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Tales of the Reincarnated Lord

– 重生之领主传奇 –

- Volume 6 -

-Author-
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[LiberSpark]

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Chapter 251
Dispute within the Chikdor Merchant Guild (1)

As Lorist was loitering about amidst the Sea of Grief expropriating ships for himself, within a great hall within the Chikdor Merchant Guild headquarters at Morante City, a dozen high-ranking officials were arguing about the failure of the fleet to stop the Flying Fish of Dawn as well as their plan to take Silowas Island.

"I really don't understand why our guild wants Silowas Island as the location for our dominion. Apart from its wide area, what benefits does it bring to the table for the development of the guild and the future of the clan? Don't tell me that our clan is going to convert into those rural noble families that we look down upon so much? And are we going to give up our dominance of the trading routes near the southern seas along the Golden Coast in the meantime?"

The one who spoke so passionately was the second young master of the Chikdor clan, Saibyoeff. He had always been the one in charge of the merchant guild's armed fleet. He was the one who exterminated pirate organizations large and small, and guaranteed the safety of the guild's fleet on their voyages.

His extensive battle experience caused him to carry with him an air of military brusqueness. Given that the high officials of the guild mostly had aloof, calculative personalities, Saibyoeff didn't get along too well with them.

He was the one who objected most to making Silowas Island their dominion. He felt that it would slacken the control of the clan on the southern seas and have huge effects on the coastal nations near the Golden Coast. Silowas Island was located far to the north. If the Chikdor clan made that its dominion, it would take far too long for news to reach them should anything happen in the southern seas; they would have too little time to react.

"I hope that all of you can analyze the situation there clearly. The clan currently only has seven fleets. Apart from my own armed fleet, five of the other six merchant fleets' main responsibility is the trade voyages at the southern seas. Their operations account for roughly 80 percent of our profits. On the other hand, we only have one merchant fleet in the north and they deal mainly with the spice trade we have with the

Shyarsia kingdom and other resources from the Hanayabarta kingdom. In total, this fleet only accounts for the remaining 20 percent of our profits."

Young master Saibyoeff casually held a small wooden stick up and pointed to the large map that was hung on the wall, and said, "Even though trade in the northern seas have the potential to be more profitable than that in the south, we must not forget that the situation here in the south took 170 years to set up. That's 170 years of effort and sacrifice made by our ancestors. Had we not had the dominance in the southern seas, there would be no way for us to be able to monopolize the trade routes to the Shyarsia and Hanayabarta kingdoms."

At that moment, Moribak, the third young master, stood up from his seat. He loathed his second brother the most. He felt he wasn't the slightest bit inferior to even his eldest brother, Serihanem, in terms of talent and capability.

Since you're the second in the family, I can understand if you don't wish to fight for the position as the successor to the clan, but why are you helping that good-for-nothing first brother become the successor? I am the one that suggested the northern expansion strategy, and the plan to take Silowas Island has also been approved by the high officials of the guild. Yet you're trying to sabotage my plan now? I will definitely not have that!

"Second brother, the situation is actually not as you have described. We are indeed the hegemons of the southern seas, but that's precisely why we need to expand our trade routes northward. There is no space left for our clan to grow in the southern seas. The north is the only direction our clan can grow in. Also, Silowas Island is a great and strategic location as a main base for our clan. By occupying that island, our merchant guild will have access to the whole northern coastlines of the territory of the former Krissen Empire. By then, the profits there will be at least 1.5 times that of the southern seas. I trust that the merchant guild only needs to add three merchant fleets in the north to meet the huge trade demand," argued Moribak, intent on winning the hearts and minds of the officials of the guilds with the promise of future profits at the north.

"Hahaha…" Saibyoeff laughed coldly and said, "Don't count your chicks before they've hatched. You can only see the potential profits this expansion would bring, but have you considered what kind of price we would have to pay and the risk we would have to take before any of these profits are certain? Leaving aside other matters, the winds and waves at the north are erratic and unpredictable. The weather conditions are even more whimsical. Can the Cursed Coasts of the north really compare to the southern seas and the tranquil Golden Coast? Merely filling up the reefs of the northern coasts

will cost us huge amounts of manpower and money.

"While your idea to take Silowas Island as the dominion for the clan is not a bad one, look at the state of our two interception fleets now. Our guild spent so much resources and time and only managed to train four blademasters, yet you've already lost one of them on the very first interception attempt! That blademaster you lost is actually one of the cornerstones of our fighting strength, the big-seven merchant guilds of the trade union!

"I've already said this long ago. Even though the Krissen Empire has dissolved, with the nations formerly belonging to it being at war for so long, that was a result of the big-seven's painstaking efforts plotting and planning over tens of years. The Krissen Empire didn't just collapse out of nowhere like a rotting beam of some house.

"While the various guilds in the union want to gain the territory of the Andinaq and Redlis kingdoms for their own dominions, not one of them actually want to face off against the 300000-strong army of the Andinaq Kingdom's second highness. Instead they hope that he will waste his strength on taking out the Redlis Kingdom before the guilds sweep in and take advantage of the situation.

"'A camel that's starved to death is still bigger than a horse.' That's a saying that you will have to comprehend. Even though the empire is no more, that doesn't mean that the nobles formerly belonging to the empire no longer have power. You didn't even bother to check out the background of House Norton before antagonizing them, and look at the results of that! You've kicked on an iron plate you couldn't break and got injured yourself.

"Think about it, Silowas Island is the former principality of the Second Highness, yet he was willing to enfeoff it to some other noble just like that. Given the might of the second highness, Auguslo, there must be a reason for his actions. And yet you're over here running your mouth over how weak and impotent those nobles are. You even attempted to forcefully restrain the other party and force them to hand Silowas Island to the guild… What kind of daydreams were you having?"

"Enough, Saibyoeff. Stop speaking," President Chikdor, who was seated at the top, interjected, "Your younger brother is merely doing his best to ensure the prosperity of the guild. The difficulties we face so far are only temporary ones. We, the Chikdor Merchant Guild, are one of the seven big merchant guilds of the trade union. We can't actually retreat just like that, can we? While we probably aren't strong enough to take

on a whole kingdom, a single landed noble should not be something that we find difficult to digest."

"Father haven't the failure of the interception fleets and the loss of the blademaster made you understand what we're up against?" Saibyoeff said with dissatisfaction, "Putting aside the development of the clan and the guild, purely from a military perspective, I can tell that you've antagonized a very troublesome person. The Peterson Merchant Guild already promised to do their best to mediate between us and said that they would help us buy Silowas Island from the hands of the count. We only have to offer him a price that he can't refuse."

"If that count is anything like the usual greedy nobles we've dealt with, then he would've agreed to negotiate the price with us. But this count didn't bother to even consider having talks and left on his ship without so much as a message for Peterson Merchant Guild. In other words, the count is intent on not letting Silowas Island go. We will have to be prepared to pay the price in blood and fire if we want to take that island.

"I must admit that third brother's preparations are rather thorough. Even though the first interception failed because our lookout wasn't paying attention, the second interception fleet is led by Admiral Pangid, and the third interception fleet is led by the incredibly-experienced Admiral Ari. I've investigated the battle and found that he did not make any mistakes whatsoever during the conflict. Additionally, the third interception also had blademaster Kumori guarding it. That was also why we were so confident with the latter two fleets.

"We thought that Count Norton would definitely be unable to escape us. He's taught us an unforgettable lesson with his methods. When faced with Admiral Pangid's second interception fleet, that count decided to use his ship's advantage in speed as well as the gold-ranked Divine Marksman that performed way beyond our expectations and burst through the blockade, causing us to lose one middle-class merchant vessel and her crew.

"Admiral Pangid then used the sea swallows to send a detailed account to Admiral Ari of the third interception fleet. Even though that was out of our expectations, Old Ari still made the perfect preparations to deal with the situation. He ordered his crews to lay chains between their ships. Other than that, he and blademaster Kumori each stood guard at different ships as a precaution against the gold-ranked marksman. To prevent Count Norton from employing the same trick again, blademaster Kumori even

intentionally went to the leftmost large-class ship.

"All that should've made the plan perfect, right? But it turned out that Count Norton was actually hiding a trump card: which one of you would've expected him to be a rank 3 blademaster? In the end, that mishap cost us more than 500 sailors, three experienced captains, 11 silver-ranked swordsmen, two gold-ranked swordsmen, and a blademaster. Even I didn't suffer that huge a loss during the three years I combatted pirates at the Solar Seas!"

Second young master Saibyoeff then criticized angrily, "The results we have today showed that Moribak didn't bother to research the background of Count Norton at all before acting against him, and his mishap has caused us to treat a rank 3 blademaster as we would a powerless noble, causing the guild much loss and damage! He must be held responsible for this outcome!"

"What is your basis for calling that count a rank 3 blademaster?" asked Moribak with his face flushed red from anger.

"Well, if killing all 347 people on a large-class merchant vessel in less than 30 minutes doesn't count, I don't know what does!" roared Saibyoeff with an even louder voice.

Pointing at an old man with a solemn expression, he said, "Just ask Uncle Udi, a rank 2 blademaster, whether he can do the same. That actually happened before the eyes of almost 1000 people! There's no way it can be faked!"

The old blademaster merely laughed bitterly and shook his head.

"You've got an enemy for the guild that we can't afford to offend!" said the second young master while looking at his younger brother insultingly, "Father definitely did not give you free reign on settling this matter. Tell me, did you actually bother to research Count Norton's background?"

"I… Of course I did! What's so different about Count Norton from other nobles? He's only somewhat better at swordsmanship than the rest…" mumbled third young master Moribak as his gaze started to brighten.

"Imbecile… Is this how you operate? You acted upon your own assumptions and ruined it all… You didn't even bother to pay off someone from the Peterson Merchant Guild to get information on the background of Count Norton at all!" yelled Saibyoeff as he headed to a corner and took out a sack which contained many beastskin

documents.

He held those documents and said, "After we failed to intercept him, I sent my men to do some research on that count. I bet none of you would have expected him to be a legendary figure in Morante City! Do you all remember the competition seven years ago held among the various academies? An iron-ranked instructor from the Dawn Academy actually defeated all the silver-ranked experts in the whole city. He defeated 3000 opponents without suffering a single defeat! He even got the moniker of Iron Locke, Silver Undefeated!"

It was at that moment that a commotion broke out among the seated men. The competition held seven years back was incredibly famous, even the Chikdor Merchant Guild had sent a number of silver-ranked swordsmen to compete. However, not one of them won, and those who returned even said that they had been bested by that iron-ranked instructor in terms of swordsmanship completely. They even admitted that there was no way whatsoever that they could win.

"That iron-ranked instructor is actually Count Norton," Saibyoeff was glad to see the looks of surprise on the faces of those present, "At that time, there was even a rumor about how two gold-ranked swordsmen wanted to show that iron-ranked instructor his place by assaulting him so that their junior apprentice brother would be able to defeat him in a match on the next day. In the end, those two gold-ranks intercepted him, only to end up as two nameless corpses that were found two days later by the city patrol.

"If he could not compete with gold-ranks, there is no way that sly fox at the Dawn Academy would allow him to challenge all the silver-ranked fighters in the city. The competition was very obviously a huge ploy. Seven years have passed since, obviously the count's swordmanship hasn't been stagnant all the time, it has definitely improved even more since then. What happened to the interception fleets only serves to prove it.

"However, when that count left Morante City to return to his dominion to inherit it as well as his title, I heard from the Peterson Merchant Guild that his family only controlled a barony back then. He formed a convoy to head to the Northlands with a few of his buddies at the academy and defeated the united noble army in the Redlis Kingdom, and even helped the Peterson Merchant Guild dominate the oceanic trade routes over there.

"The following reports only contain fragmented bits of information as our guild didn't plant any informants in the Andinaq Kingdom, but there are bits and pieces that suggest the second highness of that kingdom only came to power with the help of the count, which was how he was promoted from a baron to his current status in the first place. Silowas Island was also given to him as a hereditary dominion as a result of that promotion.

"According to the information we got from the Wessia Merchant Guild, that count is known as the Passive Raging Bear in the Northlands as he wouldn't cause trouble unless he is disrupted. The Duke of the Northlands was defeated by the forces of the count, which resulted in him losing his dominion. It is said that Count Norton had his forces raid the duke's dominion for one whole week and committed countless atrocities there. Following that, the king of the Iblia Kingdom, also known as the Second Prince of the former empire, led a force of 100000 men to admonish the count, only to have his whole army beaten to smithereens, causing the second prince to have to escape the royal capital in a haggard fashion.

"And here comes the good part," Saibyoeff said before he paused.

He held up a document, and said, "After the Second Prince was defeated, he was filled with rage and ordered his rank 3 blademaster, Zarinan, to attempt an assassination against the count. I'm sure all of you are informed of the reputation of blademaster Zarinan, who was said to be a quasi-Sword Saint that would break through if he managed to improve the slightest bit more. It ended up with his corpse being crucified and put on display half a year later when the forces of House Norton attacked the royal capital of the Iblia Kingdom to capture the second prince as payback for using such an underhanded method to get back at others for his own losses…"

"Wait a second, you said that these reports are all obtained from the Wessia Merchant Guild?" asked President Chikdor.

"That's right. The Wessia Merchant Guild bought two iron mines within the Iblia Kingdom, and they are very observant of the political situation there. Right now, the Iblia Kingdom is ruled by their queen and not one of the people there bother finding out where the second prince was brought. They treat him as if he doesn't exist. Count Norton managed to unite the three noble houses of the Northland. Their alliance has full control over the Northlands. It's very hard for anyone to enter their dominion to find out the true strength of House Norton. It is rumored that the count is busy developing his dominion, and, in hindsight, that rumor seems to be true. At the very

least, he's managed to find a sea route from the Northlands to Silowas Island. That's how he came to Morante City in the first place."

Saibyoeff put the documents in his hand down, and continued, "Now do you know how grave a mistake you have made? My brother, you actually treated a noble house with a history of military achievements as the common, rotten and corrupted noble houses… Do you know the kind of price we would have to pay for your plan to claim Silowas Island for ourselves? Even if we manage to obtain victory at the very end, the losses we sustain would still shake us to the core and possibly force us to give up the dominance we have at the southern seas to some other merchant guild. It would also cause us to be unable to compete with the rest of the big-seven guilds, heck, we might even be at the mercy of those second or third-rate merchant guilds we look down on so much. Is that how low you would have us fall before you're satisfied, brother?"

Chapter 252
Dispute within the Chikdor Merchant Guild (2)

"Alright, brother. Don't criticize Moribak like that. He only did what he did for the future of the guild's prosperity. Since the incident has already happened, let's think of how we can fix it instead of complaining all day long," said Serihanem.

He was already rather satisfied that he was appointed the successor of the merchant guild by his father after his competition with his third brother. Normally, he was a serious, straight-laced person who maintained a calm and peaceful personality. However, he felt it was appropriate to display his brotherly love and compassion once in a while.

"Father, uncles, actually, I think that my brother Saibyoeff made quite a bit of sense there. Should we really fight with Count Norton all the way to the bitter end? We will definitely sustain huge losses that might even come to shake our position as the hegemons of the southern seas. After all, even though Silowas Island is large, it is in the northern seas. The merchant guild can't afford to lose the southern seas, so we can't afford to overlook this."

Even though the first young master appeared to be speaking up on behalf of Saibyoeff, it added little to the conversation. Saibyoeff had already clearly illustrated the consequences of continuing to plot to gain the island. Even though chasing profits was the innate instinct of a merchant, should the cost exceed the gains, then he would definitely have to give it good consideration.

President Chikdor began to hesitate as he said, "The reason we set Silowas Island as our target was because our guild thrives on maritime superiority. Given that, having an island as our dominion would be ideal. There are no such suitable islands at the southern seas, neither is there any coastal territory large enough for us to locate our dominion at."

Since the trade union was going to implement a nobility system, with each of the big-seven merchant guilds given the title of duke, they would have to attain a piece of land appropriate to their title. The six other guilds had already determined their targets. Only the Chikdor Merchant Guild's plan to take Silowas Island as their dominion had

run into some trouble. Even though getting themselves a duchy was important, losing most of the guild for it was an incredibly bad transaction.

Serihanem cleared his throat, indicating that he was going to speak once more. He was of the same opinion as Saibyoeff and didn't think that the northern strategy to make Silowas Island the guild's domain was a good one. He found that Silowas Island was way too far from Morante City. It took at least 20 days to sail from one to the other. There was no way he would resign himself to stay and rot at a rural island far away. Rural life would make anyone who has experienced the prosperity of Morante City feel dull and uninteresting.

Secondly, that strategy was actually planned by his youngest brother Moribak.

Father is really too biased. Since he has appointed me his successor, why is he still counting on Moribak so much? Not only did he allow him to take charge of the plans for the northern trade routes, he even let him have a hand at the overall strategy of the plan that would determine the future of the whole guild. Just look at what happened. With such a massive fiasco, how can I just sit still without attempting to correct the mistakes of my overly-ambitious brother?

In terms of martial talent, Serihanem couldn't compare with his brother, Saibyoeff, not by a long shot. The latter was already a one-star gold rank. Even the rank 2 blademaster of the guild, Uncle Udi, was full of praise for Saibyoeff. He maintained that there was an incredibly good chance for him to become a rank 1 blademaster before he turned 50, which would further increase the core strength of the guild.

Likewise, Serihanem wasn't as capable as Moribak in terms of calculation and planning. Moribak had demonstrated jaw-dropping talent when he settled the spice trade problem on his previous trip to the Shyarsia kingdom by putting a premature end to the young king who attempted to resist the Chikdor Merchant Guild's monopoly on their spice. Even though this was the first time the Chikdor Merchant Guild had meddled in royal affairs, the matter was still settled perfectly.

Compared to his two brothers, Serihanem appeared rather common. He had been nurtured within the guild from a young age, he could only claim to be a run-of-the-mill merchant who bought low and sold high. In terms of grasping business opportunities, he was better than his two brothers, and that aspect of his was what the merchant guild treasured most. Nothing was more important for the advancement of the guild than profits, and that sole characteristic of Moribak was all he needed to be appointed

successor.

However, after Serihanem heard about the nobility system and his father's eventual ascension to duke status, he began to have his own plans. After all, the title and dominion of his father would eventually be handed down to him, so he felt that he should stick his hand into deciding where the dominion would be.

The territory Serihanem had in mind was the Urubaha duchy. The duchy was located to the south of the Forde Trade Union and could be considered to be the starting point for the Golden Coast at the southern seas. At the south of the Falik Plains (where Morante City was located) were the Callisto Hills. The Tedanini mountains, where the dwarven kingdom was located, was further south. At the very southern end of the Tedanini mountains, was the Urubaha duchy.

While the terrain of the duchy was mountainous and near the coast, it was incredibly crude and rural. Its main 'export' was pirates and mercenaries. Half of the pirates that operated at the Solar Seas were the so-called fishing folk of the Urubaha duchy. They were a hodge-podge bunch who didn't care whether a fleet they spotted belonged to a large merchant guild or not. As long as there was an opportunity for profit, they would attack and make off with the precious cargo. Should the merchant guild be the least bit careless, they would suffer huge losses to the raids.

Serihanem had made his decision purely based on his mercantile perspective. Half of the Urubaha duchy was desolate mountains. The other half was coastal beaches. As such, there wasn't much space for farmland. The thing the duchy was known for was its subterranean caverns which were known to all of Grindia as one of the seven most dangerous places on the continent. Legend says that within the caves lie a mysterious underground world, which saw 9 out of 10 explorers to the caverns failing to return alive. However, it didn't deter Serihanem at all. He was a merchant, not an explorer, nor a mercenary. Perhaps, he could even use the mystery surrounding the caverns to profit off some foolish adventurers. As for their safety, they were none of his concern.

The Urubaha duchy was a relatively poor nation. The merchants, however, believed that the reason for its poor economy was poor management, and that it could be improved if the right person was in charge. Serihanem felt he was the perfect fit to do just that. Other factors aside, he already had his eyes on the ancient forests in the duchy which would be ideal for timber production. The current duke wasn't keen on investing in roads, and didn't take advantage of the natural resources the duchy possessed. Given that the duchy was near the Tedanini mountains, trade with the

dwarves would net quite a bit of profit too. At the same time, he could have people looking for ore veins; yet another avenue in which to invest. The first young master was quite adept at coming up with ideas to make a profit.

The greatest benefit of making the Urubaha duchy the dominion of the clan was how the guild could use the pirates for their own benefit. Not only would that be able to cut out the costs of wiping out the pirates, they could even be added to the naval forces of the guild. By spending the least resources, the guild would be able to convert the poor fishing folk into sailors for its fleets, and decrease the cost of hiring and training rookies.

Additionally, traveling from the duchy to Morante City would only take three to four days by ship. The ease of transport would also allow the guild to set up their trade headquarters at the beginning of the Golden Coast, allowing the guild even more ease of control of the trade routes at the southern seas.

However, there were also huge obstacles associated with taking the duchy. Firstly, Duke Urubaha was known to be a hugely stubborn person who was also a rank 3 blademaster. Even though he didn't have any hope of breaking through to become a swordsaint, he was still fit as a fiddle in his seventies and wouldn't be easy to deal with. Other than that, he had two elite armies each numbering up to 24 thousand soldiers. Not only were they the main reason the duke was able to form his duchy, they were also his means of making money.

As the Urubaha Duchy was rather poor, it was rather curious how it was able to maintain two huge armies that would cost a lot of money to maintain. In actuality, the two armies are often 'rented' out to others. Whenever one army's rent term is over, it would return and the other army would be rented out. They would rotate their shifts like so to earn the funds to bring in wealth traded with blood for the duchy.

However, Serihanem felt that if the guild was able to conquer the duchy and make it the guild's dominion, the two armies of the duchy would be able to make up for the guild's weak influence on land. He would definitely not rent the two armies out and believed that the soldiers would quickly become loyal to the guild with his new policy.

Also, Duke Urubaha was also a relative of the president of the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild. This was the most troubling obstacle for Serihanem; not only would taking the Urubaha duchy cause them to be on the bad side of the president of the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, the conflict between the two big-seven guilds

would most definitely greatly affect the situation of the trade union. That was also why the high officials of the Chikdor Merchant Guild had never even considered taking the territory belonging to the Urubaha duchy as their dominion.

For Serihanem those obstacles wouldn't pose much of a problem. The only difficulty he had was how he would go about convincing the higher-ups of the guild to agree to his idea. He would need at least 10 million gold Fordes to build up the infrastructure of the duchy, that's if he even managed to take it, to improve the living standards to win over the duchy's inhabitants. Even though it would stabilize the guild's control over their dominion, and gradually bring in profits, it's a little too slow for merchants like them who felt that transactions that took too much time wasn't good business.

Serihanem, who understood the merchants well, knew that this was the best chance he had to bring up his idea -- when the higher-ups were troubled by the matters concerning the interception fleets -- and felt confident that his plan had a good chance of being approved. He believed that the cost the guild would incur in their fight against Count Norton was better off invested in the Urubaha duchy. At the very least, the latter had a far greater chance of returns.

It's too bad that Serihanem was just one step late in bringing his plan. Saibyoeff stood up at that moment and said, "I have a suggestion…"

Saibyoeff hung up a large map of the Solar Seas, a map the high officials of the guild were familiar with. It depicted thousands of large and small islands and reefs.

No way… Most of the islands in the Solar Seas can only hold a small village at most! Even the largest islands are mostly mountainous. There's no place that can be made into residential areas… How could those places be fitting as the guild's dominion? thought most of them present.

However, Saibyoeff soon showed them what 'thinking out of the box' meant.

"Look here. The Solar Seas located at the south. There are around 1000 islands there. Even though the largest of the islands are smaller than a common barony, these islands are mostly located at shallow waters. Even the deeper parts are only around 20 meters at most, and the shallower parts are roughly 3 meters. The waters between the islands are so shallow that one can even walk to the next one and only get one's feet wet. When the tides recede, you'll discover that some of these islands are actually connected.

"If we connect these 27 islands with this red line here, if we fill up the shallower parts connecting the islands, we will get a composite island that is even larger than Silowas Island. On top of that, nobody will be able to dispute the legitimacy of our claim to the place. Our guild will be able to strengthen our hold on the Solar Seas gradually by clearing away the pirates one after another, firming our hold on the dominion and establishing our clan's foundation for the next millennium in the process…

The more Saibyoeff went on with his plan, the more Serihanem shook his head in annoyance.

What a useless fellow! He actually dared to suggest ocean reclamation without considering the costs it would involve, as well as the time it would take… Not only that, the military resources we would have to expend to wipe out the pirates hiding among the thousand islands would be enormous. Would father actually approve it? We are merchants. What we should focus on is speedy, efficient, and profitable transactions…

It's over… Even if I bring up making the Urubaha duchy our target, no one would bother with my suggestion anymore… With Saibyoeff's 'ingenious plan' laid before them, it will be even harder for me to convince them of my own plan… sighed Serihanem secretly.

It seemed that he would have to look for another chance to put his plan into motion. He didn't understand what his brother was thinking. Even though he had told Saibyoeff that his plan definitely wouldn't work, Saibyoeff's stubbornness made him bring up the plan anyway.

As expected, Moribak's laughter resounded in the room, interrupting Saibyoeff's presentation halfway through.

Saibyoeff scoffed angrily, "What are you laughing at?!"

Moribak finally got the chance to pay his brother back for the humiliation he received. There was no intimidating him into stopping now.

As he stepped forward gradually, Moribak said, "My beloved elder brother… Your plan is too optimistic. Naturally, it's definitely quite impressive if we are truly able to control the Solar Seas. However, how much manpower and money do you think reclaiming the shallow seas by making those landfills will take? Also, how long do you think we would need to be able to finish setting up the dominion for our guild?"

"Ugh…"

Saibyoeff was rendered speechless by those queries.

"I haven't figured that out yet, but I'm sure the guild can have someone run the numbers…"

"There's no need for that, I have already made a rough estimate. To fill up the shallow seas and connect the islands together, the guild would have to invest at least two to three million gold Fordes every year as well as use 1000 large vessels to transport the dirt and rocks needed for such huge undertaking. After spending ten whole years, we will only be able to fill up a third of the area you specified."

Seeing Saibyoeff's stupefied look, Moribak continued, "Brother, do you know how much the guild's revenue is? We only make 2 million gold Fordes annually. Deducting the expenses and bonuses we have to pay out, less than 400 thousand or so goes into the treasury. Why did you think the guild refused your request to form another armed fleet? We can't afford to maintain another one. Have you any idea how much it costs us every year to eradicate pirates? 500 thousand gold Fordes, almost as much as the yearly revenue of the northern fleet…"

"I really don't understand how you could come up with such a brainless plan. Filling up the Solar Seas… Only a person like you would even conceive something so ludicrous. Do you think that this is something a merchant guild like us should do? Only an empire can complete a project on that scale, to say nothing of the dozens of years it could take us. Our father is the president of a merchant guild. Even if he gets a title, it's only the title of a duke. It's far from what we need to lay claim over the entire Solar Seas. Do you want our father to become the laughing stock of the whole continent for the next thousand years?

"Why can the other dukes forcefully conquer others' territory and make it their own, but not us? The trade union will be implementing the nobility system in just a few months. By then, the six other guilds would have established their dominions already, and we would have nothing. How do you think our guild will be able to stand on equal footing with the other guilds? Do you think we should tell them that we're filling up the seas and will have our dominion ready in another ten years?

"No matter how much you object to my plan, even you must have to admit that there isn't any other place more suitable for us to establish our dominion than Silowas Island. So what if they're a noble house with a military background? What's the big deal of a rank 3 blademaster? Isn't he human all the same? As long as he is not a

swordsaint, we will have many methods available to us to deal with him.

"Even though our guild has suffered huge losses due to carelessness and lack of intel, I believe that we are still able to hold our ground against our enemies. Now that we know enough about Count Norton's background, we will definitely triumph as long as we carefully execute a few thorough plans!"

"You… You don't understand how scary a rank 3 blademaster can be, especially one as young as Count Norton… He even has a good chance of becoming a swordsaint in the future. Your irresponsible actions will doom the whole guild to oblivion!" roared Saibyoeff.

"You're giving up before bothering to try!" Moribak retorted, "If that's the case, all we have to do is to put him to death before he becomes a swordsaint. He is still just a rank 3 blademaster, after all. We can even ask for outside help if necessary. The Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild and the Mayflower Merchant Guild each have a rank 3 blademaster among their ranks, while the Wessia Merchant Guild has two rank 2 blademasters. All we have to do is spend some money to hire them. Any problem that can be solved with money is no problem at all. If four blademasters aren't enough, we'll hire eight. As long as we wipe that count out, his house will slowly begin to crumble. Then we will no longer have anything to worry about."

"You…"

No longer able to argue against his brother, Saibyoeff rolled up his sleeves angrily and attempted to strike him.

"Stop, Saibyoeff! Stand down!" President Chikdor shouted while giving his second son a harsh glance.

The idea he proposed to fill up the seas was nothing but a big joke. Moribak's arguments had deeply resonated with his own thoughts. Indeed, Silowas Island was the piece of land most easily obtainable. All they had to do was wipe out the blademaster, Count Norton.

"Second Uncle, what do you think?" President Chikdor asked Udi, who was seated beside him.

The Chikdor Merchant Guild was not one that was controlled completely by one family. Initially, they were known as the Sword and Barrel merchant guild, which was

originally formed by a group of close friends. Eventually, when one of the ancestors of the Chikdor clan took over, and brought the guild to the ranks of the other largest guilds in the union, the Chikdor clan obtained 70 percent shares of the guild and changed its name to its current one. Also, the position of president could only be inherited by the descendants of the Chikdor clan.

As for the families of the other founders who were part of the guild, the incompetent ones would survive on the dividends of the guild, while the competent ones would eventually serve as the high-ranking officials within the guild. After Blademaster Udi was discovered to be talented at a young age, he was raised with the utmost care and attention. This caused him to become a force that the guild could rely on.

In terms of seniority, even President Chikdor had to refer to him as uncle.

Udi shook his head with a smile, and said, "I boarded the ship Kumori died on and took a look at the traces the battle had left behind. To be honest, I don't think four blademasters will be enough. It's better to hire eight. All of them should also be at least at the second rank. Since we're choosing this route, it's better to not skimp on the costs. As long as the guild exists, we will be able to make the money back."

President Chikdor thumped on the table lightly and announced, "Alright, then the decision to set up the clan's dominion at Silowas Island is confirmed. There will be no more discussion of this. Moribak, send someone to get more information about Count Norton and his house as well as everything we need to know about Silowas Island. If there is another mistake, I will not forgive you again…

"Serihanem, contact the various rank 2 blademasters and see how much they would charge us for this assignment. As long as it is reasonable, accept their offer. They shouldn't be able to criticize us for being stingy when it comes to asking them to risk their lives on a mission like this."

"Yes, father," said Serihanem respectfully as he stood up and bowed.

Chapter 253
Mayflower Merchant Guild Assault Incident

Moribak was satisfied that the merchant guild eventually settled on his initial plan to expand to the north. Not only was his second elder brother reprimanded harshly by his father, his eldest brother was working earnestly on hiring the other blademasters.

The word he had received during the past three days wasn't bad: the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild's rank 3 blademaster, Kafzo, and the rank 2 blademaster from the Forde Merchant Guild, Rolik, had both accepted the mission. As for the two blademasters of the Wessia Merchant Guild, they were not in Morante City at the moment and would only return during the end of the 12th month. Additionally, the Mayflower Merchant Guild's few blademasters were occupied with guarding the letters about glass production and couldn't afford to leave until the auction was over. Moribak believed that there wouldn't be a problem in hiring them after that.

Following that, Moribak began to gather intel seriously. He painstakingly formed three groups of loyal and elite members of the merchant guild and disguised them as a few smaller merchant guilds to sail to Silowas Island secretly. After all, if one wanted to launch a targeted attack on the enemy, one must know the enemy's whereabouts. They couldn't let the blademasters wander around like aimless flies, after all.

Moribak would never have imagined, however, that the three middle-class merchant ships he sent were all expropriated by Lorist at the Sea of Grief, along with the whole crew, who were forcefully absorbed into the ranks of Lorist's marines. It took three months for a few of them to return to the guild. However, by then, the Chikdor Merchant Guild no longer paid any heed to Lorist and Silowas Island.

Just when Moribak was patiently and confidently waiting for his plan to be carried out, a piece of news was released – shocking the whole of Morante.

At that time, Moribak was discussing the matters of the floating port with his trusted aides. The contraption was one of their trump cards and could be used at the reefs of the northern seas. The floating port was constructed by lining up and tying together huge, watertight wooden boxes and letting them float in the ocean so that goods could be transported to shore. During windy and stormy times, the wooden boxes could also

be pulled onto the shore, to be redeployed after the bad weather passed.

With such a flexible method in his hands, the reefs in the shallow waters of the northern coasts would no longer pose much of a problem. Thinking back to what Saibyoeff had said, Moribak felt like laughing out loud.

Only an idiot like him can come up with something as ridiculous as land reclamation. When the guild successfully obtains Silowas Island, I will bring up this floating-box port of mine, which will instantly boost the impression the higher-ups have of me in the guild. If First Brother makes a mistake sometime in the future, then I will naturally be able to replace him as successor without any difficulties.

Just as he was drunk on his fantasies, Moribak heard a commotion outside. One of his personal attendants barged into his room and said, "Master, master, it's horrible! Something big has gone down! Just moments ago, the blademasters of the Teribo Kingdom launched an attack on the Mayflower Merchant Guild. The guild has suffered huge casualties! Right now, the old master and the rest have already rushed over there…"

Moribak jumped from hearing the shocking news.

"The Te-teribo Kingdom… Why would they… against the Mayflower Merchant Guild… Thi-this… Their courage truly knows n-no bounds…" stammered he.

As the saying goes, 'one won't die if one does not seek death'. The Mayflower Merchant Guild truly had it coming for them. Had they auctioned out the two letters concerning the glass production methods on the agreed-upon date – the 5th day of the 12th month – then they would've shed the heavy burden they bore and nothing else would've happened. However, the vice president of the guild believed that it was too short notice, most of the ones who had come to the city and were interested in the two letters required more time to prepare the funds. Additionally, the merchant guild believed that they could use this opportunity to make the guild one of the biggest auctioneers on the Grindian continent by making more thorough preparations, hence the decision to delay the auction of the letters by another ten days.

The ambassador of the Teribo Kingdom had actually been sent on a supremely important mission to Morante city, accompanied by a few blademasters and gold-ranked knights. He kept his travels low key and arrived at the city on the 4th day of the 12th month. He paid a visit to the high officials of the guild. The moment he arrived

to discuss whether they could take back the two letters in exchange for 10 million gold Fordes.

The guild's president courteously declined, however. Since word of the auction had already spread out, it was no longer possible for them to settle the matter privately. It would cause irreparable damage to the guild's reputation. However, the president said that t Teribo Kingdom was more than welcome to join the bidding war during the auction. He did say, however, that he felt 10 million gold Fordes would only be enough for one of the letters.

The chance to have the Teribo Kingdom join the auction was another reason it had been delayed. The kingdom needed time to prepare its funds.

If the Mayflower Merchant Guild had made the sale on the very next day, on the original date for the auction, the Teribo Kingdom wouldn't have had a chance to react. But the ten-day delay allowed the ambassador to keep in contact with Teribo VII. Letters were delivered one day after another by their messengers, but the guild didn't mind. They believed the kingdom busy gathering funds.

Little did the guild imagine that the kingdom had other means at their disposal: the destruction of the two letters themselves. In the letter Teribo VII sent to his ambassador, he expressed angrily that the production methods were the rightful property of the kingdom and that the auction was like putting up for sale a wallet one picked up instead of returning it to its rightful owner! Despite the owner of the wallet bringing 10 million gold Fordes as a sign of gratitude to reclaim the wallet, the merchant guild still didn't yield!

Teribo VII was truly mad at the recent developments. For all of the past century, the Teribo Kingdom had provided selfless support to the trade union to fend off the invasion of the Krissen Empire at the Falik plains. Not only that, one Krissen Empire ambassador who had visited the Teribo Kingdom to garner their support was even beheaded in a show of goodwill.

Incredibly troubled, Teribo VII thought, *father, grandfather, and great-grandfather… The goodwill you have shown the trade union has amounted to nothing more than feeding a hungry wolf… Back then, when the trade union was pressured into a corner by the empire, it was the Teribo Kingdom that formed an armed alliance with the other nations around us to reinforce Morante city. Only after that was it possible to defeat the Krissen Empire…*

Teribo VII believed firmly that the trade union was only able to triumph over the empire because of the kingdom's support. Without them, the trade union would have long faded from existence. That was why he felt that the trade union should be thankful for them and offer them aid when they needed it to return the favor.

But to the people of the trade union, they were the ones who had to weather a whole century of assault from the Krissen Empire. It was their blood that was spilled, and it was through their own sacrifice that the various neighboring nations were able to retain their freedom and autonomy! The trade union took for granted the aid of the other nations because they felt that they deserved it. Should the trade union fall, the other nations around them wouldn't able to escape theirs either. They were all in the same boat, after all, if it was sunk by the Krissen Empire, all of them would sink together.

It was also the pride of the Moranites and the main source of their self-perceived superiority over the people of the other nations. During the previous century, it was the Moranites who marched to the battlefield with their heads held high while chanting their war cry! All the neighboring nations did, was provide support. Even though the resources were far from enough on the frontlines, the generous Moranites wouldn't fuss over such small matters, as it had been their own ancestors who were fighting on the battlefield bravely, saving the neighboring nations from their fate!

This was the main difference in the viewpoints of Teribo VII and the Moranites. While the big-seven merchant guilds, who were in power, weren't as shallow as the average Moranite, they couldn't help but be affected by that mindset.

For the big seven, even though they acknowledged that the Teribo Kingdom was one of the biggest supporters of the trade union, through their incredible contributions during the trade union's war with the empire, they believed that the trade union also repaid them in the form of generous benefits or conditions for the trade they had done over the years.

Other matters aside, the Teribo Kingdom was given monopolistic access to the trade union’s market for glass and were exempt from taxes. This was the way the trade union intended to pay back the kingdom’s support. It is important to note that the Teribo Kingdom was the sole producer of glass. Being the only producer of glass that was also allowed to use the trade routes from Morante city to export their products throughout the rest of the continent, the Teribo Kingdom profited greatly and eventually became one of the richest factions in the whole continent.

Over the past 20 years of peace following the successful thwarting of the empire by the trade union, disagreements had begun to sprout in the high council of the trade union concerning the benefits afforded to the Teribo Kingdom. There were also a number of representatives that thought the kingdom had profited more than ten times of what they had contributed in the first place.

In the end, the trade union is comprised of merchants who were sensitive to the profits involved in the glass trade. These smaller merchant guilds also submitted a report they worked on together detailing the lucrative profits involved in the glass trade of the Teribo Kingdom.

Chasing profits were the instincts of merchants, and the smaller merchant guilds were all quite jealous of the monopoly the kingdom had in the glass trade. Even though the trade union was considered to be the official distributor of the glass, making the kingdom the official supplier of glass products to the union, the ones involved understood that the profit gained from distributing the glass products was only a drop in the ocean.

The big-seven guilds did not lack the foresight required to govern the union. Those who were able to make it to the top were not simple minded. They were worried that the moment they changed the benefits they gave to the Teribo Kingdom in the glass trade, the nations surrounding the trade union might begin to worry about the rising power of the trade union. After all, the trade union didn't rely on drastic policy changes to widen their influence and instead resorted to subtler, sneakier methods to expand their power and influence over the other nations to develop in the trade union's favor.

That was why the big-seven guilds suppressed the opinions of the representatives of the smaller guilds and increased coverage in their newspaper on the contributions the Teribo Kingdom had made to the trade union, further cementing the rhetoric that the friendly relationship between the union and the kingdom must be upheld, thus justifying the continuation of benefits given to it in the glass trade.

In actuality, that was only one of the methods the big-seven guilds employed. The other was to put clearly the dissident opinions towards the kingdom so that they could, for themselves, in essence, say, 'Look, we here at the union have already shown the Teribo Kingdom much generosity, and it is now the kingdom's turn to give something back. As the party that profits most from the glass trade, shouldn't the kingdom take a step back? Even if the benefits given stay the same, at the very least, the kingdom should help out with some donations or charity events so that the

relationship between the kingdom and the union wouldn't look so awkward.'

It was too bad that the trade union's hints were as useless as lighting a candle for a blind man. To Teribo VII, the benefits were what the kingdom deserved. He even thought that the praise the Morante Daily had for them was a sign of weakness from the trade union.

Happily, he proclaimed to his officials, "Look, those merchants can't afford to have us leave on them! That's why they are broadly publicizing our friendly relationship with them!"

Teribo VII is nothing but a simple-minded idiot! was the common opinion those of the big-seven held. It was why all of them were unanimous in the decision to use the auction of the two letters held by the Mayflower Merchant Guild to give the kingdom a huge blow. Teribo VII should know his place and treat the trade union with some respect.

Additionally, the increase of glass producers would be incredibly beneficial to the trade union. This was the difference between how nobles and merchants viewed the matter of the auction. The people of the trade union felt that the auction was nothing but a common transaction which they did not have to bother interfering with, while the nobles, especially ones as strait-laced as Terbio VII, felt that it was a matter that would threaten the existence of his kingdom. Whatever it took, he had to stop the letters from being sold.

As such, when the ambassador passed on the non-interference stance the six other members of the big-seven were taking, Teribo VII blew up completely.

Since you guys don't care about the survival of the Teribo Kingdom, then don't blame me for not giving the trade union any chances.

With a solemn expression, he gave the order for the two letters to be destroyed.

On the night of the 8th day of the 12th month, the Teribo Kingdom's ambassador once again paid another visit to the Mayflower Merchant Guild and tried hard to negotiate for the reclamation of the two letters, to no avail.

In the end, he left the merchant guild shrugging and saying, "Well, you can't say I didn't try my best," before leaving on his carriage.

Less than thirty minutes after his departure, the guild was under the assault of seven blademasters and more than 20 gold-ranked knights.

The assault was far beyond of the expectations of most. Many of those on the site were dead. The assailants were incredibly cruel, they didn't show the tiniest bit of mercy to their adversaries. Their goal was clear: head to the vault the ambassador visited before and wipe out the four blademasters that were guarding it.

However, the guild intentionally did not tell the ambassador that the letters weren't in their hands. Instead, it was guarded by the eight blademasters from the academies as well as the rank three blademaster sent by the guild. As for the letters the ambassador was shown, they were fakes forged by the guild and placed in the vault guarded by four blademasters as a decoy.

After suffering such a sudden assault, the four inattentive blademasters suffered huge casualties. Apart from a rank two blademaster that managed to escape despite being heavily injured, the other three rank one blademasters were all killed. The other guards were almost completely wiped out. The ground was littered with severed limbs and corpses.

The Teribo Kingdom had deployed a rank three blademaster, 2 rank two blademasters, and 4 rank one blademasters, as well as 27 gold-ranked knights. Apart from 1 rank one blademaster who was killed in a suicidal attack by his opponent, another rank one blademaster was injured and five other gold-ranked knights dead. Their mission could've been said to be a huge success.

The moment the rank three blademaster tore the two letters into irrecoverable pieces, they all prepared to leave. However, they were unable to do so. The Mayflower Merchant Guild was one of the big-seven guilds of the trade union, their headquarters were naturally one of the most secure areas in the city. The moment cries of pain and slaughter rang out from the guild, the city’s garrison force was put on high alert. By the time the rank two blademaster that escaped sounded the alarm, the forces stationed nearby, and the other merchant guilds, would send their men to secure the perimeter.

It didn't take long for the news of the garrison force’s devastation to be spread out. The big-seven guilds were all shocked and every one of them instantly mobilized their own blademasters. Even four of the blademasters of the academies were sent out along with the rank three blademaster of the Mayflower Merchant Guild as

reinforcements.

There was no way the assailants could sneak away. After half a night of intense fighting, a third of the inner city area of Morante was devastated, with countless innocent lives sacrificed in the process. The blademasters and gold-ranked knights who realized that they could no longer escape launched into a crazed frenzy of slaughter and destruction, causing their pursuers much trouble.

In the end, one rank three blademaster of the Teribo Kingdom escaped despite his injuries, with another rank two blademaster managing to evade capture by disguising himself. The rest were all wiped out, becoming lifeless corpses that lay on the cold, hard ground.

When the president of the Mayflower Merchant Guild angrily rushed to see the ambassador with his men, the ambassador only shrugged and said, "I already tried my best."

As soon as the last words left his mouth, black blood flowed from his mouth and he died.

Such is the account of the infamous Mayflower Merchant Guild Assault Incident as documented in the history books of Grindia. However, the people back then didn't realize that this was only the opening act of the chaos that was to come. The chain of events would eventually lead to the rise to prominence of the House of the Raging Bear and the eventual formation of the mighty and prosperous Raging Bear Dynasty.

Chapter 254
Setup and Counters

Lorist arrived at Silowas Island with the ships he had expropriated on the 34th day of the 12th month. There were another two days left until the 36th day of the 12th month, which was one of the three great celebrations in a Grindian year, it celebrated the coming of the new year.

In ancient times, the weather was cold during new year and snow fell constantly, so Grindians would stay at home, indoors, to welcome the new year. People would celebrate in their homes by feasting and sleeping without doing anything else. It was also why the day was known as the Day of Rest. But with the improvement in warmth-retaining clothing, people started going out on the streets during the Day of Rest. Some shops even used the opportunity to have sales, further reinforcing the day's festive air.

Charade awaited Lorist's arrival worriedly at the port. Even though Lorist had sent him a letter, it was incredibly lacking in details. Additionally, Josk and Els only stayed briefly before heading back to the Sea of Grief. They only mentioned that something big had happened without being specific. It caused Charade so much worry he had bags under his eyes.

However, when he finally met Lorist, he didn't bother asking about what happened and instead told him a piece of good news right away. There was word from the Northlands that Terman and Yuriy had both broken through to the one-star gold rank. That meant that Lorist had another two gold-ranked knights under him. The household now had a total of eight gold-ranked knights.

Lorist was overjoyed. He turned to Els, who simply shrugged.

"I have a feeling that my turn will come next year," he replied.

Lorist's gaze returned to Charade. He laughed bitterly.

"I think I'll need two or three more years… I don't even have enough time to deal with the matters at hand, so how would I be able to sit still and train? I've already been here for more than a year…" was his answer.

Terman, Yuriy, Els and Charade were the friends that Lorist had made during his ten years at Dawn Academy, and they were also his most trusted subordinates. When they first joined Lorist's cause and became his knights, they were only at the three-star silver rank. Even though Terman and Yuriy didn't have much talent in training, through their hard work and military experience over the past seven years, they finally managed to take the next step and become gold-ranked knights.

Els, on the other hand, trained in the dark attribute battleforce technique passed down in his family. Dark attribute battleforce was known to be slower to train. Even though Els only held the position of the leader of Lorist's guards and didn't seem that impressive, Lorist believed that the moment Els broke through to become a gold-ranked knight, he would definitely be able to impress many with his prowess.

Charade, on the other hand, was easily the most talented among the four. It was too bad that he was entrusted with so many important tasks. Charade's impressive management skills had actually held his battleforce training back and Lorist felt quite sorry for having no choice but to burden him.

Lorist hugged Charade tightly and said, "I'm sorry, old friend. The burden I've entrusted to you with is indeed too heavy. Head back to the Northlands with me in due time and stay there for two years. Train hard and break through, you'll be given a manor of your own like Terman and the rest."

Stunned, Charade asked, "What's wrong, Locke? Didn't we agree that I would be put in charge of the development of Silowas Island?"

Lorist laughed bitterly and said, "I'm sorry, we've got involved in a huge, troublesome matter and Silowas Island will soon become a battlefield. Our enemy this time is incredibly powerful and I can't have you stay here. It is too dangerous. You will have to go back to the dominion. Let's talk more at the camp. This is not a good place to discuss this."

Senbaud walked over and reported to Lorist, "Milord, all the ships have already been anchored and checked. The crews for the ships have been assigned. Please give me further instructions."

Charade looked at Senbaud curiously.

“This is…?" asked he.

"Oh, come here. Senbaud, let me introduce you to the chief knight of House Norton, Charade. He makes the decision in my absence," Lorist introduced the two, "This is Senbaud, a gold-ranked pirate. Pretty rare, right? Now he's the squad leader of my marine assault vanguard. He's proven to be rather capable in the little time he's been with us already. I've been considering making him Freiyar's aid and vice commander."

With a troubled look, Senbaud said, "Milord, please don't bring up my pirate background… I'm now your subordinate. If I am a pirate, then you're the pirate boss…"

Initially, Senbaud thought the position of the squad leader of the marine assault vanguard was nothing more than a glorified title for suicide squad captain. However, when they were raiding, or rather, expropriating ships at the Sea of Grief, Senbaud realized that Lorist rushed into battle even sooner than he did. Many times, Lorist was able to subdue a whole ship all by himself. Most of the time Senbaud's job was to clear up Lorist's mess. His tasks ranged from deciding on the expropriated ships' quartermasters, restructuring the crews, and capturing the prisoners. Lorist had even praised his resourcefulness a few times.

Charade nodded towards Senbaud and said, "Nice to meet you, Senbaud. Don't mind what Milord says. He likes to joke around a lot. You should work hard now that you've joined the household. You'll have a bright future as long as you do."

Charade resolved himself to start training hard so that he could break through to the gold rank as soon as possible. Seeing many of his friends break through the milestone, and how the ones Lorist recruited were also of the gold rank, Charade felt it would be a little unseemly for a chief knight like him to only be on the verge of the three-star silver rank.

"Freiyar, come here. Senbaud will be your aide from now on," called Lorist to Freiyar, who had his eyes fixed on the large-class merchant vessels at the coast.

Freiyar got off the ship.

"Good day. I'm Freiyar, the leader of the navy marine brigade," he said.

Lorist continued the introductions.

"This here is Tok, the vice captain of the marine assault vanguard. He's also quite capable in naval battles. He will serve under you. Freiyar, this is Uncle Torin, Tok's father, and he's quite capable with logistics. Senbaud only managed to keep so many

ships in check with his help. Your marine brigade will finally have a proper supervisor."

Charade asked, "Milord, did you expropriate all these ships yourself?"

Lorist merely nodded. Everyone present had an unspoken understanding of what 'expropriation' meant.

"Milord, why did you have to resort to that?" asked Charade hesitantly.

He understood Lorist's personality well during his years of interacting with him. He had heard Lorist say that robbery was the most unskilled crime that had no bottom line. It was naught but a result of oppressing the weak with force. Seeing that Lorist had expropriated so many ships, Charade thought that he must have had some good reason behind it. He thought about what Lorist had said about Silowas Island becoming a battlefield. He couldn't help but wonder what was really going on.

"Let's talk about this when we go back. You'll know the truth soon enough," said Lorist with a sigh.

When they returned to the camp, Charade was informed of what had happened.

Angrily thumping on the table, he said, "Ridiculous… What does the implementation of the nobility system have anything to do with the Chikdor Merchant Guild taking Silowas Island as their own dominion?!"

Unlike the enraged reaction of Patt, Nors, Jim, Hansk, and Kedan; Senbaud, Torin, and Tok were all shocked. They felt it was thanks to the trade union that they had so unfortunately drawn the attention of Lorist.

Lorist's frenzied sweeping of all the ships at the Sea of Grief to form a fleet against the Chikdor Merchant Guild shocked them greatly, but at the same time, it generated a sense of excitement for them. They never expected that hit-and-run pirates like them would have a chance to confront the ships of the trade union.

The Chikdor Merchant Guild was the hegemon of the southern seas, however. Did they stand a chance of victory against such a formidable force?

"Don't worry," Lorist said as he waved his hand, "I am prepared to deploy Potterfang's heavy-armored division over here and form another steel carroballista division. There

shouldn’t be any issues with two divisions defending the island. The Chikdor Merchant Guild may be impressive at sea, but they are nothing but soft-shelled crabs on land. If they want to conquer the island, they'll have to make landfall. No matter how many they send, we will wipe them all out. Let's see how much manpower and resources they're prepared to deploy."

"What should the navy marine brigade be in charge of, in that case, Milord?" asked Freiyar.

"Your marine brigade will officially be known as the Oceanic Legion from now on. Freiyar, you are the commander of the Oceanic Legion."

Originally, Lorist wanted to call them ‘the navy’, but after considering the fact that such a concept didn't exist on Grindia, and given the rather underdeveloped state of naval warfare, he chose a name that was simpler to comprehend.

"The marine brigade we have at Bullhorn Bay will be your reserve troops. This time around, Senbaud will help you arrange the ships I expropriated into two armed fleets. One of them will focus on speed and have patrol, reconnaissance and interception duties. The other will be relatively slow and focus on transporting manpower and resources, and fight in direct confrontations, understood?"

"Yes, milord, I understand," replied Freiyar.

"Let me remind you: this time around I've expropriated lots of ships, including most of their crew. Senbaud already has an organized name list. Currently, the two armed fleets are manned mainly by our marines and the pirates that joined us along with Senbaud. As for the men from the ships we expropriated, you should be cautious with their use. If anything goes wrong, it will become incredibly hard to keep under control. If these fellows perform well, we must naturally treat them as we would our comrades. Discrimination is completely forbidden."

"Yes, milord. I will do as you say," promised Freiyar.

After Freiyar left, Charade said, "Milord, while there wouldn't be any problem for Potterfang's heavy-armored division to be deployed here, forming another carroballista division on the island won't be possible."

"What?"

"Even though Silowas Island is huge, two-thirds of its area is covered by mountains and dense forests. Only the terrain here in the eastern area of the island is suitable for agriculture and habitation. We wouldn't be able to feed a whole carroballista division's worth of men and horses. Additionally, we just took in up to 60 thousand refugees from the southwestern area of the Andinaq Kingdom to prepare for large-scale development. Even the food we purchased from the Second Highness can only last us four months at most, and the Second Highness has refused further purchases. He said that the remaining food he had was not for sale as it was reserved for his troops," explained Charade.

"Oh, is that so?" Lorist was troubled after hearing the explanation. He had forgotten that Silowas Island was barely able to sustain its population with on its own agricultural produce alone. Bringing in more soldiers would cause a food shortage.

Potterfang's heavily-armored infantry division excelled in close combat. Even though their armor seemed like the standard issue armor of the house's forces, they wore another layer of mail armor, much like Terman's knights. While it increased the load on each soldier, it afforded them far greater defense.[1] Despite that, they would only be able to show their best performance when acting in concert with the carroballista division, defending as the latter attacked.

The problem was that each carroballista required two horses to move it around swiftly so they could be stationed around the battlefield with ease. Without war horses, the steel ballistae couldn't be moved around the battlefield and stationing them would be quite troublesome. The ballistae wouldn't be able to fire at short notice in that case.

The most Lorist could do about this was to return to the Northlands and discuss how they could resolve the issue with Grandmaster Sid and the rest. Additionally, there were quite a lot of matters back at the dominion that Lorist had to deal with personally, such as setting Professor Balbo's gunpowder research into motion, as well as Master Mancheny's glass production. Lorist also had to start experimenting with cannon and gun designs. Once he had functioning designs, he could equip his ships therewith. Once that was done, the Chikdor Merchant Guild would be in for a nasty surprise. Who the true hegemon of the seas was, was a question that would have to be reconsidered.

Lorist wasn't too willing to leave Silowas Island even so. He understood that House Norton lacked high-tier battle power the most. Based on military power alone, if Lorist claimed House Norton to be ranked second in might, nobody would dare to claim the

first spot. Be it the quality of their soldiers or of their equipment, the house's forces completely trumped the other powers by leaps and bounds. Even the Second Highness' 300 thousand-strong army didn't pose much of a threat.

However, apart from Lorist, there were no other blademasters serving the house. During his recent trip to Morante City, Lorist realized that the big-seven merchant guilds could easily bring out four or five blademasters to be stationed elsewhere. However, House Norton only had Lorist.

Even though human-wave tactics could be used to swarm blademasters, it would cost the lives of countless brave soldiers. The huge bleeding gash caused by the assault of Blademaster Zarinan on the house's forces had yet to heal completely. That was why Lorist wasn't intent on leaving Silowas Island in the near future. He had to stand by to receive the Chikdor Merchant Guild's assault.

Lorist believed that since the guild had already lost one blademaster, he could definitely take on three or four more. If he could wipe out at least two of them, his forces could exterminate the invading enemy forces. The guild, after being taught such a harsh lesson, would definitely come to understand that taking Silowas Island was nothing but a pipe dream. Lorist would only be able to return to the Northands without worry after they had been taught this lesson.

"How about this, Freiyar, you will form the two other fleets as quickly as you can. Have the fast fleet patrol the island and maintain its security. When the other armed fleet is completely formed, have it focus all its efforts on transporting food from the Northlands to the island. We must have at least one year's worth of food stocked here," decided Lorist.

"What about the refugees we brought in, Milord? Are we going to stop the development plan?" asked Hansk as he stood up.

He had been put in charge of the planning effort for the development of the dominion. His hand, full of beastskin documents which he seemed intent to report on, attested to this fact.

Lorist almost freaked out as he thought, *Why are so many transmigrators I read about able to spend their days in luxury, earning money and hooking up with girls? And even when a war does come to them, they would be able to send tens of millions of soldiers onto the battlefield easily? In contrast, I don't even have enough food to supply two*

divisions of soldiers here... And given the amount of other stuff I have to tend to, I'm usually busy for the whole day...

Rubbing his temples, Lorist asked, "Summarize it for me, Hansk. Tell me how many development plans you have finished preparing."

Hansk flipped through the beastskin documents in his hands a few times before replying.

"Milord, the main ones concern the move of Whitebird Town, the expansion of the port area, the construction of the defensive walls, and other infrastructure for Whitebird Town and the commerce area, the construction of the embankment at the east part of the island, as well as the replanning and rebuilding of the seven villages and farmland. The renovation of Seaview Manor is nearing its end, and the location for the port for exclusive use of the marine brigade has also been decided. However, the location on which the local defense brigade's citadel is to be constructed has not been decided yet, mainly because of the folk of Whitebird Town's objections."

"Oh, what's up with that?"

"Milord, the folk of Whitebird Town believe that they will not need another local defense brigade because they already have a town garrison of 500 men. They think that the garrison alone is sufficient for the defense of the town. Our original plan was to build the citadel for the local defense brigade between Whitebird Town, the commerce area, and the port..."

The one who explained the situation was the leader of the third local defense brigade, Patt.

"Where will the port for the marine brigade and our Oceanic Legion be constructed?" asked Lorist.

"Over here," Hansk said as he opened a map of Silowas Island, "It's right here along the ridge between Whitebird Town and Seaview Manor. There is a small bay here that will prove to be convenient shielding from waves and strong winds. However, we will have to use a lot of manpower to level the terrain."

Lorist nodded, "Then, station the third local defense brigade where Farama Village used to be. That way, the local defense brigade, the Oceanic Legion, and the two regiments of guards at Seaview Manor will form a triangular defense perimeter. Even

before we mobilize our forces from the dominion of the house, the Chikdor Merchant Guild will find it difficult to pierce our defensive line.

"As for Whitebird Town, leave it as it is and let the garrison there maintain order. However, notify them that a battle between House Norton and the Chikdor Merchant Guild will soon take place on the island. For the ones who wish to leave, we will provide them transport to the Northlands. The garrison can choose to maintain a neutral stance in the conflict between us and the guild. They intend to take the island as their own dominion, so I'm sure they wouldn't do anything to the folk living here…"

Just after he finished speaking, Els, who was in charge of the patrols, rushed in with a white letter.

"Milord, the Second Highness just sent an ambassador here to notify us that Andinaq I, the king of the Andinaq Kingdom, passed away five days ago…"

The Third Prince is dead? The founding king of the Andinaq Kingdom, who was officially the heir to the legacy of the Krissen Empire and unfortunate enough to be injured as a result of the assassination plots between his two other brothers, Andinaq I, had finally left the realm of man. Second Highness Auguslo was finally free of the last chain that bound him. He could now finally mobilize his army and begin the war to unify the Empire.

Lorist received the letter from Els, "The skies are changing…"

Chapter 255
The Glass War

Charade went to the imperial capital to pay his respects. Lorist hadn’t gone, so Charade was there as his representative as well.

What a joke… Going to the imperial capital at this time?!

The reason Lorist was so against meeting the second highness was that he would definitely be asked to 'contribute' to the kingdom in every which way.

Another reason for his resistance to a visit was that he could not afford to take the risk of leaving and having the Chikdor Merchant Guild attack during his absence. Lorist felt that it would be best for him to stay put at Silowas Island and wait for the enemy to attack. This time around, he had to teach the Chikdor Merchant Guild a lesson they could never forget.

The preparations for the battle continued smoothly and those who wanted to evacuate left successfully. Patt also visited Lorist secretly and asked him to write a recommendation letter to be sent to Telesti.

Actually, he had successfully wooed White Restaurant’s Martha. Both she and her mother were willing to head to the Northlands to start a new restaurant by the port city. Business on the island wasn't going particularly well, so it wasn’t a hindrance to their decision.

However, Martha's mother, Nataya, hoped that their neighbor, Professor Hugo, and his family would be given the same treatment. After asking around, Patt found that Professor Hugo was actually a literature and history professor from the Royal Knight Academy at the imperial capital who had returned to his hometown to escape the civil war. Patt thought that, since Telesti was building Nico Academy, it would be a good idea for Lorist to write a letter recommending Professor Hugo for a teaching position there.

After asking around as he wrote the letter, Lorist realized that he had met Professor Hugo before. He was the puffy, drunk man at Whitebird Restaurant when Lorist had

first visited.

No wonder that old guy didn't fear a dominion lord like me and even dared to say that all nobles are perverts… He must have seen lots of things in the imperial capital. He probably understands what truly lies beneath the pleasant and mannered visages of most nobles.

Not many of Silowas Island's residents chose to leave. Most gave their familiarity with island-life and the absence of any desire to move as their reason. As long as they were allowed to continue to live as they had been, they didn't care who their dominion lord was. House Norton hadn't bothered to care for the island for five whole years after receiving it as a fief, so they felt little to no loyalty to it. They felt that they could live as usual whether there was a person lording over them or not.

In fact, there were quite a number of complaints after Lorist arrived at that island. Many of the residents felt that while the developmental plans their dominion lord had in store provided many money-making opportunities for them, it also gave them lots of trouble, affecting their peaceful daily lives.

However, the beauty, Martha, and her family managed to convince a bunch of island residents to head to the Northlands with them, roughly 100 people in total. They were families of substantial wealth. They were worried that their houses and belongings would be raided during the battle, so they felt it would be better for them to move to the Northlands.

The manager in charge of convincing the islanders' move promised that they wouldn't have to worry about accommodation or work in the Northlands. The port city's construction was completed, so there would be enough housing as well as some more benefits to make up for their losses. Additionally, the Northlands required all sorts of talents, they needed not worry about finding employment. Anyone with a skill would have no trouble finding employ.

In his conversations with Patt, Lorist got to know that Victor, the limping captain of Whitebird Town's garrison, was also one of those who had been vying for Martha's affection. However, compared to the young, handsome, wholesome, and strong Patt (it should be noted that those were Patt's personal opinions of himself that do not in any way represent how Lorist perceives Patt), who also had two functioning legs – as opposed to Victor's limp – Martha's choice was obvious.

It was part of the reason for the garrison of Whitebird Town's objection to the construction of the citadel between the town and the commerce area. Patt was the leader of the third local defense brigade and Victor was the captain of the local garrison, with both of them vying for Martha's favor, their units naturally experienced some friction between them as well. Patt, however, wore a face full of smiles the whole time. He radiated the aura of superiority belonging only to a victor (no pun intended).

Good Sol!

It was fortunate that Lorist didn't snap in anger.

Those two bastards are actually treating the house's development plans as a game! To think that I thought the folk of Whitebird Town were actually against the plan… So it was because of these two's personal grudge… Well, that limp isn't a member of the house. When the house stabilizes here at the island, there would be many chances to deal with him. As for Patt, a family knight, how could he not realize the weight of the matter…

Naturally, it wasn't that Lorist wanted Patt to have given up on the beauty. But that, at the very least, he should have informed Lorist of the true nature of the situation at the first opportunity. That way, he wouldn't have to move the third local defense brigade to the soon to be abandoned Farama Village. Relying on the limp Victor and his 500 untrained garrison soldiers to defend Whitebird Town was not the best idea.

The days passed one after another, but the enemy had yet to arrive. Each day felt as long as a year for Lorist. He awaited the arrival of the Chikdor Merchant Guild for so long that he thought that he was turning into a rock.

During this period of time, Freiyar had completed the formation of the two fleets, one was led by Senbaud to the Northlands to both send the evacuees there and to bring food to the island. After five days in the Northlands, Senbaud returned. He was far more respectful towards Lorist when he did so.

"I didn't expect that milord's family would be so mighty," said Senbaud.

He finally understood why Lorist had the confidence to fight against the Chikdor Merchant Guild. He had his horizons truly expanded during his trip to the Northlands. However, he was still rather confused about Lorist's rank. Despite being peers in title, Count Lorist and Count Seleih were worlds apart; the latter was nothing more than a beggar compared to the former. Whether it be in terms of his dominion, or his

household forces, Count Seleih couldn't compare to Lorist in the slightest! In actuality, House Norton's forces had already exceeded that of a duchy.

Senbaud was working hard to eventually become a knight of House Norton now, but it wasn't going too smoothly for him. Even though a gold-ranked swordsman would be more than welcome to enter the ranks of the knights of most other noble houses, it wasn't the same for House Norton. It prized achievements and contributions the most, though hard work could also be an acceptable substitute for stellar performance. Without one of those, however, one would not be accepted as a knight of the house.

However, after taking a quick stroll around the dominion of the Nortons, Senbaud had resolved himself even more. He wouldn't join any other house, even if they came over to invite him, after what he had seen. Based on the eight manors built for the house's gold-ranked knights at Salus Settlement alone, Senbaud was already filled with desire. The facilities of the manors were complete and not lacking in the slightest. They even with servants and workers already in place. Each year, the manors would produce at least 500 to 800 gold Fordes in profit.

It had to be noted that Senbaud only earned around 100 gold Fordes annually from toiling away and risking his life as a pirate. But now, even before he was a gold-ranked knight, he was receiving a salary of ten gold Fordes a month, which was more than enough for his wife and children to live comfortable, even luxurious lives.

I absolutely have to become a gold-ranked knight of the house and get a manor for my wife and children, thought Senbaud resolutely.

On the 22nd day of the 1st month, Charade returned from the imperial capital. Even by then, the Chikdor Merchant Guild still hadn't shown up to attack. Even Charade was suspicious of the situation. Was the Chikdor Merchant Guild intending to wait for winter to pass? Would they only attack in the 4th or 5th month?

Charade took a breath of cold air as he spoke of the rumors he heard in the capital.

