned blood red, and not a single move made by his enemies, regardless of whether they were in front or behind him or not, as long as they were on that three-masted ship, escaped Lorist's senses.

Taking their lives was as simple as raising his hand. Lorist could still recall how he felt at that moment. He had turned into an unfeeling robot that never tired. No matter how badly the red humanoid figures begged or turned tails to run, Lorist would harvest their lives without a single shred of emotion passing across his face. Some of them, those who had jumped into the ocean for their lives, still managed to be killed by the javelins thrown by Lorist.

And why did I have that weird dream after I passed out?

'People thought during the day and dreamed during the night.' Lorist felt that the saying he heard from his past life made a lot of sense. In his dream, he saw his family dominion and loved ones, possibly a sign that he missed them dearly as well as his dedication to protect them as best he could.

But why did he see that blood-colored world again at the end of that dream? Also, why did he feel that he was the ultimate sovereign of that world?

Lorist started when he suddenly recalled the final words of the brown-clad blademaster he had killed. He mentioned something along the lines of a Sword Saint's domain. Perhaps, he wasn't bringing up a Sword Saint-ally in desperation in hopes to be spared, and was instead referring to the blood-red color he saw? Was that realm of freedom and debauchery actually the domain of a Sword Saint?

Forget it, Lorist thought.

He found it hard to believe that he could become a Sword Saint that easily. It was practically impossible.

Even though Lorist was training in the Aquametal Technique from his past life using battleforce, he wasn't willing to believe that he could break through to the next realm that easily. That was especially the case given how he still didn't know how to progress in his training at the Dark Stage. It was mainly because he didn't have any other reference and didn't truly understand how the mythical Transformative Stage of his technique would look like, nor how he should train in order to progress to that stage.

Before he was involved in the assassination attempt by blademaster Zarinan, Lorist's combat ability could only compare to a rank 2 blademaster. That was because he was able to fight to a stalemate with blademaster Xanthi. But when blademaster Zarinan attacked, Lorist realized that his skills weren't of much use at all against the blademaster who was known to be a quasi-Sword Saint, causing many of the lives of the soldiers of his house that attempted to save him to be sacrificed. Additionally, Josk and Potterfang were heavily injured, and more than ten Silver ranked knights and upwards of 400 other brave and loyal soldiers had to give their lives heroically in order to save him.

Even though Reidy managed to save his life, he later lost his memories. In the end,

Lorist had fallen into the hands of the mountain barbarians because of his injuries, and experienced the worst kind of humiliation ever to happen to him, in both his lives. When Lorist recovered, he resolved himself to train his swordsmanship and internal energy painstakingly. Even after returning to the dominion, he did not let up and found time to train even on the busiest days. Lorist was determined to never be on the receiving end of another assassination attempt.

It's impossible… It's only been a little more than one year since then. There's no way that I could've become a Sword Saint already. At most, I'm only at the level of a rank 3 blademaster. And even if I become a Sword Saint, my domain should be snowstorm, or some other frost-based phenomenon, right? What is with the blood-colored world?

Viscount Kristoph, who was a rank 1 blademaster, had said that when he first sparred with Lorist, he was still able to receive more than 100 strikes. Each following spar, however, he found that he lasted for shorter and shorter periods of time, until he wasn't even able to resist 40 strikes. It got so bad that Viscount Kristoph felt it was too embarrassing and refused to accept Lorist's challenges anymore.

He had complained that it wasn't because of Lorist's swift strikes that he lost. Instead, every time he received a strike from Lorist, he felt a sudden, unbearable, icy chill. Given that his battleforce was of the water attribute, it was perfectly countered by cold chills like that, and it didn't take long until he wasn't able to continue fighting. That was the reason he felt that if Lorist ever became a Sword Saint, his domain would be based on the same frost attribute.

When he made a visit to Dawn Academy recently, Instructor Claude felt pumped and insisted that he wanted to give Lorist pointers in swordsmanship. He said that he would break through to become a rank 2 blademaster soon, perhaps no more than seven years of training still had to be done. Lorist couldn't refuse him, so he reluctantly accepted the duel. As Instructor Claude's battleforce attribute was fire, he was able to last a little bit longer, but not more than 80 strikes.

That was the reason Lorist believed himself to be equivalent to a rank 3 blademaster instead of a Sword Saint. If the latter were the case, he would've taken care of a rank 1 blademaster like instructor Claude in a dozen strikes.

Still, what is the matter with the blood-colored world? If that was a result of my killing frenzy, then why did I dream about it? The feeling of absolute control over the environment is so unique that it's incredibly hard to describe. It's like I'm somehow

addicted to it and unable to forget it.

Lorist sat up straight, and circulated a major cycle. After ensuring that nothing was wrong with his body, Lorist felt rather incredible.

When he opened his eyes, he saw a shocked Howard standing before him. "Milord, you've been asleep for two days and nights, but you're finally awake now. I didn't want to interrupt you when you were training just now. Are you alright?"