"The second highness is truly cruel. He actually lopped off Second Prince Iblia's head and put it in a silver basin in front of the Third Prince's altar as a sacrifice. The poor Second Prince never would've expected to die at the hands of his own nephew. Even in death, the prince's severed head still wears an expression of shock and terror. What a horrible way to die…

"Also, Second Highness Auguslo gave a rousing speech at the plaza in front of the palace. He claimed that nobody can suppress the desire of the empire's people to reunite and said that anyone who wanted to stop them would be mowed down by his army…

"Naturally, the tens of thousands of people cheered after the speech ended, shaking up the whole capital. All of the people there – soldier and civilian alike – felt that something was lifted off their shoulders following the death of the third prince. Right now, Second Highness Auguslo's army is making the final preparations for war. I estimate they will engage Redlis's forces in the 4th month after the harvest of the winter wheat."

Lorist continued to wait on the island until the 11th day of the 2nd month, on which two large-class, long distance merchant vessels of the Peterson Merchant Guild arrived at the island. The vice president and several others from the guild were onboard, as well as Dulles and the 40 or so talented men he had recruited in Morante City.

"Milord, you should stop waiting here like an idiot. The trade union is already in a bloody battle with the Teribo Kingdom and have no time to bother with taking Silowas Island," said Dulles after greeting Lorist.

After hearing Dulles and the vice president's explanation, Lorist came to understand that the move he made before leaving Morante City, that is, the release of the two letters, had an unintended effect. The letters actually served as a catalyst for the conflict between the trade union and Teribo, and the smaller conflicts at their borders eventually developed into an all-out war.

Lorist was more than elated when he heard the news. Initially, he only thought of causing some trouble for the trade union by releasing those two letters. However, he only thought that this would cause enough tension between Teribo and the trade union to cause them to dissolve their friendly relations. Never would he have thought that he would be able to cause a war between them.

Then again, the letters were only able to play their part thanks to the cooperation of the strait-laced Teribo VII. After the assault incident on the Mayflower Merchant Guild, a third of the inner city of Morante City was ruined. As a result, many of the high officials of various merchant guilds and their family members lost their lives. That did not only involve those from the big-seven guilds, but also the smaller ones that were

situated at the inner city as well.

All the residents in the city were boiling with rage and the big-seven guilds were completely unable to suppress the people. It was especially the case with the smaller merchant guild fanning the flames. One representative of the council after another gave their speeches in the public streets, all carrying the same rhetoric of punishing Teribo so that the innocents would be avenged. There were even some that chanted the slogan, 'Attack Feyers City, and catch Teribo VII alive!'

However, the big-seven guilds were more rational than that. Even the Mayflower Merchant Guild which suffered the most losses attempted to suppress the desire of the citizens for revenge. The big-seven sent an ambassador to the capital of Teribo, Feyers City, to get an audience with Teribo VII. The ambassador suggested the kingdom hand the rank three blademaster and rank two blademaster who had managed to escape to the trade union to be punished as murderers so that the citizens of Morante City could be appeased. Additionally, the ambassador requested Teribo pay for the damages incurred by the trade union and was even ready to renegotiate the tax-free benefit the kingdom had with the union on the glass trade.

The big seven guilds felt that their handling of the matter was already really generous, but they didn't expect Teribo VII to so stubbornly refuse all of the suggestions of the trade union. He stressed that the attack on the Mayflower Merchant Guild didn't occur on his orders and that he didn't bear any responsibility for the matter whatsoever.

He even began to utter nonsense in front of the ambassador of the trade union, saying that he thought the blademasters and gold-ranked knights who attacked the Mayflower Merchant Guild must have been incredibly patriotic subjects of the kingdom who acted on their own behalf seeing their kingdom's plight. Teribo VII said that those valiant warriors must have been unable to overlook the trade union’s sly betrayal and decided to take action against the Mayflower Merchant Guild regardless of their own lives to destroy those letters so that the kingdom’s secret could be kept.

That was how Teribo VII argued that the kingdom bore no responsibility whatsoever for the actions of those patriotic and heroic subjects. They also insisted that the ambassador's demands were nothing but nonsense.

Teribo VII’s response infuriated the ambassador of the trade union to the point that he almost spit out blood in anger. Even though the proof was laid in front of him, Teribo VII refused to admit to the allegations. The ambassador really couldn't believe a

matter between two nations was being handled in such a childish manner.

Just when the ambassador was leaving, having said that Teribo VII would definitely bear the consequences of his actions, Teribo VII lashed out once again. He gladly declared that he would award the brave warriors with the highest honor and hold a ceremony at Feyers City in memory of the brave heroes that were willing to give their lives to protect the interests of the kingdom.

This time around, the ambassador truly coughed up blood.

By the time the big seven guilds received Teribo VII's official reply from the insulted ambassador, they felt as if they had been slapped squarely in the face. So, they made a joint decision. During the 5th day of the 12th month when the auction was held, the Mayflower Merchant Guild made their own bid and purchased the oil and green glass production method letters with 23 million gold Fordes.

In actuality, the academies didn't really receive such a huge amount of money for the letters. A day before the auction, an agreement was made with them. Each academy would receive 1.5 million gold Fordes apart from the Dawn Academy, which got 2 million gold Fordes. After that, Academy Head Levins would announce that the letters were indeed sold for 23 million gold Fordes and 'donate' 20 million to the restoration of the inner city. The remaining 3 million gold Fordes would be used to set up the Mancheny Fund to support poorer students in their studies. While that was the cover story, all parties involved made quite a huge profit off the deal. However, Dawn Academy managed to also greatly improve their reputation.

Upon receiving the letters for the glass production methods, the trade union announced that they would produce and market their own glass products and refuse to import those produced by Teribo, thus completely severing any and all benefits afforded to the kingdom in the process.

The moment the kingdom received word of that, Teribo VII jumped in rage.

What?! So the two letters that were destroyed at the cost of so many blademasters and gold-ranked knights were fakes?! The trade union truly is sly… No wonder nobles always get the short end of the stick when dealing with merchants. It was all because of the paranoia of the merchants that caused us to fall for their ploy and suffer so many losses in the process…

Teribo VII, who automatically victimized himself, began to boil in rage. There was no way he could form another group of blademasters and gold-ranked knights to steal the letters back. Thus, he decided to mobilize his army of 50 thousand to the border of the trade union. He was prepared to use his military might to force the trade union to cease glass production immediately.

However, Teribo VII forgot one crucial fact. Even the impressive Krissen Empire boasting an army of 300 thousand men wasn't able to make the Forde Trade Union cower, not to say much about the Teribo Kingdom's 50 thousand. The trade union soldiers often bumped into Teribo Kingdom soldiers and would delve into a round of verbal abuse. It was fortunate that both sides didn't fight with their weapons, but bare-handed brawls were not uncommon.

In the end, one of the trade union's villages near the border fell victim to a squad of Teribo soldiers. They barged into the village for some food and rest. In the meantime, some of the soldiers felt the need to show the womenfolk of the village what a true Teribo man was capable of in bed.

Who would've expected the soldiers to encounter a Morante City mercenary group there? Mercenaries weren't beholden to as many regulations as formal defense soldiers. Normal soldiers would have to first lodge a formal complaint after sending the offending enemy soldiers back to their camp and request the other party to punish the offenders for violating military regulations.

However, when the mercenaries realized the village folk were oppressed to no end, they instantly broke into a fight. The Teribo soldiers that managed to escape reported that they had been ambushed, causing several squads of reinforcements to be sent to the village. As a result, the slaughter of the mercenaries began. That incident attracted the trade union's defense forces, further growing the scale of the border conflict.

When Teribo VII heard about the battle at the border and the number of deaths among his soldiers, he was elated and thought that he could use that as an excuse to teach the trade union's unruly mercenaries some manners. So, he ordered his 50-thousand-strong army to launch an attack on Morante City, intent on encircling the city and forcing the trade union to sign a treaty.

The war effort progressed without trouble at first as the trade union didn't think that Teribo would actually launch an attack. They had been assaulted in a completely unprepared state, allowing the Teribo Kingdom's army to occupy the two cities at the

border of the Falik Plains. The act was akin to prodding a nest full of hornets. The trade union declared war against Teribo immediately with the pretext of self-defensive retaliation. They wanted to let Teribo VII taste the consequences of his own actions, which had started the war.

The moment the trade union unleashed their forces, Teribo came to understand the saying, 'a dog that bites doesn't bark'. Right before Dulles boarded the ship heading to Silowas Island with the others, not only did the trade union take back the two occupied cities, their forces even breached Teribo’s defenses and crossed its borders, conquering seven of its commanderies, which was about half of the kingdom's whole territory.

The Teribo Kingdom only occupied an area roughly equivalent to four provinces of the Krissen Empire, it didn't use provinces to split up its territory and instead split it up into 15 commanderies.

"Right now, Teribo VII is crying out for the neighboring nations to reinforce him and even mobilized everyone he could in his kingdom, swearing that he would resist the heartless enemy that forgot all the aid his kingdom had offered. He said that the army of the trade union even broke a taboo by taking over heaps of the kingdom's territory," said Dulles in a snickering voice.

Chapter 256
The Haphazard War

The Glass War that occurred during the 1st month of the year 1773 between the Forde Union and the Teribo Kingdom caused much distress among the military historians. There were many arguments regarding the event and no consensus was ever reached.

One historian argued that the 30 years of peace enjoyed by the Union had caused their people to forget how to go to war. As for the performance by Teribo VII, it was even more laughable. During the war, which lasted for eight months, the confrontations were at most skirmishes over a village or two, there wasn't a single account of either side launching a proper attack, or of a field battle between the two sides. The war was fraught with betrayals, surrenders, trades, and ploys, however.

In the end, the war was recorded in the chronicles of Grindia as one that greatly influenced the political situation of the whole continent. Although the war lasted only eight months, it resulted in the destruction of the Teribo kingdom and seven other neighboring nations to vanish. In actuality, the conflict was a disorganized, brainless, and messy affair, nothing more than an insane banquet of insidious plots.

If you were to read a whole book on the subject, you would be unable to breathe afterward. 'Death by laughter' would be written on your tombstone.

Teribo VII, for instance, ordered a count, Count Edmund, at one point to attack Morante with his 50-thousand-strong-army. The count instructed his troops to march on Bluweck, a Union city in the Falik Plains, he even ordered the marching band to perform as they marched.

One might argue that the count intended to use a hitherto unheard of tactic to confuse his enemy before launching the attack, but the truth was that he simply thought it was standard military procedure. The count's troops actually did manage to confuse the garrison, if only because of the complete illogicality of their behavior. In fact, the garrison troops even thought the Union had struck some sort of agreement with the kingdom.

The garrison didn't bother to stop the advance of the troops, they merely watched the

performance. The soldiers even informed their captain to come out and receive them as guests. The captain, upon witnessing the scene, was confused as well. Why on earth had he not received any notice of their impending arrival beforehand?

The kingdom's troops, who, at this point, had marched to the gates of the city, hadn't even bothered to send out scouts. The impression they gave was that of a friendly army. The garrison's captain could only curse the messenger he believed to be drunk somewhere for not bringing him the notice due. Despite his misgivings about the situation, he headed outside to prepare the reception.

And that was how one of the Union's cities was lost. After the city's successful capture, Count Edmund ordered his troops to continue on to Ritte. It, too, fell by the same token. Had Count Edmund known his success was thanks to the confusion his own ignorance had wrought on the enemy, he would have attacked a few more cities before the enemy could react. His fame would have soared overnight had he done so.

It was a shame that he didn't. He thought, instead, that the garrisons had surrendered out of fear, that they had been terrified by his army's confidence. He didn't bother to question the two officers, whose names were indicative of their peasantry. He simply locked them up.

What Count Edmund did pay attention to was the arrival of tea time. He was already rather satisfied with conquering two cities within a day and felt that he should throw a banquet during the night to congratulate himself. There were a number of noble-born widows in Ritte. The count felt that some might just choose to follow him after hearing of his magnificent military exploits.

The count ordered his troops to lock down the city and prevent any entry or exit and prepared his magnificent banquet. As he went about preparing for his feast, his soldiers began harassing the citizens. At the same time, a patrol outside the city realized what had happened, and began to take action.

The Union's garrison forces couldn't really be blamed for being so careless. They had been indoctrinated with the idea that the Teribo Kingdom was a great ally to the Union. Even after the Mayflower Merchant Guild incident, most of the people felt that it was just some kind of freak accident that the higher-ups would sort out sooner or later.

The other reason for the failure was winter. Even though the Falik Plains were far

warmer than the Northlands during the winter, there had been no precedent for battles breaking out during the season. Most of the garrison had taken leave to spend time with their families. The patrol troops were left even more confused when they saw the kingdom's army advance with a marching band. Nobody would imagine that an attack would accompany the performance.

During the evening, news of the kingdom's 'attacks' and the loss of two cities spread to Morante. In stark contrast to the cheers and excitement the city's folk had shown when they had heard about the war, the big-seven guilds were completely terrified. They didn't know how strong the kingdom's forces actually were for them to be able to take two cities in a single night.

It should be noted that the Union's garrisons had experienced incredibly gruesome sieges in the past.

It's no wonder that Teribo VII dared to threaten to go to war with us, thought the heads of the big seven guilds, who were under the impression that losing two cities was a testament to the might of the Teribo Kingdom's forces.

However, they did not cower even though the enemy was already at their doorstep. Quickly, the Union decided to formally declare war. After considering the harshness of a dragged-out conflict, they announced that any citizen would be allowed to participate in the war, and those with contributions would also be awarded titles and land following the implementation of the nobility system.

The Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild's president, Cobleit William, solemnly took up the role of commander-in-chief. He had undertaken painstakingly careful preparations to combat the might of the kingdom's forces. The plan was to build an army and deploy it at Calidor, the third-closest city to the kingdom, and their next logical target, by the 3rd month.

President Cobleit contacted the Calidor's garrison immediately and forbade them from going into battle, no matter how much they were provoked by the enemy, and make defense their only priority. As long as they could defend Calidor, the Union's army could use the same strategy they had used against the Krissen Empire a couple of decades earlier: the would drag the conflict on for as long as possible and bleed the enemy white. Once the enemy was pale, they could launch a single, decisive counterattack that would end the war and give them ultimate victory.

The Union didn't put much emphasis on military might. Despite being at war with the Krissen Empire for more than a century, their standing army had always been quite small. It couldn't even rival the forces of a standard, small duchy. The whole of the Union, across the rich Falik Plains, the Callisto Hills, and Hidegold Bay was only defended by three armed forces, namely: the garrison's of the respective cities, the patrol regiments, and the Invincible Fleet.

Apart from Morante, seven other cities were located on the Falik Plains. However, each city was only defended by a 2 thousand man garrison. Morante was slightly better off. Their garrison numbered 4 thousand. The rest of the Falik Plains and the Callisto Hills were only defended by a small regiment of patrol troops that did monthly rounds.

The most well-funded force was the Invincible Fleet, and that was mainly due to them having to deal with raiders and pirates on a regular basis. After all, those parties were what truly threatened the interests of the Union. There had also been suggestions to put the Invincible Fleet under the complete control of the Chikdor Merchant Guild since it was already the hegemon of the sea. The Union would no longer need to fund the fleet, it could instead leave it entirely to the Chikdor Merchant Guild.

However, the Chikdor Merchant Guild rejected the suggestion, they argued that its fleets only engaged in ocean combat to protect its monopoly on the various trade routes. They even threatened to keep the fleet anchored at Hidegold Bay; it would serve only as a symbolic deterrent, without any actual combat capabilities.

The most underfunded segment was the garrison forces. They enjoyed no sympathy from the council members, despite being as severely understaffed as they were. Some within the council felt that, since the Krissen Empire was no more and their neighbouring nations were all on friendly terms with them, it was time for the garrison forces under the direct command of the Union to be disbanded. The cities would have to rely on their own local militia garrisons to defend themselves. Of course, the reduction in expenditure was a great incentive for this opinion.

It was a bad habit of merchants to skimp on any spending that wouldn't bring them profit. Every annual council meeting saw countless arguments concerning military spending. The big-seven guilds were markedly more rational than the rest, however. They had jointly vetoed the proposal to disband the state-funded garrisons as well as proposals to decrease the Invincible Fleet's funding.

As a result, the retaliatory army formed by President Cobleit had a regiment of

garrison soldiers from Morante and a regiment of light cavalry patrol troops from the Callisto Hills as its main force. The rest of the army included seven armed regiments belonging to the big-seven guilds, which were considerably more capable. The rest of the army consisted of civilian companies from smaller merchant guilds, mercenary bands, as well as some Moranites who wished to answer to the Union's call to arms. Within the span of three days, President Cobleit managed to gather an army of 50 thousand men, though they were naught but a ragtag bunch of troops.

The president didn't mind that it wasn't a cohesive unit, however. After all, the Union was quite experienced with siege battles. For the past century, it was with these 'ragtag forces' that the Union had resisted the invading Krissen Empire. The army would still be of much use in resisting the kingdom's forces.

President Cobleit found the most comfort and confidence in the fact that his army contained a high number of high-tier fighters despite being not formally trained. For instance, the leaders of the mercenary bands were usually of the gold rank. Other than that, the seven groups of soldiers sent by the seven largest merchant guilds had all had their battleforce awakened, not to mention the blademaster that led them.

While a group like that wasn't easy to deal with, it would definitely serve as a real pain defending against the enemy. Should the Teribo Kingdom wish to take the city, they would have to lose lots of experienced soldiers and high-tier fighters. This was the foundation of the Union which had resisted the Krissen Empire's 100-year-long invasion.

Naturally, there would be a lot of factors at play on the battlefield that couldn't be accounted for beforehand. As countless military historians have pointed out, while the Union's army was a disorganized bunch, the Teribo Kingdom's army was nothing but a joke.

When President Cobleit led the Union's forces towards Calidor to set up a defensive line, he heard some rumors from Ritte that sounded like something out of a legend.

Count Edmund had already been held up at Ritte for three days, mainly because he got intimate with two beauties there and wasn't ready to part with them yet. So, the count reported to his king that he was sitting out battle during the winter. He stated that the bad weather made it incredibly hard for troops to travel. He would continue his advance when the snow melted a little bit more.

Teribo VII was quite convinced with the count's excuse, given the count's reputation. He proceeded to wait patiently for news of the Union losing the war to come from the front lines. Never did he consider how long it would take for messengers to travel between him and the front.

The night before President Cobleit arrived at Calidor, Ritte was thrown into utter turmoil. One of the garrison's top officers, gold-ranked swordsman Jessbon, had been absent during the original attack, of the original 2 thousand or so soldiers in the garrison, 1418 had escaped the city during the original assault. Of the remaining forces, 300 had been put to death for their resistance, and another 400 held captive.

"Brothers, our garrison force has always been neglected. Those council members can't wait to disband us and have forgotten the sacrifice and contributions we made during the Krissen Empire's invasion.

"Even though we are a proud unit, we also have a rather embarrassing record. We lost Ritte just like that. I refuse to live with the shame of losing the place we were supposed to defend. So, I will ambush our enemy tonight. Is there anyone here who is willing to die fighting alongside me?" Jessbon had asked those who accompanied him.

All 1 thousand 1 hundred plus garrison soldiers responded fervently. They would rather die in battle. So, they secretly snuck into the city under Jessbon's lead and began their suicidal assault on the city hall.

Over the century-long conflict with the Krissen Empire, the Union's garrison forces had gained a lot of experience. For example, they knew that all walled cities had three or four secret paths to the outside which could be both used to escape in a time of crisis. Even if a city was taken by the enemy and heavily defended, the rightful rulers could use the secret paths to begin their assault and catch the enemy unawares.

This assault was no exception. The thousand plus garrison soldiers' attack greatly surprised the troops occupying the city. As Count Edmund, who was staying at the city hall, heard the sounds of fighting encroach upon him, he jumped out of his bed naked and stretched out his hand. However, he didn't manage to grasp his clothes and instead caught his hands on a band he wore around his waist in formal attire.

Count Edmund thus rushed out of the building naked without batting an eye. Arriving at the stables, he quickly took one of the horses and began riding. At the same time, the soldiers that barged into the count's room only saw two confused beauties. By

then, the count had already managed to rush out of the city hall and went his own way.

As for the soldiers who noticed the commotion at the hall, they hurriedly prepared to eliminate the enemy, only to be greeted with the sight of Count Edmund riding towards them butt-naked. As he swayed, he called out, "I'm Count Edmund! Quick, let me through the gates!"

The gates had only been opened slightly when the count was already through and on his way to the horizon. Seeing that their general had run away, the soldiers who remained didn't bother to fight either and made their escape.

So transpired the greatest recapture of a city in the entire history of Grindia. The Union's 1 thousand 1 hundred plus garrison soldiers' suicide attack against the 45 thousand Teribo soldiers stationed at Ritte ended with the enemy general, Count Edmund, escaping naked on horseback, and the remaining soldiers crumbling in disarray. There were roughly 10 thousand who escaped and 27 thousand who surrendered. It was said that the troops that surrendered even obediently stacked their weapons in a corner and lined themselves up by the streets in an orderly fashion.

Regiment Captain Jessbon, who had become famous because of the battle cried that night. Where would he find the food needed to feed the 27 thousand prisoners?! Upon receiving Jessbon's message, President Cobleit hurried to Ritte to take in the prisoners.

Count Edmund took two cities in a single day and lost them in a single night as well. After he escaped from Ritte, he went to Bluweck and shouted beyond its gates. There were 5 thousand Teribo soldiers stationed there. By the time the gates were open, clouds of dust had begun to form behind the count.

Ah, that must be from the soldiers who escaped... Wait, what if they're actually the enemy? Gah, I have no time to differentiate between them!

After finishing the thought, Count Edmund quickly fled to the Teribo kingdom.

The moment the soldiers stationed at Bluweck witnessed his retreat, they thought that since the force of 45 thousand that went ahead of them had already lost, there wouldn't be much of a point to them remaining. So, they began their retreat as well. Bluweck was miraculously recaptured that very night.

After two days, President Cobleit arrived at the border of the two nations with his 50

thousand troops. As for the conflict, the Teribo kingdom's forces crumbled even before any actual battle began. Given the situation, was the Teribo kingdom going to be on the losing side?

Even though the big-seven guilds were considering what they should do to wrap up the situation, the smaller merchant guilds, mercenary bands, and volunteer soldiers were unhappy. Since all of them were there because they were promised land and titles for their achievements, if no battle occurred, wouldn't they have wasted their trip? So, the decision was made to breach the kingdom's border.

After the big-seven guilds hesitated for two days, they received word that two of the kingdom's commanderies had already been conquered.

The Mayflower Merchant Guild's president said, "Since it has boiled down to this, let's just wipe Teribo out. We will need land to enfeoff for those with achievements, after all. Other than that, the simple-minded king will only cause us worry if left to his own devices right next to the Union. And since we already have the secret of glass production, we might as well take the source of their ingredients: Quartz Mountain. That would save us even more capital for venturing into the glass business."

Since the Teribo kingdom is such a delicious dish, we shouldn't abstain from enjoying it now that it has already been brought to our mouths! thought President Cobleit as he grit his teeth.

He converted his retaliatory army into an invasion force and sent it marching towards the Teribo kingdom.

Chapter 257
Clash of the High-Tiers

"The Union managed to push the kingdom's army out of their territory in just ten days? Does that mean that the Teribo Kingdom will fall in another month?" asked Els.

Dulles clicked his lips and said, "The situation is already beyond me. When I arrived, the Union's main force was in a standoff with four-allied nations' armies. The army they can muster now has to be from Teribo VII requesting aid from his neighboring kingdoms. I have no doubt that they are desperate to chase the Union out of the kingdom."

"According to them, however, they have come to mediate the conflict. The reason they stopped the Union's forces from advancing was to prevent peace from being further disrupted. They all know full well that the Teribo kingdom's forces can't withstand the Union's. Had it not been for the huge price offered by Teribo VII, no nation would dare to offend the trade union.

"Was there any conflict during the standoff?" asked Josk.

He had quite a bit of experience in life, so the joke of a war fascinated him.

"How could there not be? The Union's ragtag bunch are at least still not completely insane. They wouldn't launch an attack on well-fortified defenses unless there were worthwhile benefits involved. In fact, the reason they invaded the kingdom in the first place was so they could benefit. They want to rack up some contributions and raid the lands of the kingdom's rich nobles. None of them are idiots who would go on a suicidal mission for no gain. President Cobleit is having an emergency discussion with the allied nations as we speak. He's hoping to convince them to retreat and refrain from interfering in the two country's war.

"Milord, when I departed, the trade union had already taken over seven of the kingdom's commanderies, almost half its territory. Despite this massive gain, they've never actually fought a proper battle! Most of the time the kingdom's soldier would surrender the moment they notice the Union approaching. There was even one garrison captain from one of the commanderies who sent somebody to inform

President Cobleit that he would open the gates without resistance as long as he was given the dominion lord's daughter's hand in marriage. Naturally, the president accepted," said Dulles.

He gulped down a cup of water to quench his thirst. His throat was not used to being used this much.

Charade barged into the room all of a sudden. He had just returned from surveying the construction site. The moment he heard about the war between the Teribo kingdom and the trade union, he became anxious. Given that his father was a glass merchant, would the war affect the peace of his family?

Without waiting for Charade to say anything, Dulles said, "Don't worry, Brother. Your family is fine. Given your father's fox-like cunningness, he had long brought the whole family to hide at the Dawn Academy. He also bought a few warehouses' worth of glass with the money he had remaining. After I asked him why he bought so much glass, he said that since glass products wouldn't expire as long as they weren't broken, he could keep them until the Peterson Merchant Guild starts the trade route to our dominion. He will ship all the glass to the Northlands and be satisfied if he can get his capital back four times over."

Even though Charade felt relieved after hearing of his family's safety, he blushed when he heard about how his father planned to do business at the dominion. His awkward expression caused all those present to laugh teasingly.

Lorist patted on Charade's shoulder and said, "There's no issue. Uncle is quite a fast-adapting person. He is always welcome to come to the dominion to do business. As long as he doesn't violate our regulations and doesn't oppress others with his power, he is free to earn all he wants. If his business runs well, we can even have him take charge of our house's exports. Dulles, tell me more about the war."

"Yes, milord," Dulles said.

He paused for a while to recall what he could before continuing.

"Over 100 thousand Union troops have moved in and occupied the kingdom's territory. They've noticed how weak the kingdom actually is. It's basically a piece of deboned meat. Naturally, everyone wants to take a bite. Almost all of Morante's mercenaries are over there now. Even Charlando formed a mercenary band with

Kindoz and the rest. They're intent on making a profit in the kingdom. Louise said they were going to raid some of the rural nobles' manors.

"Now that Teribo VII is facing the destruction of his kingdom, even he must be starting to realize that things have gotten out of hand. He's ordered Count Edmund to be hung and requested the aid of his neighboring nations.

"He's also ordered his ambassadors to spread word of the increasing threat the Union poses. Apparently, they are supposed to put emphasis on that the Union has turned its sights on the previously either uninvolved or allied nations now that the Krissen Empire has been dissolved. Now that the kingdom has already become the union's first victim, Teribo VII wants to warn everyone that the neighboring nations will be next. I understand that he's encouraging the nations to unite against the Union.

"His propaganda has been quite effective. He's been king for 20 years now and is no doubt using every trick he has. I'm sure he can sleep soundly again now that he has four other nations helping him out.

"It seems he isn't satisfied with just sleeping soundly, however. I've heard he's contacted even more nations, asking them to join his campaign against the Union. He wants to fight all the way to Morante and force the Union to surrender. Aside from the benefits he wants to demand from the Union, he also wants to include the prohibition of glass production in the terms of surrender.

"Sol, if that isn't excessive, I don't know what is! Teribo VII truly is simple-minded. Even at a time like this, he's still not willing to give up on glass," commented Els.

Dulles continued, "Of course it is. Apparently, it's left his allies dumbstruck. The Union has already flatly rejected his demands. They're only willing to accept a cease-fire if Teribo VII reimburses them for the damages caused during the Mayflower Merchant Guild incident. They've also demanded that he cede the territory the Union currently occupies.

"Right now, the allied army is in quite a pinch. They only have 47 thousand people. They can't possibly take on 100 thousand Union soldiers. They might have accepted Teribo VII's offer, but that doesn't mean they're willing to clash with the Union in full-on battle. Given that they won't even clash with the Union at all, Teribo VII's dream of having them fight all the way to Morante is just wishful thinking, it's never going to happen. They just want to end the conflict so they can go their own ways.

"They don't realize, however, how troubled President Cobleit is. He only controls half of the troops. The other 50 thousand are acting independently, and thus don't take orders from him. They're merely messing around in the territory already conquered. The trade union's own forces only include those of thebig-seven guilds, the patrol regiment, and the garrison regiment. However, these people number fewer than 30 thousand. They have even taken on a defensive stance just in case the allied army decides to ambush them.

"So far, the kingdom's forces are also watching the negotiations defensively. There was an article in the Morante Daily that mocked the war for being a stagnated one with no end in sight. "

Not one of them expected the war to stay at a stalemate for three long months. When Dulles left Morante, the stalemate had already lasted for little over ten days.

"Are you sure the big-seven guilds have their attention fully focused on the Teribo kingdom? Even the Chikdor Merchant Guild? They won't be coming over to fight for Silowas Island anytime soon, will they?" asked Lorist.

"That is correct, milord," Dulles replied, "Just before I boarded the ship to leave, I saw the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, Mayflower Merchant Guild, Peterson Merchant Guild, and Chikdor Merchant Guild each send another regiment of reinforcements to the Teribo Kingdom. The Forde Merchant Guild, on the other hand, is busy taking in the Lormo duchy's Puljas province; and the Wald Merchant Guild is trying hard to convince the Mobia duchy to join the trade union in the same manner. As for the Wessia Merchant Guild, they're hesitant about the whole thing. They've invested a lot in the Redlis kingdom and aren't willing to give it up just yet.

"Oh, and President Peterson told me something secretly before I left. He said that the Chikdor Merchant Guild was originally going to hire eight blademasters above rank 2 to assault you. They've been left cowering by your killing spree last time," concluded Dulles with such an important revelation.

"What did you say?!" Els, Josk and the others all jumped in surprise, "You should've brought that up first!"

"Hehe, there's no need to worry about that anymore," Dulles said as he shrugged, "The Chikdor Merchant Guild's plan can no longer be implemented. All the high-tier fighters have gone to the kingdom, including even the Chikdor Merchant Guild's own

blademasters. "

"Are you sure about that?" Charade asked, furrowing his brow, "What does the war there have anything to do with blademasters? Also, didn't President Cobleit only bring a few high-tier fighters with him? Don't tell me the Chikdor Merchant Guild is trying to mislead us. Milord, you should definitely pay attention to your safety in the future. While you can handle a single blademaster with ease, being assaulted by a group of them would definitely be disastrous."

"I'm sure," Dulles said, nodding, "Actually, this was the result of Teribo VII's antics. With the allied army standing off against the Union's troops, Teribo VII is preparing to reorganize the military layout of the kingdom. However, the kingdom's army has always been incredibly weak, especially for the last 200 years. What's even worse, the majority of the gold-ranked knights the kingdom had were wiped out during their assault on the Mayflower Merchant Guild.

"Without them, the nobles who wish to win some quick victories, as well as the normal soldiers, no longer have proper leaders. It seems that Teribo VII is trying to pull the Union down to his level since he can't match them as they are now.

"I suspect that's why he's begun to recruit the high-tier fighters of his neighboring nations. I doubt it's so they can join his army. It's far more likely that he wants them to assassinate the Union's gold-ranked knights and their blademasters. He's offered astronomical bounties for the heads of gold-ranked knights and blademasters, a single gold-ranked knight is worth 10 thousand gold Fordes, and a blademaster is worth 200 thousand. "

The bounties tempted even Lorist. He had half a mind to return to the Union to earn himself a few million gold Fordes.

"Has the measure been effective? " asked Els.

"Yes!" Dulles responded almost instantly.

"In the eight days between his announcement of the bounties and my departure, nine gold-ranked knights were already assassinated. They were mostly either mercenary leaders or captains of civilian militias. They were targeted when they were busy raiding manors. Not only were they wiped out, their troops were dragged into the mess as well. Only a lucky few managed to escape alive.

"Apart from them, one of the Riwald Merchant Guild's blademasters was also assassinated. According to the kingdom's official statement, two blademasters from the Teria duchy were responsible for that and the bounty has already been given out.

"President Cobleit was no doubt furious. He sent his men to the Teria duchy to confront their leader. Unfortunately, he didn't know where the blademasters had gone. He's insisted that Teribo VII be blamed, not him. The duchy apparently only pays its blademasters 6 thousand gold fords annually. It's no wonder they were swayed by the bounty.

"Just one day before I left, the Morante Daily reported that President Cobleit himself had been targeted several times. Fortunately, he wasn't injured and the three blademasters that came for him were killed. His bounty is far higher than that of an average blademaster. Since he's the commander-in-chief of the Union's forces, his head is worth 1.5 million gold Fordes. The identities of the three blademasters have also been revealed. They belonged to the neighboring nations as well."

"I'm worried for that darned uncle of mine," said Els.

Laughing, Dulles said, "Don't worry. Old Char's still pretty clear-headed and more cunning than most. The moment the bounty was released, he knew something was up and went back to Morante with me. They managed to raid two manors and brought with them quite a huge amount of fine wine and made quite the profit. Right now, he's happily continuing his job as the boss of the inn."

"Then, did the Union take any measures against Teribo VII's bounties?" asked Charade.

"There's not much they can do," Dulles said, shaking his head, "I thought about it quite a bit on my way here. I couldn't come up with any possible countermeasure. The Union can't retaliate in kind since they don't have any high-tier fighters left, apart from rank two and three blademasters. The Union is likely also unwilling to stoop to Teribo VII's level. It's laughable to even think that they can compete with the king's bounties. I have no doubt that they think Teribo VII's gone completely mad to be throwing away his money like dirty water. Nobody's willing to pay that kind of money.

"As for the ones who assassinated the Union's high-tier fighters, they were mostly from other nations. There's no way that the trade union can accuse them and put bounties on their heads without any hard evidence, it would only make them more enemies. Even if they did have the evidence, the nations could simply claim the blademasters

acted independently and shift all the blame on them. This move has completely destabilized the Union's position, and apart from securing their high-tier fighters, there's not much they can do about it.

"There is word that one of the mediators from the neighboring nations criticized Teribo VII's move for creating more conflict. Right now, the Union has already sworn to wipe the kingdom out. But Teribo VII has still declared that he doesn't mind spending 20 million gold Fordes to wipe out all of the Union's high-tier fighters. He even claimed that it wouldn't take long for the Union to start begging to negotiate peace."

"Good Sol! He's smacking other people's faces with money!" Els cried out, "It's a shame I'm not a blademaster. Otherwise, I would be there earning a quick buck right now."

Future military historians criticised the war for being just a series of skirmishes over villages, but what they failed to mention was the absolute massacre of high-tier fighters that happened in the shadows between the skirmishes. About 76 high-tier fighters fell during the Glass War, ten times the amount expected from a war of similar scope fought on the field of battle. Among the 76, 52 were gold-ranked swordsmen, mostly belonging to the trade union, and 24 were blademasters. However, only 7 of the 24 were members of the Union.

The manner in which the war was fought was primarily decided by Teribo VII. The confrontations between the Union's high-tier fighters and those of the allied nations continued for almost half a year, but the Union stood as the victor in the end.

Without their high-tier fighters, the seven nations bordering the Teribo Kingdom were pillars infested with termites. Though they appeared strong from the outside, their power was hollow. They were crushed by the Union's army easily.

"While there's nothing weird about you coming back with the talent you recruited, why did the Peterson Merchant Guild send their people here too? Are they up to something? Did you interact with them during the trip?"

After being briefed on the war, Lorist asked Dulles about the people of the Peterson Merchant Guild.

"I have no idea," Dulles said, "I only know that the vice president cares the most about the local products and goods we have over here, he's even come along on the trip. They

never asked about our military, so instead, we talked about the ironspine crocodiles we have at Blackmud Marsh. I suspect he wants to monopolize trade with our dominion."

"That's weird. Wasn't the Peterson Merchant Guild going to take the northwestern area of the Redlis Kingdom as their dominion? That's the main reason they weren't able to deal with our house directly. It seems that they've changed their mind about the embargo on products and trade with the Andinaq Kingdom. Oh well, there's no use pondering over it. I'll get to know what's going on after talking to the vice president during the banquet tonight," said Lorist as he shook his head as if it helped him to toss the matters he couldn't understand out of his head.

Chapter 258
President Peterson's Conditions

Everyone made merry during the extravagant banquet. After the festivities, Lorist invited the Peterson Merchant Guild's vice-president to his study for some tea. Charade was the only other individual present.

The vice-president handed Lorist a personal letter, written by President Peterson. In the letter, he stated frankly that ever since word of the third prince's death had gotten out, voices of dissent had been surfacing among the Union's higher-ups. There was now constant arguments over whether they should continue their plan to take the northwestern area of the Redlis kingdom. After all, nobody was willing to stand against the 300 thousand troops of Second Highness Auguslo.

Peterson believed that, with the third prince now dead, the second highness would launch his attack against the Redlis kingdom by the 4th or 5th month of the year. The war would then quickly spread to the northwestern area.

If the Peterson Merchant Guild persisted and took a part of that area as their dominion there, they might be wiped out by the second highness' forces. All their efforts would be for naught.

The Peterson Merchant Guild couldn't easily afford to shift their focus elsewhere, however. They couldn't shift to the Lormo duchy. They had no intention to become its shield. They could, however, move instead to the Teribo kingdom. Although the situation there was still tense from the war, and the Mayflower- and Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guilds had declared their intent to take parts of the kingdom as their dominions, it was still a more viable option than all the alternatives. They, thus, decided that it would be the Teribo kingdom from which they would take a bite.

Given that three of the big-seven merchant guilds had changed their priorities, the Chikdor Merchant Guild had no choice but to give up on their plan to conquer Silowas. If they insisted on doing so, not only would they become eternal enemies with House Norton, they would also be a target for the second highness.

As Silowas was the dominion of the Nortons, it was considered to be part of the

Andinaq kingdom. If the guild forcefully occupied it, they would be invading the kingdom. Second Highness Auguslo, who intended to rebuild the Krissen Empire, would consider it a slap in the face. Even if the guild could afford to take on a noble house, they could most assuredly not fight against an entire kingdom, especially not one that controlled an incredibly strong military.

Lorist almost laughed as he read through the letter. President Peterson had used a few beastskins for his long argument just to tell Lorist that the Union's focus had changed and that his dominion would no longer be a target, implying that he could do business with his guild without worries.

However, the president also made three conditions. First, his guild would be the sole party allowed access to the maritime trade route from Hidegold Bay to Silowas. After the sea blockade incident, there was no way the Chikdor Merchant Guild could seek to benefit from the Nortons anymore. Since the trade route was up for the taking, the Peterson Merchant Guild wasn't going to hold back.

Some issues had cropped up as a result of the war which meant that the guild couldn't gather the 2 million gold Fordes for their fur deal with the Nortons anymore, thus the second deal. The president hoped to barter for the equivalent of their shortage. The deal was very important to the guild, it would help to relieve their burden and ease their position.

The core of the letter was in the president's third condition. Even though the Union had only been at war with the Teribo kingdom for little more than a month, President Peterson had already begun to realize his guild was rather lacking. It wasn't that the guild lacked high-tier fighters, but that they lacked an organized force with which to defend themselves or mount attacks.

As one of the big-seven guilds, the guild controlled the fur trade and were also the leaders in long-distance land-based convoys. They even had their hands in construction, overseas exports and imports, food, entertainment, and other miscellaneous activities. The guild didn't lack any manpower either. For instance, they could very easily move people around to form a force against the Teribo kingdom and reinforce the front lines.

Doing so, however, had negative side effects on the guild's operations. While the guild's forces would be more than sufficient for defensive actions, it would be incredibly troublesome to mobilize them to engage offensively. The leadership of the

nations neighboring the Teribo kingdom shared Peterson's opinion.

The nobility system was going to be implemented soon, and with it, the heads of all the merchant guilds would become dukes with their own duchies. It was a logical step for them to possess appropriate standing armies as well.

The Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild was the fastest to make the change, and they didn't hold anything back. They had completely absorbed the entire Union's garrison forces as their own. President Cobleit had already decided to approve the proposal to disband the garrisons during the 10th month. As a result, the various cities would have to form their own garrisons, thus decreasing the military spending of the Union. On the other hand, he would take all the members of the garrisons to his own dominion and have them join his army.

The Mayflower Merchant Guild wasn't about to sit there and watch either. The patrol regiment stationed at the Callisto Hills had already become their target. Since the Callisto Hills would be divided into more than 50 territories and enfeoffed to others following the implementation of the nobility system, the patrol regiment's future was uncertain.

The Forde Merchant Guild, on the other hand, was rather calm. When it took over the Lormo duchy's Puljas Province, they also absorbed the duchy's 10 thousand troops into their army and were already in the process of reorganizing.

The Riwal Merchant Guild wasn't in a hurry either. They were busy convincing the Mobia duchy to join the Union and had taken an interest in the duchy's forces. Negotiations were already under way.

As for the Chikdor Merchant Guild, they were already incredibly influential at sea. Given that they were the hegemon of the seas, they were not the least bit interested in forming their own defense force. It might also have something to do with their current sore lack of a dominion or even just a prospective dominion.

The Wessia Merchant Guild also lacked their own dominion at present, in spite of that they had already formed their own defense forces. These were used mainly to protect the mines they now possessed in the Redlis kingdom. When they finally had a dominion of their own, they need only merge the new forces into a single, integrated army to be a force to be reckoned with.

This left the Peterson Merchant Guild in an awkward position, which was why President Peterson was so worried. While dealing with bandits during their convoys' journeys or joining forces with other merchant guilds in the current conflict was no problem, forming their own standing army was an issue. It was not something that could be solved solely with manpower. Forming an army required proper training and strict military regulations. They had to have a reliable force by the time they took over their duchy.

This was where Lorist came in. Peterson's third condition was that Lorist had to provide him with a robust plan for forming an army. He also wanted Lorist to let the vice-president observe the training routine used by his house's forces so the guild could gain the basic military know-how. In a chaotic time like this, Peterson's request could be considered incredibly excessive. After all, for many military-based noble houses, their training methodology and techniques were top secret, a matter of confidence that could never be shared with, or even just showed to, outsiders.

But, given the understanding Peterson had of Lorist's character, he made the request straightforwardly. The guild did not lack talented military officials, but they did lack officials well-versed in theoretical strategy. A force without a firm grounding in military theory was no more than a slightly organised rabble, they were an unreliable bunch at best. If the guild formed a standing army like that, they would be nothing more than a punching bag for others. If that were to be the case, there was no point to forming one in the first place and it would be better to abandon the endeavour now.

House Norton was a noble house with a long and star-studded military heritage. Their performance over the past two years, best exemplified by their defeat of the Duke of the Northlands as well as the extermination of Second Prince Iblia's 100 thousand strong force, was more than stellar. They had even conquered the Iblia kingdom's capital and forced Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion to retreat.

It would be nothing but a strike of ultimate fortune if the guild could get help from Lorist in this regard. This was also why the president was trying to leverage their past dealings to get Lorist to do just that. He trusted that Lorist would give him a satisfactory answer.

Hmm, President Peterson does know his stuff... It seems that our forces' reputation has spread, thought Lorist gleefully.

After reading the letter, he passed it onto Charade.

Charade's expression as he read through the letter shifted from a hearty smile to a frown. As he finished reading the letter, he could only shake his head.

Lorist understood what the gesture meant. Initially, Charade was glad to read President Peterson's breakdown of the situation. Since Silowas would no longer be under threat, its development could continue as scheduled. He no longer had to leave.

His frown was naturally related to the requests the president had made. First was the matter of trade monopoly. Charade knew what the president was actually up to. The president was worried that Lorist would form his own fleet with which to do business. To prevent this from happening, he claimed that he didn't have enough money to do upfront purchases and asked to barter with resources instead. By trading in resources, and not handing over physical money, he could keep Lorist from having the money needed to purchase or commission the construction of ships. If he could indirectly make it too difficult for Lorist to get the ships he needed, he might give up on the idea altogether, in which case the Peterson Merchant Guild would control the trade route heading to the northlands, and could dictate the flow of resources there.

The third request was the bit that brought about the head-shaking. Charade had always been convinced that House Norton's forces far exceeded those of other nations. They were much smaller than their competitors, but the quality of their arms and armament, their discipline, and their strategy and tactics were in a different league altogether. There was no way he would agree to reveal how they trained their troops. Besides, just because the guild was on good terms with House Norton, it didn't mean that they couldn't become hostile in the future. They didn't even have to take action against House Norton, House Norton was a vassal of the Andinaq kingdom, so if the guild became hostile with the kingdom, the house and its subjects would get dragged into the conflict as well. Helping the Peterson Merchant Guild to form an army was helping a possible future enemy.

Lorist wasn't of the same mind, however. He agreed to all the conditions without hesitation. The decision was made so casually that even the vice-president was shocked.

"Treating others with sincerity has always been one of the traditions of House Norton. Since the guild has come as friends, you will be treated to a grand welcome and fine wine, and we will also do our best to help you however we can," said Lorist.

After agreeing to show the vice-president the training routine for Whitebird Town's

defense force the next day, Lorist sent the thankful man away.

When he turned around, he saw Charade staring at him angrily.

Worried that the vice-president was still in earshot, Charade lowered his voice, "Are you crazy?! Why did you agree to let them see the defense force's training? That routine is a house secret that must never be revealed!"

Lorist snickered and patted on Charade's shoulder.

"Don't be so tense. There's no way that our training routine will be revealed so easily," said he.

"Then are you planning to mess with them?"

"It can't really be considered 'messing with them'. Right now the local defense force is still just training lining up and taking on different formations. This routine is hardly a secret to the other nations, now is it? This routine was developed by Potterfang using the Whitelion Legion's routine as its basis, so much of it should already be known by others. The routine is really just a hodge-podge of that and bits we added during the convoy days from various sources. Our house's own, unique training routine was only formulated after our engagements with the magic beast wave, and these troops aren't training in that yet.

House Norton's forces went through three stages during their training. The green recruits would be sent to the training camps where they would be taught military regulations and drilled until they obeyed orders almost as a reflex. Once they were satisfactorily reflexively obedient, they would move on to the second stage. Here they would train to awaken their battleforce. They couldn't officially join the military and march under the raging bear until they awakened their battleforce. Once their battleforce was awakened, they had to go through a three-month course that taught them basic military skills. Only once they completed this final course would they be drafted into standing units and officially be soldiers of the house.

The house treated its soldiers very well. They were all provided quality equipment, regardless of their rank, and never wanted for supplies. Lorist understood that good logistical support boosts the morale and loyalty of soldiers. The direct family of soldiers also benefited from having one of their own in military service. The house made sure to take good care of them and even gave them certain special benefits if the

soldier died in battle.

All of this meant that being a member of the house's forces was just a source of great pride and elevated the soldier and their family's social status, but made the soldiers anticipate battles and even encouraged them to sacrifice themselves when the moment demanded it of them.

"In other words," Lorist continued, "the guild would have to implement all of this exactly in order to create a force capable of competing with ours. This will also require several years' investment on their part. It'll take time to train and temper their forces to an acceptable level. If they do this diligently they might have a decent force, but, if not, they'll simply be disguising a cat as a tiger - their forces will be for show only.

"Actually, I find the battles the northbound convoy were involved in brought lots of benefits to our forces. It was through actual battle that our forces grew to become elites, not normal training. The gruelling journey was a grindstone that slowly, if somewhat painfully, polished our forces. By the time it ended, we only needed to organise the fighters into proper units and structure them as a proper force to have a formidable army. They were only lacking equipment at the time, but now that they have it, their performance is unmatched."

Lorist had poured each of them a cup of fruit wine as he explained and the two now drank leisurely as he explained his plans. He planned to use this opportunity to aid the Peterson Merchant Guild and sell the equipment the house produced to the Union. The trade in arms and equipment had always produced staggering profits. The three allied houses in the Northlands had already armed their forces to the teeth, and Duke Fisablen had already signed the agreement to trade two years' livestock for equipment. There wasn't any other business in weaponry and equipment left to do in the area around the Nortons' dominion.

When Lorist had gone to the Andinaq kingdom's capital he had originally planned to do two things. He wanted to pass on the hot potato known as Second Prince Iblia to Second Highness Auguslo, but he'd also wanted to strike a deal with the latter for the sale of arms and equipment. He had not expected that the second highness had emptied his treasury just so he could feed his army. Once he knew, he didn't even bother to bring the deal up. He knew the second highness would try to purchase the equipment with empty promises, and he had no interest in provoking trouble where none was necessary.

The Union's arms and equipment need was technically supposed to be filled by the Wessia Merchant Guild, but it was patently obvious that they wouldn't be able to produce the volume the Union needed on short notice. It would be even worse with the implementation of the nobility system. The massive increase in landed nobles who needed to arm and supply their standing forces would create a massive demand for arms and equipment. Just like what had happened with the Kenmays family, the traditional nobles would no doubt view them as nothing but imposters, so they couldn't afford to lose in appearance, or, even worse, appear weak.

It was impossible that the guild would be able to satisfy such a demand and this created a golden opportunity for House Norton to enter the market, through the Peterson Merchant Guild, of course. As long as Lorist could corner a third of the market, he would no longer have to worry about the costs associated with the development of his dominion, nor about the increasing upkeep costs of the dominion's ever-expanding military.

Charade's mood changed from anger to elation instantly. He was determined to be put in charge of negotiating the arm and equipment deal, which Lorist gladly gave to him. Lorist had absolute faith that Charade would be able to get the most benefits for the house out of the deal.

At noon the next day, Lorist and Charade accompanied the Peterson Merchant Guild's men to check on Whitebird Town's forces as they trained. Despite Captain Victor, limp and all, and the rest of the force putting on their best performance, their lack of discipline and proper training was obvious. Even the men from the guild could pick up on it. They clicked their tongues in disappointment, some even mumbled that they were even worse than the troops the guild currently had.

Lorist didn't pay any mind to the comments. He treated them to a meal and let them take a short rest before they headed off to Farama Village to watch the third local defense brigade's training.

The low sound of a horn could be heard as the empty wheat fields filled up with guards wearing greyish-white uniforms. The soldiers arranged themselves neatly into three rectangular formations following a staccato of horn blasts. The men stood neatly together, not one of them made a sound. They had turned into statues, there weren't any detectable movements, only an intense killing intent radiated out from the groups.

This time, the guildsmen were shocked. The manner in which the soldiers got into

formation alone was enough to show they were an elite unit. The three rectangular formations were right in front of them. While a unit of 3000 men wasn't considered large, they possessed an incredibly oppressive aura. It was as if the onlookers were standing in front of a huge mountain range. An intense feeling of despair crept into their hearts.

The vice-president took a deep breath and asked with a smile, "So, this is the elite unit of House Norton?"

"Well, I guess they can be considered as such. This is the Third Local Defense Brigade. They were formed pretty recently," said Lorist as he nodded.

He wasn't satisfied with their performance, however.

I should go teach Patt a lesson later... For his troops to take so long to get into formation... I wonder if he's focusing too much of his attention on Martha? Lorist had forgotten that Martha and her mother had already moved to the Northlands.

The training proceeded normally after that. The guildsmen were incredibly impressed. They felt their horizons had been broadened greatly. Now, they knew how an elite unit trained.

It was time for Charade's debut. He made a list of what an elite unit like the house's own needed, what they had to do to make the troops loyal, raise their morale, and ensure their obedience. Had he not stressed the importance of excellent equipment at every one of his points, he would've sounded even more convincing.

Ten days passed in a flash. The men from the Peterson Merchant Guild had observed enough of the training of the third local defense brigade and were ready to head back. As Lorist was making his final preparations to return to the Northlands, a shocking piece of information arrived.

Second Highness Auguslo had mobilized his troops seven days earlier and attacked the Redlis kingdom's capital.

Chapter 259
The Second Highness's Assault

Lorist looked at the dark skies. Small fine snowflakes that floated to the ground ever so gently.

The second month's end had already arrived and it was rather cold, roughly around -7 to -8 degrees centigrade. The third local defense brigade continued to train twice a day despite the cold, which awed the Peterson Merchant Guild's men.

The group sighed. Though the Teribo kingdom and the Union claimed their two armies were standing off against one another, they were actually waiting for winter to pass.

Apart from the Union's citizens, who had joined in the hope of earning some riches through raiding, not many were willing to leave their camps to work. Even the ones assigned patrol duties were cursing their luck. Only the bounty hunters didn't curse. They had been drawn into the conflict as a result of Teribo VII's astronomical rewards, as well as those who fought back against them. But it was a conflict among high-tiers which did not concern the rest of the soldiers.

With the coming of the 3rd month, winter was over. What came next was a month-long rainy season. As a result, wars rarely occurred between the 12th and 3rd month. It was only by the 4th to 5th month that the armies would have enough food, taken from the harvests of winter wheat, and enough free time to begin arming themselves against any potential foe.

The war between the Union and the Teribo kingdom was already considered an exception to the rule, mainly because of Teribo VII's simple-minded actions, which had greatly angered the Union. Had it not been for that, nobody would want to fight during the winter season.

Wait, the second highness picked a season like this to attack the Redlis kingdom's capital? Is he insane or did I hear wrong? wondered Lorist.

Charade, on the other hand, looked incredibly agitated. He grabbed the messenger, the same one Charade had brought to the southwestern provinces to recruit vagabonds

as labor for the development on Silowas, by the collar. He had been left there to pay attention to the situation between the two kingdoms that were about to go to war.

"That's impossible! How was the second highness able to breach the defensive line at Kanbona province? The first prince has already fortified it so heavily! How did Auguslo make his way to the kingdom's capital?" roared Charade, spitting lots of saliva in the process.

Charade almost choked the poor messenger to death.

After struggling to reply for a while, he managed to mutter, "The se-second highness di-didn't go through Kanbona… He… he took a huge detour through Greatsnow Mountain at the Cloudsnap mountain range and arrived at th-the Bodolger province before attacking the Frederika, the royal capital… He managed to occupy the city b-by taking advantage of its lacking defenses, but the fi-first prince managed to escape…"

The messenger hesitated before he continued, "I… I heard that the second highness left with m-more than 30 thousand men, but only had around 8000 remaining when he arrived at the city…"

Good Sol! How ruthless! Lorist felt a sudden chill run down his spine.

It seemed the second highness had picked an incredibly dangerous route for the sake of attacking the city.

"Go fetch me a map in the house," instructed Lorist.

Five years earlier, the second highness had exterminated the first prince's force of 30 thousand elite troops at Flowater Creek and had continued his assault on the kingdom. After encircling Frederika with his troops, he forced the first prince to sign an agreement to cede two provinces to the Andinaq kingdom. The new border was drawn along the Northern Province and the Kanbona.

The Northwestern Province was the hilly coastal area Lorist and the convoy had passed through all those years ago. Neither the second highness nor the first prince paid any attention to it, to go to the Redlis kingdom's capital from there one would have to first cross the wide Morrison river, one would also have to pass through Kanbona. The ideal route for an attack on Frederika was through this very province, which was why the second highness had managed to capture it during his previous invasion.

He could not do the same thing this town around. By the time the second highness had gathered his 300 thousand soldiers, the king of the Redlis kingdom, first prince Krissen Redlis, hadn't just sat by idly, he had gathered up large sums of money and a lot of resources to reinforce the forces stationed in Kanbona. All over the province, there were well-defended citadels with wide moats and tall walls. If the second highness wanted to reach Frederika, he would have to conquer one citadel after another to clear his path to the capital.

"Auguslo will sustain at least 200 thousand losses in Kanbona, and the remaining 100 thousand soldiers will be exhausted. They will never be able to conquer the capital. After this battle, I can promise you the punk will not dare to attack our kingdom for at least 20 years," the first prince had once said to his officials proudly.

The prince understood the importance of wearing down the 300-thousand-strong army well. He had gathered all the family members of military officials above the rank of Squad Leader in Frederika under the ruse of keeping them safe for that very reason. Everyone knows it was just a ruse, however. If they didn't do enough damage to the second highness' forces, and the city fell, their families would fall with it.

It was the prince's plan that this knowledge would motivate the forces defending Kanbona to fight to the death. The prince felt that, even though his move was incredibly cruel, this was the only way his soldiers would be desperate enough to take down three soldiers before falling. In essence, the first prince was prepared to sacrifice 70 thousand soldiers to grind away at the second highness's forces as much as possible.

Nobody had expected that the second highness would be even more savage than the first prince, savage to himself and his own forces no less! He actually personally led his soldiers through Greatsnow Mountain in such horrible weather. Despite losing three-quarters of his troops, he managed to take Frederika in one fell swoop, forcing the first prince to flee the capital.

Lorist looked at the map in awe. It was worth noting that the second highness had delivered an impassioned speech just a month earlier at the capital of his own kingdom, pledging to restore the Krissen Empire to its former state. It was also said that he would be busy with the funeral of the third prince, patrolling the front lines and making preparations for war. It caused others to think that he would only attack the Redlis kingdom during the 4th or 5th month, as was military convention. Nobody had dared to imagine that the second highness would conquer Frederika just one

month later. Such speed shocked and awed many.

Charade pointed at the map and exclaimed, "Good heavens! The second highness actually made his way across the Cloudsnap mountain range and scaled Greatsnow Mountain… It is completely suicidal… It's far too risky."

There was a natural barrier in the Bodolger province, between the capital and the northwestern area of Kanbona. The barrier was known as the Cloudsnap mountain range. It was a densely packed collection of tall mountains and dense forests. Additionally, Greatsnow Mountain, situated in the middle of the mountain range, was easily taller than 10 normal mountains combined. Snow piled up on the mountain and didn't melt easily. The terrain was also incredibly hard to scale. It was difficult, if not outright impossible, to cross over. Despite that, the second highness cut through like a dagger flung at a snake.

Lorist laughed, pointing at the map.

"The second highness actually did something smart for once. He only managed to cross the Cloudsnap mountain range thanks to his timing."

"What do you mean?" Charade asked as everyone wondered.

"Look here. The Cloudmist Swamp stretches for around 50 kilometers along the bottom of the range. It is said that the swamp is formed from the melted snow that gathers up in the area. If the second highness attempted to cross during summer or fall, it would take him at least two or three months. But during winter, most of Cloudmist Swamp is frozen, allowing the troops to travel into the deeper parts of the mountain range without restraint. After that, they only have to make their way over Greatsnow Mountain to arrive at Bodolger," explained Lorist.

"Ah, is that so… No wonder he's hailed as one of the greatest military strategists of the new generation. To think that he actually grasped an opportunity that hidden, his fame is completely deserved!" exclaimed the vice-president of the Peterson Merchant Guild.

Lorist sighed and said, "It's a shame that his losses are not small. Only 8000 of the 30 thousand troops survived the journey. It seems that he didn't make sufficient preparations."

Lorist could already infer that the second highness had only mobilized his so-called elite troops, but didn't have enough knowledge of the troubles of winter. Had he been

better prepared, he wouldn't have had to attack the city with so few soldiers.

Lorist's guess was actually correct. Only around 4000 soldiers died from the hike across the mountain range. But more than 20 thousand of them perished due to the extreme cold. Less than 8000, able to resist the cold with battleforce, survived. It was still more than enough to defeat the unprepared troops defending the city.

"Even so, it's still better than attacking Kanbona's citadels one after another. Had he done so, he would have lost more than 100 thousand troops easily. Considering this, his choice was the wiser, despite the losses he suffered," argued one of the military officials of the Peterson Merchant Guild.

Lorist lightly shook his head, *If war was merely mathematics, it would be much simpler.*

He didn't bother to argue, however.

"How do you think the war will progress now that the second highness has the Redlis kingdom's capital, Lord Count? Does first prince stand a chance to make a victorious comeback?" asked the vice-president, who cleverly changed the subject.

"The current situation has already mostly stabilized. Unless some sort of miracle happens, the first prince will not be able to escape defeat," commented Lorist.

"That's hard to say. The second highness only managed to conquer Frederika thanks to the element of surprise. The 8000 soldiers he has at hand now is far too little. If the first prince manages to form an army a few ten thousand strong, the second highness might just lose," said the very same military official, still taking the other side of Lorist's argument.

"Hahaha…" Lorist laughed, before he continued, "It would be great if things were that simple. How would the First Prince be able to gather more troops, now that Frederika has already fallen? Who would bother to aid him now that he's on the run, powerless and poor? And who would be willing to fight to their deaths for him just to retake a city that isn't their home?"

"But he's still the king! His righteous cause is reason enough!" The military official was still not convinced.

This time, it was Charade's turn to speak.

"Righteous my ass! The first prince is nothing but a traitor, one of those who raised the flag of rebellion and caused the empire to split. While he was definitely worth reckoning with when he had troops, the loss of Frederika means that he no longer has any riches left with which to form an army. Who, then, would bother with a beggar like him? It's already incredibly merciful not to outright kill him on and present his head to the second highness."

"Well," Lorist interjected, "I doubt anybody would go so far as to kill him. 'King Slayer' is not a name any noble wants to have. Traitor or not, he's still a king. But the title will do him no good. The nobles will help him superficially at most. Even if he did get a couple of soldiers, there's no way he'll be able to take the city back, which is his own fault given how heavily he fortified the city's walls. Also, all the valuable resources and equipment are kept within the city.

"The second highness is no idiot. After conquering Frederika, he will definitely use his spoils to recruit more troops. Even though he only has around 8000 right now, his force will definitely grow three to four times in less than a fortnight. When the first prince arrives at the capital, he'll realize that the second highness already has tens of thousands of troops waiting for him."

Lorist thought deeply for a while before he continued, "If the First Prince is smart, he will begin gathering as many troops and resources as he can and retreat to the Majik province for now. If he does so, he can draw out the conflict at the very least and wait for opportunities to turn the tide."

"Will the second highness actually afford him that kind of time?" asked Charade.

"He will. Right now, the second highness only has 8000 soldiers with him and can't do much apart from defending the capital. Pursuing the first prince is out of the question. Even if he does manage to gather more troops, he'll deal with the 70 thousand soldiers defending Kanbona first. Fortunately for him, the first prince had moved the family members of officers to Frederika as hostages. He can use them as bargaining chips to force surrender.

"And by the time the 70 thousand troops switch allegiances to the second highness, the 100 plus thousand soldiers he stationed at the two southwestern provinces will begin their march towards Frederika. With that, the second highness won't need to break a sweat to destroy the Redlis kingdom and to eliminate all nobles that refuse to yield.

"That's why I believe the first prince will have the time he needs to gather troops and resources. Majik's terrain will make sure the second highness' troops are stalled for a period of time. There is no doubt, however, what will happen after the second highness' main force arrives in a month or two.

"The Northern Province won't be a threat to Second Highness Auguslo. Once he obtains final victory over the prince he can just send an ambassador there. There's no need to mobilize his troops. As for the 70 thousand troops stationed in Kanbona, they're sandwiched between the second highness' main force and Frederika. Their supply chain is completely cut off. They have no choice but to surrender."

The fates of Kanbona and Bodolger were indeed set in stone. What came next were the Anderwoff and Majik provinces. Anderwoff was the main military center for the Redlis kingdom's nobles. The joint forces of around 30 noble houses were nothing to scoff at. Together, they had the same standing as the first prince himself. They had always been at odds with him, much to his misfortune. When he asked for aid, he received only mockery.

If Anderwoff's nobles thought they could treat the second highness the same way, they were in great trouble, however. The second highness, with his army of more than 100 thousand soldiers, definitely didn't mind letting his men win some military contributions by fighting the soldiers of the noble houses.

Majik was close to the Handra and Farkel duchies. It had served as the springboard for the first prince's invasion into the four central duchies. It had been reduced to a collection of ruins by the latter's counterattack. Even after five years, it had yet to be repopulated.

"Lord Count, where do you think the second highness will turn his attention to after destroying the Redlis kingdom?" asked the vice-president.

"Well, there are many options. It's most probable for the second highness to use the troops he's gathered to attack the four central duchies and force them to relinquish their independence. After that, he will likely bring his troops through the four duchies and gather them at the Melein duchy before starting an invasion of the Iblia kingdom. After defeating Duke Fisablen's Frontier Legion he could launch a pincer attack on the Madras duchy, which would end Duke Madras.

"He'll only turn to the Lormy duchy after all of this has been achieved. If the Union

doesn't want the Lormo duchy to rejoin the empire, the 100-year conflict between the Union and the empire will restart again. However, the second highness would have reunited much of the territory of the former empire. He'll likely declare himself Emperor after he takes back the Lormo duchy. He'll be immortalized as the one who reunited the Krissen Empire, as Auguslo I," speculated Lorist.

The vice-president looked rather pale, Lorist's guesses were well within the realm of possibility.

He half-bowed to Lorist and said, "Lord Count, I thank you for your kind hospitality over the last couple of days, but I believe the time has come for us to leave. We will handle the deal between you and the guild, so please rest assured."

Lorist stood up and said, "You're welcome to visit anytime you like. As our friends, you will receive the warmest welcome House Norton can give. Also, this here is my letter to the president. I'll have to trouble you to hand it to him on my behalf."

Chapter 260
The 5th Day of the 4th Month

Drops fell from the sky. With them fell the smell of the sea.

"Milord, you should return to the cabin and rest. We know this route well enough to complete the rest of our journey with our eyes closed. We need not travel so slow, nor need we anchor for the night. We'll travel at full sail for as long as the winds allow. It only takes us 11 to 12 days to travel between the island and the Northlands. We'll reach Bullhorn Bay in another two days," advised Freiyar.

Clad in a black raincoat, Lorist stood amidst the raindrops.

"I'm fine," he said, "I only came to take a look and breathe some fresh air. You should go back to work. You don't have to worry about me."

The ship Lorist was on was a large-class three-masted merchant vessel. It was the commander of the Oceanic Legion's personal vessel, Freiyar's vessel. Freiyar had brought 28 merchant vessels and armed middle-class ships with him to the Northlands this time. They would take the stockpiled magic-beast furs to Silowas to trade with the Peterson Merchant Guild as per their agreement.

Lorist was accompanied by Els and Dulles - Josk and Jim had been left with Charade. Lorist felt it prudent, since Freiyar and Senbaud were both constantly absent from the island with their fleets, to leave a gold-ranked knight on the island.

After Freiyar had been sent away, Lorist stood on the frontmost part of the deck. He watched the waves splash against the ship, and the rain fall gently. It was pleasant and relaxing. The news of the War of Glass and the second highness' ambush on Frederika finally let Lorist be at peace. There was no one left unoccupied to lust after Silowas island. Its development could finally proceed as planned.

Lorist hoped the two wars would drag on for as long as possible. Ideally, the Union and the second highness would exterminate the Teribo and Redlis kingdoms respectively. Once done with that they would hopefully turn on one another and fight over the Lormo duchy. The longer there was war occupying others elsewhere, the

longer Lorist could spend developing his dominion in peace.

When I finish my research on cannons, I'll make sure to install them on my warships. Once my warships are fitted properly, even if a force like the Chikdor Merchant Guild once again turns its sights to Silowas, they will pose me no threat. My ships will turn theirs into floating debris, no two logs will still be lashed to one another once I'm done with them. No one will doubt who is the true ruler of the seas ever again…

As he finished the thought, a realization dawned on him; he would be incredibly busy once he reached the Northlands. There would be many things requiring his attention. It soured his mood to think of this.

Clad in a similar raincoat, Els emerged on the deck and leaned against a mast to Lorist's side.

"Locke, I've been feeling rather troubled these past few days. Do you remember sending me to deliver 1000 gold Fordes and a bunch of other gifts to Baron Dina's dominion? I just find it a little weird. When did you get to know the sisters from that barony? Not to mention their beautiful aunt. They also seemed to be on rather familiar terms with you. The elder sister, Dina, even cursed you for being ruthless.

"I really can't fathom how that happened. As the leader of your guards, I am by your side almost all the time, yet I can't recall a single moment you were free enough to become intimate with the sisters and it seems their aunt also has some relationship with you. She seemed quite concerned and interested when we were talking about you. Once they heard of your identity, however, they became quite wistful and sent us away after just the usual pleasantries. What's going on?

Lorist knew by now that when Els addressed him as 'Locke', he had the intention to converse as friends, not as lord and retainer. He seemed quite curious about the matter they were discussing.

Lorist smiled slightly when he heard about their change in behavior. Had he been a mere knight of the house, he would have been in the same social class as the two sisters, and they could marry him without issue, but Lorist was the patriarch of the family and the head of the house, on top of that he was no longer a minor noble, but a count. The two sisters could not become his wives without being nobility themselves, and they were nothing more than the siblings of a minor noble, a baron.

"It's nothing important. Didn't I go out with Dulles and Karitoke when we were last in the capital? We attended a party and I met the two sisters and their aunt there. The girl thought me a knight and hoped I would ask her hand in marriage."

"Tsk tsk tsk, milord, you have quite a bit of fortune with females… In a single night, you managed to get the elder sister and her aunt to fall head over heels for you," said Els, once more addressing Lorist as his superior.

"Forget it. Let's not talk about me. What about you? You're not exactly young anymore. Weren't you getting along well with Master Mancheny's daughter? Should I bring up marriage on your behalf and have him wed his daughter to you?

"Ugh…"

Els had not expected to become the topic of discussion. He was stunned for a few moments.

"Well, Locke, I think it's better to wait for another year or two. I'll propose to her after I've broken through to the gold rank. Her marriage can be more glorious that way and I'll have my own manor. I can only be certain that she'll live well should misfortune befall me if things are that way."

Lorist patted on Els's shoulder.

He said angrily, "Don't be ridiculous. What misfortune are you talking about? With me by your side, you're guaranteed to live to your hundreds and experience the joys of family life."

Els looked annoyed and troubled.

"If you put it that way, Milord, I really can't decide who is actually guarding who…"

……

On the 11th day of the 3rd month, Lorist arrived at the Northlands. Freiyar had been correct, only eleven days had passed since their departure from Silowas.

Howard could be seen with red, swollen eyes, patiently awaiting Lorist's arrival. Lorist had sent Howard to the Northlands forcefully back then. It would have been too dangerous for Howard to be at Lorist's side if the Chikdor Merchant Guild attacked.

Lorist would be on the front lines, he might even have to face blademasters. He felt it would be best for Howard to return to the Northlands.

Once on the pier, Lorist ruffled Howard's head.

"What's this? You're crying even though you're this old already? Sheesh, let's go to see the port city first. Have the carriage take a trip there."

The foundations for the city had already been completed in the highlands near Blackmud Marsh. There were already two completed sectors, already populated. The people living there were mostly from Senbaud's fishing village and those who had moved over from Silowas. They were the lucky few who had the privilege of settling down in the city early.

The one responsible for the city-building project was none other than Grandmaster Ciroba. He had designed the city as grandiosely as he could. After making a few rounds in the area, Lorist realized there were around ten sectors still under construction. By the time the whole project was completed, the city would be able to sustain up to 60 thousand people and still have enough land for further expansion.

A massive residence for the dominion lord and a large garden square was to be built in the center of the city, as was the convention for most cities on the continent. It would take a few years at least to finish it. Most of the work was still being done on the foundations.

"Grandmaster Ciroba did a pretty good job. I must remember to give him and the other people in charge a reward."

Lorist turned to Howard.

"It the city named yet?" asked he.

"No, Milord. It's been decided to leave it up to you," said Howard.

"In that case, tell Grandmaster Ciroba he will have the honor of naming the city as a reward for his magnificent work. When the work is done, I'll have someone erect bronze statues of all those involved in the project. Also, remind him that he already has an embankment named after him, I don't want the city named as such as well. Have him think of a better name," instructed Lorist.

At the end of the previous year, the 50-kilometer long embankment, which stretches from Tortoise Hill to the mouth of the Azure River was finally completed. It had taken three long years and 200 thousand laborers to build. The embankment would not only prevent the river's flooding from interfering with the harvests from the new farmland at Blackmud Marsh but also served as a protective barrier between the land and the ironspine crocodiles that lurked on the far bank of the river.

The house spent over 500 thousand gold Fordes on the 50-kilometer long embankment. The main labor force had been the 50 thousand indentured servants that would finally complete their term of service at the end of the year. The house had also recruited an additional 70 thousand vagabonds to supplement the indentured servants. They brought their families with them and settled near the embankment. Blackmud Marsh had thus been turned into yet another center of food production.

Besides these two, the house's soldiers and garrison forces had to offer up three months of labor annually. The residents of Salus and Felicitas also joined the workforce for some extra money. Together, they managed to complete the embankment in just three years.

Grandmaster Ciroba had asked Lorist in his final report what the embankment should be named, and even offered to name it himself.

At the time Lorist couldn't be bothered to come up with a name, so he passed the privilege on to the grandmaster, who didn't hesitate to name it after himself. He even commissioned a large stone table to be placed on the embankment with its name. Many wished to object to the name, but when the grandmaster paraded Lorist's letter round, no one could oppose him.

Lorist had learned his lesson and forbade the man from naming things after himself. He couldn't afford to set a precedent and have every other narcissist name everything after themselves. As a form of compensation and motivation, Lorist was willing, however, to have a statue of the man erected in commemoration of his efforts.

During the remaining 20-odd days of the 3rd month, Lorist checked on the various military camps and the people within his dominion. He spent a day each at the Maplewoods bastide and Telesti's Nico Academy office before rushing to Firmrock castle to attend the annual general meeting of the house.

……

On the 5th day of the 4th month, Lorist arrived at Firmrock castle and the annual general meeting commenced.

The flow of the meeting was not unlike the previous year's. The only change was the absence of those who had remained on the island, most notable among whom was Charade, and a proposal to commend and entitle those with contributions.

After a briefing on the year's outcomes came the discussion of promotions and entitlement. Lorist announced that Potterfang, Fiercetiger Loze, Josk, Freiyar, Belnick, Malek, Terman, and Yuriy would each receive their own hereditary manor. The manor and its surrounding lands were to remain in the family even if their descendants didn't become household knights.

Lorist instructed Shadekampf to plan for eight new farm towns and eight manors to be built in the red-river valley. It was the land that had originally belonged to the Kenmays. He named the place Redriver. His proclamation caused many to wonder how House Kenmays would react to the, now official, occupation of their original dominion.

Lorist merely laughed it off.

"House Kenmays is now preoccupied with their dominion in the eastern Northlands. Practically speaking, they've abandoned the red-river valley for several years now. They won't develop land so close to our dominion. In fact, this move will make them feel more at ease. It will reassure them that we've truly buried the hatchet."

The final item on the agenda concerned the expansion of the house's military through the recruitment of the 50 thousand captives, those who had previously worked on the embankment and were about to complete their term as indentured servants. Despite comments to the contrary Lorist had made in the past, the second highness' 300 thousand strong army had unsettled him. It was anyone's guess whether the second highness would leave the north in peace, or return to wipe it clean after he finished with the Iblia kingdom. It was better to be prepared than not.

Potterfang's heavy-armored troops and Loze's pike cavalry troops were expanded to two divisions each. Dulles was also put in charge of forming another carroballista division. He needn't prepare any horses, however. Lorist wished to try out an idea. It if succeeded, Dulles's unit would be able to travel on foot.

After the meeting, Lorist had Grandmaster Sid, the person in charge of the refinery at

Ironforge Castle, and Supervisor Camorra, who mainly dealt with the production of military equipment, arms, and armor at Windstorm City, stay back for two additional assignments.

The first regarded the idea Lorist had. He drew a design similar to a wheelbarrow and wanted Grandmaster Sid to test whether a steel ballista could be fitted to it. That way, there would no longer be a need for carriages and horses for the ballistae. They would still have the same levels of mobility and agility, however. Additionally, the wheelbarrow design allowed for the ballista to be dragged up hilly terrain to higher vantage points, which was much easier than moving a whole carriage uphill.

The other assignment was for a set of glamorous armor that was slightly weaker than Whitelion Legion armor in terms of defense. The armor was to be sold to the Union. Given the disposition of merchants, the better the armor looked, the more they would be hooked.

……

That same afternoon, on the frontlines of the Teribo kingdom, President Cobleit, commander-in-chief of the Union's army, saw that his force had already grown to the 150 thousand mark. With the passing of winter, he could finally stop arguing with other officers in his tent all day. He was finally about to release his ultimatum to the four nations' army. Should they not leave within three days to allow the Union passage, they would be attacked without mercy. The consequences after that would be borne by the allied army alone.

Given that the allied army had been able to stop the Union's forces in their tracks for three whole months, they could already be considered to have answered Teribo VII's expectations. Additionally, nobody wanted to antagonize the Union. Thus, the allied army promised they would retreat within three days, ending the stalemate that had lasted for three whole months.

……

At the same time in the occupied capital of the Redlis kingdom, the first group of soldiers belonging to the main body of the Andinaq kingdom's royal local defense army appeared outside the city.

Second Highness Auguslo, who watched their arrival from the walls, finally breathed

a sigh of relief. For the past month, after his ambush on the city, he had not had a single night of good sleep. He seemed to have slimmed greatly and a thick beard could be seen on his face. The negotiations with the 70 thousand troops defending Kanbona Province had taxed him greatly, but he had managed to make them surrender. Now that his main army had finally arrived, what remained would be the capture of the first prince.

"Heed my orders, send an ambassador to Anderwoff's nobles. Order them to bend the knee and pledge allegiance to me, or face extermination."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Your will is my command. But what should we do if the nobles have other demands?"

"Are they in a position to make demands? It was they who joined the first prince in rebellion and forever disturbed the empire's peace. I'm already being incredibly merciful by sparing their lives and those of their family. Is that not enough? Tell them that if their behavior is to my satisfaction, the most they would face is a decrease in their peerage and relocation. I trust that this will be enough."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will leave right away to pass on your decree."

Chapter 261
Furybear

Clang-clang-clang-clang! The clashing of swords sliced the air.

Lorist returned his sword to its scabbard and nodded in satisfaction.

"Not bad, you've improved quite a bit. Given your current swordsmanship, you should be able to take on a one-star-gold-ranked knight. You have to try harder, got it?"

Reidy held his hand in front of his chest respectfully and said, "Yes, master."

Lorist noticed that Reidy had improved at an incredible speed of the past year. After he began his training in the hall at the back of Firmrock castle's mountain, Reidy did nothing else for a long time. Not only had he broken through the third stage of the dan ocean ki-refining technique, thus reaching the bright stage, his swordsmanship had also improved by leaps and bounds.

"You should start stabilizing your power at the third stage before traveling to get some experience. Breaking through to the fourth rank in the dan ocean ki-refining technique requires actual insight, not just mindless training. Perhaps, you might even have to experience a few life-threatening situations first. During normal combat situations, you need to be far more clear-headed and maintain a calm demeanor - you must not be enraged easily, understood?"

"I understand. Thank you for your teachings, Master."

Lorist was just preparing to return to the central castle with Howard after he left the training grounds when Els showed up.

"Milord, Knight Tarkel and Supervisor Camorra are both waiting for you in the guest lounge."

Nodding, Lorist said, "Have them enter my study. You should come along too."

Time had really flown by. When they had last met, Lorist was just a person in charge

of a convoy heading north to return to the house's dominion. They had even been attacked by Count Cobry's spear cavalry on the way. It had ultimately ended with the defeat of Count Cobry and with Lorist occupying the Northwestern Province's city, Geldos.

Back then Tarkel had merely been a guard for one of the prison camps in the city. He was a two-star-iron-rank and cowardly as a mouse. Lorist was convinced that he had his talents and dragged him to the northlands forcefully. On their arrival, however, Lorist was swamped with urgent matters and forgot to tend to Tarkel. The latter was forced to join Yuriy's light cavalry scouts just to make a living and look after his family.

The time he had spent with the unit had changed him completely. There wasn't a trace of his previous cowardice left, and in its place was a rare bravery. The many life-threatening battles he had experienced had also pushed him to the peak of the iron rank. He was now courteous and respectful towards others. When Lorist finally got round to Tarkel, he immediately made him his personal attendant. A year later, having broken through to the silver rank, he was taken in as a household knight.

Lorist had sent Tarkel all over the place on one task after another over the next two years. The tasks themselves were thought eccentric by most, one of the longer trips lasted a full three months. Tarkel was required to write a report on every location he visited, including any personal thoughts or opinions he might have on it for that particular trip.

Tarkel and Supervisor Camorra both gave a knight's salute as they entered the study on the second floor of the castle.

"Good day, milord," greeted they in unison.

"Good day to you too," Lorist answered.

His gaze settled on Tarkel first.

"You've done rather well for the past two years. I see that you've been rather industrious with your battleforce training as well. You're already at the two-star silver-rank?" asked Lorist surprised.

"That's right, Milord. After receiving the battleforce manual from you, my training progressed even faster than when I was using the manual given to me in the military," replied Tarkel gratefully.

"That's because your battleforce is fitting for the technical manual I gave you," said Lorist as he smiled.

His gaze shifted to the silent Camorra.

"Camorra, if you want to awaken your battleforce, I can give you a hand."

The supervisor made a bitter smile.

"Milord, please stop joking around. I'm already in my mid-forties. I was informed that people over 35 can no longer awaken their battleforce."

"That's a common misconception," Lorist retorted, "Ten years ago when I was studying at Morante, I heard that someone managed to awaken their battleforce at the age of 48. Naturally, it was also rumored that the man used lots of precious medicinal supplements to help him out. It no doubt cost a fortune, but if you desire to awaken your battleforce, I can definitely be of help. It'll take a while, however, at least three months and possibly even a whole year. It won't be easy, you'll have to change your habits and daily routine according to my instructions if you want to succeed. Do you wish to give it a try?" asked Lorist out of nowhere.

Camorra's expression turned glum. He was silent for a time before lowering his head.

"Please show me the way."

"Very well," Lorist said as he took Camorra's pulse, "You've lived quite a harsh life in your childhood and that has caused the growth of your bone structure to be slightly stunted. In your youth, you toiled hard for most of your life, resulting in a rather weak foundation. However, your life improved markedly when you reached your middle years. Despite that, you did not slip and managed to keep healthy habits resolutely, though you do seem to be experiencing some anxiety and stress that has accelerated the loss of your hair, as well as a lack of good sleep. You wake up in the middle of the night and find it hard to go back to sleep, right?"

Camorra looked at Lorist like he was a ghost.

"Mi-milord… Y-you were able to diagnose my sleep condition j-just by taking my pulse?!" stammered he.

"Of course," Lorist said with a smile, "Actually, that part was a lie. I got to know about

your sleeplessness simply by asking your guards. They saw the lights in your room lit every night as they did their rounds.

"Despite this, your physical condition is still passable, save for your anxiety that deprives you of good sleep. How about this, hand most of your tasks to your aide and take half a year off. During that time, attend the training camp with the new recruits so you can receive some military training. Make sure you only do half of each of the exercises, though. I'll also give you a set of prescriptions. Work and rest as the routine of the camp dictates. If you can do that, I am confident that you will have an 80 percent chance of awakening your battleforce. Now, go."

Camorra spent a while in deep thought before replying.

"Alright, Milord. I will do as you say."

Clapping his hands, Lorist said, "Alright. I've called you guys here today because I have something I need your help with. Els, don't just stand in the corner, come over here."

"Our house is growing more prosperous by the day, but we still have a major shortcoming: our intelligence network. When we stay in the northlands, we won't be informed about what happens in the outside world. But now that we have the route to Silowas, we have a window to the outside world. We can gather a lot of information now. Just recently we learned of the War of Glass and the second highness' attack on Frederika.

"Our news is still too out of date, however. The slow speed at which news travels to us puts the house at a serious disadvantage. I intend to remedy this situation. I'm going to set up a department with the sole purpose of gathering intelligence. I want to speed up the rate at which we receive news about the happening on the continent enough so that we will always have enough time to prepare and react to anything that concerns us. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The three of them stayed quiet.

Camorra finally broke the silence after a while.

"Milord, are you saying you want to send spies to various regions to gather intelligence?"

Lorist nodded.

Tarkel smiled bitterly.

"Milord, that is difficult to do. Putting other things aside, just hiring and training the spies will cost us an incredible amount of money. The old empire had 29 provinces, each had a unit of spies infiltrated into the province's higher tiers of society. It requires a lot of money to do something like this."

Els gave it some thought.

"Milord, if it's just the house's dominion, I can promise you that nothing will escape our ears, just like how it was at Morante, but it's a whole different story outside the dominion. The chaos outside the dominion makes it hard for us to ensure the safety of our spies. It won't be worth it for them to lose their lives just for some reports.

Lorist shook his head and stood up.

"You are mistaken. The kind of spies I want is not the kind you're imagining. Currently, almost all spies on Grindia have to infiltrate high society as nobles and attend their parties and functions, hoping that they'll chance upon some valuable intelligence. Or, they would simply be free travelers who spend most of their time in taverns to gather information and report the presence of suspicious persons. That is not what I want."

"Tarkel, do you know why I was so interested in your skills when I met you that year in Geldos?" asked Lorist.

Shaking his head, Tarkel said, "Unfortunately not, Milord. That year, I didn't even think that I would ever break through to the silver rank. I was merely working for food and spending my life doing nothing but lazing around. I thought that the rest of my life would be the same. I didn't think that you would fancy me talented. Naturally, I am now very thankful for what you did back then. If you didn't force me to come along, I wouldn't be the knight I am today."

Lorist chuckled and said, "Did you know that it was your gossip that convinced me of your resourcefulness? I totally didn't expect that a normal guard like you would know Geldos like the back of your hand and answer any question I had for you. You told me everything. From who had a grudge against whom to what resources had arrived in the past two days and where they were stored, you knew it all! You were just a normal guard for a prison camp, not Count Cobry's chief supervisor! It was then that I realized that you're naturally talented as a spy. It was because of that realization that I forced

you to follow me to the dominion.

"Surely you won't deny that you're naturally more curious than most, right? Tarkel, during the past two years, I have assigned you to work on more than ten different occasions. You had to do something different every time, yet you still adapted flawlessly and integrated into your new working environment without fail… You even build up quite the list of new friends and contacts. You would be swimming like a fish in water in your new environment in less than a month, not to mention your friendly relations with your colleagues. If I didn't know otherwise, I might have thought that you had been working each job for several years…

"This is the talent of which I speak. You are a natural spy, and you don't have a loose mouth either. Every time you move to a new workplace you start as a blank slate. Not a word of your previous job escapes your mouth. This is a quality I greatly admire.

"The department I am thinking of forming isn't one that will spy, but one that will simply gather intelligence. You can even call it the investigations department if you want. They will require some form of spies, yes, but they will be designated as 'intelligence operatives'.

"I believe there will be people at every place that know their base very well, just like you when you were working at Geldos. Tarkel, your mission is to scout them out and hire them. Make them into our intelligence operatives that will send us important information about the area.

"As for information from the noble circles, we don't have to get a person to mix with them. We can just bribe their servants and attendants. The information we get from them is sure to be more reliable and detailed. It's just like how Camorra paid off one of Count Kenmays's personal attendant that one time.

"I believe someone who qualifies to be an intelligence operative should have some sort of influence in their area. Look at tailors, inn owners, fishmongers, or even the commanders of garrisons. No one will suspect them of being informants, so they won't take note when they see them contacting our people. They'll be interacting as friends or acquaintances would.

"If nobody meets those criteria, we can train some ourselves. There are many of our house's soldiers who have retired because of some injury or other. If they are still willing to serve the family, we can train them to gather intelligence. Have them master

a trade and move them back to their hometown where they can set up some kind of shop. Just like that, we'll have another source of information."

Lorist paused as he opened his drawer and took out a thick stack of beastskin documents.

"These are some thoughts I have concerning the intelligence and investigation department. Read this when you get back and tell me your opinions the next time we meet.

"My wish is for the three of you to be in joint command of this new department. Tarkel, you'll be responsible for the management and placement of our informants, Camorra, you will work on sorting and analyzing the reports, and Els, you'll be heading the operations department. You'll do 'fieldwork' and cooperate with Tarkel and do anything he requires."

"Operations department?" Els questioned, "What's that?"

Lorist made a cut-throat gesture and said, "During the selection process for informants, Tarkel might run into some deep trouble. Some local crime syndicates might try to interfere, some local hooligans might get in the way, or people our informants bear grudges against.

"Tarkel will compile a list of those that are obstacles to our operations and you will eliminate them. You can pick people to fill the positions from your guard brigade. For now, keep it small and have at most three squads of men."

"Understood, Milord," acknowledged Els.

"I'll be skipping out on the training camp, in that case, Milord. I must first finish the protocols for the organization of the reports for the department," said Camorra.

"No, your tasks are not that urgent. Just go to the training camp to prepare for your battleforce awakening. Take note of quick-witted recruits that are potential intelligence operative candidates as well. After you make sure they are of the reliable sort, have them transfer to the new department for training to form its foundations. We will send them out in the future as required. After all, Tarkel alone can't go everywhere to set up our intelligence-gathering facilities, can he?" said Lorist.

"This matter is not that urgent, we should take it step by step. I will be satisfied if we

can have a preliminary intelligence network covering the former empire's territory set up within three years. The house will provide all the funds and resources you require. But before that, we still face one huge problem. How will the informants send their reports? Given the chaotic state of the lands, messengers traveling on horseback aren't that reliable, as Els has mentioned, they're relatively slow as well. By the time the news reaches us, it will already be out of date. Tell me, do you have any thoughts or suggestions?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, can we breed sea swallows on a large scale and use them to pass letters just like how ships at sea communicate?" asked Els.

"That won't do," Lorist said, shaking his head, "I've already asked Senbaud about this and according to him, sea swallows have too many limitations. Firstly, a sea swallow will have to be hatched and raised on the ship for it to treat it as its home. If we want it to travel to another ship, we must bring it there in a cage and release it so it can fly back to the ship it was hatched on. Also, the distance can't be too great. They'll be useless for trips greater than 35 kilometers."

"Milord, I've read in the books that the magi used owls and crows of some sort to transport letters. Perhaps we could experiment with them?" suggested Tarkel.

Rolling his eyes, Lorist said, "It's not like you're a magus. Do you know how to train them? Perhaps, there's some relic that contains information about it?"

Tarkel didn't say anything else.

"Milord, perhaps, we can use hen harriers to deliver letters," said Camorra.

"Hen harriers?"

"Yes, milord. I know an old hunter who happens to know how to train hen harriers. I've seen him tie several types of medicinal ingredients to the claws of the birds and have them deliver it to his son's shop in a city 50-odd kilometers away," explained Camorra.

"Very well, have somebody ask around. If hen harriers can indeed be used for communication, we will begin breeding and training them en masse. The house is willing to invest a lot of money in this endeavor. Perhaps when we do have hen harriers that can deliver letters, the forces of the house can react more swiftly to sudden changes on the battlefield."

Lorist hoped sincerely that hen harriers proved useful. If they did, he had no qualms investing unlimited amounts of money.

"Milord, I have another question," Tarkel said, "What will this intelligence investigation department of ours be called?"

"A name? The KGB? The CIA? The NSA? How about the Stasi or the Gestapo? Maybe MI6?" Lorist mumbled the names of the intelligence agencies of Earth that were known to him as they flashed in his mind. None of them felt adequate, however, so he settled on an alternate phrase for 'Raging Bear' as pronounced in English.

"Furybear. We'll call it Furybear then."

Chapter 262
The First and Third Young Masters

On the 3rd day of the 5th month at the Union camp located at the frontline of the Teribo kingdom, President Cobleit freaked out and went on a rampage. Without caring about the onlookers, he began cursing loudly in his tent.

He wasn't cursing at the people in the tent, however, nor the troops that wouldn't listen to his orders, not even the enemy who defended the citadel opposite his camp. Teribo VII was not the target of any of his insults. He was actually cursing at his distant uncle, the famed and stubborn rank 3 blademaster, Duke Urubaha IV.

He's basically slapping me squarely in the face! All I wanted was the use of his forces to conquer the Teribo kingdom. I even offered him such a good deal, not only would I pay for the forces, he'd even receive a lot of benefits! But instead, he goes and pulls this!

It was no wonder that the president was bathed in such extreme fury. Two months earlier he had written a letter to the duke asking to employ the duchy's army. The Union was willing to pay handsomely for their use. The president considered the benefits and promised business with the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild offered to the Urubaha duchy reason enough for the latter to stand on the Union's side, even without the familial ties they shared.

In Urubaha IV's reply, he expressed his support for the Union's actions and emphasizes how he loathed Teribo VII's actions. He noted with regret, however, that one of his armies had already been rented and could, thus, only be given to the Union when they returned.

At the time, President Cobleit was incredibly happy with the response and even showed the letter off to the masses. The duchy's support lent further credence to the justice of their cause against the Teribo kingdom.

After forcing the four allied nations' army to leave, the president prepared to attack two more of the kingdom's commanderies. Their defenders retreated or surrendered without resistance, so the Union took the two commanderies over with ease.

However, just as the president was about to strike once more, to capture Teribo VII and conquer the rest of the kingdom in one go, his army - a ragtag bunch of nitwits - stopped following his orders and instead went raiding and looting for more riches.

Before he even had the chance to punish them for their insubordination, he received several distress calls. Some gold ranked swordsmen and some mercenaries had been captured or assassinated while they were out raiding. In barely any time at all, 14 more gold-ranked swordsmen and mercenaries became headless corpses. Their heads popped up in the Teribo kingdom shortly after in exchange for the rewards promised by its king.

With no other choice, President Cobleit launched another anti-assassination initiative and gathered up all the soldiers in the two commanderies. They all moved to the army's camp. It took him a month of hard work to reorganize the troops and implement new regulations. Only thereafter did he set out once more. The army hadn't even marched for two days, however, before they came upon a citadel blocking their path.

The president could have dealt with them using temptations or threat, had they been the kingdom's troops, but Teribo VII knew very well how unreliable his forces were and had hired another army to man the citadel. This army was none other than the one promised to the Union by the Urubaha duchy, the Crimson Legion.

The legion was rather small, at just 24 thousand men, but it was very well known, especially amongst the neighboring nations. They had been used to suppress many uprisings, had swept entire provinces clean of bandits, and had even helped the successor of a small kingdom regain his throne. They were famous for their loyalty, reliability, hardiness, and determination.

President Cobleit had wanted to hire one of the duchy's armies exactly because of this reputation. Other than that, they followed orders strictly and didn't charge much to employ: the legion only cost 100 thousand gold Fordes to rent each month. With a rented army that would obey all his orders, the president felt that he could keep the ragtag bunch in check while simultaneously showing them how a real army should behave.

Little did he know that the army he had wanted to hire had become his enemy's reinforcements and even stood right in his path. The surprise almost caused the president to spit out blood in anger.

Two days later, the truth of the matter was presented to President Cobleit. As he had expected, Teribo VII had offered Urubaha IV over three times the normal rate, he had paid 1 million gold Fordes for just three months of service. The offer was so irresistible that Urubaha IV didn't care for his promise to the president and the Union, and gladly took Teribo VII's side in the conflict.

The Crimson Legion had been ordered to defend the citadel to their last breath. Should the citadel fall, their men would perish too. In fact, the duke even hoped that this would be exactly what happens. His deal with Teribo VII stated that if he lost the legion, the king would pay an additional 5 million gold Fordes as reparations and he would replace all the lost military equipment. Human life was the least valuable thing in the duchy to the duke. It didn't matter how many soldiers he lost, he could always just recruit others to replace them.

The president cursed his uncle for being so unfaithful and greedy. If it was for money, the duke would ignore his family's pleas for help without reservation. The care the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild had shown to the duchy had also been conveniently forgotten.

No one in the tent tried to interfere, they all understood the president's troubles. Even though the Union had around 150 thousand troops that also had experience fighting defensive battles, it would be a long stretch to ask them to mount an assault. Asking them to conquer the citadel was akin to asking them to jump off a cliff. It was especially true given the Crimson Legion's reputation for being incredibly tenacious defenders.

Perhaps, the saying that 'the battlefield is the best place to learn' made sense. Should he actually force his men to attack the citadel? Even if he succeeded, he would suffer huge casualties. How many of his men would each of the Crimson Legion's soldiers kill before falling? They would definitely not surrender. They followed orders to the letter, and they had been ordered to hold the citadel or fall with it. Three per soldier? Four? Maybe even more? Would incurring such a huge loss just from attacking a citadel be worth it? The president knew that if he lost half his troops, he would lose the whole army. The rest would have no courage left and scatter.

But what would happen if he didn't attack? If he turned back, he would be the laughing stock of the entire continent, the general of 150 thousand soldiers defeated by 24 thousand in a citadel, and without a fight to boot. Rumors would spread quickly that he had chickened out in front of the legion, his reputation would be ruined. And yet he couldn't attack. The citadel's defenses had almost no flaws. The moment he launched

an attack would be the moment the land would be submerged in a sea of blood and a field of corpses. If that happened, some would no doubt criticize the Union's war as nothing more than a millstone used to grind away at the smaller merchant guilds to keep the big-seven in power. There was no good way to deal with this!

President Cobleit's hatred for his uncle seeped into his bones. It was as if all past favors and their familial relation didn't matter in the face of money.

After a long sigh, he slumped back into his chair. Shortly after he realized there was still someone in the tent. It was the first young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, Serihanem.

"Oh? Why are you still here?" asked President Cobleit curiously.

Serihanem bowed respectfully and said, "President, I have an idea that might not require us to attack this citadel."

"Oh, what is it then?" asked the president, reinvigorated.

"Well, can we confirm that the only orders the Crimson Legion received were to defend the citadel itself?" asked Serihanem.

President Cobleit nodded.

"They have no orders to take offensive actions, right?" asked Serihanem in another effort to confirm the facts.

"None whatsoever," replied the president.

"Then it'll be simple. President, I would like to be sent to the citadel as an ambassador and meet with the legion's commander. Please give me permission to do so," requested Serihanem.

"What are your intentions?"

"Perhaps, we can help them reinterpret the definition of 'defending the place to their deaths'," said Serihanem, before he revealed a sly smile.

Two days later, the Union's 150-thousand-strong force bypassed the citadel and continued their assault. First young master Serihanem and the commander of the

Crimson Legion stood at the citadel's gates and observed the Union's forces march westward.

"Thank you, Commander Seria. I must tell you once more how grateful the Chikdor Merchant Guild is to you. Perhaps, we will be able to have another chance for cooperation," said Serihanem sincerely.

Commander Seria of the Crimson Legion was a rather bulky man in his forties. He was also a two-star-gold-ranked knight.

He shrugged his shoulders and said, "There's no need for you to be that thankful. We're only acting with our own interests in mind. Just like you said, nobody actually wants to die, and neither do I want to see the young lads in my legion sacrificed for no good reason. Also, we didn't disobey any orders by doing this. We did indeed keep the citadel secure and didn't let it fall into your hands. As for your circling around the citadel, that has nothing to do with me. It's not that I received an order that required me to prohibit your troops from doing so."

On the 11th day of the 5th month, the Union's forces successfully passed around the citadel defended by the Crimson Legion to continue their invasion. Teribo VII lost his cool the moment he received the news. He hurriedly offered more money to the neighboring nations to send reinforcements and sent some men to find out what the heck the Crimson Legion was up to.

All Commander Seria did, was bring up the orders he had received. He responded proudly that he had managed to keep the citadel from falling into the hands of the enemy, and that he didn't violate any orders he received at all. As for where the troops of the Union had gone, they were none of his concern and not what he was responsible for.

Teribo VII was infuriated when he heard the commander's response. He wrote a letter to Urubaha IV. As a result, Urubaha IV mobilized his other army-for-rent, the Tricolor Sword Legion, to the kingdom to stand with the four allied nations' army, officially taking the kingdom's side. And so began yet another stalemate that lasted for three more months. As for what transpired after that, that's a topic for another time.

……

On the 14th day of the 5th month at the Hanayabarta kingdom's port city of Nupite,

more than 30 vessels belonging to the Chikdor Merchant Guild anchored. Countless badly-dressed slave youths could be seen busy moving cargo around like trails of ants.

One of the aged slaves slipped and fell. The cubic parcel he had been carried smashed into the ground. The crisp sound of something breaking rang out. The slaves around him looked at the scene with terror and quickly left the area, lest they be involved in the trouble that was to come.

The slave who'd slipped sat on the ground and revealed a cathartic smile on his face. Quickly, a few angry-looking men rushed over and pinned him to the ground. One of them tugged on his hair while another swung with his sword. Head and body separated. Blood fountained from the slave's bare neck.

"What a merciful end for an animal like him. What a clean and painless death!" the leader of the group said before he spun the parcel around and saw the marking on it.

He cursed, "This is something that belongs to Master Wazk! Dammit! We'll be reprimanded for this again… He might even force us to reimburse him, this is going to be expensive! Cursed slave, have a few of them come over and impale the head on a stake! And toss that filthy corpse into the ocean!"

It was a common site for the Chikdor Merchant Guild's men. This kind of thing happened quite often in this country built on slaves and was nothing to marvel at.

Within a luxurious building in Nupite, the third young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, Moribak, was receiving the local lord's hospitality. He was accompanied by more than ten other slave owners and traders ranked at the top of the port's hierarchy.

The fleet had started their journey on the 12th day of the 4th month. They had first stopped at the Shyarsia kingdom to purchase half a year's worth of spice and sell some of their own goods, before heading to Nupite. They had already been traveling for about a month and Moribak felt incredibly worn out. He had no choice but to stay energized the best he could to deal with these influential slave owners and traders.

The slave traders, their mouths loosened by the alcohol, complained about the difficulties of their business over the last year and how their 'stock' had been less than satisfactory.

Moribak asked curiously, "What's causing such a huge change in the slave trading business?"

There were many different responses from the different traders but they all had one thing in common - the sudden rise to power of Second Highness Auguslo.

One of the slave traders began to tell his story of the better days of the past.

"During the years when the empire was embroiled in civil war, the nobles of the former empire were extremely welcoming to us and treated us like princes. Those nobles were more than happy to sell their captives, disobedient folk, and refugees to us. Back then, a young captive only cost one small silver. If we put ourselves through a little trouble, we could even hire mercenaries to capture the refugees to be traded for one gold coin after another…"

"That's right. It's a shame that the war ended too soon. It only lasted seven years! Sigh." another trader complained, "But even so, business was still good back then. There were many nobles who wanted to deal with us. We easily transported the goods from the Redlis kingdom to the Lormo duchy and each trip would net us a few thousand gold Fordes.

"To think that the Redlis kingdom's king, the first prince of the former empire, would actually be defeated by his nephew, the second highness of the Andinaq kingdom, and be forced to cede two provinces to his nephew. Our trade route through the two provinces has been cut off."

"Do the first prince and the second highness not want to deal with slaves?" asked Moribak.

"Third young master, you don't understand. The three princes have different attitudes towards the slave trade. The second prince, the king of the Iblia kingdom, for example, doesn't support slavery on the surface but allows it to continue in secret. He's the one that was the easiest with whom to strike a deal. Naturally, we didn't forget to give him some benefits for his cooperation. Back then, we could sell slaves in broad daylight within the borders of his kingdom.

"The first prince, on the other hand, is different. He would simply play dumb. Occasionally though, he would send his soldiers to demand a generous donation from us. Every time we pass through his territory, it's as if our skins are being scraped clean. Even though we did profit, the margin was very low.

"The worst one is the second highness. Back then, he was still rather amiable after the

third prince became bedridden. There was once an occasion where we docked at Jillin Harbor of the Andinaq kingdom with the slaves we got from the Iblia kingdom. We were only fined a small amount of money after we were discovered. But after the second highness came to power, we were in deep trouble the moment we were captured by the kingdom's troops. Offenders would be beheaded without question. The second highness even claimed that his people weren't goods to be traded.

"I think that there's something wrong with his head. His people are starving and barely surviving. At least they would be able to continue living as slaves. People don't want to deal with Second Highness Auguslo only because of his 300 thousand soldiers. He'd rather have the three to four hundred thousand refugees at the two provinces near the southwest starve to death than allow them to sell themselves into slavery. If we had gotten our hands on those slaves, we'd have profited greatly!

"Wasn't Durik going to head to the southwestern provinces and trick the refugees there to come with us? He pretended to be a merchant from Morante and managed to gather around 1000 people, only to be exposed as a slave trader and hanged along with his attendants."

"Oh, third young master, has the second highness begun fighting with the first prince? I hope that we'll be able to reap some profit when they enter a stalemate," said another slave trader.

"Sigh, stop dreaming. When I left Morante, I heard that the second highness had successfully crossed the Cloudsnap Mountain Range to ambush Frederika. The first prince was forced to escape haggardly. I suspect that by the time I make it back, I will receive word of the Redlis kingdom's extermination. With the second highness having so much power, it's best if you don't get your slaves there," said Moribak.

At the same time, he told the slave traders and owners of his original northern strategy.

"It's a shame that the plans won't be executed now. My guild's higher-ups are terrified of the count just because of the loss of one rank 2 blademaster and 3000 other soldiers… Now that the whole political climate has shifted, there's no more hope left."

Most of what Moribak said flew in one ear of the slave traders and out the other, however.

One of them asked, "Third young master, you mentioned that this House Norton is undertaking huge development efforts and even brought more than 50 thousand refugees to their island?"

"That's right. That bastard no longer has to fear my clan's attack on Silowas. So, he gathered up around 60 thousand refugees from the two southwestern provinces and began developing the island," mumbled Moribak before he passed out from the alcohol's influence.

Chapter 263
Research and Improvements

It was the 18th day of the 5th month. Lorist was at the house's heavily-guarded glass factory at Morgan Hills. He instructed a smith to fit two lenses that had just finished being polished onto two separate holders. Even though there was already a detailed blueprint, a lot of effort had to be spent modifying the design before Lorist's requirements were met.

Two shiny telescopes, one larger than the other, were finally in Lorist's hands. The old smith, whose face was incredibly wrinkled, was surprised that Lorist didn't allow him to make detailed engravings on the telescopes. He thought that Lorist didn't want to indulge him in showing off his workmanship.

After Lorist messed about with the two for a while, he passed the telescopes to Master Mancheny and said, "Look, this is the telescope I was talking about."

Master Mancheny mimicked Lorist's movements and let out gasps from time to time.

"Do you see it now? That's what I was talking about when I referred to the real use of glass. The telescope is only one of the many possible applications of glass. We can polish oil glass until it becomes a lens. You'll have to hire some people to be put in charge of the polishing and find ways to standardize the process. Even the smallest variations in the production process can result in massive changes to the final product. The magnifying glass I drew on that blueprint there, for example, can help others see small objects. And this one, what I call 'glasses', can help old people, like this fine smith here, who have trouble seeing clearly. With these glasses, they'll be able to see just as good as they could during their prime even with their weakening eyes."

Mancheny bowed respectfully to Lorist and said, "Milord, I am really proud that I can be of service to you. You have expanded my horizons and allowed me to see the greater realm that I could never have imagined to exist…"

Smiling, Lorist replied, "Flattery will get you nowhere. You just need to do your job well. Your next assignment will be rather important. The production of oil and green glass right now is enough and there's no need to increase it since we're not going to

use it for trade. We only need enough to meet our demand. The important things you have to focus on are the telescope, glasses, and magnifying glass. These products will allow our house to profit infinitely from their trade.

"For now, your most important focus is research into and experimentation with clear glass. You've already seen the glasses I fashioned with clear crystals. Once we finish our research into clear glass, the gold coins will flow to us incessantly. While the transparency of oil glass isn't bad, it's frictionless. It's a bad choice of material for mirrors. That's why I want you to continue experimenting with other combinations of ingredients to come up with the clear glass I mentioned.

"Also, I want you to try and increase the surface area of each glass sheet you make. If it can be achieved, we can use green glass to make greenhouses so that we can eat fresh vegetables during winter. Other than that, play around with making daily cutlery and other products with glass - teapots and cups as well as bowls and plates. All of those will bring profit to the house.

"The main reason I'm leaving the glass factory in your care is so that you have somewhere to put your ideas and creativity on full display. Try your best to reveal the mysteries of this magnificent material. Be it funds or manpower, we'll do our best to meet your demands. Don't worry about whether embarking on a path of research is worth it or not. Even if it fails, we'll learn from the mistakes and change our approach. In that sense, a failure is also beneficial to us, understand?"

Master Mancheny bowed thankfully to Lorist again and said, "Milord, please be assured that I will carry out your will. The experiments will be initiated as soon as possible. I will definitely not disappoint you."

Nodding, Lorist said, "For the next few days, do make me a few of these telescopes. Make sure to number them properly; I'll be distributing them to the forces of the house, especially the Oceanic Legion. In another two days, I'll be going to Ironforge castle, and I'll have to take a few with me. Do send me those when you're finished making them."

"Yes, Milord."

Howard came over with a report just as Lorist exited the room.

"Milord, Old Man Balk has come to meet you. It seemed incredibly urgent."

While Balk did look impatient, his face was filled with joy.

"Milord, the paper you wanted has finally been made! Take a look and see if this is what you specified."

Balk took out a waterproof canister made of beastskin and copper from his back and took out a piece of paper which he promptly unrolled.

The paper in Lorist's hands greatly resembled the kraft paper in his previous life. It wasn't white, but instead, light-brown in color. It also had a smooth surface that felt a little bit oily.

After feeling the paper for a bit, he had Howard bring over some ink and a feather pen. He scribbled rows of words on the paper and drew a few lines.

"This is rather good. The ink dries fast on it too. The only problem is that this paper isn't white enough. Old Man Balk, tell me how you suddenly managed to come up with this," Lorist said satisfied.

"It was by accident. It was purely due to an accident," Balk said with a grin, "Milord, as we weren't making any progress whatsoever during our experiments, most of the paper produced was used as toilet wipes. The demand for toilet wipes is quite high, so it was the ideal way to make back some of the money we spent on our research.

"At noon a few days ago, one of the workers bought a huge piece of butter. He left it by the stove we used to make the paper to deal with something urgent. The butter melted from the heat and flowed into the stove without anyone noticing. When we used the mixture to make toilet paper, as usual, we realized that the product was not the soft toilet paper we were used to seeing, but rather, this smooth paper with a harder texture.

"After some investigation, we found that it was caused by the addition of butter. So, we ran several other tests with other types of oils and this is the result. It's also the cheapest of all our products thus far. We estimate 15 pieces of paper like this will cost around only 1 copper, less than 3 coppers if you include manpower costs."

Lorist was jubilant at his streak of luck. They had not only successfully completed the production of the telescope but had also made a magnificent breakthrough in paper-making. Despite the breakthrough, he made yet another request of Balk.

"Howard, write this down for me. As a reward for developing this new type of paper, Old Man Balk will get 100 gold Fordes, everyone else with contributions will be awarded ten gold Fordes each. Balk, I want you to run several more tests with bleaches, whiteners, and even medicinal herbs to try to whiten the paper. Also, try to make the sheets a little thinner. Only then can it be a staple export.

"Also, ensure that the method and ingredients used to make paper remain a secret. Howard, help me pass this order to Potterfang: 'Have all the soldiers of our dominion who retired due to old age form a new police unit that will be put in charge of the defense of the glass factory and the paper factory. Make sure our secret is kept at all costs.'"

"Understood, Milord. I will have the guards pass the order on immediately," replied Howard.

……

On the 21st day of the 5th month, Lorist traveled to the Bladedge Mountains, to a heavily-guarded valley where the gunpowder facility was located. Professor Balbo, whom Lorist had kidnapped was doing his research there.

"Lord Count, I don't really understand why you regard gunpowder so highly. Perhaps, there are some applications for it in the military, but other than that, I really can't see how it can be useful. Even though the dwarves have already had gunpowder for more than a thousand years, they haven't found any other application for it apart from its use in guns," questioned the professor the moment they met.

He handed the recipe he considered the most effective gunpowder mix to date to Lorist.

Lorist laughed but didn't respond to the professor's queries. After taking a look at the recipe, he crossed the egg white off of the list.

"Without egg white, gunpowder won't be able to harden. It'll be less effective that way," the professor objected.

"There's no need for egg white, nor is there a need for hardening. Gunpowder is most effective if it can be made into pellets," said Lorist.

He proceeded to pinch the gunpowder into pellet form in front of the suspicious

professor before leaving them out to dry.

After two days, Lorist brought with him two small metal cylinders and packed them with gunpowder pellets. He installed fuses on the cylinders before placing them in a hole drilled into the wall of a nearby cavern. Finally, he lit the fuses.

A few moments later, a loud bang blasted into the air as the surrounding rocky structures shook. One boulder after another was shaken loose and fell off the cliff. When the dust in the distance settled, the facade of the cliff further away had completely changed. Half of it appeared completely shaven off, with much debris to be seen stacked up at its foot like a small hill.

"Look, professor, this is the true feat gunpowder is capable of. We can greatly increase our mining efficacy with gunpowder. The building of roads, bridges, and even houses also improve greatly. They will all require far less manpower and time. As for the military application, you'll get to see that for yourself in another two days. A brand new powerful long-range weapon will finally appear on the face of Grindia," said Lorist gleefully.

"What will it be?" mused the professor curiously.

Lorist merely smiled and left.

……

A citadel was built at the entrance to the valley where the house's refinery was located. It was meant to secure the area and keep the existence of the refinery a secret and to provide a comfortable environment for Grandmaster Sid and his skilled subordinates. Lorist casually named the place Ironforge castle after its completion. On the 23rd day of the 5th month, Lorist paid it a visit.

"Milord, the 17 sets of highly-decorated armor have been shipped to Silowas. I have also drawn a few more designs of various armaments, as per your request. All of them are slightly weaker in defense compared to the Whitelion Legion's equipment, but look incredibly grand. The price ranges from around 80 to 120 gold Fordes," reported Sid the moment he saw Lorist.

"I never have to worry about the things you're working on, Grandmaster. Since you're the most-informed person in this field, I trust that all your decisions are made with the benefits of the house in mind," said Lorist as he nodded to show his praise.

Grandmaster Sid also seemed to be in a good mood as he walked with a slight skip in his step.

"Milord, I have already come up with some preliminary designs for your wheelbarrow ballista. There are 24 prototypes made so far on the other side of this wall."

The 24 different prototypes of wheelbarrow ballistae were arranged neatly in two rows. The steel parts of the ballistae shone brightly under the sun's gaze.

Lorist got closer to take a look and found that the wheelbarrows were made from steel and wood. The sturdiest part seemed to be their axles. He lifted one up by the handles and pushed it around and found that it not only did not take much energy to move around but that it was also easy to control.

Sid began his introduction, "Milord, your wheelbarrow design is truly revolutionary. Never has there been a vehicle that could be moved by a single person. Not only can it carry a lot of weight, it's also convenient and easy to use. In the future, we can even use these for treks over mountains. Milord, should we produce these wheelbarrows by themselves for sale in the future?"

Smiling, Lorist said, "Of course. But you must remember that the wheelbarrows will only sell if they are cheap and can endure extensive use. Are the capabilities of the ballistae affected when installed on the wheelbarrows?"

Shaking his head, Sid replied, "No, there's no effect whatsoever, Milord. Some time ago, Sir Dulles brought a regiment of 500 men to try out the wheelbarrows. They said that firing from the wheelbarrow felt more stable than firing from a carriage, and their movement wasn't restricted by the carriage sides either. In the past, they sometimes had to work together to aim and fire the ballistae properly. But that restriction is no more."

"Then, does Dulles feel that each wheelbarrow ballista requires five people to operate?" asked Lorist.

"He does. One will push from the back and two others will pull from the front. The other two will be in charge of guarding the unit. They can even switch roles if required. Sir Dulles feels that this arrangement is ideal. The only shortcoming of the wheelbarrow is that it has to be held down when firing because it is far too light to endure the recoil," explained Sid.

"Very well. Prepare a division's worth of wheelbarrow ballistae for Dulles. That fellow is getting impatient to be a division commander. Howard, write this down: 'Have Malek arrange for half the troops of the carroballista division to join Dulles's new wheelbarrow-ballista division. Have the new recruits fill up the vacancies.'"

"Yes, milord," said Howard.

Grandmaster Sid stepped in front of Lorist and interjected, "Milord, please wait. Did you not notice anything different about this ballista?"

Huh? Lorist looked at the ballista and thought, *it doesn't look that different…*

Upon taking a closer look, he suddenly noticed something and said, "Grandmaster, this ballista seems smaller than the original ones… It is, isn't it?"

Chuckling, Sid said, "Milord, that's one part, but there's more. Look at this bolt. Even though it's also made of iron, it's half as light as the old ones we used. As a result, the ballista is far stabler when it fires, and thus more accurate."

"You managed to improve it that much? Then again, would the smaller size affect it's firing range?" asked Lorist hesitantly.

Sid shrugged.

"Milord is mistaken to think the effective firing range is 300 meters. The bolt can indeed fire out to 300 meters, but it is completely useless at that range. It can only reach that far if it's fired in an arc, which makes it impossible to aim it accurately. The important range is the range it can reach when fired in a straight line. After countless experiments we determined that range to be about 80 meters.

"When we first realized this, we were just as surprised. So, we looked to Sir Pete of the mounted archers unit for help. He brought a squad of mounted archers to help us with our experiments. In the end, we also debunked the myth that gold-ranked knights would be threatened by an arrow fired from less than a hundred meters away.

"Naturally, a divine marksman like Josk is an exception to the rule. All the bowmen would acknowledge that even though they can aim properly up to 60 meters away, targets outside the 100-meter range seem smaller than a thumb. So, the bowmen would raise their sights slightly higher before firing. In essence, the projectiles they fired also travel in arcs.

As for the ballista operators, they are unable to even see a target clearly from 300 meters away. The main threat they pose to the enemy is by relying on a dense volley of ballista bolts fired in the enemy's general direction. So, please don't worry, Milord. The reduction in the size of the ballista is due to the better materials we used in its construction. Its power is not affected in the slightest."

"I see. So, who was the one who made the new bow frames?" asked Lorist.

After receiving such a lengthy lecture from the grandmaster, he finally roughly understood how ballistics worked.

I guess he does have a point. A human 100 meters away looks no bigger than a pea. Be it longbows or ballistae, they are only able to pose a threat to the enemy because of the density of their volleys. While accuracy does play a part, luck is the main factor when it comes to hit rate.

"Milord, did you forget about Old Julian? After he was appointed as the person-in-charge of the steel ballista factory, he has been contemplating how he can make better material for the ballistae. After a few years of trial and error, he finally succeeded. When Grandmaster Fellin and I went to test it out, we found that this new ballista frame is far superior to the ones we were using. So, we submitted a proposal to switch out the old frames for the new ones. We have yet to receive a reply," said Grandmaster Sid.

"Oh, also, you had someone send me a design for a copper barrel called a 'cannon' some time back. I left the task of designing it to old Julian and it's already complete. Do you want to go check it out, milord? I wonder, what could such a heavy barrel be used for? Also, what does the word 'cannon' even refer to?"

Chapter 264
Firearms, War News, and the Nightmare

On the 34th day of the 5th month, thunderous roars resounded at the Professor Balbo's research facility near the Bladedge Mountains. The roars of the cannons continually echoed throughout the valley.

Wearing shocked expressions on their faces, Lorist, the dust-covered Grandmaster Sid, Professor Balbo, Grandmaster Fellin, as well as old Julian, whose status had been elevated to that of a grandmaster's, Howard, and ten other guards who had just emerged from the trenches, approached the cannon that was located about 20 meters away carefully.

Lorist realized that he had underestimated the production standards of this alternate world. About ten days earlier, he had just visited Julian with Grandmaster Sid to check out the cannon barrel designed based on his drawings. He found that Julian had fashioned 12 of the barrels for him in less than a month. Grandmaster Sid said that fashioning those barrels was actually one of the crudest tasks available to their craft. It amounted to nothing more than practice exercises. The truly hard part of smithing lay with the use of stainless steel.

Lorist laughed bitterly at the statement. The stainless steel Sid referred to was produced through the hammering of materials nonstop using the water-powered machines. Without a proper heat-resistant furnace, there was no way that those water-powered machines could be used to make those cannon barrels.

In his past life, Lorist had been the manager of a small workshop. He wasn't trained in metallurgy, nor did he know anything about cannons. However, one of his workshop's products was a miniature bronze cannon roughly the size of a palm which he used as a glamorous paperweight in his office. The miniature cannon wasn't cast in a mold but made on a lathe instead.

Back then, Lorist was quite intrigued by the cannon model in his office. He wondered why old bronze cannons didn't use steel as their material instead. After looking up an article on an online encyclopedia, he realized the ingenuity of the ancients. Their reasoning behind the use of bronze for cannons was simple and ingenious: durability

and low cost. Naturally, Lorist couldn't recall the specific figures. The only impression left behind in his mind was that at a time when industrial standards were still not set, using bronze was the ideal choice.

Fortunately, given the realism of the cannon model, which had been made to scale, it was rather easy for Lorist to replicate the design. He could even recall the various relative measurements of the little plaything.

With the designs Lorist provided him, Old Julian had fashioned a total of twelve bronze cannons just like that.

Upon closer inspection, however, five of the cannons had been eliminated from testing. The surface of the barrel's inside was uneven. Lorist had some workers sand down the remaining seven and prepared proper mounts for them before having some of Professor Balbo's gunpowder brought over from the valley.

That day marked the first firing test. Their target was a cliff roughly 400 meters away. An instant after the guns fired, smoke billowed from the cliffside and rocks, shaken loose from the shockwave in the ground, disappeared into the plumes of smoke.

"Good Lord Singwa… Aren't… aren't these basically magic-crystal cannons?" mused Professor Balbo, shocked as he observed the devastation.

"Magic-crystal cannons?" asked Lorist.

It was the first time he heard of something like that.

"Milord, I've read some records that were made during the time of the magic civilization. In them were mentions of the sky fleets left behind by ancient gnomes that were discovered by the magi. The magi re-engineered and improved on a long-range weapon fueled by magic crystals, hence its name. A single shot was enough to demolish a whole mountain. It's said that the strongest magic-crystal cannons could even strike down the stars. When the war with the gods began, the cannons were transported to the realm of the gods and were initially able to triumph over them. They killed one god after another. However, given the slow reload speed and the limited reaction of the cannons, the magic-crystal cannon troops were wiped out by gods' armies in the end," explained Professor Balbo.

"Oh, is that so? Well, our cannons aren't comparable to those that use magic crystals. The cannons we have rely purely on the explosive force of the gunpowder to propel

their projectiles outward. There's no way they can rival those mythical weapons," said Lorist as he thought about how much more impressive those cannons must have been.

"Milord, cannons number one to three have normal temperatures, they are just a little warm to the touch. Their positions haven't changed either. Cannons number five to six are much hotter. Number 6 has the highest temperature and it's shifted roughly 12 centimeters. A small crack has also appeared on cannon number seven and it's much hotter. Even the cannon mount has slanted to the left," reported the guard.

He recorded his observations on a piece of beastskin. Old Julian's face was slightly flushed with embarrassment. The first test fire had revealed many flaws in the cannons he had fashioned.

Lorist said with a smile, "Grandmaster Julian, this is not your fault. We are testing the amount of gunpowder we require. Cannon number seven used almost double the gunpowder of number one. The fact that it only got a crack without blowing up entirely is already a testament to the quality of your work."

Lorist instructed his guards to clean up the cannons and continue the tests. This time, they tested the cannons one by one to find the optimal amount of gunpowder and record the distance and strength of the shots, as well as the time it took the cannons to cool off and their durability when used continuously. They also attempted to find the most number of times a cannon could be used.

After a few more tests, Lorist brought the few grandmasters back to the resting hall and let the guards continue with their tests.

The roar of cannon fire didn't disrupt their conversation whatsoever. Lorist paid attention to the others in the hall. Professor Balbo seemed to have something on his mind, whilst Julian seemed quite excited. He had no idea that something of his making would be so powerful, so his excitement was understandable. Sid, on the other hand, looked quite shocked and jumpy. Perhaps, he thought the cannons to be his new toy with which he could have lots of fun researching. Grandmaster Fellin, in contrast to the previous two, had a pale look on his face.

"What's wrong, Grandmaster Fellin?" asked Lorist concerned.

Fellin replied in a disheartened tone, "Milord, with the existence of cannons, ballistae will no longer be relevant anymore… Be it range or power, cannons far surpass

ballistae. The cannons will only improve as time goes on, whereas the development of ballistae is already nearing its apex. I believe that a grandmaster arbalest like me will no longer be needed and cannons replace ballistae entirely… I will no longer be able to contribute to the house…”

Oh, so that's why… realized Lorist.

Lorist patted his shoulder lightly.

"Things aren't that simple, Grandmaster Fellin. Ballistae and catapults are cold arms while cannons are firearms. They are fundamentally different weapons. You're a grandmaster in cold weapons and it is my belief that the ballistae you manufacture are at the apex of ballista technology. There are none who can surpass you. However, when it comes to cannons, everyone here is a beginner. All of us are starting at the same level with the same knowledge. In future research on explosives, we will still require your craftsmanship to make delicate parts. Don't worry, the house is proud to have a grandmaster like you in our service."

Cold arms? Fire arms? Explosives?

With his interest piqued, the grandmaster asked, "Milord, why do you categorize them as such? And what are explosives? Do they refer to the cannons?"

Lorist explained, "Weapons like the steel ballistae and catapults mainly rely on the elasticity of metal plates to launch projectiles. As the mechanism works based on the weapon's construction itself, I categorized them as cold arms.

"On the other hand, we have cannons which use the energy derived from the explosion caused by gunpowder to propel its projectile outward. This bronze cannon directs the energy from the explosion into the projectile within the barrel to shoot it out. The cannon itself doesn't have any firing capability of its own. That's why I consider weapons that use gunpowder explosive weapons, which is a subcategory of firearms. Naturally, that is just a rough grouping I've personally decided to use."

Lorist gestured for them to sit down at the table and said, "I'm sure that all of you have gotten a close look at these cannons firing. However, there is still much testing to be done. I would like to set up a research panel on explosives comprised of those present. First, complete the testing and manufacturing standards of these cannons. Make sure each cannon fires in a predictable and reliable manner. For example, you can install

some sights on the cannons to aid with aiming and so on. Make sure to finish this as soon as possible.

"The current situation the house is in is rather dire. Fortunately for us, the Chikdor Merchant Guild changed their minds about taking Silowas because of the war. For now, focus on developing these cannons. As for Grandmaster Julian, arrange for a batch of these cannons to be manufactured. I am going to install them on my warships. Only then can we ensure that the dominion and the seas of our house won't be infringed upon by others."

Lorist clapped his hands to signal Howard to enter. He came into the room with a small box which held a dwarven firearm.

"This is the renowned gun made by the dwarves. It functions more or less the same as our cannons. It also uses gunpowder to propel its projectile, a lead bullet in this case. According to Professor Balbo, the gunpowder the dwarves make is not going to improve anytime soon. The professor's current formula is far better than the dwarves' and also costs quite a lot less to make, much to his credit."

After giving the professor some lip service, he instructed Howard to hang up a few diagrams on the wall and continued.

"These are two gun designs I drew based on the dwarves' gun. This one is a long-barreled rifle and this one a revolving handgun, we'll call it a revolver. I have also detailed the parts and their measurements. However, the measurements are only based on my estimation and may require some testing and fine-tuning."

The two guns Lorist designed were hammer-action flintlocks, but their hammers were not as ridiculous as the one made by the dwarves, namely, it didn't have a winged-dragon on it. The dwarven guns used a winding mechanism which would jam 3 to 4 out of 10 times. The flintlock design Lorist used was based on using flint and metal to strike on the projectile to make it fire. He wasn't sure whether the grandmasters could make them, however.

The main problem that could arise from the production of the revolver was that of the cartridges, the barrel, and the percussion cap's production. While he was confident that his smiths could make the cartridges and barrel with a little more effort, the percussion cap wasn't going to be that easy. So, he left the problem for Professor Balbo to solve.

Professor Balbo was put in charge of researching percussion caps and scattershot ammo for the cannons while he was at it. Grandmasters Sid and Julian would work together to find the ideal material to be used for the construction of the guns as well as think up ways to improve the cannons when they were not focusing on their main task. As for Grandmaster Fellin, whose craftsmanship was top-notch, he was placed in charge of making the individual parts for the guns.

Having finished assigning his tasks, Lorist left the valley in a relaxed mood.

On the 2nd day of the 6th month, Lorist returned to Firmrock castle. Supervisor Spiel hurriedly brought over two large stacks of documents which Lorist had to be informed of or sign. Lorist had no choice but to start taking care of the piled-up paperwork, despite his hefty sighs.

After knocking on the door, Howard entered and said, "Milord, these are some documents we received from Silowas, as well as Knight Lundmorde's first correspondence ever since he moved to Morante. Within is a report on the state of the conflict between as well as the second highness's conquests in the Redlis kingdom."

Energized, Lorist said, "Let me take a look."

Lundmorde had left for Morante in the beginning of the 4th month with his three wives to open a herbalist clinic which treated women and children. His clinic would double as an information gathering center at Morante for the house. It seemed that he had gotten used to life there pretty quickly, given that his report was sent within his first two months there.

In the letter, he described briefly his journey. After the description was an update on the conflict between the two nations: yet another stalemate had begun. This time around, it was between the forces of the seven neighboring nations, who numbered around 100 thousand and were stationed at Feyers, and the 150-thousand-strong Union forces. The Morante Daily reported that the war might not end until Teribo VII's treasury was exhausted.

As for Second Highness Auguslo, he had encountered a huge problem at the Redlis kingdom. The nobles of Anderwoff weren't the least bit intimidated by his 100 thousand soldiers. He was forced to deploy for an attack. He marched on the province only to be fended off by the nobles who used the terrain to their advantage. The second highness had lost one battle after another. Eventually, the two divisions that had

surrendered to the second highness revolted. In the end, only 40 thousand soldiers of the second highness' original 100 thousand survived. It was even said that the second highness vomited blood in rage.

Lorist snickered as he read the report. The longer the two wars dragged on, the better it would be for House Norton. He wouldn't mind if they kept on going for another 8 or 10 years.

Putting Lundmorde's letter aside, Lorist began reading one of the letters from Silowas. The letter of more than ten pages had been penned by Charade. He reported everything that happened down to the minutest detail.

The first shipment of fur had already been delivered to the Peterson Merchant Guild. Five hundred thousand of the gold Fordes had been sent to the dominion. The rest was used to pay off the 500 thousand kilograms of food from the guild for use during the development of the island.

Other than that, Charade and the guild had come to an agreement. He provided the samples for the 17 different sets of glamorous armor that were on sale and a catalog to the guild so that they could collect orders for them when they got back to Morante. Naturally, the guild requested a ten percent commission on the sales they made and he had agreed. He stressed that it was a win-win for both parties. The added incentive would only encourage the merchant guild to collect as many orders as possible, while House Norton could hide behind their backs and not become anybody's targets.

The next report was about the foraging for resources at Silowas. Grandmaster Sid's eldest son Delokua had brought a group of people to the volcanic areas of Silowas to survey the land. In the two short months they had been conducting their survey, they already had good results to report. They had discovered seven different mineable resources on the island thus far. Iron and silver deposits were especially prevalent. They also believed that they would discover more resources as their survey progressed. Charade added that he had decided he would use the laborers to extract the resources when the development was complete.

Finally, Charade made a few minor complaints and told Lorist about his father who was making his way to the Northlands at the moment. Charade's father was going to buy a house and start a shop at the new port city and Charade hoped that Lorist would look out for him.

Lorist penned his reply immediately. He asked Charade to pack up and prepared to return. Coincidentally, Lorist was going to head to the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay to check on the construction of their new sail-powered warship and arrange for cannon-operation training for the sailors.

Lorist was busy for the rest of the 6th month.

One day at the end of the 6th month, Howard barged in and exclaimed, "Milord, milord, it's horrible! Silowas had been attacked!"

Chapter 265
Assault from the Hanayabarta Kingdom

On the 33rd day of the 6th month, a damaged ship covered in arrows and ram marks could be seen at Bullhorn Bay. The battered Flying Fish of Dawn docked at the port and, after the walking plank was lain down, injured people disembarked. Freiyar and Patt were carried by a few injured marines off of the ship.

Lorist stepped forward. He breathed a sigh of relief after taking a closer look. Although the two's injuries were serious, they were not in any mortal danger. Perhaps it was because they had received emergency treatment very quickly after being injured.

Freiyar was injured, a physical shock had caused his internal organs to shift ever so slightly and bleed profusely. According to the marines by their side, he spat out lots of blood and shouldn't recover in less than three months. Patt, on the other hand, had been pierced through his lower abdomen by a sword. It had struck right through him and burst out of his back. Fortunately, his spinal cord wasn't damaged, but he would still be out of commission for half a year.

Captain Wilson stepped off the ship and saluted Lorist. He had also been injured during his trip as was apparent from the turban-like bandage he wore on his head.

With a cold voice, Lorist asked, "Is this the work of the Chikdor Merchant Guild?"

Captain Wilson smiled bitterly and shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Milord. To be honest, I don't have a clear idea who it was that attacked Silowas. But I'm sure they aren't people from the guild. The enemy seemed like pirates of some sort, but I have no idea what kind of pirate force would be as big as they were. They had around three to four hundred ships…"

"That many?"

"That's right, Milord. I also initially thought that we were being attacked by the Chikdor Merchant Guild, since only they could plausibly mobilize so many ships against us. But when we clashed something felt weird. Many of the ships flew different flags, and their sailors and crew were not as well-trained and calm as those of the

guild.

"The moment our ships approached theirs, the enemy began to lose control and even broke their own formation. That would never happen to the guild's fleet. Milord, you should wait for a few days. Sir Senbaud's fleet is right behind us and he might've captured a few of the enemy alive," explained Captain Wilson.

Without accepting or rejecting Wilson's suggestion, Lorist said, "Tell me more about the incident. Start at the beginning."

"Yes, milord," Wilson said, before he began his recollection, "At noon on the 21st day of the 6th month, Sir Senbaud's fleet left Silowas on a trip back to the Northlands. I was patrolling around one in the afternoon when I discovered ships silhouettes not far away, so I ordered our men to sail out to see who they were. But halfway there, I realized something odd. More and more ships continued to appear, almost covering the oceans entirely.

"I was incredibly shocked and thought that the Chikdor Merchant Guild had decided to launch their attack. But using the telescope, I discovered that the flags flown by the ships were not uniform, neither was there any sight of the sword-and-barrel flag of the guild. So, I began to wonder where the fleet had come from and continued forward to intercept and question them.

"But before we even had a chance to converse, the ships began launching fireballs at us."

Wilson pointed at the burn marks on the Flying Fish of Dawn.