"Hehe, I'm fine. I feel great, even. But I'm a little hungry," said Lorist.

……

The deck of the ship was a big mess. A dozen injured soldiers wrapped up like mummies were basking in the sun. The moment they saw Lorist, they cried out with surprise, "Milord…"

"Milord, you're awake!"

Lorist nodded to answer their calls before heading to the helm of the ship. There, he saw Captain Wilson with one arm wrapped up as he steered the ship.

"You got hurt?"

"Yes, milord. I got hit by an arrow accidentally…"

"Why are you steering with your injuries? Where's Old Jack?"

Wilson lowered his head and said, "Old Jack is no more. When we were retreating, he got hit by a crossbow bolt and died on the spot."

Lorist stayed silent in solemnity as he took the wheel for himself. "Let me do it. Tell me how you guys managed to break out of encirclement when I was unconscious."

"Milord, back when you boarded the three-masted ship, the enemies just kept rushing at you, causing us to worry so much. However, we didn't think you'd be able to unleash the beast and kill off all our cursed enemies without even leaving their armor intact. Milord, you seemed like you were having an easy time killing them. Both the we, who were witnessing the scene, and the enemy were completely stunned.

"Only Sir Josk was still alert and reminded us to use the opportunity to push away the two middle-class ships sticking to us and remove the chains, allowing us to escape. By then, you had already killed off all the enemies on the ship, and were laughing maniacally with an old man's head in your hand. That laughter of yours was so cold that it gives me goosebumps even though I'm only talking about it…

"At that time, the whole sea was devoid of noise. The enemy was completely frightened. Sir Josk said that at that moment, your eyes were red, and that you had entered a demonic state and was unable to differentiate friend from foe. Sir Els could only shout at you from afar. It was fortunate that you were conscious back then and turned back after hearing Els shout. That was when we stopped worrying.

"But right at that moment, you collapsed unmoving on the deck. Sir Els then rushed to your side and hauled you back while we hurriedly set sail. At the same time, the enemy began to act when you fainted and fired their ranged weapons at us. Fortunately, we were still trapped between two ships, which helped us take most of the fire before they were set aflame. The smoke from the flames shielded us while we retreated.

"It was only after we left the two ships that we received a critical blow. The other large-class three-masted merchant vessel fired a large number of flaming ball projectiles and crossbow bolts at us. Old Jack was steering the ship at that time. One of the fire balls fell at the front most mast and it began to catch fire. I took care of it by having our naval soldiers hack the mast down under enemy fire to toss the mast into the sea. When I called out to Old Jack, there was no response. It was only after I got to the helm that I found him nailed to the helm by a crossbow bolt, dead.

"Due to losing one of our masts, we traveled at a much slower speed. Our enemy's ship was able to catch up after spending quite a while cutting away at the chains. But Sir Josk revealed his skills in the end, and shot down the masts of the enemy ship with only three arrows, before shooting at the middle mast's upper section, causing the ship to lag behind us. The enemy stopped pursuing us after that," Captain Wilson described the situation in detail.

"How many men did we lose?"

Wilson laughed bitterly and said, "Only 7 of our 28 sailors remain, with 13 out of commission, and 8 dead. 3 of your 10 guards died, with 5 others injured. Of the 5 steel ballista shooters, 2 were injured. However, our guests are fine. Apart from Old Jack, the rest are still here…"

"What about Josk and Els?"

"Sir Josk said that he was incredibly tired and has been sleeping for a day and night without waking. Sir Els was on duty for the whole night yesterday and just went to get some rest. Milord, it was fortunate that you regained consciousness. The speed the ship is traveling at is lesser than 6 knots right now. We're just about to enter the Sea of Grief and I'm worried that we'll be robbed. We're incredibly short-handed right now, with most of us injured. If we truly were to encounter the pirates, there's no way we can resist," Captain Wilson warned Lorist in a serious manner.

Lorist smiled and said, "Alright, don't worry. You'll have yourself some good sailors and ships soon."

Chapter 249
Senbaud

Fedley Senbaud felt that his luck was pretty good. When the empire's civil war first broke out, he was merely a one-star-silver-ranked garrison squad leader. After the First Prince declared rebellion, he became one of the company leaders of some suicide troopers at the frontlines. It didn't take long for him to be abandoned in the midst of battle due to his injuries. By the time he regained consciousness, he realized there was nothing but corpses all over him.

Lord Gunmock's corpse was not far away from him on the battlefield. He was shocked to see him lying there. Sir Gunmock was one of the most renowned gold ranked knights at the city Senbaud served at as a garrison squad leader. Rumor had it that Gunmock would break through to the three-star gold rank soon. Whenever he passed through the city gates, Senbaud had to offer his greetings. He was ignored every time. Senbaud really didn't think that a person of such caliber would perish on the battlefield just like that.

As he dragged his injured leg with him while he crawled towards the corpse of Sir Gunmock, he saw that a crude crossbow bolt had pierced the neck of the dead man. Senbaud was dumbstruck at the thought that a gold ranked knight had died on the battlefield just like that: from a stray crossbow bolt. He hadn't even been given the chance to use his abilities!

Sir Gunmock must have died a really horrible death, for him to perish here without anyone knowing anything about it. He couldn't even compare to me. I managed to slay two enemies before getting injured…

Senbaud eventually recovered from his stupor. Since the two could be considered to be from the same hometown, he dug a ditch within which to bury Gunmock, lest his body be mutilated by wild birds and beasts. As expected, when he searched the corpse, he found that the dead man was actually a walking treasure trove. The stainless steel, full-body armor, was undamaged as Gunmock had died from a bolt straight to his unprotected neck. Senbaud couldn't help but wonder what kind of unspeakable sin one had to commit to deserve such an unlucky ending.

The corpse also had a sack filled with roughly four hundred imperial gold coins and several other precious gemstones. There was even a golden bracelet which still had bloodstains on it in the sack. It seemed that during the past two days occupying the small town nearby, Sir Gunmock had profited quite a bit. However, Senbaud didn't understand why Sir Gunmock carried so much of his valuables with him in person.

Aren't they really unwieldy on the battlefield? Well, whatever. At least I get to take advantage of it.

The thing that he was the happiest about was his discovery of a high-ranked battleforce manual within the sack Sir Gunmock carried with him. The battleforce attribute of the manual was the same metal type as his own. Flipping open the manual titled 'Metaltemper Battleforce', Senbaud discovered that one of Sir Gunmock's ancestors was a blademaster who had unfortunately perished in battle during one of the empire's invasion attempts on the trade union.

The blademaster had recorded his insights and realizations in the Metaltemper Battleforce manual. It was to be passed down as a family heirloom so that his descendants would not have to go through trial and error in their battleforce training. It was a shame that nobody in the family after him had the same metal attribute battleforce, save for Gunmock. Even so it was still a shame; he had only trained to two-star gold rank at the age of 50. He was simply too lustful and greedy.

Now that Senbaud had stumbled upon such treasure, he decided to become a deserter. He found himself two strolling horses whose owners had died, stripped Gunmock naked as a newborn baby, and loaded the goods on one of the horses before taking his leave.

As the company leader of some of the suicide troops, he was privy to information on a portion of the battle plans, intelligence, and contingencies. He was a rather intelligent man; he didn't head straight home. It wouldn't take long for him to be forcefully reenlisted and placed on the battlefield once more. He traveled to the coast with his two horses instead and built himself a small grass hut in the wilds not far away from the Sea of Grief. He would hunt for a living and occasionally travel to a small town not too far away to buy some food. The rest of his time he would spend training in the Metaltemper Battleforce. In times of war, the key to survival was to have a well-trained body.

Sometimes Senbaud felt that he was like one of those protagonists in the chivalric

novels he read. Now that he had his fortunate encounter, his time to shine would soon come. Three years later, the 27-year-old finally broke through to the three-star silver rank, on his birthday no less. Just as he was on the way back from purchasing some alcohol to celebrate, he stumbled upon an unconscious beauty and brought her back with him.

Just like something directly out of a novel, that beauty described her life which was full of drama and grudges when she awoke. There was a bandit lair around two days' travel from the place Senbaud lived.

Actually, it would be more accurate to call it a pirate lair. The men there often raided at sea and seldom operated on land. That was why he wasn't aware that he was the neighbor of pirates all this time.

The beauty was, in fact, the daughter of the original head of the pirates, who had been killed off by the second and third heads of the group because he divided the spoils unequally. At first, the third head even wanted to take the beauty as his wife, but the men that were loyal to the beauty's father ambushed the third head when he was about to force the beauty to sleep with him. After that, all hell broke loose. During the conflict, the beauty was injured. She managed to escape, but was pursued. In a fit of panic, she ran as fast and far as she could, before fainting in the middle of the road where Senbaud coincidentally met her.

Thus, Senbaud drew his sword for the sake of the beauty and helped her travel along the path of vengeance. He had heard that the pirates originally had four silver ranked fighters among their ranks. The beauty's father was a two-star silver rank, the second and third heads, as well as a man referred to as 'uncle Torin', were one star silver ranks. It was uncle Torin who had brought some others to ambush the third head. At the time, only the one star silver ranked second head remained. Senbaud felt that it would be stupid of him to not take that opportunity to intervene.

All went according to plan and Senbaud was able to triumph over the second head, helping the beauty exact her vengeance. The remaining pirates then took him as their leader. With the aid of uncle Torin, he rebuilt the lair of the pirates and took the role of their boss with the beauty as his wife and mistress of the lair.