"Fortunately, our ship was agile and swift, allowing us to evade most of the enemy's attacks and escape. After we determined that they were enemy ships, we quickly returned to Silowas to alert the troops.

"Sir Freiyar suggested that we mount a naval attack against the enemy. That way, we would be able to give the island more time to prepare. He also ordered his men to inform Sir Charade and Sir Patt and his guard brigade, before ordering me to seek out Sir Senbaud, who had just left, and have him come back to reinforce us.

"By the time I reached Sir Senbaud's fleet, it was already midnight. He gave the order to turn back and reinforce Silowas immediately. But the morning of the next day we ran into four ships from Sir Freiyar's fleet that managed to break out of the

encirclement. According to the troops on the ship, Sir Freiyar had commanded 30 ships to receive the attack and managed to destroy more than 50 enemy ships, but the four that escaped were the last ones that remained.

"On one of the ships was Sir Freiyar. He had suffered heavy injuries. The marines said that Sir Freiyar had intended to intercept the enemy, but the enemy sent 100 ships to hinder his fleet, allowing the remaining ships to continue sailing to the island.

"Sir Freiyar's fleet used up all their weapons and had to board the enemy ships to fight in close-quarters. At first, they were able to take two ships, but the enemy sent out a blademaster which Sir Freiyar went up to receive. After a few bouts, Sir Freiyar got struck on his chest by the blademaster's sword, causing him to spit out blood and faint.

"The marines said it was Sir Karitoke who had hauled Sir Freiyar back. Sir Karitoke later ordered them to break the encirclement. But right as they were about to leave, Sir Karitoke was struck down by the enemy blademaster…

"Sir Senbaud ordered the four ships that escaped to travel with his fleet. We managed to arrive at Silowas…" Wilson paused as his face turned grim. "Milord, by the time we got there, flames and smoke filled the skies of the island. Cries of pain or grief could be heard all around. From the telescope, I could even see corpses littering the port. Rivers of blood flowed all over… Tho-those pirates… They killed, maimed, and did all manner of terrible things on the island… It's hell… Silowas has become hell…

"The enemy's ships were docked at the southern coasts. Even though we fought with them for the whole afternoon, their numbers just seemed to grow more and more. We managed to burn down more than 20 enemy ships, losing seven of our own in the process. In the end, Sir Senbaud had no choice but to order a retreat. The enemy didn't bother to pursue us either. They were content with us leaving the island.

"Sir Senbaud still had to circle Silowas a few times before we lost the enemy. Only after that could we rest. He said that since Swordfish Ridge still flew our Raging Bear flag, he would sneak into the marine camp near the bay during the night to make his way up to the ridge.

"When midnight came, Sir Senbaud brought us into the small bay and we realized that the fires were still lit at Swordfish Ridge. So, he brought his men up there but left me outside. They returned after a good while and had us hurriedly retreat. According to the marines who went up there, there were lots of enemies waiting there. Given that

we only had a thousand or so men with us, we had no choice but to retreat. We could no longer defend Silowas.

"We didn't bring many boats when we entered the bay, so each one we had was packed to the brim with people. By the time we ferried everyone out of the bay, the sky was already brightening and the enemy discovered us. They sent their ships for us, but we sunk the first ten or so that arrived and we even managed to take control of two middle-class armed merchant vessels in the process. The enemy mobilized another hundred or so ships to attack us, however. We were fully laden, so we weren't able to sail quickly enough and were caught once again in the afternoon.

"Fortunately, Divine Marksman Josk was there. He and Sir Senbaud picked ten ships that were still in decent condition and deployed them as our rearguard. They managed to eliminate the five ships right on our tail. As a result, the enemies further back became more cautious. They didn't come closer, but they continued to barrage us with ranged attacks all the all the way into the evening before they retreated. I don't know why that happened, but I was too relieved to be free of pursuers to care at the time.

"The next morning Sir Senbaud ordered me to head back first with the injured. Flying Fish of Dawn is the fastest ship in our arsenal, after all. The rest will catch up and arrive in few more days."

Lorist stretched out his hand and patted Wilson's shoulder.

"You must've had a hard time. Go back and rest for a day or two. Your head injury isn't serious, is it?" said he.

Wilson saluted.

"Milord, I'm fine. My head only brushed against a passing fireball. All I lost was half my hair… I shudder to imagine how my wife will react when I get home…"

Lorist nodded in response.

"Thank goodness you're alright for the most part. First, rest up at the marine camp. I will have herbalists head over and treat the injured. I hope you'll recover soon, I might have to trouble you to go out to sea in a few days,"

"Yes, milord. I will be awaiting your orders," said Wilson while standing as straight as a ramrod.

"Howard, bring some men with you to check on the injured. Console them and ask them their opinion on our enemies. Also, have someone ask around how the enemy's flags look and have a sketch drawn for me.

"Other than that, pass this order on to Potterfang: 'bring a division of heavy-armored troops and standby for deployment'. Also, have Els check on the status of Dulles's new wheelbarrow-ballistae division. Don't forget to reach out to Professor Balbo as well and give me a detailed summary of his experimental progress," instructed Lorist.

"Yes, milord."

……

By the time Potterfang rushed to the port city, it was already afternoon on the next day. Lorist had already ordered some men to set up camp near the coast.

"Milord, our territory, Silowas, was attacked?!" asked Potterfang the moment he barged into the room.

Given how heavily he panted, he must've rushed there the moment he received the order.

"Where are your men?" asked Lorist.

"They will only be able to arrive by tomorrow, Milord. I left early with a few attendants. Milord, who is it that dares to attack our dominion? Is it the Chikdor Merchant Guild or the second highness's men?"

Lorist shook his head.

"It's neither of them. Look at the few sketches of emblems and flags over here on the table. We haven't seen any of them before. I suspect that we've been attacked by pirates of some sort…"

Potterfang held up one of the beastskins on the table and revealed a look of shock. "Milord, the enemy are not pirates. I know these emblems and flags. They're the slave traders and slave owners from the Hanayabarta kingdom…"

"What did you say?! The Hanayabarta kingdom? The island-based kingdom built on slavery?" exclaimed Lorist.

His voice was cold as ice. He had finally found a lead he could follow.

"That's right. Milord, since you've never been to the kingdom before, it's no surprise that you don't know their emblems. Actually, these emblems don't even show up often here on the main continent either. Look, these emblems and flags all have black borders. It marks them as the slaver nobles and slave merchant guilds of the Hanayabarta kingdom. Most of the nations on Grindia don't recognize the legitimacy of the Hanayabarta nobles' claim to peerage. To the royal families and noble houses of Grindia, they are naught but a bunch of lowly pirates and slave traders."

Potterfang had been to the Hanayabarta kingdom twice before. The first was when he went there at the invitation of Loze. Loze had been a bodyguard for a slave trader back then. Potterfang couldn't bear the practice of slavery, he left after a month had passed.

His second trip was when he went to Nupite to purchase slaves to add to the fighting strength of the northbound convoy, as well as to recruit Loze and Malek. After these two experiences, Potterfang was well-acquainted with the flags and emblems of the kingdom.

"You're saying that a bunch of slavers and slave traders attacked and raided Silowas? Why, aren't they rather bold? Aren't they afraid of our retribution?!" growled Lorist angrily.

Shaking his head, Potterfang said, "Milord, the Hanayabarta kingdom was, after all, founded by a bunch of slavers and slave traders. To them, raiding is but a common activity. A century ago, they had been residing at the Golden Coast of the mainland. But as the defenses in that area gradually strengthened, they attacked the Hanayabarta archipelago and formed their slave nation. Those pirate bosses and slave traders became nobles of the kingdom overnight. That is also one of the reasons for the nations' non-recognition of their sovereignty.

"After the founding of the kingdom, they even raided Hidegold Bay, forcing the Union to send out the Invincible Fleet to deal with them. But after that, the old pirate king passed away and the new king announced he would no longer carry out raids at coastal areas. That allowed them to obtain trading permits with some coastal nations. They've become rich off their slave business in the decades since.

"Master, at the end of last year, Count Kenmays, Baron Shazin, and Baron Felim all went to Firmrock Castle to discuss the profits of the salt merchant committee. It was

Supervisor Spiel and me who received them. During that time, I overheard that the second highness had suddenly taken a hard stance against the slave traders of the Hanayabarta kingdom. Quite a few slave traders who were buying slaves all the way from the Iblia kingdom to the four central duchies were captured at the borders of the Redlis and Andinaq kingdoms. Second Highness Auguslo ordered for them to be sent to the gallows without a second thought.

"Also, it is said that the Hanayabarta slave traders hate the second highness to the bone. The slave trade at the four duchies and the Iblia kingdom soon became less than ideal and is basically extinct there now. It was such that many nobles even approached the committee and asked us whether we were interested in dealing with slaves. All of them held grudges against the second highness for what they considered personal business, adversely affecting their income in the process.

"That's why, Milord, I think that the Hanayabarta kingdom's slave owners and traders were the ones who attacked Silowas. On the one hand, they intend to capture the tens of thousands of islanders as slaves. On the other hand, they want to exact revenge against the second highness's policies against them. They are not the least bit afraid of the retribution of our house either. It must be known that they are descendants of pirates. Add to that the fact that their nation spans several islands, they can't even wait for us to go there and try to avenge ourselves. They hold great terrain advantage and superiority at their islands, and it will be tough for us to fight against them on foreign ground…"

Bam! Lorist thumped heavily on the table before sitting down slowly, not exchanging any words with Potterfang.

After a long pause, he instructed, "Pog, make some reorganization with your heavy-armored division when your troops arrive tomorrow. After Dulles finishes grouping the three wheelbarrow-ballistae brigades, place him under your command as well. In another two days, the whaling crew will be back and I will have them start preparations to set sail. By the time Senbaud's fleet arrives, you will mobilize your troops and reinforce Silowas.

"If… If it really is as you had described, I suspect that the enemy would've long escaped by the time you arrive. Should that be the case, take care of the aftermath left on the island and await further orders. If there are any enemies left on the island, exterminate them immediately. Other than that, watch out for your safety. Wilson mentioned the presence of a blademaster among the enemy. Don't carelessly get into a fight alone

with him, alright? Just order Dulles's wheelbarrow-ballistae brigades to deal with him."

Standing up straight, Potterfang said, "Yes, Milord."

"Come in!" called out Lorist towards the tent's entrance.

Howard walked in and said, "Milord, what is your will?"

He nodded slightly to his father as well.

"Howard, have someone go to Firmrock Castle and get Supervisor Spiel to bring me every map and piece of information he can find on the Hanayabarta kingdom archipelago to me," said Lorist.

Chapter 266
The Aftermath and the March into Battle

Charade, the chief knight of the house, and Jim, the house's silver-ranked knight as well as vice leader of the guards, were missing in action. Kriston, the security officer, Accountant Mike and Secretary Hector were nowhere to be found either.

Other than that, the house's retired soldiers, who were transferred to work at the seven villages on Silowas as garrison captains, had all lost contact with the house. The situation seemed incredibly grim.

Tok, one of marine assault guard's squad leaders had been confirmed captured, along with Mayor Hugo.

Confirmed dead were Victor, the captain of the Whitebird Town garrison and tax collection officer, Hart, who had been killed while defending the townsfolk during the evacuation.

Silver-ranked knight and regiment leader of the third local defense brigade, Joseph and Donowan, had both sacrificed themselves heroically during the reinforcement of Whitebird Town.

Silver-ranked knight and regiment leader of the guards, Mort, managed to break out of Farama Village's encirclement but sacrificed himself voluntarily to protect the regiment of troops on the way to Swordfish Ridge.

Silver-ranked knight and vice leader of the Oceanic Legion, Nors, had died in battle on the ocean as well.

Seventeen silver-ranked knights of the first and second fleets of the Oceanic Legion, Captain Rolin, Bose, Telok, Hwaleit, Moog, and the rest all perished in battle.

The total number of sailors and marines that were either dead, missing, or captured, was around 3700, with 38 ships lost. The Oceanic Legion forces stationed at Silowas, which numbered around 6000 men, had lost more than half of their forces, a staggering loss indeed.

Only 4 of the 500 Whitebird Town garrison soldiers managed to escape alive, the unit was utterly demolished as well. The third local defense brigade that numbered 3000 people only had 400 or so injured soldiers left that boasted little to no battle capability. Only the two guard regiments stationed at Seaview Manor fared slightly better -- 400 of the 1000 soldiers managed to retreat safely.

……

Both of Lorist's hands shuddered as he read the summarized report on the losses Supervisor Hansk handed him. The weight of the incident pressured him so much that he found it hard to breath. *Charade and Jim are both missing…*

Supporting himself in a forced manner, Lorist gradually took his seat and asked, "Tell me, why were our losses so heavy? Was the enemy that powerful?"

"Milord, it's all because of my ineptness," said Josk as he stepped forward.

Waving his hand, Lorist said, "No, it has nothing to do with you. There are no subordinates in this world that are better than you guys. What I want to know is the reason for the huge loss sustained by our forces during the attack. Was the enemy's strength that incredible?"

Josk shook his head and said, "Milord, the enemy is nothing but a ragtag bunch of ruffians. But… but they brought a few blademasters with them."

"Blademasters? How many were there?" asked Lorist.

"I believe there were seven. However, I've only seen four to five of them personally," recalled Josk, "After receiving Sir Freiyar's message, I stayed by Sir Charade's side. Back then, we were in Whitebird Town. Sir Charade quickly notified the Whitebird Town garrison to make preparations for battle and instructed the third local defense brigade to come over to the town quickly to reinforce us.

"The hundreds of foes who arrived on shore on the first few ships were successfully intercepted by the garrison force, but there were many more ships behind them. More and more enemy troops began to swarm us. I managed to kill two gold ranks and more than ten silver ranks, but then a blademaster appeared all of a sudden. He cut Victor down right away, lopping his head off and causing it to roll to my feet.

"By then, I knew that I was being targeted by the blademaster. I'm a marksman, there's

no way I can handle close combat with a blademaster. So, I could only retreat as I continued to fire away. It didn't take long for me to lose contact with Sir Charade and the others. By the time I circled around and managed to lose the blademaster, I realized that Whitebird Town had already been occupied by the enemy. Despite my frustration, I could only retreat to Swordfish Ridge to gather up the marines and set up a defense line. After that, we received the troops of the third local defense brigade that broke out of the encirclement at Farama Village. In the end, we were picked up by Sir Senbaud's ships…"

Josk ended his testimony, allowing Supervisor Hansk to explain the rest.

"After Knight Josk drew the blademaster away, the Whitebird Town garrison crumbled from the overwhelming force of the enemy. At the critical moment, Knight Patt and his third local defense brigade troops arrived and managed to drive the enemy away. Following that, Knight Jim led his regiment of 500 guards to reinforce them, giving us the upper hand in battle.

"Sir Charade was commanding the troops during the battle and thought that the reinforcements we just received would be able to drive the enemy out. He was right, the enemy couldn't resist us for long and were quickly beaten. But just as we saw the enemy retreating from the town, more than a hundred large-class merchant vessels arrived and started unloading their forces.

"This new wave of enemy troops was far stronger than those we had just beaten. They had many silver and gold ranks, as well as two blademasters. The local defense brigade suffered heavy losses right away, up to a thousand died. The first regiment leader of the brigade, Joseph, and the fourth regiment leader Donowan, died during that time.

"Seeing that the situation was turning bad, Sir Charade ordered us to evacuate the citizens of Whitebird Town to Farama Village as soon as possible. Other than that, he gave the order to arm the laborers and send them to fight off those pirates. At that time, we thought that they were merely pirates and didn't think for a second that they were actually the slavers and traders of the Hanayabarta kingdom.

"Sir Charade brought Knight Jim and more than 20 guards to leave in a hurry. We have no clue what happened to them after that. A few soldiers brought the unconscious and injured Knight Patt back from the frontlines soon after. Fortunately, I had a few medicinal concoctions with me, one of which I gave to Patt right away. After that, I prepared a carriage for Knight Patt and us to be brought to Farama Village.

"The troops that escorted us to the village included 300 or more from the third local defense brigade and more than a hundred guards, who were all injured in some way. Coupled with the sixth logistics regiment stationed at Farama Village, we had less than a thousand men defending the place. Also, we managed to evacuate more than 1000 of the Whitebird townsfolk, all women and children. It was from them that we heard about Mayor Hugo's capture.

"The regiment leader of the guards, Knight Mort, who was stationed at Seaview Manor brought a regiment of troops to Farama Village, only for them to encounter the enemy fighters that were making their way to the village for an assault. After driving away the enemy, Knight Mort entered the village and we finally had enough people to defend ourselves.

"But the enemy fighters that came after brought a blademaster along. That blademaster attempted to barge into Farama Village alone. Fortunately, the third local defense brigade had installed more than a hundred steel ballistae on the village walls. The first volley of 40 plus bolts instantly turned the blademaster into a pincushion. The enemy were staggered by their losses and ceased their attack on us temporarily…"

"Are you certain that the one shot dead was a blademaster?" interjected Lorist with his eyes wide open.

Supervisor Hansk scratched his head in recollection before he said, "Milord, I am fairly certain that he was indeed a blademaster. Before the fight broke out, the few enemy fighters that came up to us and requested our surrender were mostly silver ranks, with another gold rank as identified by the gold blade glow on his longsword.

"At that time, the regiment leader of the sixth logistics regiment, Knight Ollison, had intended to fire the ballistae right away, only to be stopped by Knight Mort. Knight Mort said that we should use longbows to drive those fellows away to make them think that we don't have other long range weapons to defend ourselves with so that we can catch them by surprise with our ballistae when they mount a full-scale attack. Only with that can we cause them a huge loss.

"After that, the blademaster arrived on a carriage. Every one of the enemy fighters, including the gold-ranked knight, cheered. The blademaster also seemed incredibly proud and overbearing. After conversing with some of his men, he drew his longsword and dashed towards the walls without hesitating. Even the twenty arrows our longbows shot at him when he was about a hundred meters away didn't faze him.

"Seeing him approach, Knight Mort ordered his men to use the 40 plus ballistae mounted on the wall to fire in two separate volleys when the blademaster was less than 60 meters away. While the blademaster managed to deflect four bolts heading directly for him at first, the second volley pierced through his torso entirely. He was dead on the spot. Knight Mort was afraid that the bolts weren't enough, so he ordered the longbow troops to fire two more volleys at the blademaster. There was hardly anything left but the bolts and arrows when we were done.

"The blademaster's death shocked the enemy greatly. They all stood there without a word. When Knight Mort determined that the enemy fighters were less than 200 meters from the village, he ordered the ballistae to fire again. They didn't expect our balistae to have such a range, they lost around 50 of their men before running off, tails between their legs.

"I finally felt relieved when that happened. I thought we could still use the walls to hold our ground a little longer. But the moment Knight Mort and Knight Ollison heard the report of some guards and soldiers that just came over, they decided that there was no way that they could defend Farama Village. According to the men, the enemy had two more blademasters with them. While that wasn't that huge a threat during daytime, the night would impact the vision of the ballistae operators greatly. The effective range of our ballistae would be greatly reduced. The moment a single blademaster got close, it would be the end of us.

"Knight Mort believed that we should use the opportunity when the enemy fighters were retreating to make our escape. Only by reaching Swordfish Ridge would we be able to defend ourselves until reinforcements arrived from the mainland, given the advantage the elevated terrain afforded us. As long as we defended the routes up the hill with our ballistae, no number of blademasters would be able to break through our ranks.

"Knight Ollison thus ordered the sixth logistics regiment to mount all the steel ballistae onto carriages to serve as escorts on our flanks. The sky was still somewhat lit during our time of departure, but it didn't take an hour for the darkness to blanket us. When the enemy found our tracks, they followed along and called for more reinforcements. This was when Knight Ollison elected to stay back. He took just over a hundred local defense brigade soldiers and guards with him and prepared an ambush for the enemy.

"Not long after we resumed our escape, sounds of fighting broke out in the distance.

However, it only lasted half an hour. By the time it quieted down, we had already arrived at the foot of Swordfish Ridge. The way up was not an easy one. Given that the enemy was going to arrive at any moment, we prioritized getting the women and children up the ridge, all the while forming a semi-circular defense line with the carroballistae to defend the route uphill.

"We held our position against the enemy for over an hour, but the ballistae became worn and ineffective from the repeated use. Knight Mort quickly ordered 20 of those ballistae to be brought uphill along with half of the bolts we had left. The rest of the bolts were used by our remaining ballistae. We would destroy the ballista when we ran out of bolts for it and retreat to the ones that still had to make sure they didn't fall into enemy hands.

"By the time I was halfway uphill, I saw Knight Mort cutting the last ballista in half, ignoring the sword swung by the enemy behind him. In the end, he was impaled through the chest by a pike."

Mort... It was as if Lorist could see two beggar-like people waiting for him, grasping on his legs and crying. They were Mort and Ruhr, messengers of the northbound convoy who had traveled far and hard. Of all the people in the group that had set off to find him, only those two had made it, the rest died along the way.

Lorist's eyes began to tear up. Ruhr had already been killed during the night attack he launched on Bread Hills by a ballista bolt. Mort on the other hand had followed him all this time, slowly training and breaking through the silver rank when he was part of Lorist's personal guard squad. Later, he was made a knight of the house and took on the position of the regiment leader of the guard brigade. Now, he was gone. He had died a heroic death and was willing to give his life to protect the secrets of the house's steel ballistae.

Supervisor Hansk continued, "All the guards and local defense brigade soldiers died after a long and grueling battle. Right at the most crucial moment, Knight Josk rushed down from the ridge and began firing, causing the enemy to flee once again. Only then did the remaining people manage to go up to Swordfish Ridge. With 20 ballistae and Sir Josk's marksmanship defending the routes uphill, we felt a lot safer.

"On the next day, the enemy didn't attack Swordfish Ridge. But flames of chaos still burned bright across the island. From the ridge, we were able to see the enemy force the various villagers to move to Whitebird Town. Cries of pain and despair filled the

surroundings and from time to time, some older villagers were dragged out of the group and beheaded. Angry as we were, there was nothing we could do about it.

"When midnight came, Sir Senbaud brought his fleet and arrived at the small bay. He got up to Swordfish Ridge and met up with us. After understanding the situation, he asked us to board his ships quickly, saying that the enemy was busy with raiding and wouldn't care about Swordfish Ridge. Swordfish Ridge wasn't built to be a citadel, there was no way we could defend that place in the long run. When the enemy sent another group of fighters to attack us from the bay and the foot of the hill, we would not be able to escape.

"Thus, we began our evacuation immediately, prioritizing the women, children, and the injured soldiers. After that, Knight Josk brought some guards and the 20 ballistae aboard the ships. However, we had delayed for too long and by the time everyone got on board, the sky was already brightening. The enemy realized where we were and instantly signaled the rest with their horn. It didn't take long for the enemy to send a fleet after us.

"Luckily they weren't properly prepared. The first batch of ten or so ships didn't have enough crew members, so they were quickly exterminated. Sir Senbaud and Knight Josk even managed to nab two large-class armed vessels. But 40 more enemy ships were spotted in the distance. Sir Senbaud's fleet had also suffered some casualties from the previous battle, and two of those ships were full of people, causing their speed to be rather low.

"So, Sir Senbaud and Sir Josk decided to pick ten of the armed ships in the best condition to launch a counterattack by mobilizing all the marines, guards, and local defense brigade soldiers from the rear. They managed to wipe out five of the enemy ships closest to our tail and tangled along with the remaining ones until the evening, when the enemy finally retreated.

When Sir Senbaud and Knight Josk finally returned, they questioned one of the captive sailors and found that the ones who had attacked the island were in fact slavers and slave traders from the Hanayabarta kingdom. Those captives said that the operation involved almost all the slaver nobles and slave traders of the kingdom. Their naval force already included more than 400 ships, 30 thousand people, and seven blademasters. This was nothing short of a full-scale invasion."

Supervisor Hansk brought out a thick beastskin document stack and said, "Milord,

here are the records of the captive interrogations.

Lorist flipped the records and said, "Heed my orders!"

Howard stepped inside and said, "Milord…"

"Have the guards erect crucifixes on the coastlines and nail the captives to them," said Lorist in a light voice, sealing the tragic fates of the captive sailors of the Hanayabarta kingdom.

"Ugh…" The ones present in the tent gasped with terror. Being hung was a far more pleasant way to die than being nailed to a crucifix. After all, one would only die when all the blood drained from one's body after a long time.

"Milord," mused Hansk in an attempt to advise against that.

"Stop it, my decision is final," Lorist said as he waved his hand, "They are the accomplices of the slavers and slave traders. They are far worse than the likes of pirates! They treat people as commodities and don't value human life at all. My only regret is that there isn't a crueler method I can use to put them to death! Howard, what are you doing still standing there?!"

"Yes, Milord, I will pass the order on now!" said Howard before he hurriedly left.

Standing up once again, Lorist stepped forward to Senbaud and said, "You did well, incredibly well… Far beyond my expectations. Senbaud, let me ask you… Are you willing to become one of the House of the Raging Bear?"

Stunned, Senbaud quickly snapped out of it and kneeled down on one knee, saying, "Milord, it is my pleasure."

"Senbaud, are you willing to heed the tune of the Raging Bear's horn and fight to your death for it?"

"I am willing!"

"Senbaud, are you willing to begin your conquest under the banner of the Raging Bear, never to stop, never to falter, until either you are successful, or all life is drained from your body?"

"I am willing!"

"Senbaud, are you willing to stand proud bearing the crest of the Raging Bear to the end of your life, even in death?"

"I am willing!" shouted Senbaud loudly.

Lorist drew his longsword and patted on both of Senbaud's shoulders.

"Stand tall, my knight. You have won the trust of House Norton with your courage, bravery, and loyalty. I welcome you, my brother."

After Lorist gave Senbaud a tight hug, the other knights in the tent came forward to do the same. The last one to do so was Potterfang.

"I welcome you, my brother," said Potterfang as he pinned the golden badge of the Raging Bear to Senbaud's chest.

"Senbaud, how many ships are left in your fleet?" asked Lorist, having taken his seat after the knighting ceremony.

"Milord, we have eleven ships that are still in good condition. Thirteen others require some repairs. Eight of them are only slightly damaged, but the other five will need more time."

Senbaud's second fleet had 29 ships originally. During the rescue operation, he lost seven ships but managed to take two of the enemy's, making the current count 24.

"Fix them up as soon as possible. In three days, Potterfang will bring his troops to Silowas. We will need some transport ships for them. Also, have your marines rest as soon as possible. The uninjured will have to man the ships when we depart," said Lorist, furrowing his brow.

The Oceanic Legion had suffered heavy losses, more than half of their forces. Currently, the numbers of the marines were incredibly low. He had no choice but to redeploy them in another three days even though they had just survived a grueling battle.

"Milord, I will gladly march into battle!" exclaimed Senbaud as he stood up.

"We will march into battle too, Milord!" cried out the other knights within the tent as

they stood in solidarity.

Chapter 267
The Wait

The ships' sails gradually disappeared beyond the horizons. Not even the slightest trace of them was left behind.

The reinforcements sent to Silowas this time numbered only three brigades, a total of 9 thousand men. There weren't enough functioning ships to send any more. Had it not been for the inclusion of the eight additional ships from the whaling fleet, Senbaud would only have been able to ferry just 4 thousand people, even with the use of the two new large-class long-distance armed ships completed by the shipyards recently.

Lorist had originally intended to lead the reinforcements personally, but Potterfang and the others convinced him to remain on the mainland.

"As your knight, I can't allow you to lead the charge every single time while we, the subjects of the house, sit back and reap the benefits. That would become a mark of shame for we household knights.

"Other than that, given the demeanor of the slavers and slave traders of the Hanayabarta kingdom, they might not stay on Silowas for long. They might be gone by the time we arrive. I can't have milord waste your time on a trip for nothing. It's better if you stay here and wait for our report while you tend to other matters of the house. Leaving the dominion that often will put a lot of delays in our plans."

While Potterfang sounded incredibly troubled when he voiced his concerns, Lorist understood them completely. The dominion would be far more stable with Lorist present. If he left the dominion that frequently, the other three allied families might plot something behind his back. At the end of the previous year, in the annual general meeting, Potterfang and Spiel had taken his place. It would do him no good if he were to miss this year's meeting.

As for Lorist's concern about the threat to the island, Potterfang smiled and said, "There won't be a big deal. The surviving local defense brigade soldiers and guards reported that most of the enemy are but an unruly bunch of fighters. The only thing we have to worry about is their blademasters. We will be bringing two heavy-armored

brigades and one wheelbarrow-ballista brigade. Even blademasters wouldn't dare to charge head-on into our formation.

"I think that if not much of the enemy is left on the island, or if all of them have departed, the three brigades will only have to deal with cleaning up the aftermath there. If the enemy is still there, I will set up a stronghold and wait for further reinforcements from the house. Given the speed of the Flying Fish of Dawn, it wouldn't take you more than ten days to travel over here."

Five gold-ranked knights were participating in the reinforcement operation. Apart from Potterfang, Josk and Senbaud, the battle-hungry Loze, and Yuriy, who had just recently broken through to the gold rank, were joining in. Other than that, Tarkel, who was placed in charge of the formation of Furybear, and Els, were sent on a special mission there.

The order Lorist gave Els and Tarkel was to head to Morante if the island was occupied. From there they would disguise themselves as members of the Peterson Merchant Guild and investigate where the captives taken from the island had been taken. Once this was known, they had to find a way to rescue the house's officers and knights. Foremost among the people they had to locate was Charade and his companions. On par with his importance, was the aim of investigating the military might of the kingdom, including the statuses of the slaver nobles and their slave traders.

The ocean breeze carried with it a salty smell. Bullhorn Bay had two curved cliffs that flanked the bay on both sides. As a result, the waters of the bay were calm regardless of how strong the winds outside of the bay were blowing. A lighthouse was going to be constructed at one of those cliffs so that sailors would be able to make their way to the bay without getting lost.

Lorist stood on the cliff to watch over the fleet as they departed. He also wanted to find a suitable spot for the lighthouse's construction. If he could, he wanted to have an artillery emplacement built that could watch over the bay. If this could be achieved, then the city had nothing to fear from the sea, and Bullhorn Bay would be a safe harbor for the dominion.

Once the fleet was out of sight, Lorist walked into the deeper part of the cliff and overlooked the city and the bay.

It was getting busier by the day. Laborers scurried like ants all over the place. The

house's defeat at Silowas didn't hamper the city's development. The 700 or so residents of Whitebird Town who had been evacuated were arranged to stay there. For the past two months, Lorist could hear the cries, ringing out like cracked bells, of the refugees as they mourned their loved and lost.

On the other side of the bay, a shipyard was gradually being constructed. From the top of the cliff, five ship keels could be seen laid out on the empty space in the shipyard. Countless laborers swarmed around them like ants around a carcass. In a few more months, those five ships would be completed and added to the house's new naval arsenal.

At the port near the shipyard was a ship similar to the Flying Ship of Dawn, save for her larger size. It was the house's new large-class three-masted warship, the Windstorm. A hundred and twenty-eight of the house's elitist marines were selected and allowed to familiarize themselves with the ship. By the time Senbaud returned from his current voyage, the Windstorm would be mounted with 24 bronze cannons. She would be an invincible warship, raining death and destruction down on her foes much like the disaster she was named after.

"Malek," Lorist said, "This time around, I would like to pick out half of the experienced veterans from your carroballista division and draft them into the wheelbarrow-ballista division to hasten its formation. I would like to station the wheelbarrow-ballista division at Silowas for now."

Malek though in expressionless silence for a while before answering, "Milord, may I suggest something?"

"Go ahead," said Lorist.

He didn't expect the renowned 'Iron-faced' Malek to have anything to say about his decision.

"Milord, I know that you are really close to Dulles, but I feel that you have given him too heavy a burden. He follows you around all the time. It isn't good for his training," Malek said with some hesitance, "Dulles has already served as the vice commander of the carroballista division. He was my subordinate for quite some time and I know him quite well. I've even dueled with him before, he's rather talented. He's been at the three-star silver rank for too long now. It's been three years since he's shown any progress with his training. What he needs is time to focus on his training. He won't be

able to break through into the gold rank otherwise.

"Milord, I understand your reasoning for expanding the wheelbarrow-ballista division. There is no way that you will let the slavers and traders of the Hanayabarta kingdom off. The day the wheelbarrow-ballista division is completely formed is the day you set out on an expedition to the kingdom. I hope that you will allow me to take Dulles's place as the division's commander.

"I believe this will be a win-win for the both of us. The carrobalista division is primarily responsible for the defense of the dominion. The Northlands have been firmly under our control and that of our allies for several years now. Everything here is peaceful and the division doesn't have much to do. I seriously doubt we'll see any turmoil or conflict for at least the next decade. Let Dulles become the carroballista division's commander so he can use this rare time of peace to raise his personal strength."

"Pffft!"

Lorist had to use all his might to contain his laughter, even so, a giggle or two still escaped.

Malek, aren't you just impatient for some glory? It is true that the carroballista division doesn't get involved in any combat anymore.

Despite his suspicions, Lorist had to admit that Malek's excuse had some sense to it. Dulles did indeed require a good amount of time to break through to the gold rank. If he managed to further his training, nobody would be able to accuse Lorist of favoritism for prioritizing Dulles so frequently.

"Why would you think that I had the intention of going on an expedition against the kingdom?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, we are the Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands. The house has never had an instance when we stayed quiet and endured a slap in the face by anyone. Given my understanding of your personality, Milord, you're not the type to keep quiet and swallow your anger. You would definitely take your vengeance. And given the way you executed the kingdom's captive sailors, I shudder to imagine how much more cruel your vengeance on the rest of the kingdom will be," replied Malek.

"Ugh…" *Even if you put it that way, you're basically calling me ruthless and petty, aren't*

you?

Lorist furrowed his brow in thought. He decided to ignore the off-handed remark Malek had just made. He understood Malek's demeanor well. The man was incredibly straightforward and would say whatever was on his mind, regardless of the topic or the company.

"Well, Malek, actually, I had my reasons for making you the commander of the carroballista division. The house only has a few gold-ranked knights. Even though recently, Terman, Yuriy, and Senbaud have joined their ranks, I still feel that it's not enough. Making you the commander of the carroballista division was my way of using your reputation as a gold-ranked knight to bolster their morale and warn others not to look down on our forces," explained Lorist.

"Milord, Redriver and Salus are already stationed with Fiercetiger Loze's two spear cavalry divisions. Right behind them is Firmrock Castle, which is defended at the front and back by a regiment of garrison soldiers. Paulobins's first local defense brigade is also garrisoned in the castle. We even have the first police brigade in charge of guarding the warehouses. Coupled with Terman's knight brigade, I doubt there are any that would look down on our forces.

"The carroballista division's existence has also been kept secret from the outside world; only the three allied houses of the Northlands know of them. Milord, if you allow me to switch places with Dulles, that would also provide enough stimulation to him. He would come to understand that if he doesn't advance in his training, he wouldn't be able to be of aid to you nearly as much. It will prompt him to train even harder."

Very well, Malek, since you want to switch so badly that you'd give me such a far-fetched reason, I guess I have no choice but to yield.

Smiling, Lorist said, "Fine, Malek. You have thoroughly convinced me. After the incident on Silowas concludes, I will have Dulles transfer back and you will take his place as the commander of the wheelbarrow-ballista division. Make sure to transfer the veterans of the carroballista division there, but don't make it so that the might of the carroballista division falls drastically as a result."

"Yes, I understand, Milord. Thank you," said Malek as he saluted.

After getting down from the cliff, Lorist brought Howard and a squad of guards to the valley at the blade-edge mountains where Professor Balbo's gunpowder research lab was located. Before they even arrived, they could hear booming sounds in the distance.

Professor Balbo rushed towards Lorist as he entered the valley.

His face flushed, he yelled, "Lord Count, I can't stand this! Either you hold the cannon training somewhere else, or move my lab!"

Ack…

This was one of the things Lorist had overlooked. At first, he thought that testing gunpowder near the lab was a logical arrangement. But the operation training for the cannoneers held there caused the whole valley to be graced with the thunderous sounds all day long.

"Alright! I'll have them move to another place!" yelled Lorist in reply.

Nobody would be able to hear what he said if he spoke normally.

He gestured to Howard to order the cannoneers to stop their training before doing anything else.

After a long while, the booming sounds quelled one after another. All that was left in the air was the pungent smell of gunpowder.

Grandmaster Sid brought Grandmaster Julian with him from the training field. The two of them were wearing masks and earmuffs.

"Milord, you're here," mumbled Sid as he removed his muff, "It's too quiet in here. I'm already used to hearing the booms nonstop."

"The two of you are insane!" yelled Professor Balbo loudly.

"Hahahaha…" laughed both the grandmasters.

"Milord, the 36 cannons completed in the last batch have just passed the tests. We're already letting the newly-recruited cannoneers train with them. Grandmaster Sid has installed sights on the bronze cannons, so the cannoneers are able to learn to use them

pretty quickly. They are able to hit six times out of ten now," reported Julian.

"Thank you for your hard work, gentlemen," Lorist thanked, before he asked, "Have you finished the recoil-absorbing mounts I've asked you to make? These cannons will be installed on ships, not land, so we will need something stable to mount them on."

Sid replied, "Milord, we have tried making something like that, but they're not the ones you designed that used steel springs. We tried to make them using springs at first, only to fail a lot of times. In the end, Grandmaster Fellin felt that we could use the super ballista's leather suspender and managed to achieve the same effect with the cannons. We were just testing them now, and the preliminary results seem promising. The cannons don't seem to have moved much from their original position."

"Very well, have 24 of those cannons fitted with the recoil-absorbing mounts for now and ship them to Bullhorn Bay to be installed on the Windstorm. Our cannoneers can train on board over there. Additionally, the other 12 bronze cannons will have to be moved somewhere else so as to not bother Professor Balbo here," said Lorist.

"Oh, and, Milord… There's another issue. While the cannoneers can shoot well on land, the ship motions at sea might render their accuracy useless. By then, they might even hit less than once in ten times. That's why the cannoneers believe that their accuracy training now won't be of any use at sea. Do you have any thoughts on that?" asked Sid.

"Oh? That's simple," said Lorist. He had watched a movie in his past life about the Russian navy during the times of the Tsar. He recalled how the cannoneers were trained in the movie and said, "Choose somewhere near the ocean and set up a few swing-like contraptions near the coast. The platforms of the swings will be where the cannons are mounted, which will also be roughly as large as what a normal cannon station on a ship would be. After that, have a few wooden boxes or small boats drift several hundreds of meters away from the swings on the water. Those will be the targets for the cannons. Before firing the cannons, make sure the swing is swaying so that the ship motions at sea can be more or less simulated. That will solve the uncertainty the cannoneers have and also greatly improve their accuracy."

The next fortnight saw Lorist busy with the cannoneers of the Windstorm's training as well as the other duties he had as the lord of the house. After that, he had to wait impatiently for Potterfang's report on the island.

On the other hand, there was good news from the northlands as well. Old man Balk

had buried himself in the paper workshop for a whole month and finally managed to come up with paper that was pure white. Lorist rewarded the ones involved in the research greatly and ordered Balk to streamline the production process. For instance, they could use the waste products of the paper's production to make toilet paper. Additionally, a new paper workshop would be built for the paper to be made into different derivative products, such as folders, notebooks, drawing canvases, and so on, for sale.

Apart from the breakthrough in papermaking techniques, Master Mancheny of the glass production plant also introduced two new products. The first was a gold-framed magnifying glass with a golden handle that was also engraved with intricate patterns. It gave off an air of magnificent luxury. Needless to say, this was the craftsmanship of the old silversmith.

The second product was a transparent tea-set made from oil glass. After rewarding the old master greatly, Lorist made it known that while the transparent wares looked incredibly elegant, the rich and powerful might not necessarily fancy them. But should they be adorned with golden engravings, they would definitely be able to sell for much, much more. Looking inspired, Master Mancheny dashed off to continue his work immediately.

After one week, just as Lorist was about to stare a hole through his telescope, the Flying Fish of Dawn appeared on the horizon as it sailed towards Bullhorn Bay.

Chapter 268
The Terrible State of Silowas

"We're back, Milord," said Fiercetiger Loze as he stood in front of Lorist with Yuriy.

Lorist breathed a sigh of relief and felt his emotions calm down. Loze and Yuriy's return signified that the enemy had already retreated from Silowas. While no enemies were there to fight it out with Potterfang's forces, they had still achieved their goal: the raiding of the island and the capture of the residents. The sight on Silowas was horrible beyond description.

"Tell me, how's the situation of the island now?" asked Lorist after taking a deep breath.

Loze and Yuriy's expressions soured at the mention.

Yuriy stammered, "Milord, it… it's horrible. The slavers from the Hanayabarta kingdom are not human; they're nothing but a bunch of lowly animals! The islanders aged over 50 were killed. Even children under ten years old were not spared. I still remember seeing a few infants being impaled on stakes…"

Loze shook his head as if he wanted to forget the scene he had witnessed. "Silowas has become Grindia's hell. Whitebird Town itself has turned into a complete slaughtering ground. Those slave traders massacred all the elderly, injured, and sick systematically. The ground is so soaked with that it has turned pitch black. The previously flat ground has turned into rolling hills, built out of corpses…

"Everyone who saw what happened was maddened beyond belief. Right before we traveled back, the corpse count at the plaza was above 4000. Among them, Josk found the corpses of Mayor Hugo and Old Mike, the accountant."

Lorist clenched both his fists so tightly that his knuckles turned pale. During the civil war of the empire, Silowas managed to avoid any such catastrophe as it was situated quite far away from shore. So, many thought that it would be safe from the chaotic times and brought their families to the island, hoping that they would be able to spend the coming years in peace. Little did they know that while they did manage to evade

the miserable civil war, they couldn't escape the claws of the slave traders that came from the sea.

"Milord, we found Whitebird Town's security officer, Kriston, with fifty people in an abandoned waterway. They avoided capture by hiding there. Other than that, when we attacked Seaview Manor, we found Grandmaster Sid's eldest son, Delokua, and his partners imprisoned. After seeing chaos break out in the midst of foraging, they hurriedly returned only to be captured by the slave-capturing troupes," reported Yuriy.

"Wait," mused Lorist, *Attacking Seaview Manor?* "There were still enemies on the island when you arrived?"

"That's right, milord. We even managed to take over 14 ships, two of which were large-class armed merchant vessels," Loze said.

"When we arrived at Silowas, the sunlight of dawn allowed us to discover that there were 14 ships still anchored at the coasts of the island. Senbaud ordered us to approach them only to find they were unmanned, despite being stuffed to the brim with cargo. We managed to capture around a hundred sailors at some houses nearby.

"According to them, there were roughly a thousand of them left on the island, mostly slavers and sailors from the kingdom who had stayed behind with the intention of taking as much stuff as they could," added Yuriy.

"So there are more who weren't captured?" asked Lorist with joy at the very possibility of Charade and Jim still being safe.

However, what Yuriy said next shattered Lorist's hopes.

"Naturally, the security officer and the rest are examples of those. But by the time we rescued them, they had already been starving for a good number of days. Had it not been for a basement near the waterways that still had some old leather skins, they wouldn't have been able to last for almost a month.

"The ones who escaped were mostly folk from the seven villages. The garrison leader from the village near the mountain brought half of the village folk with him into the mountains. But the elderly left behind had all been killed by the slavers and the village ended up being burnt down. The pursuit unit that followed also managed to capture more than a hundred other villagers who were later locked up at Seaview Manor.

"The captives said that the ones that led them were a blademaster and a gold-ranked knight. They were the subordinates of Duke Gouffman. They intended to defend Seaview Manor for ten more days before they headed back."

"A blademaster?" mused Lorist as his heart clenched.

While the gold-ranked knight and the duke called Gouffman was of little concern to him, being only the lowly slave owners they were, the presence of a blademaster on the island might inflict a lot of damage to the house. Should the blademaster choose to use hit-and-run tactics or ambushes, there would be a huge problem.

"How did Potterfang deal with the blademaster? Did the blademaster cause us any damage?" asked Lorist hurriedly.

Loze said in an annoyed tone, "That cowardly blademaster? He's completely useless! The moment Potterfang heard that around 500 enemy fighters were holed up in Seaview Manor, he sent a regiment of heavy-armored soldiers and another regiment of wheelbarrow-ballista troops over there with the intention of luring the blademaster out. However, the gold-ranked knight and blademaster actually decided against coming out for a fight and would rather stay turtled up in the manor.

In the end, we had no choice but to force our way in. With the manor breached, the blademaster had no choice but to come out and negotiate, and that he did. He asked to be spared and be given two ships with which to leave the island in return for his surrender. We requested that they surrender immediately, but the blademaster actually threatened to unleash a killing spree if we didn't release him.

In the end, 300 wheelbarrow-ballista fired a volley of bolts with but a single wave from Potterfang. The useless idiot got struck on the right thigh with an iron bolt and was no longer in fighting condition. He even fell to the ground and cried for his parents. The gold-ranked knight, on the other hand, managed to resist for quite a while with his men but we captured him in the end. The 200 or so enemies that survived surrendered to us as well."

Lorist asked in a gleeful tone, "Were the blademaster and gold-ranked knight captured alive?"

"Yes, Milord," Loze said as he nodded, "We have successfully recaptured Seaview Manor and rescued the 300 or more captured villagers in the process. They include

the guards that accompanied Delokua. Unfortunately, only three of the ten are still alive.

"Potterfang also ordered his troops to conduct a sweep across the entire island to capture the remaining slavers and sailors. They managed to rescue around 200 more villagers in the process as well.

"According to the survivors, Charade and Jim were captured and taken away by the slavers…"

Lorist slumped back into his seat powerlessly and thumped weakly on the table with his fist.

After a good while, he raised his head and asked, "Did the survivors say how the captives were brought away?"

Loze thought for a bit before he said, "Those survivors said that Charade and Jim brought more than 20 guards in a hurry to rush to the refugee camp and had the people in charge arm the refugees with whatever weapons they could find. The rest that didn't have any were given farming tools or even wooden sticks. The kingdom's forces arrived just as everyone was running around panicked and confused. The refugee camp was their main target.

"Charade and Jim thus resisted stubbornly along with their 20 or so guards, half of whom were killed. In the end, a blademaster arrived and managed to defeat and capture them. Without anyone to lead them, the refugees lost control and many of them were killed by the slavers, around 1000 or 2000. In the end, the ones who surrendered were spared."

Sighing, Lorist asked, "How many of Silowas's residents managed to evade capture?"

Yuriy replied, "We are not certain ourselves, but we estimate around 700 of them. After the situation stabilized on the island, Potterfang sent us back here to make a report to you, as well as escort the captured blademaster and gold-ranked knight for your disposal. As for the remaining captives we have… Well, the state of the island was so bad that we had to find a way to vent our rage. So, after a short customary trial, we ordered the troops to erect crucifixes on the southern coast and nailed the captives up on them like you did with the others here."

The crucifixion of more than a thousand captives on Potterfang order, who was

normally able to keep his emotions in check, was a testament to the tragic state of Silowas. It was so bad that even the soldiers of the house obeyed such a cruel order willingly.

"Also, Milord, Potterfang, and the rest requested for an urgent resupply of medicinal powders and ointments and preparations to begin immediate disease prevention on Silowas. Those darned slavers actually didn't even bother to collect the corpses of their own. The island is littered with corpses and the hot weather will only accelerate their decay," reminded Yuriy the moment he recalled.

"Howard…"

"Milord, please speak your will," said Howard as he stepped forward.

Lorist drafted a written order quickly and said, "Send someone to the healthcare department at Firmrock castle and order them to prepare large amounts of preventative medication. Send a few herbalists to Silowas as well. Tell them they only have three days to prepare before they leave with the Flying Fish of Dawn. The herbalists and medicines must be ready by then."

"Yes, Milord. I will have a guard pass your order on immediately," said Howard before he rushed out and left on horseback.

"Milord, what do we do next?" asked Yuriy.

"When's Senbaud's fleet returning?"

"It should take another ten or so days. He will be bringing back the survivors and villagers we rescued. Perhaps, he's already on his way," guessed Yuriy.

"Alright. By the time he gets back, it should already be the end of the 7th month. I hope that his fleet can make a few more trips during the 8th month to bring the heavy-armored division and wheelbarrow-ballista division forces to Silowas. After that will be the transportation of Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade. Yuriy, have your light cavalry scout brigade prepare to leave for Silowas with the Thunderbolt Brigade as well," said Lorist.

Loze's eyes shone the moment he heard that "Milord, are we going on an expedition against the Hanayabarta kingdom? I want to go too…"

Since Loze had already guessed his intentions, Lorist no longer felt the need to hide them.

"House Norton has always retaliated when it was slighted. This time's no exception either. We will not stay quiet and swallow our anger. What we will do is exterminate the Hanayabarta kingdom. But Loze, you cannot go this time and must stay back to defend the dominion."

"But Milord, there are lots of people here. Malek, Terman, Belnick… All of them can do that…" complained Loze as he brought up his three other comrades.

"Well, you were just one step slower. Malek had already talked me into letting him join. He will replace Dulles as the commander of the wheelbarrow-ballista division," said Lorist with a smile.

"Ugh, Milord… How about Freiyar? By the time you leave, Freiyar's injuries will have recovered already. You can have him defend the dominion. Also, I'm not going to bring the spear cavalry division there. I only need to follow you, as your personal bodyguard. Also, you understand my training style. Only by fighting against high-tier enemies will I be able to improve. Currently, apart from me, what other gold-ranked knight can stand against rank 1 blademasters? I heard that the Hanayabarta kingdom has more than ten blademasters, so I'll be much more useful over there…"

For the sake of going with Lorist on the expedition, Loze was willing to bring up all sorts of ridiculous excuses. Behind him, Yuriy secretly cheered at the fact that he had already been appointed by Lorist to mobilize with his light cavalry scout brigade.

He interjected, "Brother Loze, don't forget your duties. You're the commander of two spear cavalry divisions. How can you leave them behind just like that?"

Loze glared at him hatefully and said, "No worries, the vice commander, Knight Waxima, is extremely capable. It makes no difference whether I'm there or not."

He turned back to plead with Lorist. "Milord…"

Gah, what a headache, Lorist waved his hand and said, "Fine. As long as you organize the matters concerning your spear cavalry divisions first, I will consider letting you come along."

After hearing what basically amounted to an agreement, Loze hugged Yuriy excitedly

and spun around in joy. "Yaaay!"

Yuriy cursed and gave him two kicks, which Loze didn't mind at all.

Loze thought of something and said, "Oh, milord, if we are going to attack the Hanayabarta kingdom, we'll need more ships. If we don't send all our troops in one go, the battle will be a tough one."

Lorist nodded and said, "I've already thought of that. This time around, Els and Tarkel will both head to Morante. One of their missions is borrowing ships from the Peterson Merchant Guild. We'll also ask them to purchase some used ships in our name. Also, when the Flying Fish of Dawn returns, I'll follow along and go to the Sea of Grief to expropriate a few more before we leave."

I have no choice but to resort to expropriation again.

Loze exclaimed with joy, "Milord, I want to go along with you when you expropriate the ships!"

Yuriy said with dissatisfaction, "Milord, don't bother with Loze… the pervert. He actually hugged a man like me as he would a woman! It's better if I go along with you for the expropriation."

"Enough. Expropriating ships is not exactly something we should be proud of. Stop grumbling about trivial matters all day long. It's not like we're in that much of a rush. The Flying Fish of Dawn must first transport the herbalists and medicinal supplies to Silowas, and it'll take at least three weeks before it returns. I must first go back to Firmrock castle as I already have an appointment with our three allied houses. Only after dealing with that can we head for the Hanayabarta kingdom. You guys have only just gotten back, so rest for a day or two and deal with the other matters you have first. Oh, and, don't tell anybody about the expedition. I don't intend to make it known publically for now."

"Yes, Milord," said Loze and Yuriy before they saluted and left.

They returned a few moments later, however.

"Milord, the gold-ranked knight and the blademaster we captured haven't been dealt with yet," said Yuriy.

"That's right. Also, Yuriy, have someone bring the interrogation logs we recorded on the way back," reminded Loze.

"You have records of the interrogations?" asked Lorist.

"Yes, Milord. We had nothing better to do on the way back, so we went ahead and interrogated them. We were so thorough that we even know about the time when that blademaster caught his parents mating in bed," replied Loze.

Lorist could imagine how horrible the two prisoners had been treated by his subordinates, and he couldn't keep himself from laughing as a result. It was obvious from the fact that even something that personal was dug up that the two prisoners didn't bother to hide anything.

"Since there are records, there's no point for me to meet them. Treat them like the sailors before. Nail them on the crucifixes," instructed Lorist calmly.

Both Yuriy and Loze were shocked.

"Milord, that's a blademaster and a gold-ranked knight! The blademaster even says that he'll be willing to serve the house if his life is spared…" stammered Yuriy.

"Hehe, thanks, but no thanks. House Norton doesn't need animals like them who don't see humans as their own kind. He's someone who's able to cut down innocents without any hesitation. So what if he's a blademaster? All our troops are true and just. Letting an animal like that serve among their ranks is nothing but an insult to our heroic knights and soldiers! Have the two nailed on the crucifixes!"

The scorn which Lorist had for the knight and the blademaster made Yuriy and Loze's eyes glow with pride.

"Yes, milord!" shouted the two of them in unison.

Chapter 269
The First Household Blademaster

A large, polished plate hung amidst the dark blue veils of the night sky. Its silvery light seeped into the realms of man. Despite the time, Lorist stood on the veranda and cast his gaze on the cities in the valley below. The things that troubled him was carried away by the night's gentle breeze and tranquility ruled.

It's been seven years, huh… Time really flies. Back then, when the northbound convoy was first formed at the academy, I never would've imagined that a day like this would come. Thanks to my efforts, and those of my comrades, our little rural dominion has changed, radically so. Even the lands that used to be desolate, devoid of life, and uninhabitable have become havens for our people.

Lorist could no longer recall every single setback he experienced during the course of his journey. He only knew that the enemies he faced now were growing in might. The second prince was naught but an incompetent king. He had allowed his army, 100 thousand men, to crumble into dust. Even his assassination attempt with the blademaster had failed and, in return, Lorist had conquered his capital, Frederika. He got himself captured by the enemy and executed.

Now, however, Lorist was going up against an entire kingdom by himself. Even though it was a kingdom of pirates, it had already spent the last century developing into a strong nation on its slave trade and labor. It had its own armies as well as countless ruthless slavers. Working together, they were not a force to be underestimated.

Lorist read the interrogation reports. They revealed that the attack on Silowas had been launched with the combined forces of the entire kingdom. More than 80 slaver bands, the smaller of which were around a hundred men large and the larger over 500. The total force stretched into 24 thousand. Five hundred ships had to be used to transport them to the island.

The kingdom targeted the island because they had learned about the 60 thousand laborers recently moved to it. According to the blademaster's report, they had even sent agents disguised as smugglers to the island to confirm the information.

Despite their preparations, they had still underestimated the power of the island's forces. When they finally conquered the island, they tallied 80 ships and close to 10 thousand combatants as losses. Some of the slaver bands regretted taking part in the operation despite the massive haul. Even with the haul being what it was they had lost more than they would gain. The loot would have to be divided amongst the nobility, and the smaller bands would get only the scraps that remain thereafter. Their masters were bound to be very stingy as well, they had taken severe losses themselves and no doubt felt they ought to be compensated accordingly.

For instance, the captive blademaster's master, Duke Gouffman, was a well-known slaver in the kingdom. He had sent five slaver bands, around two thousand men, on the operation. The battles they fought on the ocean, even before reaching the island, had cost him 2 of his ships. The assault on the island and subsequent battles cost them another two bands. At the end of it all, they only had a thousand men left.

In return they had only captured 4 thousand slaves, it was far from equalling their losses. It was for this reason the blademaster had decided to remain on the island with his men a little longer. They wanted to see if they could catch any more slaves. Unfortunately for him, Potterfang's reinforcements came later and not one of them were able to return alive.

"Milord," called Howard softly.

"Finished with your night classes?" Lorist asked without turning around.

"Yes, Milord."

"Very well, go get some rest and leave me be. The three families will be visiting tomorrow. I wonder if Baron Felim will bring his precious daughter along with him this time? If he does, I'll give you three days of vacation so you can take your fiancee on a few dates."

"Milord!" yelled Howard with a flushed face.

"Hehe," Lorist chuckled, "Oh, do me a favor and get the kitchen staff to cook me something. Also, bring me a bottle of wine from the study. You may head to bed after that."

"Understood, Milord."

Howard carried out the instructions rather quickly, as he returned with two servants to the veranda after a few minutes. The servants laid down the table and chairs before serving the dishes. Perhaps in an attempt to get back at Lorist's teasing, Howard had asked the kitchen staff to serve him a huge smoked goose.

The night's scenery was awe-inspiring, but Lorist couldn't help but feel that the gigantic smoked goose in front of him ruined the harmony of his small supper. No matter how hard he tried not to, he still found the thought of biting away at oily, smoked goose to be rather ill-fit for such a great night.

"You little bastard…" complained Lorist.

In the end, he didn't touch the goose at all. He poured himself a cup of fruit wine and continued to admire the sight across the veranda as he went through one piece of information after another concerning Hanayabarta in his mind instead.

The Hanayabarta archipelago was located to the southwest of Silowas. A middle-class merchant vessel would take 11 days to make its way from Silowas to the archipelago, but the Flying Fish of Dawn only required around 8.

The archipelago looked like an octopus that had its teeth bared and flailed its tentacles about. The name 'Hanayabarta' was, in fact, the name of a demonic octopus deity that loved to cause storms and winds at sea. Legend says that the demonic octopus deity had once stolen a precious ornament belonging to Sufanna, Goddess of the Bloodmoon. The Bloodmoon Goddess was enraged by that act and summoned her husband, Singwa, God of the Sun, War, and Light, and her sister Daphlyn, Goddess of the Silvermoon when the demonic octopus surfaced from the depth of the seas. The three heavenly beings turned the thieving octopus deity into the archipelago as punishment.

Many on the continent took the moral of the story to be: angered women are unpredictable. That was why angering a woman was not to be done under any circumstances, or the consequences would be dire. For instance, the octopus deity had thought that the worst he would suffer from the theft was a drawn-out battle with the Bloodmoon Goddess, but it didn't expect that he would be turned into an archipelago as a result.

The Hanayabarta archipelago was perceived as being rural and desolate, being so far from the continent of Grindia without any worthy export to their name. It was only

after the formation of the pirate kingdom did trade start to bustle at the archipelago, causing the opinions of the mainlanders about it to gradually change as well.

In terms of actual available area, the Hanayabarta archipelago was larger than the Norton dominion as a whole. However, most of the land available at the archipelago were long and narrow islands which did indeed look like octopus tentacles.

The kingdom had been formed more than 80 years earlier and had a population of around 500 thousand. Four hundred thousand of the population, however, were slaves. Perhaps the declining slaver population was their karma.

Even so, there were still geniuses amidst the wilderness. Lorist had learned that the second king had been one such person. Originally, the pirate kingdom was little more than an anarchic state where the strong were the law. The second king successfully turned that system into a hereditary one, firmly securing the position of the hegemon of his family for the coming years.

After he had been elected by his fellow pirates, he completely changed the raiding patterns of the pirates and enfeoffed the many islands of the archipelago to the pirate bosses as hereditary dominions. Additionally, he provided them with slave labor to cultivate their lands and recruited other common pirates into the royal family's forces, allowing them to spend their days without worry for food or shelter. Not only that, he also announced that he would no longer raid the coastal nations along the Golden Coast. Instead, he would make peace with them and establish trade. The development and expansion of the slave trade also helped to secure the kingdom's foundations.

It was considered fortunate to become a subject of the kingdom, but it was a fortune built on the blood and tears of slaves. The kingdom's subjects would not want for food and shelter. That was the birthright the second king left the pirates' descendants. However, if they wanted better lives, they had to serve as soldiers of the royal family or pick up a trade.

Hanayabarta had two standing armies. The first was the royal family's local defense army, which numbered 28 thousand people, and the second was the national patrol fleet, it had 24 large and middle-class ships to its name. The two units were under the direct control of the royal family. The other nobles of the kingdom were powerful slavers whose personal forces were the descendants of the pirates that had served with their founders. As for the slaver bands under their control, they consisted mostly of desperate deserters, mercenaries, and criminals.

Hanayabarta had two cities, the first was the royal capital of Hamidas, which was located on the central island of the archipelago, and the other was known as the largest hub in the world for the slave trade, Nupite.

While the nobles of the kingdom had residences at Hamidas, they were more accustomed to living at Nupite. It was, to them, nothing short of absolute paradise. They had their slaves construct luxurious estates and lived exuberant lives at the expense of their slaves.

Being a port city, Nupite was also a place where the various products imported from the mainland was available. It was a convenient location for the slaver nobles to instruct their slave traders and slaver bands from.

Lorist was rather confident that his forces were almost entirely unrivaled on the whole continent. This time around, he was prepared to deploy two of Potterfang's heavy-armored divisions, one wheelbarrow-carroballista division, Yuriy's light cavalry scout brigade, as well as Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade. Coupled with the two other personal guard regiments, his forces easily numbered 37 thousand. He believed that as long as his forces could make their way onto the islands, Hanayabarta would be exterminated. It might even be possible for him to single-handedly send all the slavers and slave traders on Grindia to the gallows.

Despite that, he was troubled to find a way to move his 37 thousand troops onto the central island without raising any alarms. The maps showed the archipelago's coasts to be straight. In other words, Nupite was in the deepest reaches of a bay that was shielded by a few long island stretches that acted as natural barriers.

Were the islands uninhabited, there would be no problem. Lorist could easily conquer them impose a blockade. However, the islands were the hereditary dominions of the slaver nobles and there was no doubt that they stationed many of their own there. The moment Lorist's ships were in sight, one signal fire after another would be lit and word of their presence would quickly spread to the city. The pirates would have time to form up and set sail, and chaos would no doubt follow.

So far, the best course of action was to transport those who would be deployed to Silowas to make preparations for the expedition. When Els and Tarkel sent back more information about the kingdom's defenses, the expedition could begin. Once most of the soldiers made it to the shores of the kingdom, they could teach the inhuman scum a lesson they could never forget.

Lorist revealed an insidious snicker. He had resolved himself to not let the slavers that attacked the island off, especially the members of the slaver bands. They had committed too much evil and it was high time they felt the consequences of their actions. Lorist had already reaffirmed his decision to go on an expedition against Hanayabarta.

Their time of reckoning would come.

Hopefully, Els and Tarkel would be able to discover where Charade and Jim were being held. He hoped nothing unfortunate happened to them. Even if they had to serve as slaves for several months, as long as they survived, Lorist could rescue them.

Lorist sigh deeply before chucking down the rest of the yellowish wine. News of Charade's capture was still being kept under wraps. Not even his family knew. Lorist looked at the hill to the left of the castle. Two rows of 12 large houses stood there. The first house at the top belonged to Charade. Just recently, Charade's father had gone there to check on his beloved great grandchild and had yet to leave.

Sigh… How would I be willing to be the one to break the bad news to them?

All of a sudden, Lorist noticed the flash of a sword in the corner of his eye. He took a closer look. That was a strike only a blademaster could make!

Why would there be such a strike at Charade's backyard, especially in the middle of the night? Don't tell me the slavers have realized Charade's true identity and intend to take his family hostage to force him to work for them!

Feeling a little distressed, Lorist leaped from the veranda onto the castle walls like a monkey and sped to Charade's house immediately.

Everything seemed normal, however. All Lorist could hear were some soft murmurs along with the noises made by Charade's infant son.

Lorist crept to the backyard like a shadow, silently. He crept under the trees to evade the silver moonlight.

The swordlight could only have come from one person, the one training in the backyard. As the sword in his hand moved, it radiated an air of controlled and contained sword aura. Even though the blade glow arced through a wide space, not a single flower was disturbed.

The control, accuracy, and stability demonstrated by the sword-wielder were amazing, to say the least. Those were the things that differentiated a blademaster from a gold-ranked swordsman.

Lorist stepped out of the shadow of the tree.

The man raised his sword and yelled, "Who goes there?"

"It's me," said Lorist calmly.

"Ugh… Milord…" stammered the man before he sheathed his sword.

"Follow me," said Lorist, before he turned and left.

"Phew," breathed the sword-wielder in relief.

The beautiful night inspired me to start training out of nowhere, but I didn't think that Milord would be back already… It's been some time since I became a blademaster, and given that Milord has seen me train, he's definitely noticed. It's over… My days of freedom and relaxation are over… I can never spend my time with my beloved granddaughter anymore and will be ordered around by Milord to fight on one battlefield after another…

At the same time, Lorist thought, *Good Sol! How ridiculous can this get?! I didn't think that cowardly old man, the one willing to sell his daughter and even signed a contract to be my slave for ten years, would be the one to become a blademaster, and without anyone noticing at that! What kind of luck is this?!*

The sword-wielder was actually Engelich. Back when Lorist was traveling through Armatrin Harbor with the northbound convoy, he had gotten into conflict with the Sloph Slavers. Lorist had killed two of their gold-ranked swordsmen all by himself, but Engelich, a three-star gold rank, hadn't dared to fight him at all. Instead, he turned tail and ran, only to be caught anyway. Lorist had confiscated all his money and his battleforce manual and even had the old man hand in his beloved granddaughter and sign a ten-year slave contract before letting him off.

Back then, as Charade had been injured by Engelich and was bandaged up like a rice ball, Lorist had no choice but to make the old man's granddaughter Charade's maidservant. He didn't think that the two would be attracted to one another. Lorist had no choice but to go easy on the old man as a result. It would be unseemly for him to treat the father of his chief knight's lover as a slave.

When Lorist had returned to the convoy at Nadegas in the Andinaq kingdom to lead them back to the Northlands, he had to reward those who had contributions to the journey. He had intended to take the old man as one of his household gold-ranked knights, only to be refused by the latter who said that he was satisfied as long as he got to stay by his granddaughter's side. Charade had already impregnated his granddaughter around and even pledged to take her as his wife when he returned to the dominion.

In consideration of the harsh life, the old man had led and his wish to spend the remainder of his time in peace with his family, Lorist allowed the matter to be settled and didn't disturb Engelich. However, he hadn't expected that the old man would actually come to be the house's first blademaster.

There was no way Lorist could afford to leave him be. He had to utilize the old man as best he could. After all, he didn't have that good a relationship with Engelich, to begin with, given how the old man would tremble every time he met Lorist. Lorist was only troubled by how a man like Engelich had managed to reach the rank of blademaster.

When they were back at the veranda of the castle, Lorist sat in his chair and poured himself some wine, leaving Engelich standing before him obediently.

"Tell me, since for how long have you been a blademaster?"

"Mi… Milord, it has been… a year," stammered the old man in fear.

"Why did you not tell me about it?" asked Lorist lazily.

"Mi-milord, you-you were not present back then," said the old man.

His voice broke at every other word.

Lorist could not remember exactly when he was within the dominion and when he was away, so he couldn't really argue. However, he was still rather troubled.

"Why are you trembling like that? Am I really that scary? It's not like I would devour you alive. Also, you're already a blademaster now."

"I… I don't know why, but… I am always afraid when meeting you…"

"Well, Engelich, I guess we should get to the main point. Since you're a blademaster,

you ought to do your part for the house," said Lorist.

"Mi-milord… I pray that you let me be, given my age…" pleaded the old man.

"Bullshit! Don't think that I'm not aware that becoming a blademaster means you gain another 30 years of life. Your condition right now is comparable to a strong, healthy youth. I guess I can be honest with you and tell you that the house is not in that great of a position nowadays. In the near future, I will go on an expedition to Hanayabarta. Those darned slavers attacked our dominion, Silowas. Even your precious grandson-in-law has been captured by them."

"Milord, what did you say?" asked the old man with surprise, no longer looking as fearful as he did previously.

"That's one of the reasons why I will be leaving for Hanayabarta soon. I will definitely bring Charade back. Old man, you ought to play your part too. I need you to expropriate ships from the Sea of Grief for now. We still lack enough to transport all our troops there."

Now that the matter concerned the blissful life of his precious granddaughter, the old man no longer tried to push away his responsibilities.

"Alright, Milord. I will definitely make sure that you have the ships you need."

"Very well. Go back for now. I hope you can keep the matter about Charade a secret from his wife. I will notify you when the time comes," said Lorist.

"Understood, Milord," Engelich said before he turned around and headed to the stairs.

He paused at the door, however, and asked, "Oh, how many ships do you need exactly?"

"Well, try to get me around a hundred. But I'm not sure even that'll be enough," replied Lorist.

"What? You need that many?!" exclaimed the old man as he stepped forward, only to find that his leg was already beyond the step of the stairs.

The sound of a bag of meat rolling down an incline could be heard for a few moments afterward, accompanied by the occasional grunt.

Completely dumbfounded and shaking his head, Lorist mused, "For a person with a mindset like that, I wonder how he even managed to break through to become a blademaster…"

Chapter 270
Meeting of the Four Families

"Oh, Engelich, I thought hard about it for the whole night but I still don't have an answer…" Lorist sighed, "You should know that you're not an ambitious or victory-obsessed person, right? Your own survival is all that matters to you. Frankly, you're the kind that takes the path of least resistance. I find myself wondering how in the world you became a blademaster? Did you consume some kind of precious medicine?"

Lorist had called for Engelich to be brought to him early in the morning, mainly to give him something to do. He didn't feel it was okay to leave a blademaster free and unattended in the dominion. He also wanted an answer to the question he had been pondering the whole night.

Engelich smiled bitterly.

"Milord, I don't really know myself. To be honest, I was already a three-star gold rank by the time I submitted to you, but I encountered a bottleneck shortly after, and for years I couldn't progress no matter how hard I trained. I thought that I would stay like that for the rest of my life, so I didn't have any hopes of progressing any more.

"But after joining the convoy, I felt incredibly relaxed all of a sudden, as if I no longer had any burdens. I later came to understand that it was because Milord had eradicated the Sloph Slavers. I no longer had to work for others against my better conscience and it allowed me to cast off the burdens I carried with me. I was finally able to improve my circulation of battleforce, and it even became easier than before.

"Milord didn't send me on missions once we arrived at the dominion either, and instead allowed me to spend my time with my granddaughter and newborn great grandchild. The sight of my daughter becoming the mother of another fulfilled the last of my wishes and removed the last of my regrets. I have no more desires or unfulfilled goals in life, as long as I can spend my life in peace with my granddaughter and her child, I will be satisfied.

"The child grew to be rather rowdy last year, so I got him a wooden sword as a toy. I realized just how blissful my life is when I saw him swing the sword around in the

backyard and chase the butterflies. The realization gave me a profound insight. The blue of the sky appeared more striking than ever, and the fragrance of the flowers and plants seemed to be stronger and clearer than before. I could clearly discern every motion that occurred within a sphere that stretched out in all directions for ten meters…

"Fortunately, my observant granddaughter noticed that I had gotten some kind of insight and stopped our servants from entering our backyard. Every day, she would serve me my meals personally. I didn't feel anything particularly different about myself. I ate when I was hungry, drank when I was thirsty, and slept when I was bored, but I never left the courtyard - it had become my private universe, a world where I am completely free. I could even say that I was barely conscious of my own condition at the time.

"Later, my granddaughter told me that it was as if I had lost my soul during those three months. I was either tracing in the air or sitting on the ground like a statue. She said that I would not heed anyone's calls and repel her with the battleforce around my body when she tried to tug at me. She was so worried that she almost broke out in tears.

"Charade wasn't home either, so my poor little granddaughter had to deal with it all by herself. On the one hand, she was worried for my sake, and on the other, she had to take care of her child. I only regained my mind after three months and realized that I had broken through to become a blademaster. That lass was elated and had wanted to write a letter to Charade to inform him, but I stopped her because I didn't want to cause a commotion. Also, I didn't want people to come visit me out of nowhere."

Lorist finally understood that the old man had broken through not because of his swordsmanship, but thanks to his mental fortitude. That was why the moves demonstrated by Engelich after he broke through had so much control, precision, and stability - like the still water of a lake that would vibrate in a constant pattern the moment it was disturbed, seeping through every nook and cranny it could find. It was unlike other blademasters who had broken through thanks to their swordsmanship, which was reflected in the attributes of their battleforce. For instance, others would feel the chilling aura of a snowstorm when fighting against Lorist.

"I really didn't think that letting you be with your granddaughter would actually let you break through," Lorist mused, before he shamelessly claimed credit for Engelich's breakthrough, saying, "You should thank me, Engelich. It was I who had exterminated the slaver band and forced you into servitude. Had you not experienced all that, you

would've died as a three-star gold rank."

"Yes, yes… It's all thanks to you, Milord. Thank you so much," said Engelich hurriedly.

Even after becoming a blademaster, he still felt like he was treading on thin ice when standing in front of Lorist. He found his bone-deep fear of his lord very curious.

"That's enough. Come over and take this," said Lorist.

He took a small box out of a drawer. Inside was a golden badge. It differed from the ones given to gold-ranked knights, it had a star-shaped diamond embedded in its surface. It gathered and radiated the light from the surroundings in such a way that it looked like a shining, twinkling star.

"You see, my grandfather and great-grandfather had always hoped that the household would be guarded by a blademaster. Even though they could never afford to hire one, they still had a blademaster badge forged and hoped that it would encourage the members of the house to train hard and become a blademaster one day. Well, at least they didn't stretch themselves thin by making a ton of these. Otherwise, I would have to dig out the diamond star and sell it."

Even though Lorist was uttering nonsense, he still carefully placed the box in Engelich's hands. Naturally, Engelich didn't regard Lorist's words seriously. He understood from Lorist's actions that he was officially the first blademaster in the history of House Norton. His fate from that day onward would be forever intertwined with that of the Nortons.

Handling the box as carefully as he could, Engelich gingerly retrieved the badge from the box and pinned it on his shirt. After that, he stowed the box in his pocket, retreated two steps, and bowed deeply to Lorist.

"Milord, I pledge my service to House Norton until the day I breathe my last breath, until the day of my death."

Waving his hands, Lorist said, "Sheesh, don't talk about breath this and death that this early in the morning. Your conviction is what that matters. I wonder if an old man like you can continue to scale the ranks and become a rank 2, or even rank 3, blademaster. Perhaps, you might even stand a chance to become a swordsaint."

"Milord, you're a far bigger dreamer than I am! I only hope that I can raise my rank

one more time, but I don't even have the slightest thought of actually becoming a swordsaint."

After receiving the blademaster badge of the household, Engelich spoke more freely and relaxedly.

"Well, things like this are hard to predict. You are a relatively lucky one. Perhaps, one day you might just slip on a pile of dog shit and come to realize some immutable truth of the universe that allows you to break through and become a swordsaint."

Engelich laughed bitterly.

Milord's messing around again… If there were anyone who actually became a swordsaint by doing that, I bet there would be tons of people willingly stepping into dog shit daily…

"Well, there's that. I'll put an end to messing with you. Since you're a blademaster of the household, your salary will be five thousand gold Fordes annually. You can collect it whenever you please from Supervisor Spiel. If you do manage to break through to the second rank, your pay will be raised to eight thousand, whereas the pay for a rank 3 blademaster is ten thousand. I bet you're already regretting it now. If you had told me about this the moment you made your breakthrough, you would've had an extra five thousand gold Fordes already."

Shaking his head, Engelich said, "No, I don't regret that at all, Milord."

"Is that so?" Lorist asked with a look of curiosity on his face, "I recall that you looked as if you were hanged when I confiscated your personal savings earned from working for the slavers, yet you're telling me that five thousand gold Fordes means nothing to you? Or are you saying that the amount of money is too low for you to even bother with? Well, I can't help you with that. I wasn't the one who set down the regulations for how much blademasters are paid."

"Milord, you have already offered me countless gold coins. I know that average blademasters only get paid three thousand gold Fordes annually. Over the past few years I spent at home, I came to realize that what I truly want is a life of peace. I only need enough money for my own purposes; more doesn't necessarily mean I'll become happier. All I need is my family. It's a shame I don't have much money with me right now. Otherwise, I'd be willing to pay you five thousand gold Fordes for a year's leave to spend with my family," said Engelich in a regretful tone.

"Forget it, Engelich. To think that an old guy like you would be as obedient as a mule that requires caning," Lorist said, "But, I like your attitude. It's precisely because of it that you were able to breakthrough to become a blademaster. Right now, I'll leave you with an assignment. Before we set sail in another ten or so days, give Reidy some guidance with his swordsmanship for two hours. Actually, make it an hour and a half. Also, help Howard establish his basic stances. When I saw you train yesterday, I noticed that your basic sword stance was incredibly firm and allowed you to manipulate your sword in a very peculiar manner. I hope you will be able to guide them in those respects."

"Understood, Milord," said Engelich as he nodded.

"Also, after training, come here. I will have someone arrange an office for you. You have to understand the battle strategies and the development goals of the house so that I can have you help out when I require it. I'll ask Howard to bring you to the training grounds at the rear hill now. When you come back, make sure to read through the information on Silowas. Look, they're all here," said Lorist as he pointed at a thick stack of beastskin documents in the corner.

Engelich wore a helpless expression as he was escorted away by Howard.

Lorist looked at the silhouette of the old man and mused, "Huh, as if I'd let an old guy like you slack off."

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Count Kenmays's regiment of attendants and servants only arrived at Firmrock castle during the night. When he got off the carriage, he could be seen with two new beautifully-dressed maidservants.

Raising his brows in surprise, Lorist asked, "Have they changed again?"

Count Kenmays replied, "Yeah. Those two got pregnant and had to get married off to others. I had to pay out quite a sizable dowry for them too…"

Lorist nodded to the maidservants before he said, "Since they are pregnant with your child, why don't you keep them around as your concubines?"

"No way," Count Kenmays said, "Letting them stay after they have a child will cause them to have unhealthy ambitions. It'll bring me nothing but unrest. For their own

sake as well, marrying them off is still the best course of action. I give them a yearly allowance as well. When the child is older, I'll adopt them and begin cultivating their talents. It's the best arrangement for everyone involved."

Good Sol, this guy is as calculating as people get. As expected of the descendant of a merchant family, thought Lorist as he smiled and invited the group into the castle.

When the two of them entered the study, Count Kenmays walked to the familiar wine rack and opened a bottle of fine wine. Taking on the role of host, Count Kenmays said, "Come, this wine is pretty good. Let's have a drink."

"Sol!" Lorist cursed, "I noticed that half of my wine disappeared after I returned from a trip at the end of last year. So, the culprit was you…"

"Old friend, good wine is to be enjoyed with good company. How would we enjoy the luxurious taste they provide otherwise?" Count Kenmays said before he asked curiously, "Oh, where were you? That supervisor and Potterfang were so tight-lipped. They wouldn't even reveal the slightest hint as to where you were and only said you weren't in the Northlands. Troubled, I dug around and found no record of you leaving through the suspension bridge of my family nor the one at the Felim House. Also, Duke madras has sealed off the crossing point at Metropoulos River. How in the world did you leave the Northlands? Did you fly away using your wings?"

Laughing out loud, Lorist said, "I went to the Andinaq kingdom and delivered the second prince there. During the 29th day of the 12th month, the third prince passed away and Second Highness Auguslo beheaded the second prince and used his head as a sacrifice during his father's funeral."

Count Kenmays exclaimed, "What did you say?! The second prince is dead?! I only heard that the third prince was dead, but nothing about the second prince being buried with him…"

Lorist nodded and said, "Charade went to the imperial capital on my behalf and he personally witnessed the second prince's head displayed beside the third prince's coffin. It was in a silver basin and his expression was anything but dignified."

"Good Lord Singwa… So the second prince is no more, just like that?" mused Count Kenmays in terror.

Lorist merely nodded.

Count Kenmays downed the wine in his cup in one go, shook his head in thought, and asked, "As per the usual protocol, given that the second prince is my senior noble, I should be mad at you for being the main cause of his death. Given that you acted out of your authority against a senior noble, I should declare war against House Norton to avenge the second prince. But I wonder why I feel some kind of hidden joy and relief right now?"

Lorist smiled and said, "You little bastard… You should be thanking me for relieving House Kenmays of such a troublesome character. Now that you no longer have a senior noble, you can do as you please. Isn't that better? If you still had the second prince lording over you, there would come a day that you would have no choice but to revolt. After all, the second prince's greed was such that he wouldn't even leave the bones behind when he eats.

"As for acting out of my authority, that's just bullshit. It's not like the second prince is my senior noble or anything. Since he dared to attempt to take advantage of us, he should have been ready for the consequences. Also, we did not kill him. That was the second highness. Since he represents the Krissen imperial family, it's well within his right to do so and that has nothing to do with House Norton."

The count made a thumbs up and said, "Since when did you get so sly? Isn't sending the second prince to the imperial capital basically sending him to his death? Also, I almost let you change the subject… The death of the second prince is no big deal. What I want you to tell me is how you traveled to the Andinaq kingdom."

Lorist pointed at the map of the Norton dominion on the wall and said, "Look at it yourself. Didn't I tell you this already? Second Highness Auguslo represented the Krissen imperial family and made me a count. He also enfeoffed Silowas to my house. A few years back, my household finally managed to build a port at our northern coast. Later, I had someone make me a ship and I departed from there. I even went all the way to Morante."

"Good Sol!"

This time around, Count Kenmays mimicked Lorist's catchphrase before he hurried to stare at the map for a good long while.

"Locke, your house is going to be rich! With a naval trade route, gold coins will flow towards you incessantly! Merely the transportation fee will be more than enough for

your house to live in opulence. Good Lord Singwa, shipping products by sea would save so much money when compared to transporting them by land! Brother Locke, no, Master Locke, let this one buy some shares… Please let me benefit a little bit from this!"

"Scram!" Lorist scolded half-jokingly, "Do you think making money is that easy? You didn't even consider the cost of the ships, hiring and training sailors, as well as the risks of setting sail. To be honest with you, I just received word that Silowas has been attacked by pirates and suffered heavy losses. I have to make another trip in ten days' time. So, I'm not sure if I will be able to make it back before the new year. That's why I asked you to come for this short gathering of ours. Naturally, I also have some good news to announce to you guys."

"Ah, I see. The risks of setting sail are pretty high, especially with new trade routes. Winds, storms, pirates, navigation errors, there's just so many things that can cause heavy losses," the count agreed, "But I still want to use your trade route to travel to Morante. I haven't been there even once despite how famous it is. Now that I mention it, it's kind of embarrassing."

"Maybe next year. Let me deal with the security issues for now. I'll bring you to Morante after that."

"Very well, then it's decided. So, Locke, what was it you said you wanted to announce?" asked Count Kenmays.

Lorist said, "I'll tell you all when the other two arrive. I don't want to repeat myself for no reason."

"Tch, it's one of your weird quirks again."

Baron Shazin and Baron Felim arrived the next day. As expected, Baron Felim brought his precious daughter over, so Lorist let Howard take a three-day leave to spend some time with his fiancee and improve their relationship.

In the study, Lorist had his servants bring out the golden-laced glass tea-set, the magnifying glass, and the white writing paper and gifted each of the representatives of the three houses with one of each. He announced that those were the products of his household and that he would let the salt merchant committee have the distribution rights for them. Additionally, he told the count that the Norton House was already able

to produce glass and that he no longer required the Kenmays House to resell glass to them.

While Baron Shazin and Baron Felim were overjoyed by the announcements, Count Kenmays looked rather down. He had grasped the opportunity to stock up on glass as the war between the Teribo kingdom and the Union had stopped glass production almost completely. The count had intended to sell the glass he managed to stockpile for a higher price to House Norton, but it appeared that the plan was no longer workable.

Lorist told Baron Shazin and Baron Felim that it was time to raise their military strength. He announced to the three the second highness's conquests at the Redlis kingdom and expressed his concern regarding the second highness' possible intention to come to the Iblia kingdom. By then, 300 thousand soldiers would set foot in the Northlands. Lorist said that while he was a noble of the Andinaq kingdom, he wasn't sure if he could stop the second highness from taking action against the other three houses. They were vassals of the second prince and nobles of the Iblia kingdom, after all.

"I advise you all to be prepared just in case. Without a strong military force to fall back on, things might not go as well as you might think," said Lorist.

Chapter 271
Battle Report

"Milord, why do you want the three other houses to expand their military? Not only would you have to provide them loans, you would also have to sell them weapons and equipment at a low price. Currently, our house's treasury has less than a million gold Fordes. Supervisor Hansk said that if you continue to spend so much money, we will no longer have enough for future developments," said Howard as the two were en route to Professor Balbo's gunpowder research lab.

Lorist stretched out his hand to ruffle Howard's hair as he chuckled.

"And here I thought spending time with your fiancee had taken your focus away. I didn't think that you would be pondering a matter such as this…"

"Milord!" exclaimed Howard with dissatisfaction, "I was just puzzled at why you did that…"

"Haha, come on, Howard, I was just joking around. Don't mind me," Lorist said, "There's a saying that goes like this, 'prepare an umbrella when the sky looks dark, or risk being showered like a roadside dog'. The situation our house is facing right now is a little similar to that. If we don't make ample preparations, we will be soaked in the rain when the time comes.

"I'm not that worried about the Chikdor Merchant Guild. Even if they're the so-called hegemon of the sea, they are, in the end, just merchants. I'm not worried about our expedition to the Hanayabarta kingdom either since they're naught but a bunch of pirates, slavers, and slave traders. They won't be able to resist our house's elite soldiers for long.

"The one person I'm most worried about is Second Highness Auguslo. Given his long-held ambition of becoming the emperor of the reunited Krissen Empire and his recent success in conquering Frederika despite the odds that were stacked against him, there's little doubt that he'll be on the winning side of the conflict at the Redlis kingdom.

"From the ambush, we can see that the second highness is indeed a brilliant strategist and not just an inept king. He really hopes that he can realize his ambitions one day. After exterminating the Redlis kingdom, his armies will most likely turn to the Iblia kingdom next. So far, given the status of the Iblia kingdom, there's no way they'll be able to resist the second highness's attack.

"Given that the Northlands is already under our full control, we don't really have anything to worry about. But, when the second highness completes his extermination of the Iblia kingdom and turns his troops to the Northlands, given how much of a control freak he is, do you think that he will allow the three houses, the Shazins, Kenmayses, and Felims, to control part of the Northlands? After all, they are nobles entitled by the second prince.

"Even if those three pledge allegiance to the second highness, the second highness's next move would be to try and split our alliance apart. He would either decrease their noble rank and take part of their territory away or move their territory to another place entirely. That way, the second highness will be able to stretch his claws into the Northlands. Salus and Redriver are both outside of the formal dominion of the house. The second highness would easily be able to come up with an excuse to enfeoff those lands to other nobles intentionally and cause conflict between us and them."

"But Milord, didn't the second highness say that he would make you the Duke of the Northlands? As long as the whole of the Northlands become yours…" Howard said before he paused after seemingly realizing something.

"Hehe," Lorist chuckled, "When the second highness said that back then, he was in a weak position, given that he had only just gained control of the Andinaq kingdom. He still required us to do the heavy-lifting, so he made all sorts of promises. But right now, he has control over 300 thousand soldiers. By the time he exterminates the Iblia kingdom, his power will be set in stone. The other nobles will flock to him in droves and his army might become even bigger. It's not impossible for him to end up with 500 thousand troops. Do you think he will keep the promises if this were to become the case?

"Our house focuses on raising elite soldiers. While we seem to have quite a huge number of troops right now, the actual land forces we have capable of participating in open field battles number only around 80 thousand. We're also going to war with Hanayabarta soon. Only two divisions of spear cavalry and one carroballista division, along with our knight brigade, will be left behind to protect the dominion once the

expedition departs.

"Other than that, the mounted archers stationed at Hidebull Mound are there to resist any barbarian invasions. The other two local defense brigades are stationed at Tortoise Hill and Firmrock Castle respectively. As for our three police brigades, they're in charge of guarding our warehouses, prisons, labor camps, factories, and much more. The only ones remaining are the garrison squads of the various towns which are also responsible for the people's safety.

"If you look closely at this map, you'll come to understand that the western area of the Northlands has already been made into grazing plains for the livestock of our house, roughly 300 thousand cows and lambs are currently being raised there. In the next three years, the Fisablens will be providing us with another 600 thousand of them to fulfill their agreement with us to trade livestock for military equipment. The other three houses allied to us don't really mind that we're using the area to raise livestock since they will also benefit from purchasing some for themselves at a lower price.

"But if the second highness starts expanding his influence in the Northlands, the western livestock area is where he'll strike first. After all, it is not part of our dominion. There are many excuses he can use to take the livestock away and we'll be unable to do anything about it. Unless we want to fight against the forces of the second highness when they're in their prime, we will have no choice but to swallow the losses without complaint.

"Given the might of our house, we are able to recruit up to 300 thousand soldiers and are not afraid of the second highness's forces. In fact, we can even defeat him. But what good would that do us? Not only would it affect the lives of our subjects, we would also suffer great losses even if we defeat the second highness. And given that the second highness is our senior noble, going against him is treason.

"The ideal course of action is to strengthen the three houses allied to us and let them take the brunt of the second highness's assault in our stead. Our house will only have to provide reinforcement without actually being involved in direct confrontation. With a natural barrier like the Metropoulos River, I'd like to see if the second highness will be willing to send his troops to the grinder just to conquer the two suspension bridges. Either the second highness agrees to our conditions and leaves the Northlands under our control and that of the other houses, or he grinds against our allies until they give way."

"Milord, what if the second highness orders us to take out our allies? He's our senior noble after all," asked Howard.

"There would be no issue with that. Unreasonable orders from senior nobles can be refused with no repercussions. He has no right to ask us to betray an alliance we have formed," replied Lorist.

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It had been two months since Lorist supplied some firearms to Professor Balbo to experiment on, and, just recently, the professor reported that he had made great progress. After sending off Baron Shazin, Baron Felim, and Count Kenmays, Lorist made his way to the laboratory as soon as he could.

Professor Balbo, Grandmaster Sid, Grandmaster Julian and Grandmaster Fellin were all present. Upon getting into their seats, they began reporting their progress to Lorist.

While Professor Balbo had yet to find any success making the canister shot ammunition that Lorist described to him, he did have a surprise in store. The professor took out a few bullets encased in a bronze shell.

"How did you make the primer for these rounds?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, I simply had some fire crystal grains placed at the bottom of the shell with a piece of flint. When the hammer knocks against the flint, the smallest spark will ignite the fire crystals and set off the gunpowder in it as well. The gunpowder will then explode and propel the projectile outward," explained the professor.

Grandmaster Fellin opened a red wooden box on the table and revealed two revolvers with intricate golden patterns on their barrels and ivory grips. The ivory grip on one side had a carving of a beautiful woman and the other was carved with detailed patterns. Lorist thought they looked completely like the antique revolvers he had seen online in his past life.

"Oh? You guys actually managed to make the revolvers," mused Lorist with surprise.

"Yes, Milord," Grandmaster Fellin said, "We spent two months making the two according to the designs you provided. I also handcrafted the bullets personally."

"Ugh…"

Lorist was speechless the moment he found that the parts of the two revolvers were all handcrafted by Grandmaster Fellin. His craftsmanship was at such a high level that even Grandmaster Sid wouldn't be able to compare. However, the problem was that Lorist had hoped that they would be able to find a way to mass produce the guns instead of having Grandmaster Fellin craft them himself. That way, the grandmaster probably wouldn't be able to finish more than a hundred guns even if he worked until he dies of old age.

"Do these guns work?" asked Lorist worriedly.

"Of course they do," Grandmaster Fellin hurriedly replied, "We tried firing them a couple of times. However, the firing range is quite short. A lead bullet fired from roughly 30 meters away can only punch through a wooden board as thick as a finger. If the gun is fired from 50 meters away, it wouldn't hit its target at all."

Hmmm, so it has an effective firing range of roughly 30 meters… Any further than that, the bullet would go off course…

"Also, milord, we weren't able to make the automatically-rotating cartridge that's connected to the trigger mechanism. So, we had no choice but to borrow the dwarven gun's design. The hammer has to be cocked back for the next bullet to be loaded," said Grandmaster Fellin.

Ah, no wonder the hammer looks a little large. It's so that it can be cocked by the hand more easily.

"Milord, you should also take note that the barrel will overheat after five quick shots. It must cool before it can be reloaded and fired again," reminded Grandmaster Julian.

Well, I guess the material for the construction of the barrel isn't ideal either, for it to overheat after only five shots…

"Are there any other flaws?" asked Lorist.

"Well, Milord, even though the bullet primers are made by me with each one containing the same amount, sometimes one or two out of five bullets would fail to ignite. I suspect that's because the flint piece didn't produce any spark," added Professor Balbo.

Lorist was already completely speechless. In the end, the two revolvers are nothing

but intricately-carved decoration pieces. It's no wonder that the engravings were so detailed. The product was meant only for admiring its craftsmanship. But no matter what, they were still the first two revolvers the house produced and they still had some historical value to them.

"Were the bullet shells all made by you guys personally too?"

"No, we hired over 20 smiths and had each of them make ten shells. After that, we picked those that were roughly of the same size and gave them to Grandmaster Fellin for some polishing. We picked 73 of them and filled them up with the chemicals so they can be used with the guns. You can reuse these shells simply by filling them up with more gunpowder. We also have some molds for making lead bullets and a tool to fit the lead bullet into the shell," said the professor.

As long as the shell was kept, one could refill it with gunpowder. That was a rather decent solution for limited ammunition.

"Alright, I'll take these two guns, the bullets, and the molds. You will no longer have to work on these anymore. Having grandmasters like you spend two months on these is a little too wasteful. You're no regular smiths, your talents can be put to far better use," said Lorist, much to the grandmasters' joy.

"Were there any difficulties you faced during testing?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, we found that the main problem was that there was no suitable material available to us for the construction of the gun barrels. The ones on the guns we have now are made of steel. It's far from ideal, they overheat too easily. Also, making the barrels takes quite some time and effort. We also had to test different heat-resistant bricks to see if we could modify our furnace to see if we can directly cast molten steel into barrels," expressed Grandmaster Sid.

Nodding in agreement, Lorist thought that he had been far too ambitious. Without establishing the more fundamental technological foundations, he had intended to leap straight into producing such advanced contraptions. Even though the grandmasters were able to make those two revolvers with much effort and time, the revolvers had too many flaws and were incredibly impractical to make. Grandmaster Sid was correct in that they had to discover a new material to make the barrel with before they could progress.

"Very well, Grandmaster Sid's statement holds true. It won't be good for us to rush this. The house will fund you for testing different materials. Also, right now, we're only using our water-powered machines to hammer and press metals. I wonder if you can try to make similar machines for hole-boring, cutting, and drilling? That would save us lots of manpower and time," said Lorist as he casually tossed a few rough blueprints of the machines he just named, which Grandmaster Sid took in a hurry as if they were heavenly treasures.

"Milord, right now our consumption of saltpeter is far too high because we are using 40 cannons to train our cannoneers. The production of saltpeter will no longer be able to keep up with the consumption in ten days," reported the professor.

This is a new issue... After giving it some thought, Lorist replied, "How about this? Decrease the amount of gunpowder used for the training sessions. It'll be enough as long as they can fire the cannons. Ration the gunpowder we give to the cannoneers and caution them to use them sparingly. Other than that, I will invest more funds into making a few more mining valleys near the Bladedge mountains to increase its production."

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After leaving the gunpowder research lab, Lorist rushed to the port city. Senbaud's fleet had returned the day before and they would be leaving after a day of rest to transport soldiers to Silowas.

Engelich and Loze would also be sailing aboard the Flying Fish of Dawn to the Sea of Grief to expropriate more ships while Lorist had to stay at the dominion.

Within the main camp at the port, Senbaud and the rest welcomed Lorist's arrival.

"Senbaud, you shall stay here the day after tomorrow and leave the fleet to Uncle Torin. Let them depart first," said Lorist.

"Understood, Milord," replied Senbaud, even though he didn't understand why Lorist instructed him to do so.

"Do you see the Windstorm over there? That's your new flagship. You have to familiarize yourself with it before you set sail," said Lorist as he pointed to the new ship that was docked at the bay nearby.

With his eyes gleaming, Senbaud praised, "What a beautiful ship, milord. But can't I just get used to sailing it during the journey itself?"

"No, Senbaud. This ship is not anything like the regular ones you have sailed. This is the only invincible warship on the whole of Grindia so far. You'll understand what I mean when you get on board," teased Lorist.

"Very well, Milord. I shall carry out your will. Also, this is the battle report submitted to us from Knight Lundmorde at Morante," said Senbaud as he handed over a thick bag of documents.

Lorist took one out and realized that it detailed the war effort of the second highness at the Redlis kingdom. *Huh? This doesn't look right… Why hasn't the second highness wiped out the Redlis kingdom's resistance yet?*

Not counting the force stationed at the border of the Madras duchy as well as the garrison forces within the Andinaq kingdom, the second highness should have around 240 thousand soldiers. With the occupation of Frederika and the surrender of the 70 thousand troops defending Kanbona Province, the second highness should have more than 300 thousand men at his disposal.

But after the nobles at Anderwoff refused to surrender to the second highness, and the first failed attempt at wiping them all out, the second highness turned to a more gradual strategy and managed to obtain a victory by conquering Anderwoff. However, the remaining nobles banded together and were still resisting in Majik. It also seemed that they had received large numbers of reinforcements as well, further strengthening their forces.

Weird, why is there no news of the first prince? It's only mentioned that he's missing after escaping from Frederika, thought Lorist as he continued flipping through the pages.

The second highness had split his 300-thousand-strong force into three units. One unit was stationed at the Lormo duchy's border as a threat for them to relinquish their autonomy and fall under the banner of the empire once more. Another unit was busy sweeping clean the riches of the nobles within the territory of the Redlis kingdom while pillaging their resources and food so that the main force would have enough sustenance. The last unit was marching towards the Redlis kingdom's final province, Majik, and would be engaging the traitorous nobles there.

The second highness seems a little too rushed, commented Lorist.

He took out a report concerning the war between the Teribo kingdom and the Union.

The moment he read it, he was dumbstruck. *What the hell is going on? Why are the Urubaha and Teria duchies wiped out from a conflict that's supposed to involve only the Union and the Teribo kingdom? Add to the fact that the Urubaha duchy is thousands of kilometers away from the Teribo kingdom, and is separated by the Tedanini mountains and two other smaller nations, how in the world was it wiped out?*

Chapter 272
The Death of Duke Urubaha

Duke Urubaha had it coming. Never before had a rank 3 blademaster died as unsightly a death as the duke. He had only his greed to blame, well, that and his lack of self-awareness, which had made it so that the president of the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild couldn't stand him. The president had disregarded their family ties and fed the duke a force-dispersing toxin. In the end, the duke was beheaded by an attendant, cleft from shoulder to shoulder from the rear, he died just like any normal old man. It was an inglorious and unceremonious death. One to be remembered throughout the ages for all the wrong reasons.

In the middle of the 7th month of the year 1773 at the capital of the Teribo kingdom, the army of the eleven allied nations, which numbered around 140 thousand men, and the Union's army, which numbered around 180 thousand, had been in a stalemate for more than two months. Neither side attacked nor defended; not even knight duels were carried out. The main reason for that was that the knights of the allied nations' army did not think that the Union had knights among them. Most of the gold-ranked fighters were mercenaries and the allied nations' knights felt it beneath them and their honor to challenge such lordless, masterless vagrants.

Even though the two armies didn't clash, messengers were sent to and fro between the sides. It was becoming apparent that the report on the Morante Daily was true: the War of Glass wouldn't end until the treasury of the Teribo kingdom was squeezed dry.

It was a good thing for the allies, given how foolish Teribo VII was being with his money. The allies' 140 thousand soldiers would most certainly not take the initiative to launch an attack. They only had to stay on guard within their camps month after month, feeding off the provisions from the Teribo royal family. Not only were they well-fed, they were also paid well and on a monthly basis. Oftentimes, some noble ladies would even come to the camps to make merry. The soldiers of the allied army enjoyed their days greatly and wished that they could last a couple more years.

The Union, however, found it hard to distance themselves from the conflict. From the moment they retaliated and conquered half of the territory of the kingdom the war

had only escalated and there was no end in sight. While the allies' army was funded by the Teribo Kingdom, and the nations thus bore no burden or expense in fielding their forces, the Union's 180 thousand soldiers placed a great burden on their finances.

Despite that, the Union had no choice but to persevere. The war had already had a far-reaching effect, having been dragged on for so long. For instance, the eleven nations had joined up at the Teribo kingdom's request to stand off against the army of the Union for money. But should the Union show any sign of weakness or inability to hold their ground, the allied army would hold nothing back and bite on the Union for some additional benefits.

It was the main reason the forces of the Union didn't mount an assault. While they were confident in their ability to maintain their position, taking the initiative to attack might come with an incredibly heavy price. The 180 thousand soldiers already on the field were all the Union could afford to muster. No one could predict how much morale would drop from the failure of such an attack.

Despite being the instigator of the whole conflict, Teribo VII was only now becoming aware of the predicament he was in. He sent another demand for peace to the Union, phrased in a far humbler manner than the first. He was willing to accept the initial conditions put forward by the Union, namely, the secession of half of the kingdom's territory as reimbursement for their losses.

Teribo VII had forgotten, however, that he no longer had the greatest say on the issue, that honor belonged to the allied nations. The generals of the army had realized how fat of a cow Teribo VII was and intended to milk him for all he was worth. There was no way they would allow such a juicy cash cow to call off the conflict when they were at the height of their profits. Thus, they confidently assured Teribo VII that they would be able to drive the Union's forces out of the territory. At the same time, they cut off the royal family's access to the outside world. All Teribo VII had to do and could do, was to continue paying for their 'military expenditure'.

By the time Teribo VII realized the gravity of the situation, the Teribo kingdom had already been ruined. So, he decided that he might as well cause as much grief as he could for his sworn enemies. He doubled the bounty for the Union's high-tier fighters. With that, the gold-ranked knights of the allied army were moved, further escalating the assassinations and counter-assassinations. Among the many conflicts there were, the most eye-catching one was the death of the Urubaha duchy's blademaster duke.

As the highest authority of the duchy, as well as a rank 3 blademaster, Duke Urubaha could be considered one of the people with the highest status in the allied army. However, he had one fatal flaw: his endless greed for money. Even though the Urubaha duchy was a poor nation, the duke still profited much from renting his armies out to other nations. He easily earned more than a million gold Fordes annually from these transactions. The duke pocketed all the money, however, without investing anything to improve the living standards of his subjects.

Anyone who visited the duchy knew that everything, whether it be the capital or the palace the duke resided in, was in rather bad shape. The fountain at the plaza located opposite the duke's palace was the only public facility in the whole duchy that was built in the days of the current duke's grandfather. It was only good for providing clean water to passers-by to relieve their thirst. However, the current duke had even thought of profiting off the fountain by charging a fee for every drink. However, the duke gave up on the idea when he found that the pay for the guards would be higher than the profit it would generate.

The Urubaha duchy's subjects all thought of their current duke as a hateful dragon that only knew how to hoard all the riches. The duke's palace was even colloquially known as the dragon's lair. The most popular rumors were about how much the duke loved to sleep in a bed of gold coins. It was pretty apparent how bad an impression the subjects of the duchy had on their duke.

They even complained of the duke's stinginess when it came to the profits his two armies earned him. For instance, each army rented for 100 thousand gold Fordes monthly, but 60 thousand of those entered the personal wallet of the duke with the rest being the pay for the soldiers, the food they consumed, and equipment maintenance.

An army numbering 24 thousand men couldn't do much with 40 thousand gold Fordes a month apart from paying off the salary of the soldiers. With so little left behind for them, the soldiers were fed the worst kind of food, and just barely enough to keep them going. Even their equipment was among the lowest in quality available. In fact, the soldiers were usually glad to be rented out as it meant they would be better fed since the renter was responsible for their sustenance.

The rent of the Urubaha duchy's armies to the Teribo kingdom, however, was thrice the normal price; each army of his would be paid 300 thousand gold Fordes. That was the reason the duke was willing to rent out both his armies at once. He figured that

since his own duchy was not particularly developed or prosperous, nobody would bother to conquer it.

When Teribo VII raised the bounty for high tiers another time, Duke Urubaha figured that he could earn himself a couple million gold Fordes given his prowess as a rank 3 blademaster. Thus, he often found himself participating in the chaotic assassinations.

However, the Union had long had their preventive measures in place and managed to successfully counter-kill those who came bounty hunting. Some traps they set to bait in the high-tier fighters even cost the allied army a good number of blademasters. As such Duke Urubaha couldn't find many opportunities to strike. In desperation, he changed his tactics.

He was the relative of President Cobleit, so he had gone to Morante a number of times. His beloved grandson was studying at an academy in Morante. Being the grandson of an influential duke and a relative of the president of one of the big seven guilds of the Union, that youth spent his days in the city in absolute bliss. He lorded over his peers day in and day out. The Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild frequently had to clean up after him.

During his visits to Morante, Duke Urubaha would also often visit the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild, so it was natural for him to be acquainted with quite a few of the guild's blademasters. From time to time, he would even spar with them to temper his swordsmanship. So, the duke turned his sights on the guild's blademasters.

First, he sent letters to inform the blademasters of the Union of the location of the allied army's high-tier fighters with the intent to ambush them when they came after the blademasters. After some investigation the blademasters concluded that his warnings were true, so they let their guard down. They thought that he was trying to keep them safe on account of the relationship they had with him, despite now standing against them in the war.

In those moments of lapsed guard, the Duke Urubaha struck. He intentionally made a false report that there would only be one blademaster waiting in ambush instead of three, causing the Union to send out only three blademasters to deal with the threat. It ended up with a three-on-three battle where both sides were evenly matched. In the end, they settled on considering the matter a draw and left it at that. The duke rushed over at that moment and claimed that there was an unexpected incident in which the other two blademasters insisted on following the lone blademaster at the very last

minute, causing him to have to rush over to prevent any unfortunate accidents.

The three blademasters of the Union didn't suspect the duke in the slightest and even treated him as one of them, thanking him gratefully for all he had done for them so far. The duke struck them down as they thanked him.

The result of a rank 3 blademaster taking on one unprepared rank 2 blademaster and two other rank 1 blademasters was obvious. The three blademasters were slain by the duke in quick succession. Their heads were brought back to Teribo VII and exchanged for the reward.

Unfortunately for the duke, a scout had witnessed the whole affair and quickly went back to inform the Union's main force. A huge commotion broke out in the camp, with many angry folks marching right up to President Cobleit's tent to complain about the matter. It was no small issue, given that the deceased rank 2 blademaster was provided by the Peterson Merchant Guild, and the two rank 1 blademasters belonged to the Mayflower and Chikdor merchant guilds respectively.

All three guild presidents were fuming and were just short on enough rage to scream directly at President Cobleit. The matter dragged on for almost the whole night. When it concluded, President Cobleit laid back tiredly on his chair, loathing his relative to the bone. The duke had used the contacts the president had given him to carry out such a despicable plot for money, without regard for any previous relations.

He realized, then, that the first young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild was still in the tent.

"I have an idea to deal with this issue…" he told the president.

The duke's fate was sealed in stone that very night. President Cobleit agreed to cooperate with Serihanem. It was even said that the president expressed with a sigh that even his many grandchildren were not nearly as capable as the first young master of the Chikdor Merchant Guild, who was a true merchant through and through.

The president brought the duke's grandson to the frontlines forcefully and wrote the duke a letter. He said that his grandson wished to meet him. They erected a small camp not far away from the main one where they would meet.

While the duke was quite money-minded, he was far from naive, to say the least. While he did not believe that President Cobleit would dare to act against him directly, given

how he had just killed three of the Union's blademasters for the sake of the bounty, he was quite wary of the invitation being a potential trap. However, he still had to meet his grandson. He was one of his heirs, after all.

So, the duke responded that he would agree to a meeting with the condition that he got to decide the venue, which President Cobleit agreed to.

Thus, Duke Urubaha ordered his Crimson Legion to move their camp closer to the left side of the area where the two armies faced each other and had President Cobleit bring his grandson there. The duke was not worried in the slightest about being attacked by a few blademasters at once. He could easily escape unscathed with his abilities. As for the Crimson Legion, he didn't mind if they got wiped out. After all, if the duchy was rich in only one thing, then it was people. And they were more than willing to serve in the military to earn their keep.

President Cobleit headed to the camp of the Crimson Legion with a whole troupe that transported mainly some supplies to host a banquet. Since the president was the one to invite the duke to a banquet, he had to pay for all the costs involved. Additionally, the duke was someone that wouldn't treat anybody to a meal even if his life depended on it. Even if he had no choice but to show an important guest his hospitality, he would serve nothing but the cheapest and most basic dishes.

Naturally, the duke didn't fail to check the kitchen staff and the ingredients they brought for the banquet. After verifying that nothing was amiss, he proceeded to ponder the true aim President Cobleit decided to host a banquet for him at a time like this.

President Cobleit came over without even a single gold-ranked knight. His entourage only included ten-odd silver-ranked attendants and the duke's precious grandson. The duke finally relaxed his guard when the banquet began.

President Cobleit said, "The reason I called you out here to meet is to advise you stop involving your army in this conflict. The war between the Union and the Teribo kingdom has already lasted far longer than it needs to."

In other words, he was acknowledging the fact that the Union's forces were suffering as a result of the duke.

"As for the death of the three blademasters, let's just say that my luck was bad. I

earnestly implore you, please don't cause any more trouble on account of our familial relations."

The duke refused President Cobleit's advice outright.

"Cobleit, if I were the kind of person that didn't care about family, you wouldn't leave alive after this blanket. As the commander of the 180 thousand soldiers of the Union, your bounty is a staggering three million gold Fordes! The fact that I'm willing to let you come at the cost of three million gold Fordes not entering my pocket. In fact, I might have to ask you to reimburse me somehow in that regard…"

Never had the president dared to imagine that this relative of his would even consider killing him for the bounty. This realization finally resolved the residual hesitation he had.

The duke snickered and said, "Well, I won't really ask you to give me three million gold Fordes. As long as you're able to trick the presidents of the other merchant guilds into coming here with a joint bounty of three million gold Fordes, I am very much willing to let you go."

It was after the duke's statement that the atmosphere of the whole banquet turned stale and awkward. The few gold-ranked knights of the Crimson Legion were incredibly embarrassed at the behavior of their lord. It was at that moment when the duke's grandson came over and said, "Grandpa! Have a taste of this bottle of fine wine which I bought at the city! It's been some time since we met, and this time I finally found a way I can repay the kindness you've shown me!"

While Duke Urubaha was suspicious of everyone else, he loved his grandson from the depths of his heart. His grandson's gesture brought him great joy, so he opened the bottle of wine and poured himself and President Cobleit a cup.

President Cobleit didn't mind drinking it since he was far too stressed to bother with anything else. After taking a gulp, he found that the taste of the wine was rather pleasant and even asked for a refill.

The duke was relieved that the president had drunk the wine and even asked for another cup. He had held back to verify if the wine was poisoned in some way, but seeing the president's eagerness for one more serving, he felt no need to doubt his grandson's sincerity and gulped down the cup of wine without hesitation.

The moment the wine slid down his throat, however, the duke heard the sound of swords being drawn behind him. He turned around. The silver ranked attendants the president had brought along was walking towards him slowly, sword in hand. He had the gaze of a butcher preparing to slaughter a sheep.

"What are you doing?!" cried the duke.

He activated the battleforce in his body and prepared to leap into the air, only to find that he had no battleforce to activate. He was so weak that he wasn't able to even muster the energy to stand up.

Finally, he realized: he had been played. He turned to the gold-ranked knights that were responsible for guarding him.

"Quick, come save me!" yelled he.

The guards, however, only stared at him with scorn. They remained standing as statues. Nothing untoward was happening as far as they were concerned. Their duke was simply having a feast with family.

A blade flashed, and the duke's head tumbled from his shoulders. Duke Urubaha, a rank 3 blademaster, was killed by a mere silver-ranked attendant.

The duke's grandson stared with a stupefied look as his beloved grandfather was beheaded right before his eyes.

The tent's flaps were pushed open as Serihanem walked inside with a smile on his face. Before the head of the duke, he had the grandson sign an agreement to lease the Urubaha duchy to the Chikdor Merchant Guild for a million gold Fordes and an annual fee of 100 thousand gold Fordes. From that moment on, the grandson of the duke would spend the rest of his life at Morante as a political hostage.

When the agreement was properly signed, the Crimson Legion soldiers cheered. They joined the side of the Union along with the duke's other army, the Tricolor Sword Legion. With the aid of the Crimson Legion, the Peterson Merchant Guild managed to swallow the Teria duchy whole without any trouble. It was a given since the two blademasters of the Teria duchy had already fallen in the bounty hunt, and eighty percent of their military force had been sent to join the allied army.

The Crimson Legion was able to take over the Teria duchy's capital with a surprise

attack that couldn't even be called a full-scale battle. Duke Teria's whole family was ordered hanged by President Peterson for resisting the Union and the Union annexed the territory. At the same time, the Chikdor Merchant Guild announced that they would make the Urubaha duchy part of their dominion, effectively putting it under the control of the Union as well.

With that, the smaller merchant guilds saw the same opportunity and turned their sights on the nations that had sent their armies out to reinforce the Teribo kingdom and had lost their blademasters…

Chapter 273
Before the Expedition

The thunderous roar of the cannons rang out once more. The roughly 60-meter-long Windstorm looked like a fire-breathing beast. Smoke burst out of the ship like large white thorns each time the cannons roared. Small blurry black shadows flew away over the ocean as well. A cliff several hundred meters away shuddered as the shadows vanished into its face. Shortly after a single, massive piece broke loose and slipped into the ocean.

Schwoop! Senbaud popped open his telescope for a look; only to be flabbergasted at what he saw, mouth wide open. The sight before him had greatly exceeded what he imagined to be possible. He'd never dreamt that Lorist's bronze cannons would actually be that mighty, so surprised was he, in fact, that he was completely speechless.

After a good while, Senbaud snapped out of the stupor and said with an excited expression, "Mi-milord… With a warship like that, I can guarantee you there isn't a single fleet on Grindia's oceans able to rival us."

"Good," said Lorist absentmindedly as he nodded, still pondering the two reports he had read the day before.

The report that Lundmorde had sent made Lorist come to a frightening conclusion. Other than the eventual extermination of the Teribo kingdom, which was already long set in stone, of the eleven nations that reinforced the allied army, at least four or five of them, apart from the Urubaha and Teria duchies, would also be wiped out.

That was to say, after the War of Glass, the territory of the Union would grow up to five-fold and become one of the three top superpowers on the continent. That assessment was made only based on the territory they conquered, and not their military or economic influence. The area they would control would eclipse that of the now-defunct Krissen Empire and they would be the third largest nation on the whole continent.

As long as the Union was given a few more years to 'digest' and put the territory they conquered in check, even if the second highness successfully reunited the empire, the

situation would no longer be the same as it was a century ago when the empire was at its prime and used its military might to suppress the development and growth of the Union. In fact, the Union might return the long-owed 'favor'.

What surprised Lorist the most was the fact that the Chikdor Merchant Guild actually made the Urubaha duchy their own dominion.

It was good news for him since that meant that the guild had truly given up on the notion of conquering Silowas. Lorist realized after checking the map that the guild's decision was a rather well-informed one. With the territory of the Urubaha duchy, the guild would be better able to exert control on the trade routes at the south of Grindia near the Golden Coast without having to waste resources going to war with House Norton.

"Milord, Milord!" called Senbaud for a good while before getting Lorist's attention.

"What's wrong?" asked Lorist.

A little embarrassed, Senbaud said, "Milord, I was thinking of going there directly to see the cannons fire. Is that okay with you?"

Lorist laughed and said, "Senbaud, you're now the captain of the Windstorm. You can do whatever you want, as long as you don't sink the ship. Go ahead and check the ship all you want and familiarize yourself with its handling. It's your responsibility as a captain and you don't need my permission to do so."

When the 24 bronze cannons mounted on the Windstorm first fired, the recoil from the shots caused quite a few cracks on the ship, allowing seawater to start filling up the ship. It took quite a while before the ship was brought back to the shipyard at Bullhorn Bay and the flaw corrected. By the time Senbaud familiarized himself with the ship's handling, Lorist was already ready to depart for Silowas.

After another two volleys of test cannon fire, Senbaud returned to the deck of the ship with a look of joy and excitement.

"Milord, this ship is fantastic! It's just as agile as it is swift. Apart from the Flying Fish of Dawn, I doubt there's another ship that can catch up to the Windstorm. Coupled with these godly bronze cannons, this ship will be completely invincible. I don't think any ship will be able to even get close to the Windstorm."

Windstorm was based on the Flying Fish of Dawn. She was around 60 meters in length and roughly eight to ten meters in width, with a height of roughly 11.7 meters. The ship had four decks. The bottom deck contained the ballast, the one above it was for storage, followed by the gun deck which was fitted with 24 bronze cannons in total. The uppermost deck was the main deck and contained the captain's cabin and crew living quarters.

Apart from the 24 cannon operator teams, numbering 120 men, the Windstorm's full complement held another 128 sailors. It needed 52 men to form a skeleton crew, any less and the ship couldn't be sailed. Not only that, the ship could ferry another 200 marines. Whether it be ranged or close combat, the Windstorm had them covered. It was no wonder Senbaud thought that no ship could possibly take their own out.

Lorist laughed and said, "There are five other similar ships being constructed at the shipyard now. I believe that by next year, you'll have six Windstorms at your disposal. Once that happens, our cannon fleet will truly be known as invincible. Even the Union's 'Invincible Fleet' won't be able to match our own."

Senbaud scoffed, "Hmph, Milord, the so-called 'Invincible Fleet' at Hidegold Bay only relies on their numbers to oppress other fleets. They won't be able to keep up with Windstorm, even if we only considered speed, in actual combat circumstances. We'll be able to sink those modified merchant vessels easily with the cannons on board."

Senbaud was correct. The Union's warships were like floating castles. They had sacrificed any semblance of mobility for defense. While they wouldn't have a problem at the calm seas of Hidegold Bay, the ships were liable to be toppled by strong winds in other places like the Sea of Greed.

"It's good that you're that confident, Senbaud. When you test the ship out at sea, make sure to note down any weaknesses or shortcomings you notice so we can adjust accordingly for the five ships still under construction. Once they are complete, the construction crew will move on to their next project. They are to build a 120-meter-long five-masted warship and arm it with 60 cannons," said Lorist.

"What? There can actually be a ship that big?" asked Senbaud as he swallowed a nervous gulp, "Milord, I will definitely work really hard for you, so please let me command that ship when it's complete…"

……

A week had quickly passed and Lorist was about to depart for Silowas on the Windstorm. Right before he left, he held a meeting with the high officials of the house in the main camp at the bay.

"Terman, I will leave the security of Firmrock, Salus, Redriver and the grazing plains at the western Northlands to you, understood?"

"Yes, Milord," said Terman as he saluted respectfully.

"Waxima, Loze has irresponsibly tossed his two spear cavalry divisions to you, so I have no choice but to trouble you to manage them."

"Milord, I don't really mind it. It's not the first time this happened anyway," replied Waxima.

Everyone present burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"Pete," Lorist said, trying to bring the situation back on track, "have your mounted archer brigade defend Hidebull. Even though the mountain barbarians haven't caused any trouble in recent years, it's best if we remain vigilant."

"Understood, milord," said Pete with a bitter smile.

His superior, Josk, was just like Fiercetiger Loze: he also loved to follow his lord along on one adventure after another, frequently leaving the mounted archer brigade under Pete's care.

"Pajik…"

"Milord, please give me your instructions," said Pajik as he came to attention.

"From today onwards, you will be Belnick's right hand. Pass control of the second local defense brigade to your second in command and help Belnick with the reorganization of the third local defense brigade as well as the formation of the fourth and fifth brigades. The brigades will be consolidated into the first local defense division with Belnick as its commander and you as the vice."

"Yes, milord," said Pajik as he saluted. This was akin to a promotion for him.

Belnick stood up and asked, "Milord, where will the first local defense division be

stationed?"

Lorist pointed at the map of the dominion behind him and said, "The first local defense brigade will be stationed at Firmrock castle and the second brigade at the citadel at Tortoise Hill. After reorganizing the third, station them at the port city. The fourth and fifth still have to be trained for at least three months in military regulations after their formation. Use them as reserve troops for now and have them stay at the training camp until we return from the expedition."

Lorist didn't have much of a choice. Of the 60 thousand laborers whose term of service was ending at the end of the year, 50 thousand had already chosen to remain within the dominion. Some even wanted to return home and fetch their families. Even though the house had already begun to develop Redriver, they would only be able to settle a portion of their new subjects. Even so, there were far too many youths among the laborers that fit the criteria to join the army. Apart from the expansion of the heavy-armor and spear-cavalry divisions over the last six months, there were still more than ten thousand youths who wanted a place in the army. Those who were accustomed to water had been transferred to the marine training camp while the rest were stuffed into the local defense division.

Supervisor Spiel stood up and said, "Milord, our treasury has already dropped below a million gold Fordes. Continuing to expand the house's forces will only make our financial situation worse. We're starting several massive development projects in the coming months and I fear we'll be out of money by the fifth or sixth month."

"That won't be a problem," Lorist said as he waved, "In the coming months, our house will gain a huge sum of money. It will be more than enough to cover our expenses. Oh, and Supervisor Spiel, I leave you in charge of the products we intend to let the salt merchant committee sell on our behalf. It will bring in quite substantial profits as well."

"Understood, Milord," said the supervisor worriedly as he sat back down.

"Supervisor Boris…"

"Awaiting your instructions, milord," said Supervisor Boris, the ex-manager of House Kenmays.

"As Knight Charade is not with us, I will leave civilian affairs in your care. From this

year onwards, we will collect tax from the Felicitas and Salus settlements, and I hope you can take care of them."

"Rest assured, milord. I will definitely do my best," said the supervisor.

"Old Man Balk, the factories and workshops of the house will be left in your care."

The old man stood up and replied, "Don't worry, Milord. I won't disappoint you."

"Shadekampf, you're someone who's followed me for a long time. I will leave you with the management rights to the development of Redriver. Don't let me down."

"Understood, Milord," said Shadekampf.

It was apparent from his fit and healthy look that he had made good progress with his training during the recent years.

"Supervisor Kedan, Supervisor Hansk will be following me back to Silowas to take care of the mess over there. So, there are various tasks in the dominion that you will have to oversee."

"Milord, you don't have to be worried as long as I'm here. However, I wonder if we really don't need the second highness's permission to go on an expedition against the Hanayabarta kingdom. After all, it's a sovereign kingdom we're talking about," said Kedan.

All of those present knew of Lorist's intentions. Not one felt it weird. If Lorist really endured it and didn't take any action, he wouldn't be fit to be the leader of the household.

However, Supervisor Kedan's worries were well-founded. If the enemy were nobles on roughly the same standing, there would be no need to inform anyone about the attack. However, Lorist planned to take on a whole kingdom, and according to proper regulations, Lorist had to at the very least inform the second highness so that he could lodge an official diplomatic complaint on behalf of his vassal with the Hanayabarta kingdom. Only if the complaint didn't receive a satisfying resolution would the Norton House or the forces of the Andinaq kingdom be allowed to take revenge against the Hanayabarta kingdom for their misdeeds.

Lorist shook his head and said, "We don't have the time to waste on that. Besides, the

second highness is currently in the Redlis kingdom and might not even bother with small matters like these. If we really choose to wait, I don't know how long it will take for us to hear anything. Look at the case of the Peterson Merchant Guild, didn't they also conquer the Teria duchy without informing the Union beforehand?"

"But, Milord, those of the Union are nothing but tycoons without proper tradition and protocols. It's no surprise that they act the way they do. On the other hand, we're a house that has a history of a few centuries, so some basic protocols will have to be observed. Going on an expedition against a kingdom is no small issue, so it's best to first have the agreement of a senior noble. Otherwise, we could be considered to be disrespectful to those above us. As this matter concerns the household name, I hope that milord will give it more consideration," advised Supervisor Spiel as well.

"That's enough," Lorist said with a solemn face, "I understand that you guys are worrying on behalf of the house, which is commendable behavior. But did you take into account how the household knights of our house who were captured by the slavers feel? Every day of inaction means a day of torture for them. Another day where they'll have to risk their lives. If we really wait for the agreement of the second highness, it will come soonest after this year. Perhaps, we might not even get anything by the end of the next year.

"Also, has the Hanayabarta kingdom had any interactions with the Andinaq kingdom in the recent years? Did the Andinaq kingdom officially recognize the Hanayabarta kingdom as its own nation?

"Don't forget, our target this time is **not** a kingdom, but only a band of pirates and slave traders who happen to control a port city. Remember, there has never been a Hanayabarta kingdom. We are only taking action against the slavers who have attacked Silowas to save our subjects and members of our household. The Hanayabarta kingdom is naught but a shallow and deceitful construct made by the enemy to fool others. They were never a proper nation.

"Remember this! Those who slight the Nortons shall be put down, far as they may be! Understood?"

"Yes, milord! Those who slight the Nortons shall be put down, far as they may be!" called out the ones in the tent in unison.

……

Eight days later, Lorist arrived on Silowas. Potterfang received him with a group of other household knights.

"How many ships do we have now?" asked Lorist. That was the issue he was most concerned about at the moment.

"Milord, Blademaster Engelich, Josk, and Fiercetiger Loze has so far expropriated more than 30 ships. Together with our own ships, we already have enough to transport more than 20 thousand people. The Peterson Merchant Guild sent us a letter that stated that they can lend us 14 ships, four of which are large-class merchant vessels and another ten being middle-class ships. However, those ships would only arrive at the end of the 8th month," reported Potterfang.

"Alright," said Lorist as he nodded. It seemed that Engelich and the rest only had to expropriate another 50 to 60 ships to have enough to transport all 30 thousand plus soldiers of the dominion to the Hanayabarta archipelago. By the end of the 9th month, they would be able to depart.

"How's the morale of our forces? What sort of thoughts do they have on our upcoming expedition?"

"Milord, everyone is enraged about what happened to our island. Even though the second batch of soldiers to arrive didn't see it for themselves, they share the feelings of the first batch who came over to do the cleanup. All of them believe we should teach the slavers a harsh lesson."

"That's great. We must ensure that our morale stays high. Intensify their training while we wait for more ships to arrive so that they will be properly prepared for the actual battle," instructed Lorist.

"Yes, milord."

Chapter 274
Money of All Things Comes the Fastest

On the 31st day of the 8th month, Lorist got disembarked from the Flying Fish of Dawn and was received by Potterfang and Supervisor Hansk at the port.

"The haul wasn't bad this time around. We got 17 ships in total, five large-class long-distance merchant vessels and 12 middle-class armed ships. All of them belong to the slaver fleets of the Hanayabarta kingdom. One of them was transporting smuggled goods, which Supervisor Hansk will make an inventory of, and their other two fleets were ferrying around a thousand slaves. They had all been purchased from the Golden Coast. We will let them work on the island for a period of time before we release them," said Lorist.

"Alright, Milord," replied Supervisor Hansk.

"There are also more than 200 slavers on the ships. Potterfang, send someone to question them before hanging them. As for their sailors, hang those who don't behave. As long as any of them are subjects of the Hanayabarta kingdom, make sure not to let them off, understood?" instructed Lorist casually, deciding the fate of more than a hundred lives without a single care in the world.

"Understood, Milord," said Potterfang, before he turned around and barked a few orders. Soon, a few silver-ranked knights brought a regiment of soldiers with them to the ships that had just been taken.

Lorist had been rather anxious recently. When he couldn't calm himself down, he would set sail for the Sea of Grief to join Engelich and the others expropriating ships. The Sea of Grief was largely empty, however. It was no surprise since the ships came from somewhere else after all. Lorist had already expropriated most of the smuggler's ships, and even those who managed to evade capture did not dare to sail in the area anymore.

Frustrated and annoyed, Lorist traveled straight to the trade route near Hidegold Bay where the ships of the Hanayabarta kingdom would pass through with the Flying Fish of Dawn and Windstorm. As expected, there were far more ships there for their taking.

The slaver nobles of the kingdom mostly had their own fleets, with the larger ones having roughly eight ships and the smaller ones had two or three. Within half a month, more than 40 ships were successfully taken. As long as the Flying Fish of Dawn managed to line up to the enemy ships, with Lorist's presence there, the ship would no longer be able to escape. The Windstorm also finally got her chance to test out the might of her cannons. More than seven ships that attempted to sail away had been sunk by the Windstorm with relative ease.

"Milord, all the troops to be deployed have made their way to the island," said Potterfang.

"Okay. The coast is filled with the ships of the house, so I already had a hunch about that," said Lorist.

"However, I realized that many of our soldiers are not used to the ship motions. Many of them get seasick because they are not used to spending extended periods of time at sea," said Potterfang.

"We don't have a choice. Have some herbalists cook up more medicine for seasickness and give each soldier one bottle of it," Lorist came up with a less-than-ideal solution, "Is there anything else?"

"Milord, the 14 ships the Peterson Merchant Guild lent us has also just arrived. President Peterson even wrote you a letter. Also, Knight Lundmorde sent us an update on the conflict between the Teribo kingdom and the Union as well as the second highness's battles at the Redlis kingdom," said Supervisor Hansk as he took out a letter.

As he opened it, Lorist asked, "What did the report say?"

"The Teribo kingdom is no more and the Union has won. Also, the second highness suffered a huge loss at the Majik Province," Potterfang replied, "I placed the report in your tent, Milord."

"Oh," Lorist said, before putting aside the matter of the report as he started to read President Peterson's letter.

Apart from asking how Lorist was doing, the president briefly described the victory and the following changes coming to the Union. One of the most important things he stated was the fact that the Union has been set back rather heavily after eight months

of war with the Teribo kingdom. Even the Peterson Merchant Guild, one of the big seven guilds of the Union, had suffered huge losses in terms of might and business. It has been one of the toughest ordeals they have ever faced.

This was different from the resistance of the invasion of the Krissen Empire. Back then, the Union had allies all over that supported their cause. The various neighboring nations all understood that if the Union fell, they would be the empire's next targets. That was why they supported the Union as best as they could and forged very close ties. Even if the Union suffered heavy losses from a Krissen invasion attempt, they would recover rather quickly in the coming years with trade between the other nations.

But the War of Glass was a different beast altogether. Even though the Union was technically the one that was attacked, their enemy was the simple-minded Teribo VII. It was incredibly unlucky of the Union to get an enemy like that who managed to change the perception other nations had of the Union. He turned the Union from the victim to the aggressor.

To the neighboring nations, the Union, which no longer has an enemy to worry about at the north, had begun to use their superior might to suppress the smaller nations around them. Many believed that the War of Glass was started as an excuse for the Union to begin their monopoly on the glass trade.

The truth of the matter was not important to those onlookers. What mattered was the situation before their eyes. The Union's deployment of troops at the capital of the kingdom, Feyers, and their declaration of the extermination of the Teribo kingdom was seen as excessive by the neighboring nations no matter how much of a fool Teribo VII actually was. The formation of the allied army of eleven nations was more of a precaution for the Union's ambitions than a way to earn a quick buck at Teribo VII's expense.

But nobody would've expected how the War of Glass actually came to a close. Just as the military historians who studied the conflict had described, there were no open field battles or sieges. Apart from raids, military mobilization, assassinations, and counter-assassinations the armies of both sides had stood each other off without any large-scale conflict for more than six months. Right after that, however, seven of the smaller nations were exterminated out of nowhere.

This was a war-laden with deception, scheming, transactions, threats, assassinations,

surrenders, and betrayals, as one military historian described. The truth was not far from his writings. Nearing the end of the war, two smaller merchant guilds worked together and supported a rival military faction in one of those nations financially and held their countrymen at ransom, causing the reinforcements that nation sent to the allied army to have to retreat to capture the king and surrender him to the Union in exchange for the lives of their family members.

President Peterson understood that even though the War of Glass had ended with the Union's victory, the aftereffects were only just beginning to show. On the bright side, the Union did manage to successfully implement the nobility system. After swallowing the territory of seven neighboring nations, the Union became the third largest nation on the continent and had more than enough land to enfeoff.

But as a consequence, the remaining neighboring nations of the Union steeled their guard against the Union. Not only were the various trade routes of the Peterson Merchant Guild affected, some nations even levied sanctions against any and all trade with the Union or imposed heavy taxes on any trade carried out by the Union.

Given the situation, the Peterson Merchant Guild had begun to face serious trouble. Even though they managed to get a dominion for their guild, it cost them rather a lot. Not only did they have to start new trade routes, they also had to reestablish their trade deals, settle down their new subjects, develop their dominion, and form a new combat force.

That was why President Peterson expressed his hopes that he could delay his payment to the Norton House for a year and a half, and even wished to purchase the military equipment of the house with a loan from them. The president said in the letter that the old method of trading goods was also no longer possible as many of their trade routes had been cut off all of a sudden. Also, with the inflation of prices, the house would also no longer be able to obtain the food they needed through them, given that the price of food had quadrupled after the war.

"How much money does the Peterson Merchant Guild owe us?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, they still owe us 320 thousand gold Fordes for the magic beast fur deal. Originally, they were going to pay us back with food, but they delayed the payment because of the war. As we happened to be attacked at Silowas at the same time, we agreed to let them postpone payment. Other than that, they also ordered more than 10 thousand sets of military equipment worth 540 thousand gold Fordes," Supervisor

Hansk recalled the details of the trades at his fingertips, "Milord, what did the president say? When will they guild pay us back the money?"

"See for yourself," said Lorist as he passed over the letter of the president.

Supervisor Hansk's paled as he read the letter.

"Milord, there is no way we can accept the request of the guild this time around. If they delay for another year and a half, our house will run out of money. Supervisor Spiel has already made clear estimates that the funds of the house will run out by the 6th month of next year at the latest. We were hoping that the payment from the guild would relieve us of the burden imposed on us by the development projects within the dominion. If this is the case, there's bound to be chaos in the dominion soon…" said he.

Nodding, Lorist said, "It's fine, I have some plans in mind. I will draft a reply for President Peterson's letter. Supervisor Hansk, there should be around ten thousand gold Fordes' worth of goods on the ships, so go make an inventory of them. We must use whatever we can right now."

The supervisor rushed to the ship.

Potterfang could no longer stay quiet and said, "Milord, is the house in that much financial trouble?"