Ten years had passed in a flash and Senbaud already had two sons and one daughter. He lived a mostly blissful life, but his career was a little lackluster.

As the pirate boss, Senbaud understood the principle of 'the early bird gets the worm, but the early worm gets eaten by the bird'. That was why he had always been extremely careful when it came to raiding at sea. Whenever he decided to act, he would only do so against smuggling ships or ships that sailed astray from their fleets, without ever touching those belonging to large merchant guilds or nobles. He also never flaunted the wealth he got from raiding.

The pirate lair had developed much during the ten years and began to resemble a normal fishing village more and more. Its population was already reaching 1000 people. Senbaud didn't only focus his attention on raiding, he also recruited vagabonds to begin farming and tending to livestock at the wastelands near the hills. As a result of his foresight the pirates no longer had to rely on trading with the outside world for food. He also had the elderly, women, and children gather firewood, boil seawater for salt, and even formed a small trading convoy to trade their surplus salt, and raided goods for some other resources the fishing village needed. When there was an opportunity, he would set sail to take it. At other times, he would live an honest life fishing and tending to his home. His life was one filled with relaxation and freedom.

But he was aware that even if he managed to disguise the pirate lair as a fishing village, they were not completely safe. There wouldn't be a problem during times of war when others were out killing on the battlefield. But when the situation stabilized, dominion lords or standing armies would be well within their rights to act against the lair. By then, the scene of peace before him would instantly turn to one of blood, fire, and ash.

Additionally, the location of the pirate lair wasn't that well-hidden. There were many outsiders who knew of the place, and the terrain wasn't particularly dangerous. It was situated at the coast at a rural and hilly area. The local dominion lord didn't care much about the lair since the pirates didn't raid his dominion in the first place.

These hills were considered a part of Count Seleih's dominion. Count Seleih used to be a division leader of the former empire's army, but he followed Duke Lormo during the civil war of the empire and helped him establish the Lormo Duchy. Thus, he was promoted from a baron to a count and given the piece of land he currently occupied. There were three villages and one town in Count Seleih's dominion, but most of them were congregated within its southern area. The northern area of his dominion was mostly wastelands, forests and tidelands.

It had been two years already since Senbaud first got in touch with the count. He had hoped to obtain recognition from the noble, and to legalize the existence of his fishing

village. For that, he was willing to become the knight of the count and was also ready to pay a huge sum in taxes.

However, Count Seleih was often absent from his own dominion because he served by Duke Lormo's side. Senbaud's letter ended up in the hands of the supervisor of the dominion appointed by the count, who looked down on Senbaud's pirate background and didn't care for his three-star-silver-ranked battleforce. His master was a gold ranked knight, after all.

What the supervisor was concerned about was how he could increase the income of his lord. But Senbaud would never accept a tax rate higher than 65 percent, and wouldn't accept the supervisor's request to send some men to operate at the fishing village so that the tax collection process would be easier.

The baseline for Senbaud was a tax rate of 50 percent, which would be paid by the fishing villager themselves without any intervention. But the supervisor was not willing to accept those conditions, he even threatened to have the count send troops to deal with them. As a result, Senbaud barked back and said that should the forces of the count ever come, he would drop all pleasantries. He would fight the count's forces in a nearby hilly area. He wondered how high a price the count was willing to pay to wipe them out. Senbaud also said that, as long as they existed, they would raid the villages and towns. It was entirely within their ability to render the count's dominion useless.

And so, the two parties arrived at a stalemate. They could do naught but pay attention to one another warily. The supervisor could only shut one eye when it came to the trading convoy of the fishing village and allow the convenience of trading within the town and villages. Senbaud on the other hand would send the supervisor and Count Seleih a tribute during festive seasons. So far, the two sides managed to get along peacefully.

Things had begun to change two months ago, however. Senbaud had broken through to the one star gold rank. Count Seleih, who was far away, at the capital of the Lormo Duchy, heard about it and wrote a personal letter to Senbaud. He expressed his willingness to take Senbaud in as a knight of his house, and said that he would let the fishing village become the manor of a gold ranked knight like Senbaud. Naturally, Senbaud would have to construct the castle or the manor himself, as the count was short on funds.

Despite that, there were obvious benefits to Senbaud becoming a knight of Count Seleih. In doing so, the folk of the fishing village would be considered citizens of Senbaud's manor, and they would only have to pay a tax rate of 30 percent. However, Count Seleih also stated that he would require Senbaud to go to the capital of the Lormo Duchy to do his bidding by his side. The count said that the moment Senbaud arrives at the capital, he would knight him on the spot and elevate his status.

For Count Seleih, taking in a gold ranked knight was really different from taking in a Silver ranked knight. Silver ranked knights were common as clouds, but gold ranked knights were few and far in between. It was such that the count was even willing to overlook Senbaud's background as a pirate. In the battleforce-driven world of Grindia, it was as Senbaud had thought: training hard to get a high battleforce rank was the key to survival in the chaotic times of war.

After pondering for a month, Senbaud accepted the count's invitation to become a knight of House Seleih. However, he couldn't just leave immediately, he had much to do before he could go, such as picking a suitable place for the construction of his castle. Back then, he only thought of first defining the boundaries of the castle and building a makeshift stone building and a moat there since he didn't yet have the financial capabilities to build a proper one immediately.

Two days ago, however, Senbaud received a letter from the count's supervisor. It stated that the count's 50th birthday would be in 20 days, and that the count hoped that he would be able to knight Senbaud on the day as well to add another layer of joy to the celebration. The supervisor didn't fail to remind Senbaud of the count's hobbies, implying that he should bring the count a generous gift for the occasion.

But not only was Senbaud not well off, he didn't have anything that suited the count's taste. That was why he turned his sights back to the sea, hoping that he would be able to profit off raiding once more before heading to the capital of the Lormo Duchy to become Count Seleih's knight. He hoped his wife and children would be able to live better lives after his departure to the capital.

……

"Boss, there are two ships over there that seem tangled together. One of them is a quick, twin-masted, middle-class, merchant vessel and the other looks rather weird. It seems like a middle-class vessel, but it doesn't appear to be in good condition, one of the masts seem burnt. The two ships are traveling incredibly slow next to each

other. Should we tail them and make a killing?"

The one who had spoken was Tok, a huge, burly man with two-star-silver-ranked battleforce. He seemed even more like a pirate than uncle Torin.

Senbaud nodded in reply. It was obvious that the two boats had just been raided. Sights like these were common in the Sea of Grief. The winning side would tie the losing ship to their own to continue their voyage. In doing so they would become sitting ducks themselves.

The process of boarding the merchant vessel couldn't be smoother. Nobody resisted or cried out in confusion; in fact, not a single soul could be seen on the ship. On the other hand, there were a few people on the weird-looking ship, all of whom seemed completely oblivious to the presence of the pirates and continued to mind their own business. There was even one youth who placed his finger against his lips and hushed, gesturing for the pirates to be quiet.

Senbaud had brought two-armed, twin-masted ships along with him which could travel rather fast; they could reach a maximum speed of eight to nine knots. However, they would face some difficulty when traveling against the wind, and required a more experienced helmsman to steer them. Despite that, that particular kind of ship had great battle potential. It could carry many people, which was perfect for boarding actions.

The two armed ships carried on them around 330 pirates in total. There were roughly 100 pirates who boarded the weird-looking ship. They filled the deck up completely.

On the weird ship was a small table on which many beastskins and a pen were placed.

A youth with a black ponytail said to a weathered middle-aged man, "The reason I used your secret technique of green and oil glass production as bait is because I think those are nothing special. Look here at this telescope and the eyeglass. These two are the things that'll make us a real profit. Also, there's the magnifying glass, glassware, flat glass sheets, thickened glass dividers, and even patterned glass. These are the directions glass-working should develop in…"

"Mister Mancheny, you've already roughly got an idea of my thoughts on how glass-working can change. When I bring you back to the dominion, you can be in charge of research and development, as well as production. I'll provide all the manpower and

funds you require, and you can experiment to your heart's content without caring about the cost. I trust that my investment in you will multiply hundredfold and benefit our house…”

Senbaud was confused when he heard all that on the deck. Terms like 'glass-working', 'research', and 'technique improvement' sounded so foreign that he couldn't quite grasp the concepts. Also, he felt that the scene before him was off somehow, but he couldn't quite put it into words.

Just as he was about to instruct his men to be more careful in case that was a trap, he saw the ponytail-wearing youth turn to him and reveal his shiny white teeth, laughing joyfully at Senbaud and his men.

"You guys took too long to come! You're making me rather impatient," the youth said as he smiled, "We've waited here at the Sea of Grief for two whole days and only managed to get such a small catch…”

The youth then looked towards the twin-masted, middle-class merchant vessels and said, "Even so, your ships and crew are in good condition. That's great."

The black-haired youth then stood up and said, "I am Count Norton, dominion lord of the Northlands and Silowas Island. I hereby declare that your ship and crew have been expropriated for my use!"

After that, he pointed directly to Senbaud and said, "Hmm, you seem pretty good. From now on, you'll be the squad leader of my marine assault vanguard."

Chapter 250
Threat and Expropriation

All of the pirates began chattering, *Is that black-haired youth insane? Is he even aware of the situation he's in? Does he really think that he's superior and can push people around just because he's a noble? We are pirates, and this is the free and wide sea. Killing anyone and dumping their corpse tied to a huge rock into the ocean won't leave any traces…*

"Kill him!"

"Skin that baby-faced youth!"

Squad leader of the marine assault vanguard? What the hell is that? thought Senbaud, just as he felt a strong feeling of humiliation.