"That's right. Had it not been for the release of the laborers this year who have finished their term and the attack we suffered at Silowas, we might have been able to survive longer. The new products we just released might even help us out quite a bit on that front," Lorist said as he smiled bitterly, "But I didn't think that so many of the laborers fit the criteria to join our forces and actually want to. While refusing them is easy, it's a huge waste. I was under the impression that the Chikdor Merchant Guild wanted to attack Silowas, so I agreed to the expansion of our forces.

"With so many new soldiers who we have to provide with adequate training and gear, the cost of maintaining them will only continue to rise. That is especially the case with the marines' and sailors' training. The cost of training the Windstorm's cannoneers is roughly 30 thousand gold Fordes already.

"The Hanayabarta kingdom's attack on Silowas only served to worsen our situation. The pension we have to pay for the dead soldiers is quite substantial. The expedition

against the kingdom will also likely cost us hundreds of thousands of gold Fordes. Supervisor Spiel is correct, the house will be bankrupt by the 6th month of next year."

"Is there nothing we can do, Milord?" asked Potterfang.

"Well," Lorist said as he waved the letter of President Peterson around, "Originally, I intended to take advantage of the merchant guilds that want to form their own forces to protect their own dominion. But given how long the War of Glass has dragged on, the guilds have also lost far too much. Even the Peterson Merchant Guild, one of the big seven, is finding the recent days tough, so the smaller guilds are even further out of the question. If we want to dabble in this business, we'll have to wait three years, at least, for the guilds regain their momentum."

Potterfang breathed a long sigh at the news. Given that he was a man of the military, all he could be worry about the financial situation of the house.

Pog, I have a question for you. Do you know which method is the easiest to make money with?" Lorist asked, much to the surprise of Potterfang.

"Umm," Potterfang hummed, before he finally replied, "Isn't it dealing in military gear? I've often heard Knight Charade say that the military business is extremely profitable. That was what the northbound convoy relied on as well along the journey."

"No," Lorist said, shaking his head, "The best method is raiding and robbing the landed nobles. Do you remember the time we defeated Count Cobry and occupied his city? I returned to the dominion first whereas Charade and you guys stayed for three months. You did business with the local nobles and didn't even make more than a million gold Fordes of profit.

"But after that, the convoy traveled to the Andinaq kingdom. Even though the convoy was exploited by the second highness, you guys used your might to wipe out two-thirds of the nobles there and managed to pilfer 5 million gold Fordes' worth of goods. If we didn't use that money for anything, our knights would be able to live lives of luxury for a few lifetimes.

"But I invested the money in the development of the dominion and strengthening the forces of the house. With that, we managed to exterminate the magic beast wave that had plagued the dominion for more than 200 years and provided a safe environment for our troops and subjects to live in. We also started many factories and workshops,

as well as villages and institutions of study. We'll also be launching a proper academy soon.

"Other than that, we also managed to find a location to build a port at the Bladedge mountains and built up our port city, all the while converting part of the dangerous Blackmud Marsh into farmable land. The dominion was only able to flourish because the house invested so much money in it. The annual spending of the house is easily over a million gold Fordes. All the profits we reaped are also invested for further development, like the case with the 2 million plus gold Fordes we made from the military equipment deals with our three allies.

"Had it not been for the slavers' attack on the island, I might have deployed you guys against the Madras duchy. That's because there aren't any richer forces near the Northlands that we can raid. Originally, I intended to attack the Sidgler province's Platinum Beach before launching an ambush on Duke Madras' lair and making off with his riches. We could have used the money we gained from that expedition to solve our crisis.

"Don't look at me like that, Pog. You are one of my most-trusted knights, and that's why I'm willing to be so frank with you. I made that plan to give our forces a chance to engage in actual battle as well. You should know best that good soldiers aren't the result of training, but participation in real battles. Other than that, the Madras duchy is hostile towards us, so we have a good reason to go to war with them. Profiting off their riches was only a minor goal of the plan," said Lorist as he laughed.

"But now that the Hanayabarta kingdom has come knocking on our doors, we'll let Duke Madras off the time being. After all, his dominion is at Sidgler, and it's not like he can move away all of a sudden. We can be sure that there will be more chances to attack him. To be honest, I'm not that worried about our financial situation right now. The Hanayabarta kingdom is bound to have much more riches than the Madras duchy, given that the slavers must have made huge profits over the dark trade of people. I would definitely be glad to use their ill-deserved wealth for a greater purpose."

Lorist revealed an insidious smile as he said, "Potterfang…"

Potterfang stood at attention and said, "Milord, please let me know of your will."

"Remember, the main priority of the expedition on the Hanayabarta kingdom is the rescue of our men from the slavers. After that comes sucking their wealth dry to

relieve the financial crisis of our house. As for our soldiers, we should spread the propaganda that we are taking righteous vengeance against the Hanayabarta kingdom for wronging us. Let them know that we are sailing to free our comrades. That way, our soldiers won't feel like they are pirates or bandits, understood?"

"Milord, I understand. Like you said, those who slight the Nortons shall be put down, far as they may be! We are going to punish the darned slaver nobles and slave traders. Reaping their wealth is only par for the course and not our main goal."

"Good. Potterfang, tell me more about the report Lundmorde sent. How did the second highness lose that badly?"

"Well, after the War of Glass, Teribo VII went insane and killed himself. Many nations that sent forces to join the allied army were also swallowed up. Two of the nations, in particular, was ended by the very soldiers they sent out as reinforcements, so I suspect something along the lines of bribery went on. They actually captured the leaders of their nation and surrendered them to the Union. Right now, the Union has the third largest territory of all the nations on Grindia, and they have incurred the caution and suspicion of their neighbors.

"Lundmorde says that the price of goods in Morante right now is incredibly high. The ale at the Red Grace Inn that costs only two coppers is worth ten coppers right now. Also, Lundmorde asked for a raise, he said he wouldn't be able to feed his family otherwise.

"As for the second highness's loss, Lundmorde only found out about it after he read the Morante Daily. According to the paper, a new military strategist called Zitram or something emerged among the nobles of the Redlis kingdom. He used the second highness's carelessness to bait his forces into a low-lying area and destroyed a dam nearby. As a result, the second highness's army has been wiped out. Even though it's said that the second highness managed to escape alive, his army of 70 thousand is almost completely decimated. He's sworn vengeance against the man.

Chapter 275
Battle on Shore

Ship sails fluttered noisily, filled by the strong ocean winds. A circle of 137 ships of all shapes and sizes slipped over the water.

Whale Island VIII was one of these ships. It had originally been a whaling ship, but the whales had long been eradicated. It underwent extensive modification and was now a large-class fishing ship. She was part of a fleet of eight, all of whom were former whaling ships, that fished for the house.

Whale Island VIII's cabin was tightly packed. More than ten household knights were seated shoulder-to-shoulder. They were listening to Potterfang's brief on their strategy for the upcoming attack on the Hanayabarta kingdom.

A hand-drawn map of the Hanayabarta archipelago hung on the cabin wall. The room was illuminated by slightly over ten thick cow-fat candles.

Potterfang held a thin wooden stick in his hand as he continued the brief.

"Apart from the main island of the archipelago, there are another 27 islands of different sizes. The ones we have to watch out for are the eight right next to Nupite, called the Seaweed Islands.

"According to some slaves, the Seaweed Island Major is the dominion of Baron Sinyada. There is a plantation there were more than 400 slaves toil away with a security squad of roughly 30 people. As for the smaller ones, they're too small to be enfeoffed as a proper dominion, but sometimes, the slaver nobles will travel there for a vacation. As long as we pay attention to the shorelines of those islands for the presence of ships, we'll be able to determine whether there is anyone there easily. Regiment leader Polant, you are assigned to take those islands and leave a regiment of troops on the large one to settle the slaves down. Tell them that we, House Norton, have come to liberate them. As for the guards, if they're not helpful or cooperative, hang them."

"Roger that, sir," said a big-bodied silver-ranked knight as he stood up.

Potterfang continued to wave his wooden pointer stick the map as he said, "After the Seaweed Islands come the Twin Pomfret Islands. They are roughly of the same size, about the size of a viscounty each. Like the largest island, these also have slaver noble manors with roughly 800 slaves on each island and another security team of approximately a hundred people. Leddings, take the western Pomfret Island and Grey will take the eastern one."

"Understood, sir," said two silver-ranked knights in unison.

"Following that we have the Twinhead Tortoise Island and the Featherfall Island. The Twinhead Tortoise Island has two dominions on it; one belongs to a viscount and the other to a baron. In both dominions are slave-run manors. The Featherfall Island, on the other hand, has a county on it that even has a castle. Rumor has it that the slaver count would occasionally travel to the island to stay a few days at his castle. Morse, the Twinhead Tortoise Island will be yours to take care of.

"Zigda, I'll leave the Featherfall Island to you. I will also send out a regiment of wheelbarrow-ballista troops to assist you. According to the slaves, that count is also guarded by a blademaster. If you do see the slaver count on the island, don't be rash lest you suffer huge casualties. Just send someone to report to us and we'll take care of the blademaster, understood?"

"Yes, sir," replied the silver-ranked knight Zigda.

"Lastly, we have Goldshark Island and Duck Island. These two islands are angled together like a V-shape funnel, and at the innermost point between the two islands lies Nupite. Goldshark Island belongs to a duke. Fiercetiger Loze, sweep Goldshark Island clean with one division of heavy-armored troops and another regiment of wheelbarrow-ballista troops."

"Alright," responded Loze with a smile.

"Ovidis…"

"Reporting for duty, sir!" exclaimed Ovidis as he stood up suddenly.

"Your Thunderbolt Brigade shall fight to occupy that corner of the island after Loze's attack. Over there is an ocean channel roughly 160 meters in width which you must seal up so that the ships docked at Nupite won't have the chance to escape. I will assign a brigade of heavy-armored troops and another brigade of wheelbarrow-ballista

troops to aid you in your endeavor so that the enemy won't get the chance to get off their ships and attack you on land."

"Sure thing. Not one of the enemy ships will be able to leave the port," promised Ovidis.

"Malek, Duck Island is a little larger than Goldshark Island, and there are two counties and one viscounty there. You will be responsible for occupying the slave-run manors there."

"Roger," replied Malek.

Potterfang began waving his stick again as he continued, "Between Duck Island and the main island is a reefy area, so we won't have to worry about the enemy escaping from there. From the map, you can see that the bay at Nupite resembles a huge wine barrel. All we have to do is seal the main and sub routes, the ships in the port will definitely be unable to escape.

"I'm leaving that task to the Oceanic Legion. Senbaud, Milord said that you only need to sink around ten incoming ships to clog up the routes. Remember, it is crucial that you do not let the enemy ships get close, understood?"

Senbaud nodded in agreement.

"Apart from the units who will conquer the eight islands, the remaining ships should all circle around the reef area opposite of Duck Island and get onto the shores of the main island. Milord will personally lead that unit. As there is roughly a kilometer between Nupite and the coast we will be docking at, all troops are to get into defensive formations promptly once they're on the shore. When all the troops are properly deployed, we will commence our attack.

"Yuriy, your light cavalry scout brigade won't be participating in the attack on Nupite. Since your troops are cavalry units, take a detour and make your way to the rear of the city immediately and occupy the hilly area there. That is the crucial route from the port to the Hamidas, the royal capital. Occupying the route will allow us to stop our enemies from getting any news of what's happening at Nupite and also seal off the land-based escape route for the slavers. Josk, Milord ordered you to follow Yuriy and the rest to back them up."

"Roger that," said Yuriy and Josk in unison.

"Milord, do you have any more instructions?" asked Potterfang as he turned to Lorist, who sat in the corner.

Lorist got off his chair and said, "Potterfang, you've been incredibly thorough with your attack plan, so I won't need to comment much. I will, however, remind you all of two things. First, we're here to save our people and avenge the deaths of those who were killed, but we're not here on a suicide mission. Even though the forces of the house are incredibly strong, it won't do for us to be careless.

"The slavers of the kingdom are incredibly rich, so they've no doubt hired quite a number of blademasters. According to the captives, Nupite alone has close to 20 blademasters. That's why all of us have to exercise extreme caution. Make sure to stay in formation to avoid any unnecessary casualties. Let the wheelbarrow-ballista units, Blademaster Engelich, and I deal with the enemy blademasters.

"Second, the Hanayabarta kingdom has more than 400 thousand slaves. Those slaves will be our main source of aid. Make sure to tell them that we're here to liberate them and that they will regain their freedom as long as the slavers are defeated. We have to treat them well. They will be our guides.

"Alright, if there are no other questions, go back and make your preparations. The fleet will set sail shortly. Remember the main reason for our attack on the kingdom: those who slight the Nortons shall be put down!"

All of the knights stood and saluted as one, thumping their right fist on their left chest as they chanted, "Those who slight the Nortons shall be put down!"

The blow of a horn could be heard across the wide and expansive sea as one ship after another raised their sails and headed to the southwest.

……

A horn blared not far from Nupite. It warned of an attack. Panicking droves of enemies could be seen in the distance through the telescope. They didn't know how to respond and had no choice but to pace around in terror. There had never been an invasion in the decades the Hanayabarta kingdom existed. The local guards to no longer knew how to react properly. They were so used to dealing with nothing but weak, helpless slaves that they couldn't deal with an organized force anymore.

The Windstorm had already turned to the side, aligning the cannons on her left to the

mast-filled shores of the port before firing. Any ship that raised their sails would be torn apart without question nor mercy.

Led by a middle-class ship at the front, up to a hundred household armed ships of various sizes took a turn around the Windstorm, avoiding the reef area and heading straight for the shore up front.

The city's bells rang with ever-increasing urgency and the city, so famed for its ability to deal with slaves, erupted in a frenzy of panic and terror. Cries and curses streamed incessantly into Lorist's ear.

The Windstorm's cannons let out yet another round of thunderous booms. Lorist could hear that the twelve cannons on one side of the Windstorm did not fire all at once; instead, they were divided into three firing groups that alternated. Each volley was shot by four cannons. It ensured that there were cannonballs flying towards the city at all times.

The ship shuddered momentarily - it had beached. Lorist leaped from the ship and, despite still being quite a distance from dry land, found that the water only came to his chest. He could hear countless splashes behind him as he started wading to shore.

Standing on the shore, Lorist turned back and saw the water-splashed soldiers of the house. He could see heavy-armored troops jumping off another ship that had just reached the shore, but the wheelbarrow-carroballista troops were troubled about what to do with their weapons. While they could jump straight into the sea like the others, they couldn't actually toss their wheelbarrow-ballistae off the ship.

Lorist stopped a guard beside him.

"Go tell them to have four ballista troops to get off the ship first before lowering the wheelbarrow-ballistae down and carrying them to the shore," he said as he pointed to the ship.

"Understood, Milord," said the guard before he dashed away.

Another sounding of the horn could be heard as thousands of people rushed out of the port in the distance. They began charging to the troops forming up on the beach.

"Get into formation!"

Every single disembarked troop hurriedly assembled into a square formation, each contained about 100 people. The formations lined up side by side, forming a long rectangular defensive line. The soldiers still jumping off the ships scrambled to get into formation as well. They didn't even bother to shake off the water or twist it out of their clothing. In the blink of an eye, more than ten square formations stood in front of Lorist.

The people rushing out of the port were less than 200 meters away. They didn't expect that Lorist's troops would be able to assemble so quickly. They thought they would be able to catch them off guard and push them back into the sea. However, by the time they arrived in front of the enemy, the ones rushing at the front had begun to hesitate. Even though they were still approaching, they did so warily, with careful steps.

It seemed that those who had arrived were a group of hurriedly-assembled slavers. Their armor and weapons were hastily put together. As Lorist swept his gaze past the enemy fighters, his view suddenly stilled.

Among the ranks of the enemy stood about a hundred men wearing the armor of the Norton troops. It was obvious that they were the ones who had been part of the attack on Silowas and had taken the armor off the dead of the third local defense brigade.

"My soldiers, do you see them over there? Those fellows are wearing the armor of our comrades! What do you think we should do?" Lorist called out in a clear voice for his men to hear.

A commotion broke out among the troops before a thousand voices began to chant the same thing: "Kill! Kill them all!".

Lorist drew his longsword and pointed it at the enemy.

"Then, kill them as you please! Avenge our fallen comrades!"

Leaping to the very front, Lorist rushed towards the enemy ranks. The distance of roughly 200 meters was closed almost instantly. With a great howl, Lorist thrust himself into the forest of spears. He swung his longsword and lopping enemy heads off with abandon. Blood splattered all over as man and horse crashed to the ground and the enemy formation fell into disarray.

Countless corpses lay unmoving on the ground as cries of pain resounded nonstop. Lorist moved wherever he pleased amidst the enemy -- none of whom were able to

match his sword as it cut them down. He left a river of blood in his wake. The moment Lorist spotted an enemy wearing the armor of the Norton soldiers, he would give pursuit relentlessly until the enemy was felled by his sword.

A sword strike like flowing water flashed in the corner of his eye and appeared in front of him a moment later.

"Oh, a blademaster?" he said excitedly as he parried the strike.

The longsword in his hand blurred out of existence as he launched into a storm of attacks, pressing on against the old blademaster with a goatee. The Hanayabarta kingdom was not short on blademasters who craved the high pay offered by the slavers. Lorist resolved himself to kill as many as he could to minimize the casualties of his troops.

Clang-clang-clang-clang! Sounds of clashing swords echoed across the beach and out over the ocean.

"Ugh," grunted the old man.

He rolled his eyes the moment his throat was slit. Blood poured nonstop from the gaping hole.

"Sol, can you even call yourself a rank 1 blademaster with those skills?" commented Lorist in an aloof tone.

The goateed blademaster must have been one of the weakest of his rank, for he had only been able to take twelve of Lorist's strikes before being felled.

Two roars rang out beside Lorist with no warning. Turning around to look, he could see a dark-skinned burly man and another old gloomy-looking guy rushing towards him with their swords.

"Ah, two more blademasters have come. Hehe, just in time!"

Lorist as he rushed to cross swords with them.

The pudgy dark-skinned man's strikes carried with them lots of weight. Given the obvious and glaring horizontal and vertical strikes, the man had to be one that walked the path of brute force. The gloomy old man, on the other hand, excelled in sneak

attacks. He launched careful strikes behind the huge dark-skinned man. The two were a rather good team.

However, it didn't take long for Lorist to get a good grasp of their attack pattern. The two blademasters struggled more and more under Lorist's flurry of strikes as time passed. It wasn't long before the huge blademaster sustained two injuries and was slowed down substantially.

"Arrgghh!" cried the huge blademaster the moment he suffered yet another cut.

This one chipped off a good chunk of flesh and revealed the bone beneath.

Seeing the unfavorable situation, the gloomy blademaster ducked behind his huge partner and shoved him straight at Lorist before turning tail in an attempt to escape. Lorist sidestepped the huge man and pushed his sword through the back of the gloomy-looking blademaster.

The dark-skinned man chuckled as he said, "Haha, that old dog actually tried to abandon me and run… I bet he didn't think that he would be the first to die instead… Hahaha, come, just end it for me already…"

Lorist furrowed his brow and asked, "Aren't you all rank 1 blademasters? Why are you so weak?"

The dark-skinned man smiled in a weird manner before he said, "We were satisfied when we reached the rank of blademaster and began to enjoy life as we pleased. Over here, I fooled around with more than ten women every single day! How would I have the time to train with my sword?

"That old dog over there likes young girls, what a messed up fellow. As for that one," he paused as he pointed at the first blademaster to die by Lorist's sword, "That fellow loves food and men the most."

Lorist came to understand that the blademasters that accepted the Hanayabarta kingdom's offer were all those who no longer intended to continue their training. They weren't the least bit as strong as Lorist had imagined them to be and were a far cry from the rank 1 blademaster of the Dawn Academy, Instructor Claude, or Viscount Kristoph of House Fisablen. The main difference between the blademasters of the kingdom and those other two was that the former wanted to enjoy their lives rather than continue to toil hard until they broke through to the next stage.

"How many of you are there?" asked Lorist.

"Four," said the dark-skinned man without needing further elaboration on Lorist's part.

"Remember to not walk the wrong path in your next life," said Lorist before he strode past the man, lopping his head off.

Lorist looked around trying to spot the last blademaster but only saw emptiness all around him. Nobody dared to get close to the body of the blademasters around him.

Even though the battle on the shore was still being fought, the Norton forces were obviously holding an advantage. Even though there were quite a number of gold-ranked swordsmen among the enemy, the discipline of the Norton troops allowed them to hold their formation. All of the corpses littering the shore were those of the slavers.

Ah, there he is, thought Lorist the moment he saw a distinct sword flash in the distance.

Engelich was caught up in battle with another old fellow dressed in black scale armor. From the looks of it, Engelich seemed to be on the losing end.

Lorist rushed there promptly, but still managed to cut off the heads of two gold ranks along the way.

"Engelich, you're far too lousy. I've already killed three blademasters myself, yet you were unable to take care of even one. It seems that I will have to school you hard in the future, lest you embarrass the Norton name."

Engelich said as he breathed raggedly, "Milord, did you not see that the guy over there is a rank 2 blademaster?"

"Oh, no wonder you weren't able to take him on. Step back and let me at him," said Lorist before he jumped forward with his sword.

The old blademaster wearing the black scale armor was terrified the moment he heard that Lorist had slain three blademasters. He tried to escape immediately. Just as Lorist was about to give chase, he heard a loud cry.

"Fire!"

Several loud twangs rang out. A moment later the retreating blademaster let out a cry of pain. He looked just like a wild hare that had been nailed to the ground with an arrow. There were two iron bolts piercing through his back and more than a dozen on the ground around his body.

The wheelbarrow-ballista division's troops had finally managed to get into formation on the shore. Their first target was the old blademaster that had been battling Engelich. They had been unable to fire any earlier because Engelich was engaged in close-combat with the blademaster. They released their bolts without hesitation the moment the two parted, however.

With the four blademaster completely wiped out, the remaining slavers cast their weapons aside and ran back towards the city. They weren't fast enough to evade the ballistae's fire, however, and were nailed to the ground one after another.

"Blow the horn to get into proper formation! We'll launch our attack on the port right away!" instructed Lorist.

Chapter 276
Karman

A large number of people could be seen at the plaza next to the port in the distance. However, when Lorist rushed over there, the group of people merely stirred slightly before stepping aside to make a path while looking with an odd gaze of wonder and envy. Their tattered rags made their identity clear; they were slaves.

Lorist found it weird that so many slaves were gathered at the port and wondered why they had done so. However, Lorist was a little slow to arrive. The guards of the port who had been busy frightening the slaves at first had cast away their armor and entered the inner walls of Nupite before hurriedly closing the gates.

It didn't take long for another wave of pained cries and moans and a few streaks of smoke coming from the distance to take Lorist's attention. A large group of enslaved women and children were despairing on the bridge near the port, where another 17 to 18 small speed boats could be seen carrying huge linen sacks that were set aflame.

Lorist quickly understood the reason for the women and children's cries. Those slaves had been chained to the port and were unable to move away from where they were. They could only stare as the linen sacks burned brighter and fiercer and await their death with despair.

Some of the slaves wore expressions of grief while others looked as if they were finally going to be liberated from their life of suffering. There were also those who were coughing nonstop for inhaling too much smoke. One huge, scarred man seated at the frontmost part with a burning sack behind him called out to his family and implored them to stay strong and live.

Like a huge bird, Lorist dashed his way to the burning speedboats. The moment he set foot on the deck, a waft of smoke rushed into his nostrils.

Good Sol, these sacks have all been doused with oil. No wonder the fire's so strong.

Without hesitation, Lorist used a long stick he picked up by the side of the port to push the sacks into the ocean, causing one cheer after another to resound along the bridge.

A few other soldiers and knights made their way to the bridge and helped their lord save the slaves.

The household knights easily cut the slaves' chains with their silver blade glows, allowing those who had barely just survived to reunite with their families.

"Sir, good Sir…"

Lorist turned around and saw the man with scars all over his body holding two children around ten years old come to him and prostrate himself as he said, "Thank you, Sir, for saving our lives."

Lorist stepped back and said, "Stand up, you don't have to thank me in this fashion. House Norton forbids slavery. You are free."

On Grindia, prostrating oneself with all limbs flat on the ground was one of the most extreme forms of submission. It was normally reserved for sacrificial ceremonies to the gods. It just so happened that the Hanayabarta kingdom mandated that the slaves show them the same degree of respect to sate their egotistical cravings for power.

The huge man looked flabbergasted as if he couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"We… we're free?"

Lorist nodded.

"That's right, you are free. However, you will still have to be monitored temporarily so that you don't cause trouble for our operations. We are in the midst of a war, so you will only regain true freedom once I defeat the slavers and slave traders."

The huge man straightened his back and hugged his two children, crying.

"We're free… We're finally free…"

Lorist took a good look at that man and his two children. The older one was a boy around the age of twelve while the younger child was a girl of around seven. She was dressed just like a boy, however. Her hair was incredibly messy. Lorist assumed it was a protective measure to ensure her safety.

"Sir, apologies for showing you my unsightly form," the huge man said after a good

long sob, "Can you tell me your name, Sir? I will definitely not forget my debt to you."

"We are House Norton from the Northlands, also known as the Roaring Raging Bear," replied a guard beside Lorist proudly.

"Northlands… Norton… Raging Bear?" the huge man mused, "Ah, I know. You're here to exact revenge. No wonder your armor looks so familiar. A fight broke out over one of your armor sets and some people even died as a result."

"Oh, what are you called?" asked Lorist, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm called Karman, Sir. I come from the Romon Empire," replied the huge man respectfully.

"The Romon Empire? Wow, that's quite far. Stand up. Tell me how you came to be a slave in the first place," said Lorist.

"Thank you, Sir," said Karman as he stood up, "I used to be an apprentice attendant to Count Bilop. The count angered the prime minister and was stripped of his dominion and attacked by the empire's army. After the attendants and guards were captured, of which I was one, we were sold off as slaves. It happened about 19 years ago. I was just 15 at the time."

"You've awakened your battleforce?"

"That's right. Had it not been for that, I wouldn't have been able to stay alive for so long. It's only because of my battleforce that I was considered in a much better light and even allowed to bear two children," replied Karman.

"Then, why were you chained up over here?" asked Lorist.

"Look," Karman said as he pointed at the Windstorm near other sunken ships in the distance, "Is that ship one of your family's, Sir?"

Lorist nodded.

"That ship's far too powerful! The ten of the royal family's patrol ships were sunk in mere moments. The remaining ones don't dare to engage it. So, one of the people in charge came up with a ploy to dump flaming piles on the speedboats and have them sail towards your ship. They wanted us slaves to paddle the boats in exchange for the

safety of our families…”

Lorist felt a chill run down his spine and relieved that he had made it in time to stop the enemy's plan. Over 30 flaming boats ramming into the Windstorm would be something terrible to behold.

"Search all the ships around the port and capture anyone on board and bring them here. Kill anyone who resists," instructed Lorist to the guard nearby.

"Sir, the crews of the royal patrol fleet have already retreated behind the inner walls. Their ships have long been evacuated," said Karman.

"Aren't there still people on the other merchant vessels? Everyone must come here to be screened," said Lorist with satisfaction.

The 200-odd ships would become his property soon. They alone were easily worth more than a million gold Fordes.

"Karman, tell me more about the incident regarding the armor of our troops."

"Did the slavers attack your dominion three months ago, Sir?" asked Karman.

"That's right. They attacked one of our island dominions."

"Sir, the garrison troops of your dominion were really amazing," Karman praised, "I still recall that more than 20 guards from this port joined that attack and only three of them came back. Even though they managed to gain quite a bit of coin, they only managed to get one breastplate from your troops. After they returned, the three fought over who should take possession of the breastplate without end. Due to being excessively drunk, a fight broke out and it ended with two dead and one heavily injured. The injured one died two days later from excessive blood loss, so the leader of the guards took the breastplate for himself.

"I was among the slaves who were tasked to deal with the corpses, so I got a good look at that breastplate. The moment I saw your troops wearing armor of the same design, I knew you were here to take revenge. However, Milord, there seemed to have been lots of people who were captured during their attack. I recall seeing tens of thousands of enslaved people. We were wondering where they came from in the first place."

"Only a part of the people captured were subjects of my dominion. Most of them are

refugees who were brought in to develop our dominion. It was precisely because of their presence that the slavers decided to attack us. Karman, many of our troops were captured as well. Do you know where they are being held?" asked Lorist.

"I seem to have heard something about it before," said Karman in deep thought.

"Bali. Bali, come over."

Karman called out to a slave behind him.

A thin young man around the age of 17 came forward timidly and asked, "You called for me, Uncle Karman?"

"Yes. Bali, do you remember seeing a group of weird-looking slaves at the port two months ago?"

Bali nodded.

Karman continued, "Think hard about this. Why did those slaves strike you as weird? Also, where were they taken?"

"Oh, they looked a little too prideful to be slaves. Many of them were injured and some were even outright cursing, saying that their lord would come to save them and kill all of the slavers without question. The leader of the guards here was present at that time and attempted to use his whip to teach them a lesson. But the slavers said that those slaves were for the Hamidas Dueling Grounds and that the guard leader would have to pay for the losses should the slaves be injured. In the end, the guard leader took his anger out on us and even gave me a few whips," explained Bali.

"Hamidas Dueling Grounds?" mused Lorist with dread.

What Karman said proved Lorist's fears to be right.

"Sir, perhaps, only a few of your soldiers are still alive. The Hamidas Dueling Grounds is nothing short of hell. That place hosts the crying souls of the dead slave gladiators. The slavers love performances like those the most. They love to see magic beasts tear helpless slaves apart and pit one group of slaves against another until one side is completely wiped out.

"There is usually a 'show' once every ten days, but those shows are relatively small

scale with only a little more than ten dying each time. Every month, however, there would be a large-scale battle with more than a hundred slaves participating for the slavers' entertainment. Last month, they held one of those shows to celebrate the founding of the kingdom. I heard that up to a thousand slave gladiators died during the fights."

Lorist fumed.

He said with bloodshot eyes, "Very well… For every one of our troops that died at the Hamidas Dueling Grounds, I will have ten slavers buried with them. If one of my household knights die, I will sacrifice ten of those slaver nobles to appease their souls."

"Milord," a heavy-armored soldier called out as he rushed over, "We have already sealed off four of the city gates, but there are lots of ballistae on the walls that caused us a small number of casualties. Blademaster Engelich sent me here to ask you when we will begin the siege."

Lorist raised his head and looked at the distant inner walls upon which many people were gathered.

"Are there that many ballistae up there?"

"We estimate at least a hundred," replied the soldier.

Even though Lorist was still feeling seething anger after finding out where his troops and knights were sent, he didn't let his emotions affect his decision to order the troops to attack the walls immediately.

"Order our troops to retreat to a safe distance. Form a defensive line to stop anyone from escaping. Order the wheelbarrow-ballista units to keep firing at the walls around four gates to put pressure on the enemy troops on the walls operating the ballistae. Since we've occupied the port area, have Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade come ashore for now. We'll let the enemies in the inner walls live for another day. We'll launch our attack tomorrow," instructed Lorist.

"Yes, milord," said the soldier before he ran off.

"Milord," said Potterfang as he came over.

"What's up with your situation?" asked Lorist.

"Yuriy and Josk have already begun operations with the light cavalry scout brigade. Apart from the ships that have docked, we had the remaining ones come over to the port over here. I've already had the battlefield cleaned up. We have around 300 casualties and more than 2000 dead enemies," replied Potterfang.

"Good. If Fiercetiger Loze, Malek, and the rest managed to conquer the eight islands, order them to bring their men here. Have all the slaves and captives brought over to the main island and leave a company of troops to defend each of the islands. Make sure to light a smoke signal the moment any enemy movement is noticed. Also, get Senbaud's Oceanic Legion to increase the patrols around the islands. Assign one brigade of heavy-armored troops and another brigade of wheelbarrow-ballista to him to deal with the remaining 19 islands. Have the slaves and captives brought over here as well."

"Understood, Milord," replied Potterfang.

"Sir, Sir…" Karman called out.

"What's wrong?" asked Lorist.

"Sir, can you give us a chance to aid you in any way? You've saved our lives and have given us our freedom. We are willing to form up and help you attack the walls. Sir, we are not afraid of death. As long as you give us some weapons, we will be more than willing to revolt and pay the slavers back for all the pains we've suffered."

Lorist shook his head.

"Karman, I appreciate your sentiment, but to be honest, you guys are not well-trained and have quite weak constitutions. It's not that I'm looking down on you guys, but sending you to attack the walls is nothing short of suicide. It is a sacrifice that will not bring us any benefit at all."

Karman's gaze dimmed as he understood that Lorist spoke nothing but the truth.

"However, there is a way that you can help me out," Lorist said as he pointed at the slaves gathered up near the port, "Organize them properly. We will need guides to show us the way to the palace's food stores so that we can get something prepared to feed you. I heard that there are more than 400 thousand slaves here in the kingdom. If I merely liberate you and leave you to your own devices, a food crisis would surely ensue.

"Find some more talented and trustworthy ones among the slaves and gather them up. I believe that you are more than capable of this. Form a temporary settlement to help us organize and deal with the slaves we rescue. Only after the slaver nobles are exterminated can we transport you lot back to the mainland and return you to your homes.

"Also, there's a lot of things I will need your help with. You guys can help us screen the slavers and determine which are worthy of death and help us find their hidden warehouses; you can also help with cooking… Support the injured instead of charging to your deaths. If you are willing, you are also free to follow us back to the Northlands to our dominion and start your lives there. Karman, are you willing to help me out?"

Karman bowed deeply and said, "Milord, it is my greatest honor to be able to serve you. I trust that the other slaves are more than willing to do so as well."

Chapter 277
Hector and the Slave Camp

Karman did not disappoint. He quickly gathered up the slaves at the port and began to set up camp. He also sent some slaves who were familiar with the islands and terrain to serve as guides and aided with the occupation of the warehouses in and out of the walls. He also managed to recruit other slaves to his cause and set up tens of youth slave squads numbering around a hundred men each to keep the camp in order. Not only that, he also had the women and children help out with other chores such as cooking food and making soup, greatly contributing to the Norton forces.

Being the most well-known slave trading area, Nupite was considered a rather large city, even though the inner walls weren't that large. Ever since the founding of the kingdom, the city's walls had never once been assailed by enemies, so the slavers and slave traders turned complacent and began expansive development at the outer part of the cities away from the defense afforded by the inner walls. They built mansions, manors, warehouses, and trade areas, all of which had fallen into Lorist's hands.

Countless slaves gathered together joyfully and the newly set-up camp continued to grow in size. The slavers and traders cried and cursed from the top of the walls as they watched one warehouse after another pried open and stripped bare.

At three in the afternoon, the guards on the inner walls began to throw flaming torches down to light up the houses built along the sides of the inner walls. Perhaps they had intended to use the flames to torch all that was outside the walls, but Lorist reacted quickly and had the slaves aid the family forces to set up an isolated area beyond which the fire could not spread just shy of the of the ballistae on the walls' range, thus foiling the enemy's plan. He had his own ballistae firing at the walls all the while, inflicting severe casualties on the those atop them.

In the evening, a group of soldiers Lorist sent out to scout brought some good news: they had found Hector, the chief secretary of Silowas, much to his surprise and delight. The slave camp they had built held around 80 thousand people, but that number was still shy of a third of the total slave population on the archipelago. There was little doubt that the population in the camp would grow explosively over the coming days,

so Lorist was glad to hear that Hector would be able to return to his service and manage the area. Lorist had much else to do.

When the slavers attacked Silowas, Hector could have retreated to Farama Village first. But just as he was leaving Whitebird Town, a group of slavers was on their tail and Mayor Hugo brought ten or so youths with him to keep them at bay. Hector, on the other hand, was busy evacuating the panicked townfolk, which had cost him the time he needed to escape, leading to his eventual capture.

The only thing Hector could find solace in was the fact that he had moved his family members to the Northlands back when he thought that the Chikdor Merchant Guild would attack the island. He was glad he wouldn't have to worry about his family's safety. He had witnessed more than a few tragic moments, of families being broken apart, during his voyage to the kingdom.

To Hector, the slavers were nothing but uncultured beasts wearing the skin of men. They did not contain a single shred of humanity. Putting aside the slaughter of the elderly and injured before leaving the island, during the ten-odd days of sailing back to the Hanayabarta kingdom, they violated every single woman on the ships save a few nubile maidens picked and saved for the slaver nobles.

Hector, on the other hand, was rather lucky as his captors had noticed his talents during the voyage. Upon knowing that he was the chief secretary of Silowas and graduate of the Krissen Empire's Mobor Academy, the slavers did not treat Hector as they did the other slaves. Instead, they had him become a bookkeeper to handle the miscellaneous matters of a company at Nupite.

When the Norton forces took over one warehouse after another, Hector was flabbergasted. He had thought that Lorist would at most send a representative to ransom him and the rest of the knights. He didn't think that Lorist would be able to mount a full-scale attack in just three short months.

During the day, Hector continued his work in the warehouse as usual without knowing about the situation outside. It was not until he saw the troops dressed in Norton standard issue armor that he announced his identity and was brought before Lorist.

After some consolation and pleasantries, Lorist quickly assigned Hector some tasks. Hector felt his head numbing when he saw the thick stack of documents on the table and started to miss his job back at the warehouse.

"Milord, you've given me so much to handle, but do you have anything you want me to focus extra effort on?" asked Hector.

Lorist realized that he shouldn't have asked Hector to take care of every single matter, trivial or not, and said, "How about this… Just deal with the matters of the slave camp. The main priorities of the house are to rescue our knights and officials that were captured and avenge the deaths of our good folk during their assault. As an aside, we're going to glean as much wealth as possible from the kingdom to solve the lack of funds our house is facing.

"To be frank, this deployment is an incredibly risky endeavor. Apart from a few select high officials of the house, the rest are not aware that we only had little more than a week's worth of supplies before we took over the resources here. In other words, our fleet wouldn't have enough food for a return trip. Had we encountered misfortune on the way here, the tens of thousands of troops would very possibly perish.

"That's why, the forces will have to rely on this place to get our supplies, and it is crucial that we get the help of the slaves for this. I have declared that we came to take revenge on the slavers as well as to liberate the slaves of the archipelago, with the condition that they must first be organized. Otherwise, the whole situation would fall into chaos with vengeful slaves messing up our plan and causing a huge fiasco.

"The Hanayabarta kingdom has more than 400 thousand slaves, with more than 100 thousand located at the plains near Hamidas. The other 200 thousand are most likely located around the area of Port Nupite. Today alone, we have taken in more than 70 thousand slaves. Countless more are due to arrive in the next week. The key of your task is to manage them well enough so they can aid our forces in our expedition.

"Milord, I understand. I will definitely make sure that they're in good order," said Hector.

Lorist shook his head and said, "Hector, don't treat these slaves like normal refugees, that will be to your detriment. You can't allow the slaves to spend long periods of time in the camp with nothing to do. The key is to keep them occupied. The thing I'm most worried about is that these slaves will launch a revolt against the slaver nobles right away the moment they are freed, setting fire to the manors and mansions if they are unable to find their tormentors. This situation is so volatile that it may erupt at any moment."

Lorist handed Hector a document.

"Read through it," he said, "We have two warehouses' worth of linen cloth from our spoils. I have already instructed for it to be sent to the slave camp to be made into clothes for the slaves. I want to gain their trust and confidence, and show them that our efforts to liberate them are sincere, not some ploy to trap them.

"Doing so will also keep the slaves occupied instead of letting them dilly-dally around the camp with nothing to do. The latter is just a recipe for disaster. Some of the more ambitious slaves could use this chance to rally some minions and push the others in the camp around. The moment that happens, it will become a huge pain for our house. You should be aware that there are over 300 thousand slaves on the whole of the archipelago while our forces only number around 40 thousand.

"When you manage the camp, put your efforts into these few things. First, form a smith camp and have slaves with any sort of skill in crafting assigned there. Second, form a few patrol brigades from a few strong reliable youths to keep the order of the camps. Third, screen the slaves and pick out any bad apples, especially those that have oppressed other slaves on their masters' behalf. Kill those who have blood on their hands and put the others into a camp for hard labor. Those are the ones who will cause the most trouble.

"Additionally, make sure to pay extra attention to our captives. I will assign two heavy-armored brigades and one wheelbarrow-ballista brigade to you that will be in charge of watching the captives and our supply stores, and as a precaution against any form of revolt or chaos breaking out in the slave camp. Should that ever happen, mobilize those three brigades to quell any resistance. We must ensure that the slave camp is kept in order at all times.

"I've already instructed the Oceanic Legion to scour the surrounding islands. They will bring more captives and slaves here over the next few days. The population of the slave camp will easily shoot past 300 thousand. As it's already the 9th month and the harvest season, we should not waste the food planted around the island. You may organize some slaves to help out with the harvest, and if there are any who wish to stay on the island after this whole ordeal to make a life for themselves, we can promise them farmland here. They can settle down here as our subjects and enjoy a life of bliss and stability."

"Milord, are you saying that you're going to make this place a dominion of the house?"

asked Hector.

"That's right," Lorist nodded and said, "I intend to exterminate the Hanayabarta kingdom and make this the overseas dominion of our house. After screening those slaves and rooting out the troublesome ones, you can assign those who are willing to stay back here on the archipelago to help us out. The house will provide them with living necessities as well as farmland and houses."

"What about the captives, Milord? How should we handle them? Let them work hard labor?"

"Hard labor? Hehe, only in their wildest dreams. They aren't even qualified for that," Lorist said as an insidious smile surfaced on his face, "Ask the soldiers of the house whether they're willing to let those murderers off after seeing the state of Silowas. Only humans serve hard labor, not animals. Let me be honest with you, Hector, I'm not going to spare a single soul of the citizens of the Hanayabarta kingdom, whether they be nobles or commoners. I will kill every single one of them to make an example for the rest of the world to see…"

Hector felt a chill down his spine from the seething killing intent radiating from Lorist.

"Milord, I understand that the slavers and slave traders are deserving of death. Their soldiers that have committed so many atrocities are no different either. But you can't kill the commoners, especially those innocent women and children… They of all people should not be your target to vent your rage on…"

Lorist smiled while shaking his head as his gaze turned ice cold. "Hector, I know you are a good man. But you've forgotten that the Hanayabarta kingdom is a nation built on the suffering of countless slaves. The commoners, including their women and children, are guilty by birth. While some of them did not personally take the life of a slave, it doesn't change the fact that they're benefitting off the blood and tears of the slaves. Now, the time of retribution is upon them. They will not be able to escape it."

"Milord, we have more men than woman and most of them are young and fit, can't we draft the female captives into a harlot camp to serve those slaves that serve our house? Also, if they wish to settle down here, they may take those captives as wives. Our soldiers will also need an outlet for their lust after all the killing, right? I think that at the very least, taking the female captives into the harlot camp as atonement for their sins is far better than killing them off just like that," suggested Hector as a

compromise.

Lorist fell into deep thought and finally said, "You're right, Hector. I'll leave this matter in your hands. Remember, maintaining the order of the slave camp is of paramount importance."

"Understood, Milord. I will start working right away," said Hector before he bowed.

"Take these documents with you. Also, I will have Karman, who's in charge of the slaves right now, come see you. He's a slave himself but has a three-star iron battleforce rank. He's a trustworthy one and you can make him the leader of the slave patrol squads after they are formed. Tell him that if he manages to break through to the silver rank, I will take him in as a household knight."

"Understood, Milord."

Hector left hurriedly and would be busy for quite a while. Lorist sat down in his chair and breathed a relieved sigh.

War was not just about charging into enemy formations and slaughtering away. It was a complicated intertwined web of logistics, food supply, casualty management, defensive patrols, and stationing troops. Only when all those aspects are taken into consideration would the end result be a favorable one. While 40 thousand elite troops were more than enough to wipe out the Hanayabarta kingdom, managing the 400 thousand slaves was the key to realizing the goals of House Norton.

Potterfang entered the tent and said, "Milord, your instructions have been fully carried out. More than 2000 captives have been decapitated and their heads are already in the process of being embalmed. The headless corpses are being buried by the slaves. Also, the cremation of our dead troops by the pyre is also complete and their ashes have been gathered up."

Potterfang hesitated for a while before he continued, "Milord, I don't understand why you gave that kind of order. What would you do with the heads of the enemy? You also instructed Fiercetiger Loze to do the same and bring the heads with him when he comes over. What good will this do?"

Lorist smiled and was just about to speak when a guard rushed in from outside the tent and reported that an ambassador carrying a white flag had been sent from the inner walls of the city.

"I'll answer your question later, Pog. Let's see what those ravenous wolves have to say for themselves."

The ambassador representing the slavers in the inner city was an old man, who introduced himself as a viscount of the Hanayabarta kingdom with no hereditary dominion. In other words, he was merely an honorary noble who had been picked to be the ambassador after drawing an unlucky lot.

Lorist and Potterfang were seated within the tent and the old man began to make his objections heard.

"Do you know that your mobilization in our territory is an affront against peace and our kingdom? You have brought blood and fire with you and caused us nobles of the kingdom to sustain severe losses! This is not something we are willing to forgive and put behind us!"

Lorist laughed heartily before he stood up and said, "I'm sure you know very well who I am, where I'm from, and why I came. I'll get straight to the point. Since you lot were daring enough to attack my house's dominion, you better be ready to accept our retribution. Don't tell me that you're willing to reimburse us for our losses. To be honest, there's nothing you can do to make up for our losses unless you can revive the poor people you killed on Silowas."

Lorist patted on the shoulder of the old ambassador in a friendly manner.

"We are reasonable men. Since you're here as an ambassador, we won't harm a single hair of yours. Even though we're at war, we will treat ambassadors well, so you don't have to be so afraid. We'll definitely see to it that you'll make it back safe and sound. Tell those in the inner city to have a good meal and enjoy the night, since it'll be their last. It's best if you bathe yourselves properly too. That way, the weapons of my soldiers won't be dirtied when they cut you down tomorrow."

The old man shivered uncontrollably and forced himself to stammer out a response.

"We w-will not s-submit… We still have si-six blademasters… W-we can hold on u-until the f-forces of the k-kingdom r-reinforce us…"

"Ah, wonderful," Lorist said gleefully, "Just this noon, I killed only three blademasters, but it wasn't satisfying enough for me at all. I hope that your six blademasters can last longer and not let me down. As for that king of yours… Don't worry, he will be buried

alongside you soon enough."

The ambassador collapsed and burst out into tears as he made his way back whence he came.

"Pog, bring some men with you and head to an empty lot of land outside the inner walls. Stack the embalmed heads into a pyramid. As for the heads of the four blademasters, put them up on a stake and display them in front of the head pyramid. Make sure to put some torches there so the pyramid can be seen clearly even at night," said Lorist.

"Milord, you intend to…"

"Don't ask, you'll understand it when it's done."

A hundred meters from the walls of the inner city, Potterfang cleared a piece of land and began to stack the heads on one another. Even though the plot of land was within range of the ballistae, and orders could be heard barked on the walls, they never fired. The threat of return fire from the wheelbarrow ballistae was too great. The guards could only wait to see what the Nortons were up to. It didn't appear they would be attacking anytime soon.

When the few carriages' worth of heads were sent over, some of the Norton soldiers with more courage than the others began to build the head pyramid amidst the silence of the night. It was so quiet that Potterfang was even able to hear the chattering of his own teeth. During the deathly silent hour, the construction of the pyramid took, not a single arrow was fired from the walls.

Ah, so this will terrify the enemy and greatly lower their morale, figured Potterfang.

At two in the morning, a guard rushed into the tent, woke Lorist, and reported, "Milord, the enemy has breached encirclement! All of them charged out from the rear entrance towards our defense lines without regard for casualties and attempted to escape! Our troops stationed there were unable to handle the sudden surge of fleeing people. Blademaster Engelich also called for reinforcements to help hunt down the escaping enemies."

Good Sol, to think that the structure would actually scare them shitless to the point of reckless escape, thought Lorist frustratedly.

Chapter 278
News from Tarkel

Lorist finally understood what it meant to have everything go wrong because one underestimated one's enemy. He had considered the people hiding within the inner walls nothing but mere cattle waiting to be slaughtered. He thought all he had to do was wait for Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade to arrive and obliterate the ballistae on the walls before launching an attack when the enemy was deprived of their ranged defense. After that, he could occupy the four inner walls and begin dealing out retribution to the slavers and slave traders.

However, he didn't think they would as desperate as they evidently were. They were willing to risk everything for their lives. They gathered up all the slaves in the inner city, modified a carriage by nailing some doors onto the push handles, and forced the slaves to push the shielded contraptions straight towards the Norton soldiers' line to draw their attention. Following that, tens of thousands of people rushed out of the gates and continued their charge without regard for their casualties in a desperate struggle to push past the defensive line and head into the wilderness before making their way to the royal capital.

Lorist suddenly recalled a joke from a show in his past life about a 'baldhead' reprimanding his subordinates for being inferior to pigs, as the 'rabbits' had to spend more than two days and three nights to capture tens of thousands of pigs whereas his tens of thousands of subordinates were captured within an afternoon by the 'rabbits'…[1]

Even though the enemies rushed out in droves like a bunch of pigs, real pigs only knew to escape but those enemies would resist when they had to. When they saw that there would be no escape, they would make their last stand against the Norton soldiers. Some silver and gold ranks went all out before their moments of death, inflicting huge casualties on the Norton troops.

Lorist could do naught but order the rest of the soldiers to regroup before giving pursuit later and avoid enemies that they weren't able to handle in the interest of minimizing casualties. They were under orders to stall the enemies as best they could

until more household knights arrived. On another front, Lorist himself was busy heading all over to give his assistance, all the while instructing Malek and Loze who had just arrived and were going to rest up to help him out.

It was only in the afternoon that Lorist gave the order to cease pursuit. During the night, when everyone else was gathered in the tent, Lorist felt like slapping himself after hearing the casualty report. There were more than 2900 casualties, of which 824 were dead. Almost an entire brigade had been rendered incapable of battle. Most of the dead died during the enemy's frenzied charge.

While it didn't show on his face, Lorist felt extreme remorse and thought that he should have pretended that he had the intention of negotiating with the old ambassador if only just to stall for time and let them feel safe for the moment behind their walls. Why did he have to tell the enemy about his clear intentions to kill every single one of them? After scaring the old man away, he even had Potterfang erect the terrifying monument outside the walls, which was definitely the straw that broke the camel's back.

That went horribly!

Lorist sighed and felt humbled after realizing that it had been his own overconfidence, his own hubris that had led his men to their death.

While the port was heavily-defended, only a single brigade of heavy-armored troops and another brigade of wheelbarrow-ballista troops were stationed at each of the three other gates of the walls. Lorist had believed that 500 ballistae were more than enough to secure each of the gates, but he did not take into account that his troops needed to rest. The midnight when the enemy charged out, less than 100 ballistae were fully manned and able to fire, which was one of the main causes for the enemy's successful escape.

"Milord, we've run the estimates," said Potterfang as he walked into the tent.

His left arm was bandaged.

He had been the first to rush to the troops' aid. Fortunately, he arrived in time to save Engelich's life. The old blademaster had been forced back by three other blademasters and would have been in a huge pinch had Potterfang not arrived in time.

Compared to blademasters, Potterfang was a bit lacking. But his swordsmanship was

strongly defense oriented, so he was able to keep the enemy occupied without trouble. Fiercetiger Loze later rushed over and changed the situation completely. One of the blademasters who was fighting Engelich saw that the situation was taking a turn for the worse and ran. One of the other blademasters was killed by Loze and Engelich.

As the second blademaster was struck down, the third - occupied with Potterfang until then - attempted to escape as well, but Potterfang - in exchange for a blow to his shoulder - foiled his attempt. Luckily, Loze and Engelich made it in time and killed him before he could do more damage.

"Speak," said Lorist, clutching his head.

"Milord, there are 7432 enemy corpses at our defensive line. Five thousand of them were found near the city gates. Over 1700 of the dead were slaves. After a day's pursuit, we managed to capture 35 thousand prisoners, most were women and children."

Sol, so over 70 thousand enemies were within the inner city and we only managed to capture and kill around 40 thousand in total... Most of the 30 thousand who escaped must have been youths who were willing to leave the elderly, women and children behind...

Lorist only hoped that Josk and Yuriy's scouts would be able to hold the enemy back. They mounted and equipped with longbows and crossbows, so they should be able to deal quite a bit of damage.

But the number of horses available was not enough! Each scout at most had one mount to themselves instead of the usual two. It was just not possible to bring enough horses along on such a rapid response expedition, one which had to cross a vast ocean no less. Even Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade assignment of two horses per siege engine had to be cut down to one. Their mobility was halved as a result. If they had another cavalry brigade, the escaped enemies could easily have been surrounded. However, only Loze brought his beloved steed with him. Lorist didn't even have a mount.

"Well, for our captives, have Hector pick out the women to serve in the harlot camps and let the slave patrol squads use the rest as target practice. Allow them to vent their anger or exact their vengeance, but make sure to cut the heads off for embalming. Loze, I trust that you will be able to see it's done."

"Yes, Milord," said Loze, standing to attention.

"Malek, I'll leave clearing out the inner city to you. After that, keep all the spoils we have within the inner city and make sure not to forget to assign food and other supplies to the slave camp once every three days, understood?"

"Yes, Milord," replied Malek.

"Pog, reorganize our family forces and leave behind two heavy-armored brigades and one wheelbarrow-ballista brigade to defend the inner city and monitor the slave camp. The rest will rest for three days before marching towards Hamidas," instructed Lorist.

"Roger."

At that moment, a guard entered the tent and reported, "Milord, Tarkel has a report for you."

Huh? Why is Tarkel still on the island? thought Lorist with surprise.

He had instructed Tarkel and Els to infiltrate the Hanayabarta kingdom two months earlier. Their mission was to gather information on Nupite and Hamidas, and to find out whether it was possible to ransom the household knights and officials. Until Tarkel's arrival today, however, they had never contacted him. As a result, Lorist had been forced to deploy his forces despite the risks involved. He didn't think that Tarkel would still be on the island.

But if he's here, what about Els?

At that moment, Tarkel entered the tent. He saluted and began his report immediately.

"Milord, Els and I posed as two relatives of several high officials in the Peterson Merchant Guild and made our way here. Upon our arrival, however, we discovered things weren't going to go as smoothly as we'd hoped. The Hanayabarta kingdom has close relations with the Chikdor Merchant Guild, but not the Peterson Merchant Guild. The slavers didn't take us seriously, though they treated us with courtesy. They assumed we were young masters traveling around to see the world."

Even though he had been ignored by the slavers and slave traders, Tarkel still managed to fit in by getting acquainted with the mid-lower class officials and quickly gained

access to large amounts of information, such as how many slaver bands and slaver nobles participated in the attack on Silowas as well as the number of slaves dispatched to every location and what they were tasked with.

Tarkel even made records of what the warehouses around Nupite had and also managed to rescue more than ten captured islanders from Silowas by purchasing them. But just as he was about to send his report, Tarkel realized with a shock that no ships were available to him.

The ships had long since finished their business on the island and had left. Some of the friends he'd made during his stay also advised him against boarding the merchant vessels of lesser, unknown slaver bands, especially since half of his slaves were women. Being attacked by the crews of those ships at sea was a real possibility, as they could easily dispose of his corpse without leaving a single trace behind.

The best course of action available to him was to wait for another month. By the end of the 10th month, the ships of the Chikdor Merchant Guild was scheduled to arrive at the kingdom, and it was far safer traveling with them than with anyone else. So, Tarkel had no choice but to stay at Nupite to await Lorist's arrival. Unfortunately for him, he was forced to evacuate into the inner city at the insistence of the few 'friends' he made, and he only managed to escape when chaos broke out during the reckless escape conducted by the people within the inner city. When he saw the household soldiers entering the city, he revealed his true identity and was busy settling down the islanders he had freed and waited for Lorist to return from pursuing the enemy.

"Why would the Chikdor Merchant Guild's fleet be coming here during the end of the 10th month?" Lorist asked, his curiosity piqued.

"I heard that their fleet comes over here routinely during the 4th and the 10th months to engage in trade. During their previous trip in the 4th month, the third young master of the Chikdor clan came over for a visit and began telling the slavers about his initial plan to invade Silowas before the War of Glass threw it out of the window when he was drunk at a banquet. It was he who had revealed that our house brought in tens of thousands of refugees to help develop the dominion and it was thanks to this information that the slavers attacked our island," explained Tarkel.

"Haha… Chikdor Merchant Guild and the third young master… So they were indirectly behind the attack all along," said Lorist as he began to understand the truth of the matter.

Well, this is a debt that I'll definitely collect in the future.

"Where's Els?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, Els has gone to the Hamidas. Over 1300 soldiers of our house were captured on Silowas. Apart from 30-odd of them who were tortured to death, they, including Knight Charade and Knight Jim, were sent to the Dueling Grounds…"

Tarkel began to cry out of the blue and pleaded, "Milord, you have to go and save them quick! Less than 300 of those captured are still alive right now… They were sent to fight against magic beasts and other slaves… Too many good men have died. Last month, they even held a festival to celebrate the founding of their kingdom, and over 500 of our soldiers died! Els and I had to witness their gruesome deaths without being able to do anything. The audience even felt that the show was not exciting enough and even clamored for the injured ones to be killed! Those people within the capital… They have to be killed without question! Milord…"

Tarkel's words were like oil being poured into a fire. All the knights within the tent cried out to be sent into battle against Hamidas.

Lorist waved his hand with a solemn expression to stifle the chatter within the tent.

"Stop being so noisy. Hamidas is right over there and not a single one of them will escape anytime soon. The house will definitely have its revenge. As much as I'd like to march towards the capital right here and now, think about it. We've only just arrived last night and our troops haven't had the time to rest properly and recover. The soldiers at the defensive line were so tired that they only realized the enemy's desperate attempt to charge out at the very last minute.

"It takes one day to travel from Nupite to Hamidas on horseback. The charged happened in the early hours of dawn, so Hamidas will only receive word of our arrival tomorrow. I trust that not one of them will be in the mood to watch any more of those Dueling Grounds shows, so our captured soldiers and knights should be safe for the moment. What we need to do now is to get three days of rest before marching towards Hamidas and avenging the deaths of our heroic soldiers!"

"Understood, Milord!"

"Tarkel, why did Els stay in the capital?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, Els is presenting himself as a swordsmanship-crazed young master and bribed the manager of the Dueling Grounds to allow Charade, Jim, and the other knights to spar with him. That way, they won't be chosen as the fighters for the shows of the slaver nobles. During the celebratory show, Knight Rafaed sacrificed himself to save Knight Charade. Knight Jim and Tok were also injured."

"What about Charade?" asked Lorist worriedly.

Knight Rafaed was one of the regiment leaders of the third local defense brigade who had been captured as he was injured and out cold following his reinforcement of Whitebird Town. The thought of him sacrificing himself for Charade was a surprising one.

"Knight Charade is fine and only lightly injured. However, because of Knight Rafaed's sacrifice, the boss of the Dueling Grounds feels that he is some kind of big shot and refused Els's attempt to purchase him. Els has no choice but to visit him on the pretense of sparring. Els, on the other hand, intends to organize a revolt at the Dueling Grounds and fight his way out of Hamidas. It will prove very difficult, however, given there are two blademasters standing guard. Also, the slave fighters are not armed. There's no way the plan will work," replied Tarkel.

Upon hearing that Charade was still alive, Lorist breathed a sigh of relief.

Engelich stood up and said, "Milord, why don't you let me sneak into Hamidas and rescue Knight Charade and the rest?"

As the matter concerned the happiness of his beloved granddaughter, Engelich was willing to give it his all.

"You won't do," Lorist said while shaking his head, "You'll surely be recognized by many who escaped from the rear gates of the inner city since you were stationed there. The moment you appear at Hamidas, the blademasters will definitely come for you. It's fine if you want to kill yourself, but don't drag Charade and the rest down with you."

The old man sat back down, fully understanding that Lorist spoke naught but the truth.

"If anyone's sneaking in, that would be me. Apart from the old ambassador yesterday, most of the people within the inner city don't know how I look. Later, make sure to

check the corpses and captives and see whether that old man managed to escape. If he didn't, I will make my way to Hamidas and find some way to rescue Charade and the rest," said Lorist.

"Milord, you can't take this risk," advised many of the knights in the tent.

"I've made up my mind, so don't bother dissuading me. You guys just focus on allowing the troops to rest and reorganizing them for the next attack. Remember, launch the attack three days from now. Don't worry about me, I'm pretty confident that none of the blademasters at Hamidas will be able to take me on. Perhaps, I might even be able to cause them some trouble," said Lorist with a laugh.

"Tarkel, work with Malek to sort the valuable spoils we have and keep them well stored behind the inner walls."

Tarkel saluted and said, "Yes, Milord."

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[1] The author is referencing 'Year Hare Affair', which is an allegorical Chinese webcomic (that's also been made into a web animation that can be found on Youtube with English subs) about China's take on modern history.

Chapter 279
Changing Strategic Arrangements

Josk and Yuriy returned the next day. Both looked incredibly haggard. Well, anyone would look like they did if they only just managed to escape being chased by three blademasters for a whole night.

The order Lorist had given them was to lock down the route between Nupite and Hamidas so the news of the port's assault and fall wouldn't spread to the capital. During the afternoon of the day before, they arrived at the target location with their scout brigade and began to set up their defensive line after picking a place to set up camp. They even managed to capture a number of messengers heading for Hamidas. All seemed to be going well.

But a day later, Josk and Yuriy noticed the appearance of a convoy of carriages guarded by a substantial cavalry detachment. They were initially able to stop them from advancing, but, as time passed, more and more enemies began to arrive. They easily numbered ten thousand. Eventually, they launched a full-scale assault on the brigade's position.

Josk and Yuriy believed that the enemies had escaped from Nupite and were prepared to stop every one of them. They had their scouts occupy the high ground around the path for ease of interception.

Despite making two frenzied charges, the enemy did not succeed in dislodging the scout brigade from their positions and suffered heavy casualties. Their corpses littered the road. They responded to the situation by breaking their forces into two units. One was sent against each of the enemy positions whilst their carriages charged down the road once more. In order to prevent a sidestep along the other side of the road, the scout brigade had to spread itself too thin to cover both sides of the road. They were unable to bring their full force to bear on either of the two units and began to waver. Things soon broke into chaos.

Josk and Yuriy were targeted by three blademasters right away. Josk's marksmanship could threaten a rank 1 blademaster, but it was not able to do the same for those of higher ranks. Unfortunately for the two, the enemy had exactly a rank 2 blademaster

among their number. The blademaster quickly understood the situation and pursued Josk relentlessly. If not for Yuriy's desperate assistance, Josk might have met his end. The two were quickly separated from their troops and had to spend the whole night running around before they finally shook the blademasters off.

When the two regrouped with their troops, they counted 1000 casualties, and that despite the fact that the enemy had only fought to break through their lines, and not to eradicate or exterminate them. Seeing that their troops were tired and worn, the two of them decided not to give pursuit and instead brought the men back.

While it pained Lorist to admit it, Josk and the others knew that his actions had been a grave error. Underestimating the enemy and treating them like a pack of wild dogs, Lorist thought that he would be able to overwhelm them by stacking the last proverbial straw, hence his decision for Josk and Yuriy to intercept them initially. Had the scouts allowed the enemy to use the path and employed hit-and-run tactics by attacking from their rear, in which their advantage of ability could be fully utilized, they might have been able to cause huge damage to the enemy, far more than the 8000-odd kills they had.

Waving his hands to dismiss the two of them, Lorist began to think with a solemn expression. *It seems that this expedition is not going as well as I had hoped. I guess exterminating a whole kingdom was never going to be an easy task. While the enemies at Nupite didn't even stand a chance, the things that happened after the first attack has been one accident after another.*

With only 8000 enemies killed, at least 15 thousand will make it back to Hamidas, and I'm sure they have quite a few high-tier fighters in their ranks as well. The royal capital is also guarded by 28 thousand soldiers of the royal family's defense legion. Taking into account the conscription of the slavers who make it back, it is extremely possible for them to cobble together over 40 thousand men. Should that be the case, their military might will rival my own…

After a rough estimation of his troop numbers, Lorist concluded that the two heavy-armored divisions and one wheelbarrow-ballista division each had 15 thousand men left. Given that he left two heavy-armored brigades and one wheelbarrow-ballista brigade back at Silowas, he only brought around 36 thousand men with him. Coupled with the Thunderbolt Brigade's catapults, the scout brigade, his two guard regiments, and Senbaud's Oceanic Legion, he had 46 thousand men.

However, Senbaud's Oceanic Legion could not participate in land battles, unless Lorist no longer wanted to return to his dominion. The post-landing casualties so far amounted to 5000 men. This meant that he only had 38 thousand able-bodied men left. After assigning a heavy-armored brigade and a wheelbarrow-ballista brigade to Senbaud to sweep the other islands, that number decreased by another six thousand. Add to the fact that he left a company of a hundred heavy-armored troops on each of the 27 islands to stand guard, up to another brigade's worth of men were no longer available. Additionally, the two heavy-armored brigades and one wheelbarrow-ballista brigade he would be stationing at Nupite meant that Lorist only had a little over 20 thousand soldiers for the march to Hamidas.

Though Lorist felt like crying from his frustration, he was not able to tear up. With only 20 thousand men available to him, forget about taking Hamidas, it would already be fortunate for him to not be encircled by the enemy midway there. If he were the king of the Hanayabarta kingdom, he would forcefully conscript another 60 thousand young slaves and mount a suicide attack on his camp. He would use the assault to exhaust the enemy's ammunition stores and take things from there. He would likely not win the battle, but it would definitely severely wound the enemy. Not only would the capital be safe, the kingdom might even stand a chance at retaking Nupite.

No, this won't do. I'll have to reorganize the distribution of my forces. Attacking Hamidas will require at least one complete heavy-armored division and three wheelbarrow-ballista brigades as the vanguard. Coupled with my one thousand guards and another two thousand scout cavalry troops as well as the Thunderbolt Brigade, I will have close to 30 thousand troops. If I can form another five police brigades with the slaves, we should be just a little shy of 40 thousand men.

Lorist sighed and reminded himself that war was no children's game and that describing military might by only approximating numbers was incredibly unwise. Despite that, he had to consolidate the number of his veteran soldiers. Only by being able to do so could he obtain victory and minimize his losses. Using untrained slaves on the battlefield was a double-edged sword. While he could superficially inflate his numbers by doing so, the first troops to collapse into disorder when the battle broke out may very well be those slaves. The chaos that would inevitably ensue thereafter might also cause them to turn back in an attempt to escape and disrupt the formations of his main forces.

Forcing the slaves to act was no great feat for the Hanayabarta kingdom. If they refused to comply, they could simply put some to death to scare the rest into submission.

However, there was no way Lorist could employ such a method. He had justified his attack with the liberations of the laves, doing such a thing would go against his stated goal and undermine his position.

A simple mistake during the first conflict had cost Lorist so much. If the enemy could be wiped out when they were within the inner city itself, then the Norton forces would be able to show up at Hamidas without anyone noticing. Even if they weren't able to wipe out those in the inner city all at once, they could still keep the enemy trapped within and slowly claim the land around the capital with the help of the slaves' support and gradually deal with Hamidas.