During the civil war of the empire, he was already a company leader. Even though he was merely used as cannon fodder, had it not been for his desertion and fortune, he would've become a regiment leader already. With the passing of 13 years, he'd already broken through to the gold rank and was just about to become the knight of Count Seleih. To think that there would be someone who would dare to call him a mere squad leader.

He must think that I'm just another person he can use as cannon fodder! Ridiculous!

The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. Senbaud slowly drew his sword and promised himself that he'd teach that long-haired youth a lesson he'd never forget.

I will make sure this count never goes to sea again…

Senbaud waved his hand, indicating for the other pirates to quiet down, before manifesting his golden blade glow. He felt a sudden desire to look at the youth's expression and wondered whether the youth would freak out upon discovering his gold rank battleforce.

Much to Senbaud's surprise, however, the youth revealed a look of pleasant surprise

rather than regret upon seeing his golden blade glow.

"Oooooh…" the young-looking count uttered happily, "I really didn't think that there would be a gold rank fighter amongst you pirates. It seems that I have quite a good eye. That's it, you'll definitely be the one to take up the position of the marine assault vanguard squad leader."

Senbaud only felt a rush of anger cloud his mind as his face puffed red and purple.

He gripped his sword so hard that it shook as he said, "I will cut you into pieces and feed you to the fish…"

After that, Senbaud leaped towards the young count like a ferocious panther.

……

The chronicles in the future stated that the Raging Bear King, Norton Lorist, had 16 generals which were often discussed by others. Those 16 gold-ranked knights had already been with him by the time he stepped on the path of uniting the Krissen Empire. The common trait among those knights were that none of them were of noble birth, the only exception was Divine Marksman Josk. Even he was originally an orphan who was adopted into a noble family.

The 16 gold-ranked knights would later become the paragons of future generations. Some of them would be made dukes, and some of them would eventually become blademasters. Among them, one who was both a blademaster and a duke, was the controversial and legendary Senbaud.

When he first went under Lorist's wing, he was made a marine assault vanguard squad leader right away. After every naval expedition he participated in, his position would slowly rise until, eventually, he became the admiral of House Norton's naval forces. When Lorist formed his own nation, Senbaud was made a duke. He came to be known to others as the 'Windstorm Duke'.

During the 80th birthday celebration of the Windstorm Duke, per his grandson's suggestion, Senbaud began to dictate his experiences for his grandson to organize into a million-word autobiography titled 'From Pirate to Duke'. The book mainly described his exploits following his recruitment into the Raging Bear King, Lorist's, ranks. After the book was published, it only took half a year for it to become one of the best-selling books on the whole of Grindia with more than a million copies sold. Many newer

editions were published over the following decades. Countless military historians and strategists relied on it for their careers.

Naturally, the book also had its fair share of criticism. During the time of its publication, many of the pirates who had joined Lorist were still alive. When Count Tok read the first chapter of the book, he claimed that Senbaud had lied about how he felt Lorist's domineering aura right away, which was why Senbaud took Lorist as his lord at the very first moment.

The white-haired Count Tok said to the reporters, "Back then, Senbaud felt so humiliated that he wanted to kill himself. A gold-ranked knight like him was actually toyed with by a young-looking count like a ragdoll for half an hour. He had been unable to put up the slightest resistance."

"What were you doing back then?" asked one of the reporters.

Count Tok laughed bitterly and said, "The moment Senbaud was knocked off his feet and fell onto the deck, we rushed to his aid right away. It was then when His Majesty spent less than ten minutes beating us all down on his own. He had said that from that moment on, our lives no longer belonged to ourselves, they belonged to him. The reason he disarmed us was so that we wouldn't kill ourselves in the heat of the moment."

"So it was then when all of you joined His Majesty, joined his struggles, and managed to rake in lots of achievements yourselves! What a drastic change in your futures that was!" exclaimed the reporter in realization with a look of admiration.

The gold-ranked knight, Count Tok, no longer spoke and closed his eyes, *Bright futures and great achievements… The reporters made it sound so light-hearted. I wonder if they know how bloody and dangerous that path was… It was filled with killings and mountains of bones… Out of the 300 or so pirates who joined, only around 30 survived… Had it not been for His Majesty's underhanded methods back then, who would've been willing to join him on that so-called path to glory?*

……

Senbaud, who was knocked flat onto the deck, kept crawling up to fight again. He wasn't willing to become a mere squad leader for the marine vanguard. Even Tok, who was clutching his waist and had forgotten his pain, could see the pathetic puffy-faced

look of the beaten Senbaud. He could feel Senbaud's yearning for death. He had been played like a puppet by an unarmed count despite being a gold-ranked knight. The pure humiliation made it so that he would rather die in battle than live with it for the rest of his life.

In the end, Lorist kicked Senbaud unconscious in annoyance.