But now, he had to prepare for open field battles. The Hanayabarta kingdom would definitely mobilize their troops. The fact that so many people were able to escape from the inner city was a testament to the low number of troops the Nortons had brought with them. Even idiots would not sit around helplessly and watch their doom encroach upon them. The next step the Hanayabarta kingdom would take would be to conscript more soldiers and send out some troops for reconnaissance as well as attempt to drive the Norton troops back to sea.

Lorist summoned his guards and instructed them to pass the order down for a few gold-ranked knights and Blademaster Engelich to go to the city hall of the inner city for a meeting on revising their strategy.

During the night, the main hall of the building was illuminated by candlelight. Lorist pointed at the map of the Hanayabarta kingdom as he briefed his subordinates on the current state of affairs.

Potterfang asked, "Milord, do you mean to say that we're no longer able to attack Hamidas head-on with our soldiers?"

"Pog, if you're the king of the Hanayabarta kingdom, what would you do when you receive reports of our invasion?" questioned Lorist.

After giving it some thought, Potterfang said, "I would mobilize my troops immediately to conquer the hilly area between Nupite and the capital and set up defensive lines there to prevent our forces from entering the plains where the capital is located. After that, I would send out scouts to gain an understanding of the might and distribution of the enemy forces, all the while conscripting more soldiers to aid with the war effort. If the enemy forces are not enough, I would choose to drive them

back to sea and take back Nupite."

"Not bad, Pog. Your hypothetical is spot on. While we don't know for sure whether that's what the enemy will do, it's best if we no longer act carelessly and give them the benefit of the doubt. Tomorrow morning, the five reorganized heavy-armored and wheelbarrow-ballista brigades will have to march to the hilly areas to set up a line of defense before the troops of the kingdom do so.

"This unit will be led by Fiercetiger Loze with Malek as his vice. Pog, since you're injured, stay here to guard the port. Josk, Yuriy, take two thousand mounted scouts and keep an eye on the enemy's movement, patrol the supply routes to Loze and Malek as well. Also, send some troops to the plains' slave farms and free as you can. Cause as much trouble as possible. Don't allow the enemy to harvest their crops, we need to keep our siege as short as possible, understood?" asked Lorist as he thumped on the map.

"Understood, Milord," replied Josk and Yuriy in unison.

"Preserve as many of your men as you can; don't clash with the enemy if you don't have to. Your advantage lies in the fact that you're light cavalry, meaning that you can easily escape enemy pursuit. Since the Hanayabarta kingdom doesn't breed horses, and they only have around 1800 cavalry, they're greatly inferior to us on that front. If you have a chance, wipe them all out in one go.

"Another thing, if you do manage to cause chaos at the plains near the capital, the enemy will definitely hate you to the bone. They might just send out blademasters to wipe you out the moment they spot you. Knowing that you can have Malek and Loze set traps for the enemy blademaster and deal with them using our steel ballistae. Don't use our scouts to engage the enemy head-on like you did yesterday," warned Lorist.

"Yes, Milord, we will definitely pay attention to that," said the both of them with a slight flush of embarrassment.

"Pog, it is really important for you to stand guard at Nupite. The house only mobilized eight heavy-armored brigades, but we've already got more than a brigade's worth of incapacitated troops, not to mention the other thousand cavalry scouts and two regiments of wheelbarrow-ballista troops. I've already ordered Senbaud to stop sweeping the neighboring islands for now to consolidate our forces. When he sends the rest of our troops here, reorganize two heavy-armored brigades and one

wheelbarrow-ballista brigade and deploy them to the frontlines to reinforce Loze. Other than that, order Ovidis's Thunderbolt Brigade to head out at the same time. It will become our main force against Hamidas.

"Gather all the injured in the inner city and leave a brigade of heavy-armored troops and another regiment of wheelbarrow-ballistae to guard them. I will also have 500 of my personal guards stay behind. That way, the remaining heavy-armored brigade can be disbanded, reassign the men as senior officers to the police slave brigades.

"I will give you five days. After the formation of the ten police slave brigades, send five of them to bolster our ranks at the frontlines where they can also receive preliminary training to get them into shape. Senbaud will be assigned two of the remaining five brigades as well as another regiment of wheelbarrow-ballista troops to continue the island-sweeping operation. The other three brigades will be in charge of helping out with supplying the frontline troops and will be our rearguard.

"We've already conquered Nupite and the supplies here, including the food and equipment, are quite plentiful. So far, we've no need to worry about being unable to sustain our troops. The ten new slave brigades may take as many supplies as they need. So, you must be vigilant in the selection of the slaves that join the ranks. They will be treated the same as proper soldiers of the house, and their family members will also be allowed to enter the inner city to help us with various tasks such as caring for the injured. Make sure to compensate them for their work, understood?"

Potterfang nodded and said, "Milord, I got it. I will make sure to turn their allegiance to us as soon as possible and make them feel proud to be House Norton's soldiers. However, after we form the ten police brigades, who will keep the order? As of today, we have more than 30 thousand of them here."

"I've already instructed Hector and Karman to aid you however they can. After the formation of the ten police brigades, more slaves will be recruited to form some defense units. After each island is swept, leave behind around a hundred to three hundred men from the defense units to stand guard. Two additional defense brigades will also be formed from the slave camp. The rest of the men will fish, harvest, and transport supplies. We have to keep them occupied.

"Also, Josk, Yuriy, before you two leave tomorrow, head to the slave camp first. Karman has assembled a group of slaves who are familiar with the layout of the terrain around the capital. They also have quite a number of other acquaintances there. With their

help, the slaves at the plains will be able to trust that we've truly come to rescue them."

"Alright, milord," replied Josk.

"Engelich, I suppose you should leave with Fiercetiger Loze and the rest to guard the frontlines. That will be all for now. Does anyone have any other opinions?" asked Lorist.

Engelich stood up and said, "Milord, the attack on Hamidas has been delayed, and the arrangements you made will take quite some time to complete. The Hanayabarta kingdom has ample time to be aware of the real reason for our invasion. Won't they take vengeance against our captive knights and soldiers?"

Oh, I see that the old fellow is worried for his grandson-in-law's safety. I suppose I can hardly blame him for it.

Lorist smiled and answered, "I've just received some good news this afternoon. Some guards that were surveying the results of the battle involving the scouts informed me that the ambassador that had been sent to meet me is dead. So I'll be leaving with Tarkel tonight and head to Hamidas to rescue our knights and soldiers at the Dueling Grounds.

"If the Hanayabarta kingdom deploys their troops, the longer you can drag the battle at the hilly area on, the safer my mission will be. Also, make sure not to be too hard on them and cause them to turtle up and retreat. We will be trapped within the capital and that would be horrible. Make sure to pretend to be unable to resist their onslaught and let them take a few areas that are not crucial to our overall strategy. Put them under the impression that they still stand a chance to win if they give it another push."

Everyone within the tent erupted in laughter, with Josk saying, "Milord, should I follow you to the royal capital as well?"

Lorist laughed and said, "No, you can't. The three blademasters that chased you down will definitely be able to recognize you. Not one of you should follow me there. The sudden presence of a gold-ranked swordsman will bring suspicion to me. The enemy aren't idiots, you know, so only Tarkel and I will be going. That's final. It'll get really busy tomorrow, so make sure to fulfill your respective duties and not let me down."

"Understood, Milord."

Chapter 280
Encounter

The rumbling of horses' hooves broke the night's silence. About a hundred light cavalry rode forward at breakneck speed. They came to a halt at the edge of a valley. The leader waved his arms. Shortly after a squad of ten broke away from the group and headed off into the area. The main unit dismounted and began to feed their horses. An hour later, the men mounted up once more and continued heading towards the plains near the capital. Nobody noticed that only eight men rejoined the main unit.

Lorist and Tarkel had snuck into the woods. After they were unable to hear the sound of the galloping, they began to make their move.

Had they traveled by carriage using the route directly from Nupite to Hamidas, they would arrive at the capital about fourteen hours after their departure. A messenger that traveled quickly on horseback would only need about ten hours to cover that distance. It would take at least a day and a half, however, to make one's way from Nupite to Hamidas on foot.

Lorist and Tarkel could not use the main route, it was under Norton control. Even idiots would suspect someone who reached the capital with that route. Thus, the two prepared to make a detour around the hills and pretend to be one of the enemies from the inner city that managed to escape capture at Nupite.

After walking for two hours and resting twice, the skies were gradually beginning to brighten.

Lorist, who was walking at the front, ceased his steps and pointed forward before sneaking in the direction. Tarkel was by his side.

They were in a dense forest. Not far from their position was a small hill where sounds of flowing water could be heard.

Right beneath the hill was a small, busy stream, next to which a few people were resting. They seemed to be some nobles who had escaped from the port.

A hugely-built, tanned, half-naked man with one battle scar after another visible on his unclad back could be seen standing in the middle of the stream, crouching and attempting to catch some of the fish with his bare hands.

Unfortunately for the man, he did not have any experience catching fish. His endeavors bore no fruit despite getting himself wet; his prey eluded his snatches one after another.

A glamorously-dressed noble could be seen leaning on a boulder near the stream. He appeared in his thirties with a pale look on his face. He wore a tired gaze and sat slumped over the boulder, An old man was massaging the noble's feet as he cursed the huge man in the river for being so useless.

Beside the nobleman knelt a middle-aged man, in his forties. Another huge man wearing shiny-silver chain mail could be spotted lying on the ground not far away, using both his hands to prop his head up as he stared absent-mindedly at the commotion going on nearby.

Tarkel signaled to Lorist with his hands. Upon seeing Lorist nod, Tarkel walked out from the woods towards the riverbank.

"Who goes there?" called out the mail-wearing man.

He appeared to be the most alert of them all, given that he leaped upright and drew his sword right away. With a flash of light, a golden blade glow covered his sword, revealing his level. But, while the mail-wearing man was of the gold rank, his stance was rather laughable. His front foot stepping weakly on the ground and his weight centered around his rear. It was the stance of a person ready to make his escape at any moment.

The kneeling middle-aged man and the nobleman turned silent at the sight of the newcomers. As the middle-aged man drew his sword in preparation to guard the nobleman, his master kicked him in the back and said angrily, "What are you waiting for? Put the shoe back on me right this instant!"

The huge man in the stream also looked towards the woods cautiously.

"Don't be so tense, Kalik, it's me," said Tarkel as he got closer to the stream.

Upon realizing that it was indeed Tarkel, the middle-aged man said, "Oh, Tarkel?"

"Good riddance, I was completely damned by the lot of you. You forced me to enter the inner city saying that the place would be properly defended, yet you made your escape even before the enemy made their attack. Had it not been for my miraculous luck, I might have died as a result of your actions," cursed Tarkel as he stepped into the stream and walked towards the middle-aged man.

Being able to see clearly for himself, the middle-aged man breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Ah, so it's you, Tarkel… I thought that Klimo would be with you as well…"

"Kilmo? He's long dead. We were still together when we left the city, but a stray ballista bolt nailed him right back on the walls! You don't know how terrified I was! I ran and ran only to notice that I had somehow lost Ballop and Feline. Right after, though, the enemy cavalry troops started closing in on me," said Tarkel as he spun a story while approaching the middle-aged man.

"So you're saying that you made it here alone?" asked the wary gold-ranked knight.

"Come on, there's no way I would be able to pull that off!" he complained as he sat down in a tired manner. He continued after he took a few swigs from the stream.

"Had it not been for the three guards that the guild sent to protect me in the shadows, I would've long been captured or killed by those cavalry troops."

"Locke, it's okay now. Come out, they're friendlies," called Tarkel towards the woods.

Lorist emerged from the trees and approached slowly.

"He's one of the guards sent by your guild? Why haven't I seen him before?" asked the middle-aged man, Kalik.

"They were tailing me in secret, mainly to protect Els and me and to report our trip back to the guild. Had it not been for the emergency, they wouldn't ever have appeared," explained Tarkel.

It was enough to convince the rest that Lorist's untimely presence was fortuitous. It was quite common for huge noble families to send someone to watch over their descendants secretly as they traveled around. By doing so, they would also be able to understand the temperament of their descendants better and evaluate whether investing money and effort in training such an heir was going to be worth it.

"Didn't you say that there were three of them?" asked Kalik as he eyed down Lorist.

Tarkel cursed out, "Sheesh, I don't know how the hell I ended up deciding to come to your island just in time for a war to break out! Didn't you say that you don't have any sort of enemies? Gosh, they even came knocking at your doorstep! Had I been allowed to stay in the outer city, I might have been treated as a VIP and wouldn't have to worry about my life…

"But after I was brought into the inner city by you lot, I was forced to run for the whole night, only to meet up with more cavalry troops who wouldn't bother to hear my explanation at all. Had it not been for my guards' help, I would have been long dead. In the end, three of the cavalry troops died at the cost of my two other guards. It was far from enough to stop the rest of the cavalry from giving chase, however. Had it not been for Locke here, who's adept at navigating the woods, I would've had to toil hard and scale the hills just to be able to survive!"

Kalik stroked his nose in embarrassment and said, "Tarkel, I only brought you there for your own safety since you're a friend of mine. I didn't think that the enemy would actually be that powerful…"

Tarkel waved his hands dismissively and shook them dry as he said, "How in the world did you offend someone as mighty as them? I think I heard some people from the guild mention that they recognize the bear insignia of the enemy, but I just can't recall their names."

Kalik kneeled back down and said, "I'm not too sure either. I only heard that around three months ago, some slaver nobles and slaver bands got together and sent a few people to Silowas, an island in the Andinaq kingdom, to hunt for more slaves. The operation didn't end too well. I believe the island was the dominion of a house called Norton…"

"House Norton?" Tarkel exclaimed, "Good gods, how did the lot of you get the courage to offend them? It's no wonder they came all the way here…"

"Oh? You know about House Norton?" asked Kalik.

"I've only heard rumors. They are known as the Roaring Raging Bear of the Northlands and are a house of the former Krissen Empire with sizeable military achievements. Before I left to travel, I heard the Nortons defeated the 100-thousand-strong army of

the Iblia kingdom's king. How brain dead were you to provoke people like them willingly? Gosh, a military-oriented noble house like them will persist until they settle the grudge completely. Wasn't the dominion of the Nortons in the Northlands? Since when did they own Silowas?"

"Honestly, I don't know much about this either. I heard that Silowas also belonged to the Nortons and that they'd brought up to 60 thousand refugees there to begin development. That's why the higher-ups decided it was a good idea to target them. I heard during one of the meetings that our kingdom has been lacking slaves as of late, so it's no surprise they got greedy when they heared about all those refugees," explained Kalik.

"Are the nobles of your kingdom all idiots? Even if you want to attack, you should at least research the background of your target. Why didn't you use your brain a little? Is a noble house that's capable of recruiting more than 60 thousand refugees that easy to target? Normal nobles won't even be able to sustain 60 thousand of their own subjects! With your slaves dying because of your reckless use, it's no wonder that you're lacking in them! Why don't you guys understand that slaves are not expendable objects; they will continue to create wealth for their owners if used right. Can't you give them a little more care for that? The death of a slave is naturally a loss for the master. It's just that simple!" criticized Tarkel.

"Kalik, where is this friend of yours from? It sounds like he has strong opinions on us, the nobles of the Hanayabarta kingdom. Should we have him educate us on how to train and discipline our slaves?" asked the noble who was still leaning on the huge boulder.

"Ah, Lord Viscount, I forgot to make the introductions. I'm truly sorry for that. This is the eldest son of the Peterson Merchant Guild's vice president, the guild is one of the Union's big-seven. The other young master that's not present with us is called Elibak, and they've come to visit our kingdom to learn more about us. That over there is his guard, um, what's his name again?" asked Kalik.

"He's called Locke, a guard of the Peterson Merchant Guild. It's my pleasure to be made your acquaintance, respected Lord Viscount. Tarkel of the Peterson Merchant Guild pays respect to you," greeted Tarkel respectfully to the pale-faced noble.

However, the nobleman merely humphed without bothering to answer the greeting.

Not minding it one bit, Tarkel headed to the stream and asked Kalik quietly, "Who's that?"

"That's Viscount Timba. His ancestor was one of the 17 dukes who founded the kingdom, but his title has since degraded after being passed down for three generations. However, his elder sister is the consort of the current king, Lude III. She just gave birth to a male heir for the royal family. It's quite possible he'll be made a count soon," explained Kalik with a similarly quiet tone.

The 17 dukes were in fact 17 pirate bosses with greater influence than the rest. Given that pirates ran the kingdom, it was quite expected for things to be run a little differently. A regulation was made in the early days that if the duke's successor was not able to pay a healthy sum to inherit the title, it would be downgraded by one rank when it was passed on. While the territory of the dominion would not change, the lesser rank did sound less than pleasing to the ears of many. It seemed that the predecessors of the current viscount were rather frugal, to say the least, willing to have their rank downgraded rather than paying the inheritance sum.

"What about that person?" asked Tarkel as he gestured with his gaze at the gold-ranked swordsman lying on the ground behind the boulder.

"That's one of Duke Gouffman's gold-ranked knights. He's called Oss or something. We only just met him yesterday, and the viscount paid a good price for him to be our escort to Hamidas," said Kalik.

Kalik was one of the few close friends Tarkel managed to make at Nupite. He was a junior supervisor working for the city hall. He was in charge of the security and management of the warehouses. After being treated to a few drinks, he found himself treating him as a good friend and was even willing to share the warehouses' details and information about the resources stored near the city.

Tarkel had promised him that if the Peterson Merchant Guild formed a trading post in the city, he would give him ten percent shares. That was why Kalik was so insistent on bringing Tarkel to 'safety' in the inner city the moment the Norton troops defeated the three thousand or so slaver fighters.

Being a frequent visitor of the city hall, the junior supervisor was actually acquainted with the viscount. During the city's evacuation, Viscount Timba escaped on a carriage but was unfortunate enough to be one of the first to make his way to the hilly area

where Josk and Yuriy are camped, waiting. In the end, all of his servants and guards were killed, only two slaves were still by his side. The first was a grey-clad middle-aged man, and the other the huge man currently attempting to catch some fish in the river.

In his rush to escape, the viscount encountered Kalik. The latter was forcefully brought along to be his escort. Later, Duke Gouffman's men showed up, but they didn't bother with Viscount Timba for he had lost all his troops and servants. Afraid that he would be drafted into their forces as enemy fodder, Kalik encouraged Viscount Timba to take a small detour to avoid the main route, which required crossing the hills to arrive at the capital.

Kalik suspected that gold-ranked knight Oss was a deserter as he was traveling on the same route as their group. Kalik had no choice, however, but to allow Oss to tag along. The former was only an iron rank and didn't have much of a say in the matter.

Kalik continued to whisper quietly into Tarkel's ears, "This gold-ranked knight Oss is not trustworthy. Given that he was able to disobey his lord's order and desert, we are no doubt nothing but ants in his eyes. Had it not been for Viscount Timba's promise to pay him after they arrive at the capital, I suspect that he wouldn't risk his life being with us like this."

Kalik was also glad to meet Tarkel as he was a silver-ranked swordsman. At the very least, Tarkel would be able to take a few hits for himself while he tried to escape for his life should some misfortunate incident come to pass.

"So, what are you guys up to right now?" asked Tarkel curiously.

Chapter 281
Setup

"Well," Kalik said with a bitter smile on his face, "From yesterday till now, all we've had are two pieces of wild fruit. We filled our stomachs with some stream water last night. In the morning, Viscount Timba could no longer resist his hunger and ordered his slave to catch something for him to eat. But he's been going at it for more than an hour now and hasn't gotten anything for us yet…"

"Why's that viscount barefoot?" asked Tarkel.

"Ugh, well, the Lord Viscount has never experienced a journey this grueling. The walk yesterday caused two blisters to form on his feet, so he's been riding that slave on the way ever since," Kalik said, before he turned to look at the fish-catching man.

"But when he was let down yesterday during the night, he cried out in pain. It seems that the old slave seemed to have solved that temporarily by giving him a massage."

Tarkel said, "Oh no, if the blisters aren't treated quickly, they will take quite a while to heal. Don't you know this?"

"Well, what else can we do? The Lord Viscount is sensitive to pain, and we don't have the tools to pop the blisters. Apart from this sword of mine, I don't have anything sharp. The viscount also left with only two slaves and nothing else, and slaves aren't allowed to carry weapons. As for that gold-ranked knight, he's been behaving rather weirdly for a while now and doesn't really seem to care about us," complained Kalik.

"Well, then perhaps you want to join us on the journey? With a burden like the viscount with you, you won't be able to escape should anything bad happen. It's better if we leave as soon as possible," Tarkel whispered to Kalik.

He felt that having Kalik by his side would be more than enough to enter Hamidas. There was no need for him to put up with the young noble's antics. One look and he could tell that the noble youth had been spoiled from his birth. All he could worry about was how troublesome this journey to the capital would get, especially with that suspicious gold-ranked knight tagging along.

Kalik shook his head and said, "No, that won't do. When we arrive at the capital, we will need someone to back us up. Without money or influence, the soldiers at the capital won't let us in. If we do manage to send Viscount Timba back to the capital, however, we will have earned quite a good merit. After all, he's the only younger sibling of the king's consort. Their parents passed on quite early and he was raised single-handedly by the consort herself. As long as we can bring him back safely, we no longer have to worry about anything. With Viscount Timba backing you, you'll be able to start the business you talked about without any problems."

Tarkel stoked his bearded chin in thought.

"Do you mean that we have no choice but to bring that viscount back to the capital?"

Kalik nodded.

Standing up, Tarkel said, "Then, let's get to know each other better."

Moving closer to the boulder where the viscount was resting, he bowed and asked, "Lord Viscount, I brought some medicinal supplies with me. Do you need me to help treat the injuries on your foot?"

"Oh, you have medicine that can help my foot heal?!" exclaimed the viscount with joy as he stretched his foot out to Tarkel right away, "Quick, treat me immediately. My foot hurts so much that I'm unable to even step on the ground."

Seeing the left foot whose skin is as smooth as a baby's, Tarkel understood why it pained the viscount so much. It was apparent that he had not worked so hard since the day of his birth. From the looks of the two large blisters, the viscount must have been traveling for more than a few hundred meters.

"Lord Viscount, it will hurt a little when I pop the blisters, but it'll feel cooling and refreshing right after I apply the ointment. However, this is the best medicinal product our guild offers for sale and we only need a little bit to stop the bleeding on your foot. In twelve hours, your wound will scab up properly and you'll be able to walk just fine."

As he said that, Tarkel brought out a small silver box. When it was opened, a fine hooked needle could be seen embedded in the cover. Tarkel used it to pop the two blisters and remove the fluid within before wiping it clean with a white cloth. He used the scoop end of the needle to take out some ointment and gently apply it to the wounds.

The moment Tarkel popped the blisters, the viscount let out groans of pain. But when the ointment was applied, he breathed a relieved sigh.

"Ahh, that feels rather nice. It doesn't hurt anymore."

Using a thin linen strip, Tarkel bandaged up the foot.

"Lord Viscount, even though the treatment is complete, you will still have to avoid stepping hard on the ground in the next six hours to let a scab form. In twelve hours, your foot should be fully healed."

Viscount Timba gingerly sat down on the floor and looked at his foot as he said, "Um, thank you… I will definitely reward you greatly when I get back to the capital."

"There's no need for that, Lord Viscount. We are partners in this journey now, so we'll have to help each other whenever we can. It's my pleasure to be able to be of service," said Tarkel flawlessly.

His skill with words was one of his characteristics that allowed him to get along with almost anyone.

All of a sudden, Knight Oss appeared before Tarkel, stretched out his hand, and demanded, "Let me see that ointment of yours."

Tarkel on the other hand didn't mind it and handed it to the knight. The knight opened the lid and took a whiff of the smell before saying, "Not bad, this is good stuff," and pocketed the silver box before leaving. Tarkel, Viscount Timba and Kalik were left stunned.

What's going on? Is this daylight robbery?

Lorist stepped forward into the knight's path, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, just like how a real guard would behave.

"Scram!" ordered Knight Oss.

"Knight Oss, what's the meaning of this?" said the viscount, finally.

Turning around, the knight said with a solemn look, "Milord, I am your personal bodyguard and the only gold-ranked knight around. If we encounter an enemy, I'll be

the first one to jump into the fight, so I have to take into consideration how I can best be of service to you. With this medicine in my possession, I'll be able to stop bleeding in the middle of the fight so that my performance won't be hindered. It's best for me to be the one carrying it."

The viscount was speechless. While he was spoiled from his birth, he was no idiot. He turned to look at Kalik and saw the later shake his head in helplessness.

"Well, Tarkel, I feel that the knight has a point. Just let him have your ointment. I will definitely make this up to you when we reach the capital," said Viscount Timba a little apologetically.

"It's alright, Lord," said Tarkel with a smile before he waved to Lorist.

Lorist stepped back expressionlessly and cleared the way for the knight. Despite that, Knight Oss still spat in front of Lorist before going back to lie down on the rock.

The atmosphere at the riverbank then was tense and awkward. No one bothered to speak up and break the silence.

"Curses, Hannu, can't you catch any fish at all? I'm already starving over here," mumbled Kalik as he looked at the slave in the river, changing the subject as he did so.

Tarkel sighed as he looked at the fruitless efforts of the huge slave.

Shaking his head, he said, "He's only working a fool's errand. Have him come back up to go pick some firewood. I'll let Locke catch you some delicious fish. We ourselves haven't had anything to eat yet, so it was fortunate for you to be able to join us. Locke, go get us some fish."

Lorist did not say anything. He simply nodded before he headed to the river and waved for the huge man in it to get on shore.

The slave called Hannu looked back at the viscount, who scolded, "Didn't you hear me call you back up? Go get us some firewood."

Lorist stepped onto the two huge rocks in the river and held his sword in his right hand. He stared at the stream in complete silence.

Kalik asked curiously, "Will he be able to catch anything without getting into the

water?"

Tarkel smiled and said, "Don't worry, Locke's great at surviving in the wilderness. With him around, we won't have to worry about having an empty stomach."

The moment Tarkel finished his sentence, the longsword in Lorist's hand pierced the stream like a lightning bolt. After the splashes of water dispersed, a black-patterned fish could be seen dangling on the end of the sword. Lorist flicked his sword. The fish flew in a neat arc before it landed in front of Tarkel.

Laughing out loud, Tarkel shouted, "Get us some more so we can have some nice fish soup!"

Lorist nodded and continued doing his thing.

Kalik recovered from his stupor and said, "Tarkel, it's already enough for us to roast the fish. We don't have any pots to make soup in the first place."

Snickering, Tarkel said, "Kalik, to be honest, I'm a silver rank in name only. My swordsmanship is a total mess. But my silver-ranked battleforce on the other hand is good for this…"

Tarkel took out his dagger and infused it with his battleforce, causing a silver blade glow to manifest. He then took up a large cobblestone, dug the dagger into it and turned it around once or twice, causing the powdered stone to fall out. Before long, a rough approximation of a bowl was left in Tarkel's hand.

"Look, after breaking through to the silver rank, you'll no longer need to worry about not having anything to eat with in the wilderness," said Tarkel.

Kalik and Viscount Timba looked shocked to realize that there was such a benefit to being a silver rank.

Splat! Yet another fish fell in front of the two. Tarkel brought out a small blade and handed it to Kalik.

"Clean this fish up while I look for a rock large enough to make into a pot."

Kalik looked at the blade in his hand, then at the fish, before he tossed it to the grey-clad slave.

"Yannu, clean this fish up. I'll set up a cooking station."

The fish in the river was plentiful, but the largest ones were only as big as the palm of one's hand. Lorist managed to catch around 30 of them without much trouble before he headed into the woods and returned with some wild vegetables and mushrooms. Tarkel also finished making a large stone pot. After cleaning those up, they placed the pot on the wooden cooking stand set up by Kalik and began boiling some stream water.

Lorist put ten fish into the pot as well as some of the mushrooms and vegetables he picked before taking out two bamboo containers from his waist, one of them contained salt, and the other, spices. He sprinkled some of each into the pot and waited for the soup to cook.

Tarkel and Kalik, on the other hand, were using a heated stone plate to grill some fish. At that moment, Kalik was flabbergasted by the bottles laid beside Tarkel.

"This one contains some oil, and that contains butter. Look, all you need to do is to apply some of it using the brush over here. Also, hand me that small silver box, there's some salt in there. That silver container over there has a mixture of my favorite spices which will make the fish taste doubly as good," said Tarkel as he introduced Kalik to his seasonings.

"Wait, Tarkel, why do you carry so much things with you? I thought you didn't manage to bring any luggage when I dragged you into the inner city," said Kalik with surprise.

"Hehe, Kalik, you may not know this, but the Peterson Merchant Guild has long made preparations for these situations," Tarkel said as he pulled open his robe, "Look, this belt of mine is called the 'treasure pouch', which I can use to store many useful things. There's medicine over here and some fish hooks over there. Even though we're relying on Locke to catch fish right now, there won't be a problem for me to survive in the wilderness alone even if he were not here given the things I have in the belt."

Kalik praised, "Wow, as expected of one of the big seven guilds of the Union… You're prepared for everything."

Tarkel laughed and said, "Kalik, this treasure pouch belt of mine is specially-made. Locke's own belt is not as good as mine and doesn't have nearly as many things prepared for emergencies. There's also a secret compartment here where more than ten gold Fordes and some gold Forde notes are stored. So, I would have some money

to spend by the time I reach the capital, unlike you, not having even a single copper with you."

When he finished, the fish was already cooked. Kalik carefully moved it into a small stone plate and prepared to serve it to Viscount Timba.

The viscount looked incredibly happy when he received the fish. He had spent almost the whole day hungry. The moment he smelled the pleasant fragrance of the fish, his mouth salivated like never before. But before he got his hands on the plate, a large hand stretched over and snatched it away.

"Milord, since I'm your bodyguard right now, I have to taste test the fish for you to make sure it isn't poisoned," said Knight Oss, before he began to wolf down on the fish.

"Not bad, it's rather decent," said the knight when all was left was nothing but bone. Knight Oss then came to Tarkel and took the two other fish that were almost done cooking and began feasting on them.

"You…" growled the viscount with his face flush with anger.

Just as he was about to rebuke the knight's behavior, he saw Kalik shaking his head in discouragement. Having no other choice, he stifled his complaints with a sour look.

After the knight finished his fish, he tossed the stone plate away, pointed at Tarkel, and said, "You, give me that belt of yours."

Tarkel took two steps back and said, "No way…"

Knight Oss then drew his sword and manifested his golden blade glow.

Revealing an insidious smile, he threatened, "Are you sure you want to cross swords with me, a gold-ranked knight? I don't wish for that nice belt of yours to be bloodstained, so hand it to me and I'll spare your life."

Lorist dashed between them, much to the knight's amusement.

Knight Oss laughed and said, "A mere iron rank wishes to resist me? I see that I'll have no choice but to make an example out of you for the rest to see…"

The gold-ranked knight swung his sword horizontally without much care as he

thought that the iron rank guard would no doubt be felled by a single strike of his.

Clang! The sword covered in a golden glow was knocked away instead, causing the knight to have a look of astonishment on his face. The figure in front of him blurred and in the very next moment, he saw a fist enlarging before his very eyes. With an audible 'pow', Knight Oss's face caved, his nose bled and his head to rung, even his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

The fist pounding him again and again, hits struck him in quick succession. All of a sudden, the knight felt his right hand twist. Viscount Timba and Kalik could clearly see the guard called Locke pull the knight's right hand down to meet his left kneecap. With a loud snap, the knight's arm was broken and he loosened his grip on his sword, allowing it to fall to the ground.

"Aarrrgh!" cried Knight Oss in pain. But before he could react, he felt a knee digging its way deep into his torso. He stopped screaming and slumped to the ground.

Everyone present looked at the iron-ranked guard, Locke, who had just treated a gold-ranked knight like a sandbag, with fear. They had never imagined that an iron rank could fight such a one-sided battle with a gold-ranked knight. By the time Tarkel snapped out of it to stop Lorist, Knight Oss was already at his last breath.

Lorist raised his leg and stomped down, breaking the knight's left leg. The poor knight was momentarily woken from his slumber by the sudden pain, but fainted shortly afterwards for the very same reason.

Lorist crouched to retrieve the silver box he had stolen and stripped the knight clean, not even leaving behind any undergarment for the knight. In the end, he brought his spoils and placed them in front of Tarkel and proceeded to taste the soup as if nothing had happened at all. He added some more firewood to the pile. The soup could use some more cooking.

Kalik and Timba looked at the naked knight, before turning back to stare at Lorist. Both wore the same expression of disbelief.

"Umm, Ta-ta-ta-tarkel… Don't you think this is weird? Your guard is only an iron rank," said Kalik to the man who was busy rummaging around the spoils on the ground.

Tarkel didn't even bother to turn his head as he replied, "What's weird about that? Even though Locke is only an iron rank, his unarmed combat capabilities is top-notch

in our guild. Nobody can beat him on that front. None of the silver-ranked swordsmen in our guild can beat him, and even gold-ranked swordsmen have lost to him for being careless. He's known as Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated in Morante."

It was then that Viscount Timba and Kalik realized that the first move Lorist had taken was to disarm the knight. Only thereafter did he proceed to 'dismantle' him piece by piece using his two fists. He never bothered to use his own sword.

"Eh? This is weird. Kalik, why were you guys starving in the first place? Knight Oss carried with him quite a lot of stuff. Look, there's salt, jerky, and even a small bag of flour. Can't you make some gruel by cooking it with water? That'll be more than enough to fill you up, no?" asked Tarkel as he stood up with a few bags raised in his hands.

Viscount Timba and Kalik turned to look at the fallen knight and thought back to the time they spent starving, lying against each other's back for support, and hatefully thought, *no wonder the knight didn't complain about his hunger yesterday! He was keeping the food for himself all along!*

Viscount Timba found himself wanting to give the darned knight a few stabs with a sword.

Lorist's mouth curved slightly as he thought, *Not bad, Tarkel, you lured him into our ploy hook, line and sinker, giving me a good excuse to waste him completely. With Knight Oss around, the viscount wouldn't rely on Tarkel enough. But with him gone, the viscount will be forced to rely on Tarkel and will come to have a good impression of him. With Viscount Timba backing us, it'll be far more convenient when we enter the capital…*

Chapter 282
Arrival

Viscount Timba and Kalik both finished the whole pot of delicious fish soup in almost an instant. Lorist tossed the remaining fish into the stone pot for a second serving before he left to pick more wild vegetables and mushrooms.

Viscount Timba asked curiously, "Why are you cooking again even though we've already finished?"

Lorist pointed to the pair of slaves - Hannu, the huge one, and Yannu the old one.

Kalik said unconcernedly, "They're both slaves, so you don't need to feed them. We can just give them the remains of the fish head."

Tarkel smiled while shaking his head as he said, "Kalik, we are currently on the run. This is not a simple field trip. Taking care of everyone in our group is actually the key to our safety and survival. Look at Hannu. Though it displeases me to say this, he is somewhat like your mount, Viscount Timba. Even mounts have to be fed water and food, right? Otherwise, they will collapse midway and cause us much trouble. If we don't feed him well, he won't have enough energy to carry you around and there's no saying when we'll be able to leave our dangerous predicament."

Viscount Timba nodded in agreement and said, "Tarkel's right. Well, isn't it quite fortunate for you slaves to be able to have the same food as us?"

Since they had to wait for the two slaves to finish eating before they could resume their travels, Tarkel got hold of the sack formerly belonging to Knight Oss and took out some dough Lorist had stuffed in it and began making small biscuits as rations. By the time they wrapped everything up, it was already afternoon.

Not one of them bothered with the moaning, pleading knight. It was as if they didn't notice him there. With his limbs broken, and stripped naked as he was, the former gold-ranked knight was nothing more than a cripple that could do nothing but wait for his death.

Before they continued their journey, Lorist stopped the viscount from climbing up on Hannu's shoulders and only made some hand gestures. Confused, the viscount asked Tarkel, "What's he up to?"

Tarkel said, "Lord Viscount, Locke feels that it is not adequate for you to be riding on the slave's shoulders. It's a little too eye-catching. You'll easily become the first target the enemy sets their eyes on. He feels that it's better if you get carried on his back instead.

Viscount Timba asked, "Why didn't he just say so?"

Tarkel replied, "Lord Viscount, Locke has always been the quiet type. He doesn't like to speak unless he has to."

In the meantime, Lorist had used the knight's clothes to make a soft hammock-like back sling for the viscount.

The viscount was rather satisfied with the makeshift sling and asked Tarkel whether he would be willing to give Locke away, saying that he would be more than happy to pay a high price for him.

Tarkel shook his head and said, "Lord Viscount, Locke is not a slave, and I'm not the one employing him. He's one of the rare talents cultivated by my guild for more than ten years and he only answers to the president. Don't misunderstand, while he obeys my orders on the surface, he has all the right to escape by himself if the situation is dangerous enough. The merchant guild can afford to lose me, but not someone like Locke, on whom they're willing to spend huge amounts of money to train into a blademaster that would serve as the martial foundation of the guild."

"Oh, then how are they trained?" asked the viscount interestedly.

"Lord Viscount, apart from us, the Peterson Merchant Guild, all other guilds of the big seven basically do the same thing. They take in young orphans and train them according to their talents, be they academic or martial, so they'll be the cornerstones of the guild in the future. By the time they become a gold rank or a blademaster, the guild would have spent more than 10 or 100 thousand gold Fordes on them," replied Tarkel.

"Why can't you just hire blademasters instead of cultivating them yourselves?" asked the viscount in confusion.

"Lord Viscount, while we do hire blademasters, it's exceedingly rare. Unless we're very well-acquainted with the person and their background," Tarkel said solemnly, "Our guild is not like noble houses such as yours. We have lots of trade secrets that we have to protect, so we find it hard to trust the loyalty of blademasters that are not raised as our own. If, by any chance, our trade secrets are revealed, that would cost us quite severely."

"Ah, I see," mumbled the viscount, nodding, "That's right, hiring blademasters could prove to be quite troublesome as well. I've spent a huge price to hire blademasters before and all they care about is money. A couple of times they even gave me an unpleasant look when I asked them to do something. And to think they would be that useless when deployed… Not one of them returned to me after they were deployed…"

While the viscount was complaining, Tarkel secretly asked Kalik about what he said and quickly found out the truth.

When Lorist was leading his troops on shore, the rank 2 blademaster hired by Viscount Timba brought four of his gold-ranked knights and 300 slavers to join the battle. However, all of them were crushed, not even a messenger managed to escape and report their defeat. The viscount had lost all his high-tier fighters and, as a result, he had to escape with his two slaves.

Lorist stifled a laugh when he heard about how the rank 2 bladesmaster, who had been giving Engelich trouble during the initial fight, was actually the viscount's man. In the end, that blademaster died from being impaled by multiple ballista bolts.

Viscount Timba, on the other hand, began to show more interest at Tarkel's description of the orphan-raising program and hoped that his own house could employ the same method to garner loyal supporters. There would be no shortage of orphans for him to raise either, he could simply use the progeny of his domestic slaves.

Domestic slaves? Tarkel didn't understand what that term specifically meant and asked Kalik about it.

"Domesticated slaves, you see, are children of two slaves that had been intentionally allowed to breed. Well, some of them may be the result of female slaves getting pregnant after being forced by their owners. Given their status as slaves upon birth, they aren't nearly as rebellious as captured slaves and most often accept the status quo without question.

"Yannu over there is a second-generation domestic slave while Hannu is one of the third generation. His parents are also second-generation domestic slaves like Yannu. Domestic slaves can easily sell for double the price of captured slaves at the port.

"While Viscount Timba's idea of using domestic slaves is sound, there's a crucial problem with it. In the Hanayabarta kingdom, slaves aren't allowed to carry weapons. While they are allowed to awaken their battleforce, they can in no way be given a weapon to carry, they would pose too much of a threat to their masters."

As they traveled, Tarkel, Viscount Timba, and Kalik chatted rather heartily, which allowed Lorist to gather quite a bit of information about Hamidas. From how King Lud was actually a one-star-gold-ranked knight, to the fact that the three blademasters of the royal family were leaps and bounds stronger than those hired by the nobles, Lorist heard it all.

During the night, they feasted on the wild hares and cockerels Lorist managed to catch. Grease smudged all over their faces.

According to Kalik and the viscount, they were already near the border of the hilly area. They would only have to scale two more small hills from morning to noon the next day before arriving at the plains where the capital was located. Viscount Timba mentioned that he had hunted at those plains with his brother-in-law, King Lud III, before. It was the reason for his ability to recall the terrain of the area roughly. By the time they leave the hills, they would only have to travel for another half a day to arrive at a manor belonging to the royal family. After that, they would be able to take a carriage back to the capital.

The travels on the next day proceeded smoothly without incident. It did not take them long to travel across the two hills to arrive at the border between the hilly area and the plains. After a few more hours of walking, they could finally see the manor in the distance as they walked past a wheat field.

Lorist, who was leading the whole troupe, suddenly stopped in his tracks and made a gesture to listen, before he turned around and made some hand signals. Quickly, he jumped into the wheat fields and disappeared from view.

Tarkel tugged on the viscount's clothes and asked Hannu to squat down a little.

"Stop walking. Locke said that something is wrong with the manor up ahead. Let him

go there to check first," warned Tarkel.

"I don't think anything's wrong with that. Aren't you being a little too paranoid?" asked Kalik suspiciously.

Viscount Timba joined in and said, "If we travel faster, we might be able to make it in time for a good meal before taking a nice bath and having some much-needed sleep. By tomorrow, we'll be able to take a carriage to the capital as planned, so please don't mess around right now…"

Tarkel said in a serious tone, "Lord Viscount, Kalik, I trust Locke deeply on this one and he mentioned that he feels danger up ahead. He told me that even though the wheat was already ready for harvest, we didn't see a single slave working in the fields for the whole afternoon we were traveling. There's definitely something fishy about this, don't you think?"

Upon giving it some thought, Kalik's expression changed and he said, "That's right. Milord, if everything was as usual, we would've seen slaves working on the harvest along the way here. But not a single one is in sight. It's possible that something's happened to the manor up ahead. Have you forgotten about the enemy's cavalry? I suspect that they've already made their way to the plains. If we go to the manor now, we might just walk straight into their hands!"

The viscount was finally convinced. He beckoned them to hide behind a pile of dirt by the road as they waited for Lorist to return.

After an hour or so, Lorist came back and signalled Tarkel with his hands. The latter went over and the two exchanged a few sentences. Kalik and the viscount couldn't hear what was being said clearly, but they caught enough to turn them pale. Among the phrases they heard were words like 'cavalry', 'hangings', and 'revolt'.

Tarkel gave the two a clear explanation upon his return.

"It appears that we are in trouble. Locke checked out the manor and said that there are more than ten cavalry soldiers over there. Based on their gear, it seems they are Norton scouts. Gallows have been erected and the supervisors and slave managers all hanged. That's not the worst of it though. The slaves are going to revolt and take up arms to encircle Hamidas for an attack."

Viscount Timba's face paled.

"Then, should we still head to the capital?" asked he.

"Don't panic, Lord, Locke said that they seem to still be planning the whole affair. He mentioned that they are going to the other manors around the plains to gather more slaves before they'll take action, so it should be quite some time before the revolt actually starts. All we can do now is wait here till nightfall. The soldiers here should have a hard time spotting us in the dark. It's best if we travel straight to the capital. I estimate we'll arrive by noon tomorrow at this rate," cautioned Tarkel.

Kalik added hatefully, "That's right. Lord, we have to wait here patiently until nightfall. Only by doing so can we rush to the capital and warn them about the impending revolt! His Majesty, the king, will definitely put these foolish slaves to death so this never happens again!"

With Tarkel and Kalik's urges, the viscount finally calmed down. They rested for an hour before the sun set and gave way for the night. Traveling single file, they snuck away from the bustling manor and headed straight for the capital instead.

Having traveled without rest in the following four hours, they stopped by a stream for a short rest.

Kalik asked, "Lord, I recall that there is another manor of the royal family not far from this stream. Should we check that place out as well?"

The viscount had already been frightened enough once, however, and objected to the idea right away. Given that the manors were not too far away from each other, within an hour or so on horseback, the slaves at the other manor might have been liberated as well. He was far from willing to take the risk of being hung at the gallows.

"Lord Viscount, are there many royal family manors like these around the plains?" asked Tarkel.

Kalik was the one who responded, saying, "Initially, these plains didn't have a name. But with the passage of time, we began to call them the Capital Plains. During the founding of the kingdom, the pirates who didn't know how to produce their own food and fought frequently for territory only relied on fishing for a living. That's why they initially attacked the Golden Coast so often. However, the coastal nations began to strengthen their defenses, causing the cost of procuring food by raiding to rise.

"When the second king, Lud I, came to power, he pledged to no longer raid those

coastal nations and managed to establish new trade routes. Only thereafter was the food problem solved. Directly following this, Lud I began to develop Capital Plains fervently and built dozens of manors around the area. He effectively made these plains the main food producer for the kingdom. They're able to supply the whole kingdom.

"Currently, over 130 thousand slaves work at manors such as the ones we came across all over the plains. If all of them are roused by the Nortons for a revolt, the consequences would be unimaginable!"

Kalik shivered as he said the last sentence.

The group resumed their journey after another half-hour rest. By the time dawn came, they were all tired beyond their wits.

Another manor could be seen in front of them. Lorist again went ahead to check the manor out. He returned soon after. According to his report, the manor seemed to be untouched. The slaves and their supervisors were all fine and going about their business.

Timba and Kalik were gladdened by the news and rushed toward the manor without any reservation or hesitation. The manor's tenants immediately recognized the viscount and they were received hospitably. The viscount's visit, in spite of his haggard condition, was still a good omen for them, at least according to the supervisor.

The viscount didn't bother to listen to the supervisor's flattery. He hurriedly called for a carriage to be prepared for their immediate departure towards the capital. He only bothered to inform the supervisor of the impending threat as he stepped onto the carriage.

The manor's alarm bell could be heard signaling for the return of the slaves as the carriage drove away.

Dawn was upon them once more when they were about an hour from Hamidas. The carriage was already on the highway and was no longer at risk of being pursued. After another half an hour, a loud horn could be heard up ahead and the coachman stopped the carriage at the side of the road to make way.

A group of soldiers dressed in earthen-yellow garb could be seen lined up like a huge snake. They marched out of a huge castle in the distance, with more than a hundred cavalry leading at the front.

Kalik cried out with both his hands in the air, "That's our royal defense army coming from the capital! Hurrah! They've deployed! Praise be our king and royal defense army! Hurrah!"

Chapter 283
Royal Capital

The manor's carriage was a simple two-wheeled wooden cargo carriage. Each side was covered with but four wooden boards. It had, however, been cleaned up pretty well on the supervisor's instructions since it was to be used by the viscount. It had even been loaded with a couch. The vehicle looked rather awkward.

Viscount Timba was fast asleep on the couch, and Kalik and Tarkel sat on two short stools on either side of it. Lorist, on the other hand, kept guard beside the coachman. Hannu and Yannu had to walk beside the carriage; their social status didn't allow them to ride in or on the same carriage as free people.

The Hanayabarta kingdom, being on an archipelago, didn't produce any of its own horses. As a result, imported horses sold for a high price, whenever any were available. The risks associated with dealing in horses were rather high as well. They were quick to get sick on ships, for one. They couldn't deal with the swaying. It wasn't strange for only half, or even just a third, of them to survive to journey to the islands. They were sold for a far higher price than normal so their merchants could make up for the losses suffered on the journey.

The carriage was being pulled by a Northlands horse. It's posterior was branded with the royal family's crest and the number 19. The coachman was another slave manager. He'd had to promise his colleagues quite a few benefits to get the position he currently occupied on the carriage since everyone knew what reward awaited him upon their arrival at the capital.

The coachman stopped the carriage at the side of the road when he saw the mobilizing soldiers. He planned to wait for them to pass before moving ahead once more but Kalik's loud cheers caused the knights at the front to notice them.

A few of the knights rode towards the carriage.

"Who goes there?" they asked, "Why are you making such a fuss?"

The coachmen informed the knights of his passenger's identity as the viscount, roused

from his sleep by the calls, sat up and yawned drowsily. The knights, having learned of the high status of the carriage's occupant, left for guards with it and sent two men back to report to their lord.

A short while later, a large group of knights arrived with a luxurious four-wheeled carriage.

Their leader was a mustachioed man in his early fifties. He gave the viscount a hug and laughed heartily.

"My poor little Timba," he said, still holding the viscount in the air, "you're finally back! Did you know how worried your sister was? Before I left, she emplored me to bring you back safely. Haha, quick, get on. I've arranged for you to be sent to the palace to see your sister immediately."

Viscount Timba left thusly without so much as a farewell to his companions. Hannu and Yannu quickly stood on the side skirts of the carriage. The mustachioed knight recognized the two slaves and allowed them to leave with the carriage.

Tarkel, Kalik, and Lorist were ignored completely. As the carriage left for the capital, the knight ordered his men to continue leading the army.

Kalik was completely flabbergasted. He had not expected the viscount to abandon him so easily. Currently, he had no status at all and would not be able to find a place to stay even if he got to the capital.

The coachman, on the other hand, cursed out loudly at the departure of his potential benefactor. His trip had been for naught. Without the viscount, he would not be paid and he didn't know how he would explain it to his colleagues back at the manor. As his rage built up, he began to vent it on Kalik. He said that he should not have caused such a commotion to bring the knights to them and allowed them to notice the viscount. He even said that he was going to strip Kalik of his sword and belongings as compensation for how far he had brought them.

Kalik remained in his corner of the carriage without making a sound. He was so crestfallen he looked like a castrated chicken. In terms of status, he was inferior to even the coachman. The coachman was a slave manager working for the royal family whilst he was only a small time supervisor working at the Nupite's city hall -- a place, mind you, that had already fallen into enemy hands.

Lorist gave Tarkel a look. The latter quickly understood his intention and took out a single gold Forde and gave it to the coachman.

"I am the eldest son of the Peterson Merchant Guild's vice president. I promise that you will be rewarded duly if you bring us to the capital," he said, smiling.

With the gold Forde in hand, the coachman began to act incredibly friendly and amicable. He answered all the questions Tarkel had. He told Tarkel that the mustachioed knight was the current king's uncle and was a two-star-gold-ranked knight deeply trusted by the king. He added that, given that the royal defense army was mobilized, Nupite would be taken back from the enemy soon.

Lorist observed the troops that were praised so highly by Kalik but was quickly disappointed. He could see that the armaments they were given were not uniform and their ranks rather disorganized. The royal family's soldiers could be heard complaining as they marched by. One even boasted about their nighttime sexploits with multiple female slaves and other tall tales. Some of the soldiers around him asked for more details out of curiosity.

Lorist snickered as he thought, *So that's what they consider elite? They're far from comparable to just our garrison forces, much less our elite troops. They've only just deployed even though I've been here at this hilly area for more than two days… I believe Loze is already waiting for them as well. I can only hope that he doesn't overwhelm the royal defense army and cause them to run back and turtle up in the capital. If that does happen, my plan to rescue everyone will fail…*

It took the army most of the afternoon to pass by, but right behind them followed their supply train. Each carriage had only one horse pulling it, but ten slaves could be seen pushing each as well. A carriage was rather hard to move with only one horse, especially given how heavily they were loaded. There stood a soldier every couple of carriages that whipped those he deemed to be underperforming. The whip cracks were frequently accompanied by spats like 'lazy idiot!'. Another two hours had to pass before the road was clear and the carriage could proceed.

When they finally arrived at Hamidas, Lorist was shocked by the sight before him. He never expected to see such a magnificent castle -- even larger than the one at the imperial capital -- on an island kingdom built on the slave trade.

The coachman proclaimed proudly that in the founding days of the kingdom, the

capital was at Nupite. But at the start of the second king's reign, the castle before them's construction was started. It took a full 18 years and 300 thousand slaves to build. After its completion, it was named the new royal capital, Hamidas.

Lorist's head ached. He had not expected the royal capital to have such a large castle. The castle's design felt like a copy of the maplewood bastide's. The bastide was built on a large hill and the only avenue of attack was the small road that led up to the gate. Hamidas, too, was built on a large, excavated hill, though it was about ten times bigger than the bastide's. From a distance, it looked like a city built on a platform. The only way to get up to it was a kilometer long road flanked on either side by a steep cliff at least 30 meters tall. The cliffs surrounding the castle itself was at least that tall as well, and on top of them were 20-meter tall walls. The 50-metre climb was the only way to attack the castle directly.

A castle like that could only be brought down with a long siege. It had to be starved out, no assault using current technology could breach its defenses. This wasn't something that Lorist and his forces could do, most certainly not given that -- according to Viscount Timba -- its food and water stores could last it a full three years. Nobody would be able to have an army surround a city for three whole years. The food cost alone would be astronomical.

Lorist also realized that his wheelbarrow-ballistae and catapults would not be of much use given that the castle had been built on elevated ground. The ranged weapons could only fire when it was brought close enough to the castle to be able to take out the defenders on the walls, but the cliff rendered that tactic unusable. Additionally, the castle walls were bound to be equipped with lots of ballistae themselves. Even Nupite's walls had more than a hundred, so Hamidas would definitely have more.

Lorist felt a strong urge to curse out loud, he had never imagined the island nation's capital would be that hard to take. He had expected it to be defended more or less the same as the Iblia kingdom's capital, Windbury. How could a pirate nation, not recognized by most of the other nations on the continent, be so powerful?

Lorist was extremely relieved that he had changed his tactics and had instead focused on defending his foothold at Nupite whilst trying to bait his enemy into attacking him first. Had it gone according to his original plan, where he would attack Hamidas right after taking the port city, he would have been caught completely off-guard by the capital's strong defenses.

The coachman sitting beside Lorist realized his silent mumbling and asked, "What's going on?"

Lorist replied, "Nothing, my balls just hurt?"

"Balls hurting?"

The coachman could not comprehend what Lorist meant. Just when he was about to ask, they arrived at the castle gates.

Entering the city cost a small silver per person. Additionally, given that the nation was in a state of war, the checks at the gates were stricter than usual. If Viscount Timba had still been around, they would not even need to pay and would be allowed to enter the castle without much trouble. The viscount's absence brought trouble for Kalik.

Lorist and Tarkel both had identification documents from the Peterson Merchant Guild and passed the screening process with relative ease. Kalik, however, only managed had his sword with him after his escape from the city. Additionally, the coachman stubbornly refused to back Kalik's claims -- he was the one that lost him the reward for bringing the viscount back. In the end, Kalik was searched harshly from top to bottom. It was already fortunate that they did not insist on probing his rectum to see if he'd hidden anything there.

In the end, Tarkel offered the coachman another gold Forde, and one large silver for each of the guards. The coachman was finally willing to testify that Kalik had come along with them from the royal family's manor. The guards were only willing to let Kalik into the city after they heard the coachman's testimony.

Hamidas was split into five sectors. The gate where the carriage entered was located in the east and was connected to the eastern sector, which was the city's largest commercial area. It was also a residential hub, more than 30 thousand citizens lived there alone. Most of the royal family members' defense forces lived there. Including the slave population, roughly 60 thousand people lived in the eastern sector.

The city's southern sector was reserved for nobles. All the kingdom's nobles had their mansions there. The western sector was a heavily-guarded warehouse area where the food and armaments were stored and was the smallest of the lot. The northern sector itself was divided into three districts, namely, the slave district, the tournament district and the army headquarters.

The slave district was the closest to the northern walls and was tightly packed with huts. The tens of thousands of slaves who lived there were mainly in charge of the waste removal and maintenance work at the city.

The tournament district, on the other hand, was where the dueling grounds were located. There was also a cock-fighting ring which also doubled as the city's largest casino. The nobles would often spent thousands of gold coins betting on the lives of the slave gladiators.

The northern sector's middle district was the royal defense army's base of operations, which also served as a buffer between the slave district and the rest of the capital. Should an insurrection occur, they would be able to react quickly to stomp down on any insurgents so that the safety of the rest of the capital wasn't compromised.

Apart from the four sectors, the royal sector located at the center was where the palace and court were. It was surrounded by tall walls which separated it from the four other sectors.

According to Viscount Timba, apart from the royal defense army's 28 thousand soldiers, there was another royal guard force of 2000 men stationed in the royal sector. The four other sectors each had a 1000-man garrison to maintain order and patrol the walls. In total, the city was garrisoned by more or less 34 thousand people.

The address Tarkel asked the coachman to head to was where an inn called the 'Blood and Flame' was located. Els had picked it to be his residence due to its proximity to the dueling grounds, a convenience for him as he went there almost every day to spar.

After the carriage drove for some ten-odd minutes, it finally arrived at the Blood and Flame.

Tarkel paid the coachman five gold Fordes, much to the latter's surprise and delight. He praised Tarkel incessantly as he left on the carriage.

The Blood and Flame was not as comfortable as the Red Grace Inn; the guest rooms upstairs weren't as clean despite the much higher price -- one gold Forde per night. Tarkel booked three rooms in total -- one for each of them -- before asking the inn's servants to prepare bathwater.

Initially, the middle-aged maidservant -- of relative beauty -- had wanted to bathe alongside Lorist. But after a long period of arguing, she gave up after some stern

warnings. Cursing out loud and slamming the door behind her, she entered Kalik's room next door and it did not take long until the loud noises of promiscuity could be heard.

After Lorist finished his bath, he went to Tarkel's room, only to discover the man was not there. Going downstairs, he saw Tarkel chatting happily with the owner of the inn, so he took a seat at a table nearby and ordered a bottle of fruit wine while he waited.

After a while, Tarkel came over and ordered some food from a maidservant.

Taking a few looks around, he whispered to Lorist, "Milord, Els is not in his room. I've asked the owner about it and he said that he hasn't seen him for two days. According to him, Els left the morning the day before, as usual, to spar at the dueling grounds, but didn't return that night, he hasn't returned yesterday either. The owner thinks he might've been invited as a house guest by some noble…"

Lorist's gaze stiffened as he asked, "What do you think actually transpired?"

"I suspect that he's encountered some misfortune. There's no way that Els would attempt to socialize with the slaver nobles. He's pretending to be a young master who's crazy with perfecting his swordsmanship, so he won't bother with anyone else. Let's head to the dueling grounds after dinner. We've already made an arrangement to leave a sign outside the grounds for meet-ups," said Tarkel quietly.

"Alright, we'll do that," said Lorist, nodding his head in agreement.

Chapter 284
Drunken

Kalik only went downstairs after Lorist and Tarkel finished their meal. Tarkel ordered more food for Kalik and told him that he would go out for a stroll with Lorist a little bit later. Kalik could put anything on his tab if he needed something.

It was already evening by the time Lorist and Tarkel departed for the dueling grounds. The Blood and Flame was quite close to the tournament area. After passing through a small alleyway, they arrived at the royal district's main road where the royal defense army's camp was located. Even though the army was mobilized, the campsite was still bustling. Flags of various colors and patterns were flown at the entrance of the camp, with many people equipped with armor, swords, and spears, going entering and leaving incessantly.

Before they passed through the main road, a few people from the camp came over and surrounded the two.

"Hey, you two must have come to answer the king's call to arms, right? I'm the Senbak Mercenary Band's vice-leader, Jason, and I welcome you two brave warriors to our band with open arms," said a thin man in old and torn leather armor.

"Go back to your crummy old mercenary band. Your men number less than 50, and most of them are injured fighters anyway. These two might as well jump off a cliff. Brothers, we are the Tigershark Slavers, subordinates of Duke Gouffman himself. We have more than 300 members. Joining our team is definitely the wiser choice," interjected a tall and proud-looking man.

Another huge red-faced man called out, "Join us, the Kalir Slavers, and you'll be provided with weapons and equipment! Friends, they're all free, so don't miss out on this chance!"

"We're the mercenary band of Duke Hock. Even though we've just formed, we treat our recruits well! You'll be treated to a bottle of sweet wine every day!" said a middle-aged man in mail.

Oh, so all of these people are here to recruit and expand their forces.

"My deepest apologies to you great warriors," Tarkel responded with a smile on his face, "The two of us work for the Peterson Merchant Guild and we've come to the kingdom to deal with setting up a trade route and other affairs while learning more about this place. We only came over because we spotted the busy campsite over there. I'm very sorry to have disappointed you gentlemen…"

The moment they heard that many turned around and returned crestfallen. However, a few people remained.

"I recognize you," said a man, looking at Tarkel.

"Who may you be?" asked Tarkel, scratching his head.

"You're one of Ballop's friends. I've seen you drinking together with him," said the man.

"Oh," Tarkel muttered with relief, "Pleased to make your acquaintance. I'm Tarkel. Do you know what happened to Ballop and the rest? We lost sight of each other when we rushed out of Nupite. I haven't seen any of them since."

"Ballop's dead. I saw him collapse with a few arrows in his back when we were rushing the enemy lines," replied the man.

"What about Feline, Krinando, and Chelwar? Do you know them and their whereabouts?" asked Tarkel concernedly.

Shaking his head, he said, "I don't know them, but I think I've heard Chelwar mentioned somewhere before. He should be in the camp over there. Do you want me to take you to have look?"

"How may I address you?"

"The name's Drei. I used to be one of the supervisors in charge of shipments at the port. Just recently though, I was forced to enlist as a soldier of the Snowshame Army," replied he.

"The Snowshame Army? What's up with that?" asked Tarkel curiously.

"It's nothing surprising. Ever since we escaped the city's encirclement, the king blamed us for losing it to the enemy. Even Duke Gouffman and Duke Hock were put under house arrest so they could repent for their mistakes. As for us, we were forcefully drafted to form the Snowshame Army. Once we have 24 thousand men, we'll be sent to aid the royal defense army's recapture of Nupite. All of those people were trying to recruit scapegoats for their own men."

"Scapegoats?"

"That's right," Drei replied, "Many mercenary and slaver bands incurred huge losses during the escape from the port, so they are trying to recruit more people to bolster their ranks. When we reach the frontlines, they will send out their new recruits to take the brunt of the enemy's hits to prevent actual harm from coming to their long-time members. Consequently, the new recruits' sacrifice will also show their bands in a good light and they might be rewarded."

"Do you think that will fly?"

"Of course it will. Since the king has already declared a call to arms, those who wish to join the army's forces will come over here and be split up among the slavers and mercenaries. Once our ranks fill up in another couple of days, we'll move towards Nupite. We'll have to rely on Singwa's protection to be able to survive," said Drei with a pained smile on his face.

"I believe you'll easily live to your hundreds. Perhaps, you might even be able to score a huge achievement in the coming battles and be made a noble," Tarkel consoled before he pointed at Lorist and continued, "This friend of mine hasn't been in this area before. I was just going to show him to the dueling grounds to expand his horizons. We'll come visit you once we're done and take you for a few drinks at the Blood and Flame."

Drei nodded and said, "Very well. I'll help you locate Chelwar and the rest in the meantime. When you reach the camp, just mention Drei of Thunder's Fire. They'll know what to do."

Lorist and Tarkel arrived at the dueling grounds shortly after bidding Drei goodbye. The dueling grounds was the second-most impressive building within the capital, after the royal palace. From the outside, it seemed like two oranges squished against each other on the ground, a little similar to the sport stadiums in Lorist's previous life.

"There is a mulberry tree in the left alley near the entrance," Tarkel remarked, "Look, it's over there."

The alley was incredibly quiet and the air there carried with it a displeasing stench. Perhaps, it was used by the show-goers as a makeshift toilet of sorts, the walls were stained to a yellowish-green and a vomit-inducing stench seeped into the air from them.

However, the wall itself was marked with more than 30 strange markings that looked to be children's doodles.

Pinching his nose, Tarkel said, "Milord, every time Els goes inside, he would leave two horizontal markings on the walls, and when he comes back out, he'll add a vertical strike through the horizontal lines. Others think that he's only here to take a piss and wouldn't imagine the markings to be anything but the works of children."

"31, 32, 33., 34…"

Tarkel stopped. The last marking didn't have a vertical line through it, meaning that Els did not leave the last time he made his visit.

"Come on, let's go ask around," said Lorist.

The soldiers they met were not aware of what Tarkel was talking about. It was only after Tarkel snuck a large silver down all of their pockets that they called their company leader over. However. the company leader denied that Els had come over and insisted that he'd left after sparring two days earlier. He thought it was weird for Els to not visit for two days.

Lorist tugged on Tarkel's clothes and the two took their leave.

On the way back, Lorist told Tarkel confidently, "Something must've happened to Els. The company leader was averting his gaze without daring to meet yours. We should come again secretly during the night to find out more about this."

Tarkel said, "But that would be rather risky. Why don't we wait until we visit Viscount Timba tomorrow and have him ask around with us?"

Lorist merely shook his head. Just as Tarkel was about to make another objection, someone called out to him loudly out of nowhere. It was Drei. He brought with him a

few other men, Chelwar was among them, a friend Tarkel made at Nupite.

Chelwar came over with a brilliant smile and gave Tarkel a big hug, congratulating him on his successful escape to Hamidas. He wanted Tarkel to treat him to a meal because he had nothing to eat apart from the black bread and vegetable soup they served at the camp due to losing his official documents during his escape. Now that he had met with the rich Tarkel, he would not hold back, throughout their conversation, he introduced his friends.

Oh great, here comes another freeloader like Kalik, thought Tarkel, though he did ask the rest of them to go to the Blood and Flame for a good meal nevertheless. On the way, Tarkel gave a brief account of their travels to Hamidas and breathed a long sigh.

"What's wrong, Tarkel, my brother? Why are you sighing? Are you blaming us for feasting at your expense?" asked Chelwar with dissatisfaction.

"It's not that. The two of us just went to the dueling grounds just now and realized that one of our friends staying there has gone missing. I'm just worried about his safety… I wonder how I will inform my uncle," said Tarkel in a wistful tone.

"What's wrong?" asked Drei.

"Chelwar, you should know that there was another person called Els that traveled to Nupite with me. He's is my uncle's son. Being a martial maniac, he only occupies his time with swordsmanship training. Didn't you bring us to the dueling grounds to watch a show once? Els said that he wanted to spar with the gladiators afterwards and chose to stay here at the capital. But when I got back to the inn earlier today, the owner said that Els hasn't been back for the past two days. When I went to the dueling grounds to ask about it, they said that they haven't see Els either.

"Everyone knows that the two of us came here representing the Peterson Merchant Guild. This trip of ours also involves starting a new trade route and choosing a place to build our office. Naturally, we had a secret method of contacting each other, and I just realized that Els didn't make a mark when he left the dueling grounds last time. The soldiers we asked over there, including a company leader, also told us they haven't see Els."

"You're saying that Els is missing?" Chelwar exclaimed with surprise, "Forget about the meal, let's head back. I'll gather a few people to search the dueling grounds with

you."

"There'll be no need," Tarkel hurriedly said as he stopped Chelwar, "I am more than happy with just the sentiment. However, you can't do something like this. We can't afford to offend the king by causing trouble at a time like this…"

"He doesn't scare me. We're already going to battle in a couple more days, so it makes no difference whether I die now or on the battlefield. There are only fewer than 200 people at the dueling grounds, so now's the perfect time to cause a commotion. Perhaps, we won't be sent to the battlefield after some chaos breaks out," said Chelwar.