By the time Senbaud was awake, he found himself tied onto a mast. The rest of the pirate leaders, including Tok, shared his fate. They could see that all four ships were sailing towards the fishing village. Not all of the pirates were as stubborn as Senbaud. He saw many of his crew working as sailors, per the orders of a stranger he didn't recognize.

He took a look at the cursed, black-haired, ponytailed count and thought, *oh, he even had a change of clothes.*

The count was standing in front of Senbaud with a cup of tea in his hands, smiling at him with his white teeth.

"I admire your bravery and strong will. Naturally, I've noted your gold rank battleforce as well," the youthful count said, "But those are not important. What is, is that I have found out about your situation and you only have two options to choose from. First, serve me and I will treat your family well, just like I treat the family members of my soldiers. Their livelihoods will all be taken care of by the house. Second, you may refuse my suggestion and I will kill you without the slightest hesitation. As for your family… Hehehe, your beautiful wife and three children…"

The count then licked his lips with his tongue.

"No, you can't do that…" muttered Senbaud, panicked.

The count had prodded at the only soft spot in his heart.

"You're a noble, you can't do something so underhanded…"

"Underhanded?" the youthful count snorted, "You don't even know what that word truly means. And don't forget that you're a pirate. Even if you've broken through to the gold rank, a pirate is still a pirate. Your hands are no doubt stained with the blood of countless innocents. The people you've killed at sea all had their own families. They all had parents, wives, and children. How many blissful families have you ruined? Now

that it's your turn, you're telling me that it's underhanded?"

At that moment, the young count stopped smiling and revealed a sinister expression that looked absolutely terrifying to Senbaud.

"Think about it. After your death, your beautiful wife will no doubt fetch a great price with a slave trader. After that, she'll spend countless days passed around from man to man, crying out in pain… As for your sons, they'll have to spend their lives with no clothes and food, and will be forced to fight for food from wild dogs. During winter, there's no doubt that they'll die somewhere in the streets, frozen as unmoving statues that get nothing from passers-by but their pity… Your…"

"Stop talking!" Senbaud cried out in tears, "I will serve you! Spare my family, and you can do as you wish with my life!"

"Ugh…" Lorist didn't expect that Senbaud would cave in so quickly, *Tch, I still haven't gotten to your daughter's fate…*

Lorist turned to the snickering Tok who was similarly tied up at the mast, "What are you laughing at? It'll be the same for you. Think about your family…"

"I'll serve you as well, milord. Oh, please spare my family," replied Tok casually.

"Gah…" Lorist was completely speechless.

After he recovered, he figured that he couldn't just rely on threats and had to offer them some incentive as well.

"Very well. Serve me well, and I will make you the knights of my family. In the future, I might even make you landed nobles. This is not an empty promise. I vow this to you on the Norton family name."

Just like that, Senbaud became Lorist's lackey. For the sake of becoming the knight of Count Seleih, he had gone back to sea to rob for the count, no, a better way to put it was 'to find a gift' for the count. Instead he ended up in Lorist's hand. He became a proud squad leader of the marine vanguard troops.

Having his path as a knight for a count extinguished, he became the cannon fodder of yet another count. But his eventual achievements would come to define his future, and would go on to impress and awe many.

With Senbaud and Tok's cooperation, Lorist managed to take over the pirate lair, or 'fishing village', as some would prefer to call it, without trouble. Much to Lorist's delight, the fishing village had a properly outfitted shipyard, meaning that the Flying Fish of Dawn could receive adequate repairs, and didn't have to crawl her way back to Silowas Island.

"I didn't think that this pirate lair of yours would be so well managed. I really couldn't see that talent in you," Lorist praised Senbaud.

Currently, Senbaud, his wife, and his three children were brought before Lorist.

Employing the stick-and-carrot method, Lorist stroked the head of Senbaud's 8-year-old son and said, "This kid looks rather intelligent. Not bad… Alright, when he's 16, I will take him as my disciple and he'll serve as my personal attendant. Howard, take care of this junior apprentice brother of yours. Give him the training routines you used to use so he can work on it as well."

"Yes, milord," Howard said.

He was happy to no longer be the most junior disciple under Lorist.

"Thank… Thank you, milord," Senbaud expressed his gratitude in a troubled fashion.

To him, this wasn't a fortunate encounter. He thought that his son was being taken hostage to ensure his obedience.

"Alright, they'll be leaving tomorrow. Rest up and have a good time with your family during the night. Don't worry, when they arrive at the Northlands, they will write you a letter. When you read it you'll realize how fortunate it is for them to be able to live there," said Lorist.

The first thing Lorist did when he arrived at the fishing village was to gather up the family members of Senbaud, Tok and the other pirate leaders and send them to the Northlands.

Senbaud knew that he would no longer be able to serve as Count Seleih's knight. Instead he would have to be the so-called squad leader of the marine vanguard corps. It was no more than a suicide unit in his mind. He was worried that his inability to serve as a knight of Count Seleih might invoke his rage. He feared that the count would send soldiers to the fishing village. Senbaud wasn't sure whether that would come to

pass or not, so he had no choice but to agree to Lorist's arrangements. He only hoped that the desolate Northlands he had heard so much about was as nice a place to live as the count had said.

It wasn't that nobody tried to escape at all. Some planned to secretly bring their family members to the nearby hills and camp there for a fortnight. They believed the accursed count wouldn't stay at the fishing village very long. Additionally, no matter how good at fighting the count was, he was only a single person. There was no way he could monitor every corner of the fishing village at all times. As for his men, they were busy defending the four ships. More than a couple pirates were ready to escape.

It was then when Josk appeared at the plaza of the fishing village with his green bow. He shot an arrow towards a tree thick enough for a person to barely loop his arms around roughly 100 meters away. It was felled completely and even sent flying. A few hundred men witnessed, with their own eyes, a huge tree sent flying for three or so meters. The stump of the tree splintered as if it was knocked down by a huge force. Josk's reason for shooting the tree was that the sparrows nesting in it were too noisy. Everyone knew it was actually a show of strength.

Nobody dared to take the risk to escape after that. After all, they were faced with a gold-ranked divine marksman. He could hear the noises made by sparrows 100 meters away. The sounds the pirates would make should they attempted escape would be like a shining beacon for the marksman to fire at.

Many of them hoped that someone else would attempt escape first. It would afford them an opportunity to test the marksman's capabilities before making their decision to leave or stay. In the end, none of them tried. Dawn was upon them before anything was achieved.

The time to board the ships had come. The pirates experienced something akin to separation for life as they watched their family members being brought on board the ships with teary eyes.

Lorist had the Flying Fish of Dawn sent into the shipyard for repairs before forming a small fleet with the three middle-class merchant vessels. Josk and Els were the fleet's main escort. He had all the marines -- injured or otherwise -- Master Mancheny and his family, and Professor Balbo and his maidservant, Swila, sent to Silowas Island before they would be transferred to the new port city at the Northlands.

To Lorist, they were people he couldn't afford to lose. With Silowas Island being in the eyes of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, there was no way Lorist would allow them to remain there. As a precaution, he felt it was best for him to send them to the main dominion in the Northlands.

The other 100 or so family members of the pirates would be sent to Silowas Island using the other three ships. They would be manned by some more honest and loyal pirates. After they dropped their passengers off at the island, they would return. As for the ones remaining at the fishing village, because there wasn't enough space on board, Lorist wrote a letter to Charade to tell him how to deal with the matter. The trip to Silowas Island and back would take roughly 20 days.

After sending away the small fleet, Lorist focused his attention on the Flying Fish of Dawn. Accompanying him were Howard, Captain Wilson, and two other guards. Fortunately, all the Flying Fish of Dawn needed was a new mast, which didn't pose too much trouble. Five days later, the Flying Fish of Dawn was good as new and set sail for the Sea of Grief once again.

As fishing while waiting for other pirates to take the bait and raid them would take too much time, Lorist elected to take a more active stance. Given the advantage in speed and agility of the Flying Fish of Dawn, he raided the ships that caught his eye at the Sea of Grief. Lorist did all that in the name of expropriation. He made it clear that if the ship owners cooperated, and didn't resist, House Norton would repay their losses in full. As for those who didn't believe his promises, they were given a taste of Lorist's fists.

Senbaud finally saw for himself the savagery and shamelessness nobles were capable of. The robbery, or as Lorist put it, expropriation, opened his eyes to a whole new world. Compared to Lorist expropriation, Senbaud's previous raids felt like nothing more than child's play.

At the same time, the pirates felt incredibly lucky for their encounter. They once saw two large-class merchant vessels belonging to the Wessia Merchant Guild with three gold-ranked swordsmen and seven to eight other silver-ranked fighters on board. Lorist boarded their ship alone and didn't take more than 15 minutes to kill off those high-ranked fighters, before a hundred other normal fighters, who didn't believe what they were seeing, rushed into a suicidal attack, and perished. The remaining people on the deck of those ships could only watch and shiver in terror.

By the time Lorist returned to them, completely covered in blood, all the pirates lowered their heads to pay their respects. Even Senbaud lowered the head he had proudly held high up until then. He understood that, had it not been for the mercy Lorist showed him, allowing him a second chance to serve Lorist, he would've become a dead soul at sea.

After 20 days, Josk and Els brought the three ships back to the fishing village along with Jim and 500 other guards. By that time, the fishing village's coasts were already filled with up to 50 middle-class vessels and 4 large-class, long distance merchant vessels. There were so many ships that the coast was almost unrecognizable.

Lorist said with satisfaction, "We should have enough ships by now. Senbaud, I'll put you in charge of organizing the crews for the ships. We'll head back to Silowas Island soon."

Senbaud lowered his head respectfully and said, "As you will, milord."

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