"Huh? Didn't you tell me that there were more than a thousand royal defense soldiers stationed there? Why are there only 200 all of a sudden? What're they going to do if the slaves revolt?"

"Hehe, the royal defense army already sent out 25 thousand men. They've left behind less than three thousand. Those who remain also have to deal with the safekeeping of the warehouse sector, so there won't be that many left at the dueling grounds! All of the gladiators are locked behind bars anyway, and there are no weapons or equipment there. So, there'd be no point for them to revolt.

"Additionally, we of the Snowshame Army are gathered nearby the tournament area. If something does happen at the dueling grounds, we'll be there to stop things from getting out of hand. While I can't speak for our abilities against other fighters, we'll have no problem suppressing some slaves. Don't worry, the capital won't fall into chaos.

"Also, I heard that the king is preparing to host a huge show at the dueling grounds on the day we mobilize. More than 1600 slaves will be split into two factions for a fight to the death as a sacrifice for the war god so that we can gain his blessing for a victorious battle," Drei informed resourcefully.

"Oh, then the show on that day will definitely be an amazing one. I love watching those gladiator shows. Chelwar, make sure you don't do anything rash at the moment. I will visit Viscount Timba tomorrow. I trust that he'll accompany us. Let's stick to the plan for a nice drink tonight!" Tarkel Chelwar told.

"Alright then, it's a deal! We won't go home until we're dead drunk!" exclaimed Chelwar cheerfully.

They arrived at the Blood and Flame soon and Drei, Chelwar and the rest ordered one delicacy after another. Tarkel asked the owner whether Kalik was upstairs, but the owner said that Kalik left after drinking three bottles of fruit wine and had yet to return.

Chelwar patted on Tarkel's shoulder and said, "Stop worrying about Kalik. I think he mentioned that he has a cousin brother living here in the capital. Perhaps, he went there for a visit. Friend, book me a room, will you? I haven't laid with anyone for a long time."

Tarkel turned around only to see that Chelwar had already begun flirting with one of the maidservants of the inn. Smiling, he told the owner, "Boss, I'll be booking all the rooms upstairs for the night. Friends, if you'd like to let loose, just bring whoever you like up to those rooms before coming back for a feast. The bill's on me." When he finished, he placed a gold Forde note on the counter, garnering cheers and praise from all those present.

Drei didn't bring any maidservant into a room and only stayed to drink. Upon finishing his fourth bottle, he looked at the silent Lorist with interest and challenged him to a drinking game.

However, Lorist refused the challenge on the pretense of being Tarkel's guard. Despite that, Drei was insistent on challenging Lorist to a drinking match. In the end, Tarkel had to 'order' Lorist to accept a match so that his friend didn't lose face.

Lorist said with a distressed look, "Young master, I'm not good at holding my drink…"

But under everyone's pressure, Lorist downed three bottles of fruit wine before spitting his last mouthful out and collapsing on the table unmoving, much to the rest's amusement.

Tarkel complained, "Sheesh, you guys… You didn't have to force a non-drinker like him to get drunk… Someone, help me carry Locke up to the room for some good rest. I'm afraid he'll rat me out when we get back to the guild…"

Downstairs, as Tarkel and his friends were just beginning to make merry, loud humping sounds along with the moans of the maidservants could be heard from the room next door. The 'drunken' Lorist, on the other hand, opened his eyes wide and quietly sat up straight…

Chapter 285
Dueling Grounds

Lorist pushed the window of his room open lightly, confirmed that nobody was at the small alley behind the inn, before silently making his way down to the ground and disappearing into the darkness.

The buildings along the alley to the rear of the inn all had their windows closed, perhaps because the Blood and Flame was frequented by noisy patrons. Lorist looked around to see if there was anything amiss before he headed in the direction of the dueling grounds.

The royal defense army's camp was still busy. Sounds of cries and loud laughter could be heard. The Snowshame Army's slavers' and the mercenaries' partying made a mess of the camp. Countless people could be seen coming and going through the camp gates. Even the guards of the camp's gates abandoned their posts. They sat down in groups and drank, completely oblivious to the people passing through the gates.

Lorist currently donned the disguise of a haggard mercenary. Alcoholic fumes drifted up from his clothes, he had a messy head of hair, and a bottle of rough liquor dangled by his side in one of his hands. He approached the campsite gradually, mumbling and fumbling along.

One of the lookouts noticed him and walked over. His eyes were fixed on the bottle in Lorist's hand all the way.

"Hey friend, I'm sure you've had enough to drink. Are you alright?" asked the lookout.

He helped Lorist stand and reached for the bottle with his other hand simultaneously. Lorist refused to let go of the bottle, however.

"This… is to celebrate our king's retaliation… We're going to battle soon… I… I want one more bottle… Urghh…" Lorist muttered.

The lookout patted on Lorist's back and said, "Friend, if you want to puke, do it in that alley over there. I'll hold your bottle for you while you do so, alright?"

Lorist finally loosened his grip on the bottle and let the lookout leave with it. He looked quite happy that more than half the liquor had yet to be consumed.

He pushed Lorist forward.

"Quick, go on…", he said.

His focus had already left Lorist completely; he cleaned the bottle carefully before taking a swig.

Lorist slumped over to the alley beside the camp, making sure to sound like he was struggling to hold his portion of the bottle's alcohol in.

As his steps brought him to the mouth of the alley, he was shocked by what greeted him. Dozens of drunk men lay strewn about like broken teeth and the stench of vomit and bile - stained with a hint of alcohol - billowed out of its dark depths in waves like the breaths of some gigantic beast.

He pinched his nose and disappeared into the mouth. On the other end of the darkness, the dueling grounds lay and wait for him like a beast slumbering in the night. It was a large, black mass of shadow looming domineeringly in the distance. As opposed to the alcohol and vomit of the alley now behind him, it billowed the sickeningly sweet and iron-like malodor of blood. It was indeed a monster and a hungry one at that. It devoured tens of thousands of slave gladiators and spat out that stench in return.

The darkness inside growled silently as Lorist approached, at least a dozen distinct sounds of bestial hunger could be heard. The dueling grounds' main entrance was locked. Four torches gleamed like two pairs of eyes inside, illuminating the interior in a stuttering, pale yellow glow.

Two guards approached the gate, yawning incessantly. Lorist noticed their approach and quickly circled around the beast, taking care to remain hidden in the shadows. The five other entrances were completely closed off. The ground offered no way into the beast.

He spat on his hands, rubbed them together and began the arduous climb up the sides. Like a lion clawing its way up the calves of a giraffe, he made his way up the walls and arrived at the elaborately-decorated roof. His body flipped… and he was in the belly of the beast.

The arena was circled by floors of villi-esque seats. More than ten levels rose into the night sky, chaining the space above the arena. The middle of the building was the lowest, and there was a huge tower near the main entrance, which probably served as an alarm tower. Opposite it were the priority seats and cabins from where the nobility and those of status viewed the shows.

Right in the middle of the dueling grounds was the main stage, six meters below the lowest rings of villi. Unlike the stone walls that Lorist climbed on, the inner walls around the main stage were pasted with green clay like gall covering the inside of a giant stomach. It was exceedingly smooth, nothing could scale it to escape. Anyone that entered had no choice but to be digested by the carnage inside.

The main stage had a glint like a black eye staring at the poor souls about to be swallowed whole. The smell of blood dripped off it into the air as though the stage itself was made of blood. The breeze blew through the building. It screamed in terror around its interior corners and clashed metallically with walls and other obstacles.

Charade, Jim, and the other soldiers of the house were forced to fight on those grounds with other slave fighters to the death for the entertainment of their spectators. Even though the pirates had founded their own kingdom, they had passed down their savage and dehumanizing practices. They had never once viewed the slaves as fellow humans and had them fight for their lives just to humor their masters.

Since that's the case, I shouldn't have to treat them like humans either.

Lorist's eyes blooded like the stage. Death and the desire to kill beamed from them like the rays of a blood moon. Looking at his surroundings, he realized that the alarm tower was not manned, possibly because not one of the guards were willing to soak in the chilling night breeze. He hurried to the tower and with a flash of his blade, severed the cord.

Once on the ground once more, he dropped the rope to the stage. A silent alarm was useless to his enemies, and he could continue on for quite a bit of time more after being discovered without fear of reinforcements coming to his victims' aid.

Behind the alarm tower was a gate leading to the inner sections of the building. According to Tarkel, the path led to the underground sections of the dueling grounds where the slave fighters were kept. It was said that there were at least 5000 down there.

The gate was bolted shut by a huge iron rod that was chained up and locked securely. It was no obstacle to Lorist, however. Stretching out his shortsword, he circulated his internal energy and cut the chain and bolt cleanly. The gate opened with a slight creak. Lorist entered with utmost caution and closed the gate behind him. He restored the severed chain and continued on.

After walking for a few moments, Lorist arrived at a junction. He picked the left path after some deliberation but arrived at yet another three-path fork not long after.

Darn, I still haven't got underground and there are already so many splitting paths… I might get lost if I'm not careful…

Lorist put his ear to the wall. He could hear the voices of people conversing coming from the left path. Thus, he entered the tunnel, feeling the walls as he walked on in darkness. Not long after, light could be seen from the other end of the tunnel. The source was two lit torches that hung on the walls. Beyond the tunnel, two half-naked guards were rubbing their bodies with a linen cloth soaked in a basin filled with water.

"It's fine, there's no need to rub it that clean. Get some sleep, we both have shifts early in the morning," said one of the guards.

"No, that won't do. When Blademaster Benack killed and tortured that slave, some of the blood got on my neck. It feels absolutely gross. If I don't wipe this off, I won't be able to sleep soundly… Heck, I might even get nightmares," said the other.

The first guard laughed and said, "Haha, who asked you to suck up to him so much by staying so close to him? I knew that nothing good would come of it, so I chose to watch from a distance. You should know that the blademaster has a weird temperament. Even if you get on his good side, you won't benefit much."

"It's not like I want to ask a lot of him. I only need him to get a word in for me. You know I've been serving in the royal defense army for seven years. I should've been promoted to a vice squad leader long ago, but that cursed company leader kept me from doing so to let his brother-in-law climb the ranks. But his brother-in-law is a bronze rank and has three years less experience than me. He doesn't qualify," complained the guard.

"Forget it, Stam, it's your fault for antagonizing the company leader in the past. Given how petty he is, he won't let you off that easy. I heard Suraid, the one who guards the

main entrance, say that someone came over during the evening to look for that sword-obsessed punk. The company leader insisted that the punk had left when they asked to see him. But Suraid says that he didn't look like the sort to give up that easily, so he might come back with a noble in a day or two for an inspection. If you leak the news, the company leader will definitely be in trouble and become the scapegoat…"

"That doesn't sound like a good idea," Stam replied, "You know that the sword-obsessed punk got the attention of Blademaster Benack, but I just don't get it… Even though he's a three-star silver rank, his comprehension abilities are lacking and he isn't ruthless enough. He never deals a killing blow to the slaves he spars with. If he's so soft, there's no way he'll be able to grasp the essence of the sword…"

"Haha…" the first guard laughed, "You don't get it. What Blademaster Benack has his eyes on is the punk's family. He comes from the Peterson Merchant Guild, one of the big-seven. If the blademaster manages to be appointed as his swordsmanship instructor, he'll definitely be paid at least two or three thousand gold Fordes a year apart from other benefits.

"Think about it, the kid spends around 30 gold Fordes a day just to come here for a spar or two. If you add the tips he gives us, his monthly spending is easily higher than a thousand gold Fordes. It's his ability to spend that much without batting an eye that caught the blademaster's attention."

Lorist surged with joy. He finally had a lead on Els's location. In the distance, the two guards finished cleaning their bodies. Right after they entered the room behind them, Stam stepped out again and mumbled something along the lines of someone snoring too loudly as he headed for another room nearby.

When the place quieted down, Lorist snuck out of the tunnel for a quick glance and realized that he was at a barracks. There were at least 70 soldiers. Lorist walked up to Stam's room and entered it.

"Who's this?" mumbled the guard.

Even though the room was not illuminated, Lorist could roughly see some ten beds. At the moment, however, only Stam was in the room.

It seems that Drei's intel is accurate, there are only 200 guards left…

Without a sound, Lorist made his way to Stam's bed with his sword drawn and pressed

on the guard's neck.

With great terror, Stam muttered, "Who-who are you? Wh-what do you want?"

Lorist said, "You don't need to know who I am. I just want to know where my young master is."

"Your young master? How would I know where he is? Are you sure you have the right person?" asked Stam.

"I recognize you, you're the one who opens the gates for my young master when he comes here to spar. I also recall that he's tipped you on occasion," said Lorist.

"Oh," said Stam.

Exhaling in relief, he said, "Friend, are you the Peterson Merchant Guild's guard for the young master? You've come to the right place, but I'm not the person who can help you. It's not something you can solve either. All you can do is have a noble or blademaster from the capital come over. Your young master is indeed here, but he's caught the eye of Blademaster Benack, who wants to take him as his disciple. Your master has been refusing stubbornly so far and its infuriated the blademaster.

He's locked him up in return."

"Then why did the company leader deny that my young master was here when the people from the guild came over earlier to ask about it?" asked Lorist with a hoarse voice.

"Hey, friend, that's none of my business. All I know is that Blademaster Benack has an odd temper. If he snaps and something happens to your master, the company leader will be able to push the blame elsewhere. If somebody dies over here, all we have to do to erase any trace of it is to toss the body into the magic beast cages. No evidence will be left for anybody to place any blame," said Stam.

Given how much he hated the company leader, he took the opportunity to badmouth his superior. He understood that a young master with a personal guard secretly protecting him definitely was not someone to be trifled with.

Perhaps, this is the end of that darned bastard, and my time will come soon.

"Get dressed and bring me to my young master. I need to be sure that he's safe," Lorist said as he tapped on Stam's face with his sword, "If you help me out, our guild will definitely reward you heavily. Here's the down payment."

With a glint, Lorist brought up a torch in his hand to brighten the room. When Stam recovered from the sudden flash of light, he saw a gleaming gold Forde note falling before him.

"You have two choices. Either you bring me to see my young master and be rewarded for it, or you refuse and be silenced. I can simply find another person who's willing to cooperate. There are more than 60 people here. I'm sure one of them will help me out," whispered Lorist in a rough voice.

Stam grit his teeth and held the note in his hand.

After checking its authenticity with the light from Lorist's torch, he kissed the note and said, "As the saying goes, 'men die for money'…I'll give you a tour, but you can't remain dressed like this. The others will notice."

Lorist pointed at the bed next to him where a set of gear lay.

"I've already made preparations. I'll look no different after putting this on. This bronze helmet also has a visor that's ideal for masking my face. We'll look just like any other patrol. All I need you to do is to bring me to my young master. I only need to know that he's alive and well."

Chapter 286
Three Floors Underground

The royal defense army's equipment was rather bare bones; they only had a bronze helmet, a bronze breastplate and leather pauldrons, faulds, bottoms, and wristguards.

The bronze helmet, in particular, had an ancient design; it reached down to the shoulders and had a T-shaped opening at the front for the eyes, nose, and mouth.

It was rumored that there was a copper mine somewhere on the archipelago. The pirates did not manage to find any other source of metals on the islands and, given the embargos levied on them by the other nations, King Lud I was not able to provide any metal armor for his troops during his reign. The suggestion to use refined bronze for their the armor emerged only after the king's death.

Decades had passed, but given that the kingdom never faced any wars in that time, and at worst had to deal with a few slave uprisings, their equipment had never improved despite eventually having the funds for it. In the end, under the guise of 'honoring the traditions of their ancestors', they chose to simply continue using their old equipment indefinitely.

Stam brought Lorist through a dim corridor as any patrolling soldier would. In Lorist's left hand was a bronze semi-circular shield, his right held a bronze-tipped pike. Those were the standard weapons of the royal defense army. Stam, on the other hand, wore no helmet. He only had a bronze-plated vest and a longsword dangling at his waist. He explained that, since he was a regular there, there was no need for him to dress up fully. He was also carrying the same pike and shield as Lorist.

The corridor's walls ahead had two lit torches, and beyond it, two pike-and-shield-wielding guards could be seen.

"Hey, brother Stam, didn't you go back to rest already? Why are you back here?" one of them asked when they saw the two approaching.

Stam pointed at the ceiling and said, "That bastard said that we have to pay extra attention to security since we're so understaffed. They've forced us to do another

round of patrols…”

The two soldiers snickered, before the one who spoke up shook his head and said, "You're starting to get singled out by that company leader more and more often, brother Stam. Why don't you transfer to another company instead?"

Stam replied nonchalantly, "Let's have this discussion some other time. Changing companies will see me being the rookie for a couple of years again."

After taking a turn, two iron gates, one behind the other, could be seen. Four soldiers stood guard between the two. However, with Stam leading him, Lorist was able to pass by them unobstructed. After going through the two gates, Lorist realized that there was a stairway that headed deeper underground.

After descending another floor, they were greeted by another twin-gate setup with four soldiers stationed in the middle. Stam once again used the excuse of being forced to go on a patrol by his superior to bring Lorist across. Beyond that was an empty hall which Stam explained to be where the slave fighters would be rewarded. They were allowed to frolic with the prostitutes here. The slaves were kept locked up two floors further down.

Lorist held onto Stam and feigned anxiety as he asked, "What's going on? Why is my young master kept locked up here? Didn't you say it was only a house arrest of sorts?"

Stam shrugged, "It wasn't my call. It's not my fault your young master got on the bad side of Blademaster Benack. Originally, he was imprisoned upstairs, but when people from your guild came to ask about him, the blademaster instructed for your young master to be sent to the lowest floor to experience some suffering. Heck, I was the one who was assigned to bring him down here."

After passing through the empty hall, they arrived at yet another guarded twin gate, beyond which lay the stairs to the lower floor. The second basement was different from the first, however. The sides of the hall were barred into separate small cells. Each individual bar was as thick as a fist. Some of the cells were empty while silhouettes could be seen in others. They all seemed to be the slave fighters of the dueling grounds.

Ten fully-armed guards walked out of another corridor further down the hall. The leader was a little surprised to see Stam and Lorist. So, he came over to ask about the

situation.

Stam used the same excuse as he pointed harshly at the ceiling, causing the leader and the rest of the guards to laugh at his misfortune.

"Stop it! As if I'm not unlucky enough already. I'm going to go down for a spin before finishing up this stupid old task. I really need to go get some sleep. Won't you guys go down with me for a look?" replied he.

The leader shook his head and said, "You go down yourself, I just got back from there. Also, Blademaster Benack is down there, so you better be careful not to piss him off."

"Oh?" Stam said with surprise, "What's the blademaster doing down here so late at night?"

"He's here for the sword-training kid, obviously. I heard that someone came to look for him earlier today. The blademaster must be anxious, so he's back here to force the kid to take an oath to be his disciple," said the leader.

Stam looked at Lorist, only to see him nod slightly.

"Whatever, it's none of my business. I'm only going down there to finish up my patrol. What happens down there is none of my business," said he finally.

When they got down to the third basement, Lorist found it was far smaller than the floor above. Stam explained, "The third basement of the Dueling Grounds is used to keep the most dangerous or disobedient slaves. The security here is also the tightest. Friend, I didn't know that the blademaster would be here tonight. If you have a chance, try to convince your young master to submit for now to preserve his life.

"Blademaster Benack is one of the two blademasters guarding the dueling grounds. Not only does he have a weird temperament, he's also lustful, greedy, cruel, and petty. There was once a regiment leader that got into some kind of disagreement with him… It ended with the blademaster killing a hundred slave fighters to vent his frustration. He then reported that the slaves were revolting to justify his senseless killing and blamed the regiment leader for inadequate management. The poor man was demoted and transferred to the regiment manning the walls.

"So, whatever you do, don't be reckless in front of Blademaster Benack. Otherwise, I'm afraid you won't be able to leave here alive. If something bad happens to your young

master, please endure it for now. Send some word back to your clan so that they'll send some blademasters here. If you do that, you'll be able to ask the king to sanction a duel between your blademasters and Blademaster Benack. That's the best way you can resolve the situation. Do you understand?"

Lorist nodded before Stam felt assured enough to continue leading the way.

Lorist could see a thick black rope dangling in the corner. Passing his pike in his right hand to his left, Lorist took a few steps back and took out a triple-edged blade from his waist. Infusing it with internal energy, Lorist swung his right hand lightly, throwing the blade right up and nailing it flat at the ceiling.

He then moved the pike back to his right hand before catching up to Stam, who did not appear to have noticed what Lorist had just done.

That was already the fifth triple-edged blade Lorist used to nail the black ropes unmoving on the way. Originally, Lorist did not know what the rope was for; he only realized that it was connected to a small alarm bell after he passed through the twin gate on the first basement.

If some incident happened at any of the basement floors, patrolling soldiers only had to pull on the black rope to sound the alarm on all the floors. That way, they could wait for reinforcements to hold back any slave violence or respond to any accidents swiftly.

Stam was correct about the third basement being heavily defended. Apart from the four guards at the twin gate near the stairs, there was another twin-gate crossing point further ahead also stationed with four guards. Only after they passed through the second crossing point was Lorist able to hear some echoes of conversation.

The third basement was different from the second basement in that the corridor between the two rows of cells at the side was rather wide. There were also a few rectangular-shaped pillars along the corridor. The basement was illuminated mainly by the two torches which were hung on the pillar in the middle. As they approached the center, they could hear a rough voice saying something in a mocking tone.

"Who goes there?" said a high-pitched voice. It was apparent that the speaker had heard Lorist and Stam's footsteps as they approached.

"Sir Blademaster, it is I, Stam. We've received orders from the company leader to patrol the area," announced Stam as he saluted.

Lorist mimicked his salut.

"What's wrong with Pabola? Is there really a need to be that thorough with patrols?" the man with the high-pitched voice complained.

It appeared that Pabola was the company leader's name.

"Sir Benack, I also didn't understand why the company leader had me patrol once more, but he said we should be extra careful today since the regiment is away, leaving only two squads of troops behind here. So, he said there was a need for increased security," explained Stam.

"Whatever, come over you two. You're just in time to help me out with something," the blademaster said with his sharp voice.

As Lorist moved forward along with Stam, he felt himself getting more agitated the more steps he took. He was able to see the two cells in which his soldiers and guards were kept. While he could not remember every one of their names, he did think their faces looked familiar.

By the time he arrived at the brightest part, he saw Els, Charade, Jim, Tok, Torin and some other household knights.

Charade was half naked with only short and tattered trousers to wear. His chubby figure was no more, replaced with a toughened-up build bereft of fat. Bloody lacerations could be seen all over his exposed torso. Both his hands and legs were in chains. At that moment, he was seated cross-legged right in front of the thick iron bars, staring at the glamorously-dressed old man in the middle of the hall.

Jim was seated next to Charade. However, there was a dirty bandage wrapped around his body and looked to be recovering from his injuries. Further away was Tok, Torin, and the rest.

Els, on the other hand, was in a cell adjacent to Charade's, but he was still properly dressed and was not chained up like the rest. He was currently seated with his back against the moss-covered walls. He didn't bother to look at the old fancily-dressed man in the hall.

Lorist gave the old fellow a look. The man was Blademaster Benack. Under the illumination of the torchlight, his face looked exceedingly insidious.

"Kid, I'll give you one more chance. As long as you sign this agreement and put down your fingerprint to take me as your master, I'll make sure that you end up as a gold-rank within three years. Otherwise, you can forget about leaving the dueling grounds…" said the blademaster with his raspy, high-pitched voice.

Els spat on the ground without bothering to turn his head to look the blademaster in the eye.

"Hahahaha, that kid made the right choice. Gigantic rat, you'll only be able to take him as your disciple in your dreams. Breaking through to the gold rank within three years? Hah! He would be easily able to reach that rank without your tutelage! And to think that you want him to pay you 2000 gold Fordes annually for your teachings… You're seriously blinded by money!" exclaimed a rough voice from behind Blademaster Benack.

Oh, Blademaster Benack does indeed look a little like a giant rat, given his oddly-shaped eyes…

Turning back to look, Lorist saw five to six other slaves laughing in the cell at the opposite side where the sound originated from. The chains that bound them seemed much thicker than those that bound Charade.

Blademaster Benack puffed angrily and forced himself to ignore what the slaves had said before continuing to address Els, "Kid, are you really going to be that stubborn? Fine, I will let a few of your friends here come out to die by my blade. I'll see whether you'll agree to it after I skin them alive!"

Lorist's gaze cooled as the blademaster pointed at the cell Charade and the others were in when he made his threat.

The voice from the opposite cell resounded again, "Big ol' rat, shame on you for being a blademaster who only picks on iron and silver ranks! If you dare, let me out. I'm only a gold rank, unlike brother Shuss here, let's see you take me on if you dare! Stupid rat-faced bastard!"

Benack turned back and scolded angrily, "What does this have to do with you lot? Do you want a beating?"

The slave fighters laughed mockingly and echoed, "Yeah, we'd love one! Come in, stupid rat! We're itching to be beaten!"

The blademaster was so mad that he almost seemed to fume. However, he was not able to offer any rebuttal, so he turned back to Lorist and Stam and barked, "Did you two not hear me? Get the guards to pass me the silver keys!"

Stam turned back and said, "Roger, I'm on it," before taking Lorist with him.

Along the way, Stam said, "Darn, we're rather unlucky tonight. Blademaster Benack will be torturing the slaves to vent again… We will have to clean up after him later, and trust me, it's the grossest thing you'll ever see."

Lorist asked curiously, "Who were those people who mocked the blademaster just now? Why doesn't he just vent on them?"

"Hehe, that big rat won't dare-- Oh, I meant the blademaster. Those are gold-ranked slave fighters. The one who spoke out first was a blademaster called Shuss. He's practically a living legend in the dueling grounds. Seventeen years ago, he managed to break through to become a blademaster during one of his fights. Even though the royal family attempted to recruit him, he simply refused. It's said that he was still kept at the gueling grounds so that the rank 3 blademaster of the royal family can spar and train with him," said Stam.

"But apart from Shuss, aren't the others just gold ranks? Why doesn't Benack go teach them a lesson?" asked Lorist.

Stam angled his nose up high and said, "Hmph! Would he dare? The first time Blademaster Benack wanted to punish a gold-ranked slave fighter, he ended up injured heavily himself. Even though he was rescued in the end, he lost his right ear from the gold-ranked fighter's bite. In terms of swordsmanship, Blademaster Benack definitely had the advantage. However, he still wasn't a match for slave fighters who survive on a fight-to-fight basis. Ever since then, Blademaster Benack only dares to pick on iron and silver ranks."

The two had arrived at the heavily-guarded twin gate by the time he finished. Stam told the guards that the blademaster had requested for the silver key and they handed it to him promptly, but they did not fail to add that they could not leave because they had to stand guard over there.

"Ptooey! I know you shits just don't want to help with the cleanup. Your third-rate act doesn't fool me!" snapped Stam before he took the key and turned back with Lorist.

"Go, open the three cells over there and bring a few of them to me," Blademaster Benack said while pointing at Charade, before he turned to Els and said, "Kid, let me show you how it's really done. Your stupid sparring sessions are only filled with circling around him without ever aiming for the killing blow… I'll show you what it means to deal a fatal strike! After my performance, you'll definitely be impressed by my skills and take me as master…"

"Hahaha, far from learning swordsmanship from you, I think you'll teach us how to borrow like a rat far better! That's what you're really meant for!" said a voice from the opposite cells.

The blademaster took a few deep breaths to suppress the rage in his mind before he turned to Lorist and Stam and said, "What's going on? Do what I say quick!"

Stam gulped audibly before he stammered as he pointed at Charade's cell, "Th-that time t-tehe supervisor su-suspected that those slave fi-fighters have diff-ferent statuses from normal people… Didn't h-he ask us to check up o-on their backgrounds properly first? Sir Blademaster, i-if you bring them out and kill them just like t-that, it won't be too app-propriate…"

"Background check my arse!" the blademaster exclaimed angrily, "They are going to die in the dueling grounds in a few days anyway! It's only a matter of time before he dies, so just do what I say!"

"A-alright," said Stam as he tugged on Lorist, beckoning him to head towards the cell.

Chapter 287
Taking Action

Charade, Jim, and Tok were dragged out of their cells. Charade stood in the middle. He did not say a word and merely stared coldly at Blademaster Benack with eyes full of scorn. Jim wanted to stand in front of Charade but was stopped by him. Tok was already cursing. Being an ex-pirate, his choice of expletives was not of the mild variety; from the moment the cell was opened to when he was brought out, Tok had already 'laid' with more than 17 generations of the blademaster's female descendants, and he was already making his way to the 18th.

The Norton knights and soldiers kept within the third basement all cussed and jeered, banging at the iron bars behind which they were locked.

Els jumped around angrily and demanded that Blademaster Benack spare them, saying that he would consider taking him as his master should that be the case.

"Shut up!" cried Charade to Els.

His voice carried a hint of scolding, much to Stam's surprise.

Charade pointed at the blademaster and yelled, "Are you really going to take that darned big rat as your master? You're going to embarrass the whole of the house! Look at that pathetic excuse of a man! Do you think you'll be able to live this shame down even with the rest of your life? The moment you take him as your master, your life is over! I don't care if I die, but you must never take this kind of shame upon yourself! When the house's forces arrive, I trust that our lord will not let this stinking rat off and will exterminate all his kin alongside him!"

The reason Charade was so emotional was because apprenticeship was a huge deal on the continent. The relationship between a master and apprentice was far closer and significant than how it was in Lorist's past life. Choosing a master was a serious deal filled with lasting implications. The apprentice had to see his master as a second parent. They were obligated to obey their master for the rest of their lives, and serve in some capacity to further their goals.

In the case of the blademaster forcing Els to be apprenticed to him, the moment Els signed the agreement he would have to look at the rat-like Benack as his master. Not only would he have to pay his dues for the guidance, but he also had to abide by his master's every whim. Blademaster Benack could have Els solve every one of his problems no matter how trivial.

Should Els go back on his agreement, the blademaster can use the contract against him and spread word of his disobedience. No one would care why Els took the man on as his master. It would only matter that he was indeed the blademaster's apprentice, and he would receive appropriate criticism for his bad behavior. It would be a lifelong stain on his reputation.

Even the Peterson Merchant Guild, with which he claimed affiliation, would have their reputation sullied. The other reason Blademaster Benack wanted to forcefully take Els as his apprentice was because he wanted to be affiliated with one of the largest guilds in the Union.

At that moment, Els's face was already covered with tears. He cried wildly.

"You freaking big rat, I beg you to spare them! As long as you do so, I'll give you all the money you could ever want! Ten thousand? How about twenty?! If you kill them, I swear that I will use the cruelest methods to put you and your family to death, ending your line once and for all! Mark my words!"

"Oh, is that so?" Blademaster Benack mused with his face flush with anger, before his expression turned calm as he said, "Since you're not willing to take me as your master, I will kill these three filthy slaves in front of you. If you do decide to sign this agreement, I'll agree to give them a swift and painless death."

Everyone present could hear the venom infused in the blademaster's threats. Even his high-pitched voice turned deep and dark as he uttered them. He had already made up his mind to kill off Charade and the other two no matter what, given how they berated him and stopped Els from agreeing to sign the agreement despite being only silver ranks.

Hmph, stupid filth who's not even a gold rank… Since you dare to behave like that in my presence, I will make sure that you die in the most excruciating way possible. I'll show you what horrors a blademaster like me is capable of.

Blademaster Benack drew his sword. Under the illumination of the torches, the blade glowed subtly like the reflection of the moon in calm water, an indication that the sword was of good make.

"Very well… You filthy slaves… Did it feel good to berate me? If you kneel and prostrate yourself to that punk and ask him to take me as master, you'll be graced with a painless death," said the blademaster with his sword pointed at the three.

"Ptooey!"

All three of them spat on the ground in at the same time, rousing yet another round of mocking laughs in the opposite cell.

"Big rat, aren't you a blademaster? If you dare, remove their chains and give them a weapon to fight you fairly! You're a freaking blademaster and they're only three unarmed silver ranks locked up in chains. If you kill them as is, it'll be nothing but shameless slaughter. Give them weapons and remove their chains to give them a warrior's death!" said a rough voice.

The gold-ranked slaves began to chant, "Give them weapons, remove their chains!" incessantly.

The blademaster deafened himself to the chants and walked over, raising his sword and slashing down savagely.

The flash of the blade was akin to lightning. The strike seemed slow but was horridly fast. It carried with it a seething vibe of poison. The trajectory it traced would split Charade's face in half, severing his lower jaw from the rest of his head and revealing his tongue if it hit. With another loop, the blademaster could easily cut off the tongue itself.

Charade shut his eyes and rushed straight towards the incoming strike. Jim and Tok, on the other hand, leaped forward as well, dragging their chains with them.

The rough voice resounded again angrily, "Big rat, you better not give me a chance in the future. Otherwise, I'll definitely skin you alive and remove every gram flesh from your body…"

Clang! A bronze pike suddenly appeared, blocking the longsword strike. Even though the pike was cut clean in half as a result, the longsword was deflected to the side.

Blademaster Benack didn't expect a guard from the royal defense army would actually manage to parry his longsword. During his moment of stupor, he saw a semi-circular bronze shield smashing towards his face.

"What the heck are you doing?!" roared the blademaster in rage. With a sweep of his legs, he managed to avoid the shield bash. But he did not predict that Lorist would be right in front of him. Perhaps, he had moved to face Lorist inadvertently while avoiding the strike.

Lorist lowered his head and headbutted the blademaster right away with his bronze helmet. The latter stumbled and fell to the ground. A massive lump quickly formed on his forehead. There were even a few cuts all over his face. Even a blademaster would not be able to resist having his unprotected face smashed in with a bronze helmet.

Stretching out his hand, Lorist grabbed onto the blademaster's outstretched wrist and gave it a harsh twist. The sword the hand was holding fell and Lorist caught it. With a few casual slashes, he severed Blademaster Benack's arm and leg, causing him to fall unconscious from all the screaming in pain.

The others in the basement looked on in absolute silence. They never thought that such a complete reversal would occur in those few moments. It was as if time itself stopped flowing.

Els continued to stare with tears all over his face and his mouth agape. Charade maintained his forward-rushing posture with a shocked expression. Jim and Tok were already prepared to take the strike for Charade, but the scene stopped them in their tracks completely.

The gold-ranked slaves in the other cells stared wide-mouthed, seemingly unwilling to believe that a mere foot soldier was able to so easily take out Blademaster Benack without any traces of using battleforce.

Stam was the first one to snap out of his stupor. Shivering all over, he turned tail to run. Lorist gave the broken pike a light kick and caused it to pierce through Stam's undefended back. THe poor man fell face first into the ground and didn't move again.

"Good thing I arrived just in time to save you lot," said Lorist with a smile as he removed his helmet. Given the force he used during the headbutt, Lorist's forehead was slightly bruised as well.

"Mi-milord…" Charade, Jim, and Tok all knelt in relief, having survived in the face of certain death.

The imprisoned soldiers and knights of House Norton began to chant 'Milord' in the same fashion.

Lorist moved his index finger to his mouth and hushed them.

"Shut up! I still need to bust you guys out of here! Stop making so much noise!"

He moved to help the three to their feet and hugged all of them tightly.

"It must've been tough on you guys. I'm proud that our house has such unrelenting and strong-willed knights."

Tok mumbled, "Milord, I'm still not a household knight yet…"

"Shut up!" Lorist exclaimed, "If I say you are, then you are! See that corpse over there? Drag him over here and take the keys to the cells."

Charade laughed and said, "Tok, Milord means to say that he's accepted you as one of his household knights. He'll give you the badge and admittance gift after we escape."

"Oh," said Tok before he turned to loot Stam's corpse.

"Come back here," Lorist called out. With a flash of his sword, he cut off the chains binding them.

Els was the first one to be let out. He kneeled right away in front of Lorist while giving himself two harsh slaps on the face.

"Milord, it's all my fault… I almost caused Charade and the others to lose their lives…"

Lorist helped him up.

"What's your problem? There's no need to slap yourself like that. This is not your fault. It's all because of that greedy rat. He's the one that tried to prey on you."

Lorist pointed at the fallen blademaster who had just regained awareness and was screaming in pain again. He clutched the stump of his arm with his other hand. Els

leapt over to him and gave him a harsh walloping before finally stomping down on the blademaster's chest. The man fainted once more.

"How many of those here are men of our house?" asked Lorist.

"Milord, there are 257 remaining. That stupid rat killed five just this evening alone," said Charade hatefully.

"Milord, avenge us! We had 1300-odd people when we were first imprisoned!" called out one soldier kneeling with tears all over his face.

Lorist covered his face and tried not to let his own tears flow.

"Let's be patient. Our forces have already conquered Nupite and will soon advance to the capital. As long as they are subjects of the Hanayabarta kingdom, they will not escape my wrath. I want a few of you to come here and wake this blademaster up with your piss. After that, I'll skin him slowly so that he doesn't enjoy the luxury of a swift death," said Lorist.

Blademaster Benack cried out in agony as Els brought a few soldiers and broke his bones with the chains that previously bound them. Every time the blademaster fainted from the pain, they would piss on his face to wake him up. His cries in the basement prison sent chills down the onlookers' spines.

Half an hour later, Blademaster Benack finally breathed his final breath. His corpse had already become an unrecognizable mess of pound meat. By then, the Norton soldiers had all been released and they were resting.

"Milord, how are we going to make it out?" asked Charade.

"I haven't given it much thought. Well, we could always slaughter our way out," replied Lorist.

"No darn way!" Charade cried out while giving himself a smack in the forehead, "You were so reckless that you didn't even have a plan in mind before you acted?"

Lorist said casually, "Doesn't this count as an emergency? You were about to lose your lives, you know. I can't stay my hand at that."

"But right now, we're mostly unarmed and not in prime condition. How will we bust

our way out by force?" complained Charade.

"Why don't we just make the iron bars into makeshift pikes by sharpening the point? That way, we'll at least be armed," said Lorist as he looked at the iron bars.

"It's pointless, milord. The material is the same as those of our chains. They don't conduct battleforce and we won't be able to use them as weapons," replied Charade with a bitter smile.

"Hey, kid, come here and let us out. We'll be able to help you," said the man with the hoarse voice.

"Oh, milord, let me introduce you to him. That over there is Brother Shuss, a blademaster. He showed us the ropes when we first arrived. I need to thank him for it," said Charade as he headed for the man's cell.

The slave was an old man of abnormally large stature with a determined gaze. Wounds from battles long past decorated his body all over. The chains that bound him were at least three times thicker than those that bound Charade. However, Charade could not find the key to his cell, which was not something to be surprised about, since the keys Stam took were silver. Lorist remembered seeing another set of bronze keys at the twin gates which were probably those used to open the other set of cells.

Lorist infused Blademaster Benack's sword with his internal energy and cut off the thick bars of the cells. When Shuss emerged from it, Lorist's longsword flashed past before the chains binding him fell to the ground with loud clatters.

"Magnificent swordsmanship!" praised Shuss with a thumbs up.

Lorist looked at the other four gold-ranked slaves' yearning expressions and said apologetically, "Just wait here for a moment. I will go get the keys from the guards to let you out. Cutting the bars will expend too much of my energy."

"Milord, won't you alert the guards that way?" asked Els.

"Don't worry, those guards know that the big rat frequently tortures you lot to death. That's why they are not willing to approach this hall in the slightest. We can use the excuse of getting cleaning supplies to approach and kill them. After that, you guys will put on their equipment and pretend to be guards, understood?" asked Lorist.

"Alright, Milord," replied Els.

Chapter 288
Secret Path

The four guards at the entrance looked at Lorist walk over as he mumbled.

"Hey, what's wrong?" asked one of them.

"Don't ask, it's far too disgusting… Blademaster Benack is too cruel," Lorist said as he knocked his wrist on the bars of the gates, "Stam wanted me to get some cleaning tools. We'll have to move some corpses later as well."

One of the guards said as he opened the gate, "Are you an idiot? Why would you do it yourself? Just get a slave down here to do it! After all, the corpses will be fed to the magic beasts anyway."

Lorist nodded.

"That was what I thought should be done as well, but Stam told me to hurry up because the blademaster doesn't have the patience for me to go all the way up to get one."

Another guard chuckled and said, "Well, sucks to be the two of you, bumping into the blademaster when he's in a bad mood. Oh, and, how many died just now? The cries I heard sounded rather terrifying. The slaves must have died horribly."

With the door opened, Lorist walked through to a good spot, snickered, and replied, "Four."

With a flash of his sword, the four guards lost their lives. Four strokes, each making an opening on a guard's throat. They fell one after another without a sound, slipping into death's cold embrace in silence. Waving his hands, Els and eight other household soldiers rushed over and stripped the corpses bare. Three soldiers with physiques similar to the guards put on the uniforms.

The remaining soldiers dragged the four corpses back to where they came from. Lorist looked at Els and the other three and nodded with satisfaction.

"Very well, fortunately, the enemy loadout includes an old-style bronze helmet that hides faces well enough. If the enemy comes and says they want to go in to check because they don't recognize you, let them. Only kill them if you have. We don't want them to report the situation and call for reinforcements after all."

Els nodded and said, "Understood, Milord."

Lorist took the silver key and left. With Els watching over the situation, he was not worried in the slightest. After all, most of the royal defense army's soldiers were of the bronze rank. Only leaders had to be silver ranked and above. On that front, they were not that much different from the Nortons' forces. Even if a group of ten patrol soldiers came over to check, with a three-star-silver-rank like Els and a few other iron ranks with him, there would be no issue.

"Thanks. He's called Jades, and this here is Messen. Over here we have Sendhank and Plom. All four of them are gold ranks, so they're locked up here with me. How should I address you, by the way?" asked the blademaster, Shuss, as he received the keys and opened the cells to release the four gold-ranked fighters.

"I'm Norton Lorist. Just call me Locke," said Lorist before he nodded to the gold-ranked fighters.

"Our lord is the head of the Family of the Raging Bear of The Northlands. He's a count," said Charade as he stepped forward to introduce Lorist formally.

However, Blademaster Shuss did not really care for Lorist's title and casually said, "Fine, we'll either call you Lord Locke or Lord Count. Jades, Plom, here are the keys. Release the other fellows at the back."

"Please, call me Locke. My friends all refer to me as such," Lorist said.

He eyed Jades and Plom as they disappeared into the darkness beyond the room they were in.

"Are there more?" asked he.

"Yes. The third basement was originally only for keeping silver-ranked slave fighters. There are 27 others deeper inside. Most of your men were kept over here and were made examples for the rest of them to follow, mainly because their loyalty and solidarity were too strong," said Shuss.

"Milord, did you mention that our forces have already occupied Nupite?" asked Charade.

"That's right," Lorist said, before he gave a brief description of the current conflict, "I snuck into the capital because I was worried about you guys. Fortunately, I got here in time. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to meet you guys again for the rest of my life."

"Milord, you shouldn't have risked your safety like this. While it's not a huge deal if we die, you are different! You have to lead the house. If some misfortune befalls you, our rescue will have been in vain," said Jim, as he, Tok, Klinbo and the other household knights teared up.

"That's right, Milord. You shouldn't have taken that kind of risk," said Charade.

"Bullshit. Even though I'm the leader of the house, you guys are my friends and brothers. It's because you fought for the house that you ended up in captivity. Would I still be human if I left you to rot like this?" asked Lorist.

"Nicely said. Naturally, you acted on what you said as well. Nobles like you are rare these days. What are you going to do next, Lord Locke?" asked Blademaster Shuss.

"Well," Lorist stroked his head, "I didn't really come here with a plan. Originally, I only wanted to check this place out to get a grasp of the area. All I wanted was to see them safe. But the urgency of the situation forced my hand. If it's only one or two people, perhaps I can find a way to bring them out. But I really have no clue what I should do with so many people. At worst, we'll have to fight our way out. It's a possible feat given that the royal defense army was just deployed and the capital is not as well defended as usual. But I can't say how many will survive."

Shuss stared into Lorist's eyes. He became curious about what gave Lorist the confidence to say that he would be able to fight his way out of the capital.

"If all you want is to leave the capital, we don't even have to fight, I know a secret path. Follow me," said he finally.

Shuss turned and walked away. Lorist and his companions waited where they were.

The sound of metal clattering on stone could be heard from the other side of the dark tunnel. Soon a group of slaves, led by the three gold-ranks, emerged. They greeted

Lorist and the blademaster as they passed.

Shuss brought them to the innermost cell of the floor and stood there for a good moment before having the gold rank called Jades to open the cell. Once inside, he moved aside an old wooden bed and some rotting dried grass and tapped on the stone floor. He removed one of the tiles. A small hole became visible beneath. It was just large enough for a person to fit through.

"Old Jones spent 14 years digging this tunnel, but just as he was about to escape, he lost his life on the dueling grounds," he said wistfully, "That day, he even told me excitedly that he would sneak two pieces of black bread with him before he escapes during the night. Who knew that he would be pitted against two swordtooth tigers on his own that very day."

If a slave fighter managed to win a fight, they would be awarded a luxurious meal that included roast meat, potatoes, black bread and some cheap liquor. They were even allowed to take two extra pieces of black bread for supper.

"Where does this tunnel head?" asked Lorist.

"Even I don't know the answer to that," the blademaster said, shaking his head, "Jones only told me that he dug until he reached a waterway and left the last piece of rock untouched. He just had to remove the last rock to escape. But since his death two years ago, I never managed to enter his cell, so I haven't been able to check it out myself."

When he finished, the blademaster rummaged around the old wooden bed and found a small piece of metal and a thumb-length wire. "These were his tools. This here is a piece of metal broken off a sword Jones found and kept. This wire here he got from a broken basket. The most important feature about these two items is that they can both conduct battleforce and allow a blade glow to form. Old Jones relied on only these two items to dig that tunnel over 14 years."

Lorist could not help but recall a certain classic Hollywood film he watched in his past life, titled Shaw-something Redemption. The protagonist was sentenced to serve a very long jail sentence and managed to use an iron spoon to dig a tunnel over the course of ten-odd years to finally obtain freedom. Jones was quite similar in that regard, save for his ill fortune.

"Milord, let's go down there to check," said Tok, before he jumped right inside.

"Hey, wait a second," Charade said before he passed the torch to Tok, "Take this torch down there so that we can see better."

After around half an hour, Tok reemerged from the hole covered with mud.

"Milord, this path is not that long, only around 15 meters deep. The only thing is it's a little too narrow. I wasn't able to twist my body around or breathe properly but there is a bit more space near the stone wall at the end. I knocked apart two larger rocks and walked towards where there was an air current and saw the exit. It's gated with iron bars at least as thick as a bowl."

Tok gestured to show the width of the bars and said after some hesitance, "After looking around, I found the exit of the waterway had two towers to its left and right around 50 meters away. A huge wall connected those two towers. If we escape through the waterway, we'll be detected easily by people on that tower. We won't be able to retaliate if they attack us with crossbows or other ranged weaponry."

Tok knelt down and drew two semi-circles and two circles at the two ends to denote the two towers. At the center of the indented side of the inner semi-circle was a dot that represented the waterway exit.

"What about the other waterway? Where does that head?" asked Charade.

"I didn't go there so I don't know. I only know that it leads pretty far away, and I didn't want to make you worry by staying down there for too long," said Tok, shaking his head.

"You don't need to go all the way to the end just to find out. I know where that leads," Blademaster Shuss said, "I recall one slave fighter said it leads to the ring road. That path is actually a huge sewer. As storms around the Hanayabarta archipelago typically last two to three days, the capital built these waterways to help with the irrigation and avoid flooding. There are four city sectors with one such waterway underground. Every month on the 10th, some guards would bring us to clear up the waterways. That fighter knew that because he used to be one of those slaves as well. He was sent to the dueling grounds because he got into a fight with a slave manager. Shame he only lasted three rounds before dying."

"What do we do now, Milord?" asked Charade.

Lorist considered his options. Even though he would be able to escape the capital

safely through the waterway, he had to free more than 200 men, not just a few. It would take them at least three hours to make it out and they were all tired and hungry to boot. According to Charade, they only got a meal of gruel for the whole day when the dueling grounds were closed. While seeing Lorist come to their rescue did improve their mood a bit, that would probably not be able to last them the whole journey out.

Additionally, according to Tok's findings, escaping the waterway was no easy task either. The guards on the towers would surely notice that many people coming through the waterway. Without any weapons, it would only end badly for them. While Lorist did want to help them escape, he did not want to lead them to their deaths.

Even if he did manage to kill the enemies on the towers and wall first before the rest escaped, it still was not going to end well. While Lorist did not consider the guards a threat to him, they were doubtlessly on high alert and his ascent up the walls would alarm all of them. As long as the enemy sent a number of blademasters to hold Lorist down while others chased Charade and the rest down, the unarmed household knights would be unable to fight back. There was no way Lorist could save everyone, regardless of how strong he was.

Lorist was in a dilemma and was not able to come up with a resolution for a good while as he stroked his chin in thought.

"Lord Locke, I heard you mention that the royal defense army has mobilized this morning. Do you know how many guards they have left at the dueling grounds?" asked Blademaster Shuss, knocking Lorist off his train of thought.

"Hmm, I believe there should be around two hundred of them. Roughly two squads" replied Lorist.

"That's wonderful. Then, Lord Locke, can you lend us a couple of weapons? I want to rescue the other slave fighters on the upper basement and conquer the first basement as soon as we can," said Blademaster Shuss.

"Oh?" Lorist mused, not knowing what the blademaster intended to achieve.

"Here's the plan," Blademaster Shuss said after seeing Lorist's troubled expression, "Actually, the 200 royal defense army guards you mentioned are only responsible for the patrols and supervision. There are another one or two hundred instructors and supervisors here. They are the ones who pose a real threat to us. Another rank 2

blademaster, Jiluet, is also among them.

"However, there is only one entrance to where we are locked up. If we strike fast and seal off the sole entrance to stop the instructors and supervisors as well as the blademaster from barging in, we'll have enough time to plan our departure."

"Then, do you know where the pantry and armory are?" asked Lorist.

"They're over there as well," the blademaster said as he knelt down and drew an oval on the ground with the mud on his finger, "Lord, this here is the dueling grounds. The prison for us slave fighters is located a little bit to the right. It's where the magic beasts are kept as well. As for the instructors and supervisors, their dorm is to the left, alongside the pantry and armory. Every morning, some slaves would be sent to collect some food to feed those of us down here. Only after we have our meals will the instructors bring us out for different kinds of training."

"I see. Blademaster Shuss, how do you compare to that rank 2 blademaster? Is the gap wide?"

"Well, usually I would be able to fight on even grounds with him. Perhaps, I might even win if I fight desperately enough, but I definitely wouldn't be able to walk away with the victory without any damage. There are ten other gold-ranked instructors and I definitely won't be able to handle them if they come at me at the same time. Don't think that Jades and Messen will be able to hold their ground either. Despite being gold ranks, they have been underfed and chained up like this for far too long. We'll definitely lose if they fight desperately enough. That's the reason I suggested fighting our way up and occupying the entrance while the guards' numbers are low to buy us some time," explained the blademaster concisely.

Since that's the case, why shouldn't I occupy the dueling grounds? thought Lorist, before an idea suddenly surfaced in his mind, *When the enemy is unprepared, we'll deal with the 200-odd guards here first before finishing off the gold-ranked instructors, supervisors and rank 2 blademaster while we're at it. Wouldn't this give my soldiers enough time to rest and recover? At the same time, we can have the underground tunnel widened for ease of passage and arm ourselves with the most basic armaments. Only after that and some food and rest will we stand a chance at escaping…*

"I have an idea," began Lorist…

Chapter 289
Trap

Blademaster Jiluet had a grim expression. He brought his two attendants Keba and Taxiwa as he followed one of the guards, Locke, down to the prison where the slaves were kept.

Nobody would be in a pleasant mood if they had to head out just as they were preparing for some pleasant times with their female slaves after a bath. The moment Locke mumbled in fear and reported the situation to the blademaster, Jiluet was so pissed that he smashed the wine-filled cup in his hand.

Ridiculous! thought the blademaster.

Even though Blademaster Benack was a rank 1 blademaster who had relied on precious medicines and supplements to attain his current strength, he was still not someone to be lightly trifled with. While it was understandable that he might not be able to fight against a desperate gold-ranked slave fighter, being defeated by three mere silver ranks and held hostage was out of this world.

Is he really sick of living?

While Blademaster Jiluet was enraged beyond comprehension, he still put on his clothes and followed the guard down to the third basement with his two attendants hurriedly. As a rank 2 blademaster assigned to watch the dueling grounds, it was his responsibility to keep the slaves under control. At the very least, Blademaster Jiluet was not someone who would skimp out on his duties for no good reason.

He had already crossed Benack off as deceased or non-functional in his mind. No matter how the situation turned out, Blademaster Benack would have to leave the dueling grounds, even if he was some distant relative of the king. Blademaster Jiluet did not wish in the slightest to clean up after Benack again.

While the Hanayabarta kingdom had many blademasters, only four served the royal family. They were rank 3 blademaster and swordsmanship instructor to King Lud III, Locksy Kabia, rank 2 blademaster Jiluet, and two other rank 1 blademasters, Viscount

Sakri, leader of the guards that kept order in the capital, and Blademaster Benack who had relied on precious medicines to train.

Jiluet had always looked down on Benack because of the latter's reliance on outside sources to improve. Usually, it meant that the person in question would not be able to improve much further. Benack would stay a rank 1 blademaster for the rest of his life and would always be inferior to those of the same rank that broke through naturally.

The reason Benack, a relative of the king, was stationed at the dueling grounds, was that the king wanted him to use this chance to train his swordsmanship with the slaves so that he could be of some actual use. It was a shame that the king's effort was wasted. During Benack's first duel with a two-star-gold-ranked slave fighter, while he did manage to wound his opponent heavily, he had his ear bitten off when the slave finally managed to lock him down in close combat.

In the end, the gold-ranked slave was cut into mincemeat and fed to the magic beasts. However, Blademaster Benack, who had barely escaped with his life, never dared to use gold-ranked slaves for training ever again. He only sparred against silver or iron ranks to bolster his confidence. Jiluet had warned him before that training against someone of vastly inferior abilities was of no aid to one's swordsmanship, but Benack did not care about his advice at all and tortured the low-ranked slave fighters to death to satisfy his twisted desires.

Now that something like this happened, Benack would no longer be able to stay at the dueling grounds, even if he is shameless enough to want to, thought Jiluet gleefully.

After all, the dueling grounds used to be 'ruled' by him completely. While the arrival of a relative of the king was not a real threat to his position, he felt that the addition of another blademaster was a troublesome thing. This was especially the case with the current situation where he ended up having to clean up after the bastard.

It seemed that the two squads of soldiers had all been put on alert; there were more than 20 of them fully-armed standing at the entrance of the basement. They paid their respects to the blademaster as he arrived.

Jiluet stopped at the entrance and asked, "Where's your company leader, Pabola?"

The leader of the guards gave Locke a confused look before he replied, "I don't know. He should be down there. The only order I received was to watch the entrance and

make sure nobody unrelated to this enters."

Not the slightest bit suspicious, Jiluet marched through the entrance after acknowledging the response.

The first basement was still in good order, but many of the slave servants had been roused from their sleep, standing at the sides of the halls as they chattered.

The second basement, on the other hand, was much rowdier. Many of the slave fighters knocked on their cell bars and cursed and shouted loudly. More than a hundred royal defense army guards used their whips to lash out against some of the slaves. Cries of pains, curses, and more whip cracks sounded out in response. The atmosphere sounded almost like a marketplace. Except in this marketplace, it wasn't wares that were being sold, but pain, agony, and suffering.

Jiluet snorted with dissatisfaction at the scene, but he was far too busy to bother with trivial stuff like this. As long as he finished settling matters at the third basement, he would have more than enough time to deal with the slave fighters here. At most, he just had to make examples of a few of them and the rest would stop making a fuss.

Upon entering the third basement, one could see all the guards on high alert as if their archenemy was marching right at them. Each of the cells had just over ten guards standing by them.

When they passed the last twin gate checkpoint, Blademaster Jiluet asked, "So, where the heck is Company Leader Pabola?"

The guards there did not reply and merely pointed at the depths beyond, before locking the gates up as quickly as they could.

Jiluet's attendant, Taxiwa, complained, "Why did you lock it up so quickly?! With Blademaster Jiluet here, the situation will be dealt with in no time!"

The other attendant, Keba, tugged on the former's shirt and said, "Forget it, they're just small fry. It's only their job to be cautious. Locke, lead the way forward quickly."

Locke murmured in acknowledgment before taking the torch from near the gate.

When they could see some lights in the distance, Locke said, "Sir Jiluet, it's just ahead…"

Jiluet passed Locke by and marched forward with long strides. His attendants had to scurry to keep up.

The lit area in front of them was chillingly silent. Not even the breathing of man or animal could be heard. Then suddenly, the screech of metal against metal echoed out from the darkness. A few moments passed, about enough time for a single breath to be exchanged, and the screech came again. It was steady, even methodical.

Jiluet marched on. Soon he saw a man seated like a proud lion. On his lap lay a slightly curved sword. He dragged a small stone, just about large enough to fill his palm across its blade-edge every couple of seconds. The same, desolate screech escaped into the darkness every time he did so.

Jiluet squinted. He felt as if he was being stared down by a huge beast. Stopping in his tracks, he said, "It's you, Shuss…"

Shuss, who was sharpening his blade, raised his head and said, "Hehe, you're finally here. I've waited for a good amount of time, you know. Over here, we can finally settle this fair and square."

"Where's Benack?"

"Over there," said Shuss as he pointed to the corner.

In the dark corner, a few completely stripped corpses could be seen. The empty expression on Benack's rat-like face as it stared at the ceiling was an obvious telltale sign of his death.

"You killed him?" murmured Jiluet.

Shuss shook his head with a smile and said, "Nope, it wasn't me. I had no hand in that stupid rat's death."

"I killed him," said a clear voice behind Jiluet.

When the blademaster and his attendants turned around, they saw the guard called Locke put the torch in a rack on one of the pillars before he removed his helmet and revealed his head of long, raven-black hair. Standing straight and proud, he no longer seemed like the cowardly guard they thought they knew.

Jiluet waved and his two attendants lunged towards Locke. The blademaster was well aware that he had fallen into a trap, but he did not panic. He believed that the only one he had to deal with was the slave blademaster Shuss. As long as he was able to deal with the man, the slave fighters' plot to entrap him would crumble under his raw might.

Just as he was about to turn his head, he caught the flash of a blade in the corner of his eye, followed by the sound of two muffled cries of death. Jiluet's expression changed. The moment he looked back, he was greeted by his two attendants, sprawled on the ground and clutching at their necks as if trying to stop their souls from leaking out of the two gashes in their throats.

"Who are you?" asked he, this time with a hint of caution in his voice.

"I am Count Norton Lorist," replied Lorist with a smile.

"So it's your house's forces that conquered Nupite?"

While Jiluet spent most of his time at the dueling grounds, he was well-informed about the kingdom's situation.

"Bingo! Too bad there's no gift for getting the correct answer," said Lorist as he gave a thumbs up.

"Why did you invade the Hanayabarta kingdom? We shouldn't have any grievances with your house," said Juliet.

"Haha, why you ask? Are you actually thick-faced enough to ask me that question? The slaver bands and slave traders of your kingdom actually dared to attack my dominion and capture our soldiers to make them slave fighters over here… More than 1300 of them were brought here, but now only 200 are left. I have come for vengeance. You will pay your debt of blood, with blood."

"So that's why you tricked me to come here? Do you think numbers will help you?" asked the blademaster as he drew his longsword.

"I tricked you to come because I actually consider your abilities to be a threat to me. Now that we're here, you won't be able to escape. I was afraid that you'd turn tail if we were out in the open. But don't worry, I won't bully you with numbers. Pick one of us to fight," said Lorist as he swung his sword casually.

"I pick you!" roared Jiluet as he launched himself towards Lorist.

His sword traced myriad slashes in the air, seemingly filling every inch of the hall with glints of his blade.

Clang-clang clang-clang!

Amidst the tremolo of clashing swords, Lorist said calmly, "Haha, Shuss my friend, he came to me on his own, alright? Don't blame me for stealing your prey. Haha, you chose well…"

Yet another quick succession of clanging swords resounded before the blademaster dashed away at an awkward angle, clutching his right chest where a small cut could be seen.

Shuss looked on with disbelief. He had clearly seen Lorist not even retreating the slightest under the barrage of strikes by Jiluet. He met each and every one of the attacks with a similarly fast response of his own. Not only was Lorist able to receive the storm of strikes with relative ease, he was even able to mount a counterattack of his own and left a mark on the right side of Juliet's chest with his sword! The most peculiar thing was Lorist's arcane swordsmanship style that seemed to have a chilling aura of a snowstorm that caused Blademaster Jiluet's strikes to slow down as if the cold was robbing his strikes of their energy.

Shuss finally understood why Lorist's subordinates were unquestioningly supportive when he said that he would deal with the rank 2 blademaster himself. He had wondered whether Lorist's victory over Benack was a fluke and even tried to advise Lorist against taking on Jiluet. He suggested that he be the one to fight the blademaster instead. He really did not think that the leader of House Norton's swordsmanship would be that impressive. He was filled with admiration for a count like him that was even willing to risk himself by sneaking into the capital alone to save his subordinates.

Jiluet was completely drained after his clash. He deeply regretted not picking Shuss as his opponent instead. Even though Shuss was no doubt a rather good fighter, he was merely a rank 1 blademaster that Jiluet had fought on occasion before. Even if Shuss could stall Jiluet for a couple of hours in a fight, he did not stand a good chance of defeating him. Jiluet felt that Shuss was definitely easier to handle than Lorist. The man kept him constantly on edge. He was not someone he could escape.

"Agh!" cried the blademaster in pain as he took another cut, this time on the side of his ribcage.

Lorist smiled and said, "Not bad, you were able to receive more than 300 of my strikes. As expected of a rank 2 blademaster. You are definitely worth your weight in gold."

Jiluet on the other hand was not able to muster any energy to make a retort. He felt that his whole body, including even his blood, was slowly being frozen. It caused his movements to slow down more and more.

It was as if he could see a snowstorm before him. Each of Lorist's strikes was a gentle snowflake falling onto his body. It seemed that Lorist was not feeling the chilling cold around him. He fused perfectly with the snowflakes around him and floated about freely above the field of pure white.

"Gaaghhh…" Lorist's longsword pierced through Jiluet's throat, but at that moment, the blademaster had already lost all consciousness. His eyes rolled back into his head as he collapsed dead on the ground with a sinister smile on his face.

"Lord Locke, your swordsmanship is nothing like anything I've ever seen before. It's also rather chilly in here. Even the men around me were sneezing at the cold," said Shuss as he approached gingerly to look at the dead Jiluet.

"Well, I had the elemental advantage against him since I often train in the cold snowscape," Lorist said with a carefree tone, "Alright. Blademaster Jiluet is already dealt with. Next, we have to handle the silver and gold-ranked instructors."

Lorist's plan was simple. All he had to do was lure them down to the deepest cells underground and deal with them down there. As for the 200-odd guards, they had already been replaced by slaves who had donned their equipment before Jiluet was lured down.

Lorist had settled the biggest problem successfully himself. All he had to do next was pretend to deliver orders from Jiluet so that the gold-ranked and silver-ranked instructors would head to the third basement to 'stop the slave fighters' revolt'.

All 13 gold-ranked instructors and more than a hundred silver-ranked instructors were ambushed at the third basement. It did not take long for their corpses to litter the ground. The only thing that went wrong was the desperate struggle of one of the gold-ranked instructors that took the life of gold-ranked slave fighter Plom. Even

though Lorist and Shuss were both involved in the fighting, they could only do so much and were not able to save Plom and seven other unfortunate silver-ranked slave fighters from their untimely fate.

At dawn, the dueling grounds had completely fallen into the slave fighters' hands. Lorist left the dueling grounds secretly and returned to his room at the Blood and Flame.

Chapter 290
The Ploy

'Entrance with no exit' - the quintessence of the plan Lorist and Shuss had devised. Lorist needed the group to be able to spend two days in undisturbed peace. The rest would allow the slaves to rest and recover and allow them to find ways to arm the slaves.

There were around 1600 slave at the dueling grounds. Coupled with the female slaves and other servants, there were more than 2000 people. Unfortunately, even after turning the whole place upside down, they only found 400 sets of weapons and armor. Most of them were obtained from the instructors of the slave fighters at the dueling grounds. Apart from Charade and the other Norton household knights and soldiers, only Blademaster Shuss and roughly a hundred slave fighters were armed. The rest were completely unarmed.

The main reason Lorist left the dueling grounds to return to Blood and Flame was to see whether he could find a way to get his hands on weapons. All 1000 slaves had already awoken their battleforce. They would be a force to be reckoned with if they were properly armed. Lorist felt that the slave fighters could play a huge role in the upcoming assault on the capital. For the time being, however, he did not have the means to put the plan into action.

It was already noon by the time Els got to Blood and Flame. When the innkeeper inquired about his absence, he said that he had sprained his ankle and had had to rest for a few days before he was able to return. The guards had also changed shifts, so no one knew of his whereabouts, which had led to the issue. It hadn't been until his morning that he learned that his guild's guards were looking for him, which was why he was in such a rush at the moment.

After satisfying the innkeeper's curiosity, Els took Lorist to a corner for some food and a chat. He took out a report from Charade and handed it to Lorist. the report stated that the group was short on medicine, weapons, and food. The slaves were under tight guard despite the state of war the kingdom was in and its recent deployment of the majority of its forces.

Of most immediate concern was the shortage of food. The food they had could only feed the roughly 2000 people for three days. On top of that was the fact that the rations were extremely bare. The group only had two single-serving meals of porridge a day, it was hardly a proper diet for a force soon to go into combat. The current state of their food stores was only possible thanks to the stashes they found near the instructors' dorms. If not for those, they would have run out of food that very day. Besides the dire state of their food supply, they were also severely wanting for proper medicine to treat the 300 injured slaves.

Charade urged Lorist to remedy the situation as soon as possible.

Lorist felt quite troubled. They were in the enemy's capital, even if they could procure all the necessary supplies, it was nigh impossible to get it all into the dueling grounds without raising the suspicion of only every armed individual in the city. Even if everything else went off without a hitch, just the royal defense army alone - camped right outside the grounds - posed a severe problem to the success of the operation. The majority of the army had been deployed, but, even so, around 20 thousand men remained. Most of them were the bumbling drunks of the Snowshame army, but there was bound to be one or two vigilant people. If he made any mistake, the entire force in the dueling grounds would end up trapped there without any escape route or possibility of survival.

"Milord, what if we launch an ambush in the night?" Els asked in a low voice, "Before I returned, I passed through the army's camp. I even went inside for a walk. the food stores and armory are located at the back of the camp, with only a wall between them. If we attack in the dead of the night and catch them off their guard, we should be able to take hold of the two before they can react."

Lorist shook his head.

"Things won't go that smoothly. Our forces might be able to pull it off, but the slaves aren't disciplined. They won't follow orders nearly as easily. If we bring them with us on the attack, there is a good chance they'll run amok, disregard our orders and go on a killing spree. They'd be surrounded by the time they finally snap out of their frenzy, if at all. They'll be completely wiped out. We must not underestimate the hatred they hold for the capital's citizenry. If we give them a chance to vent too early, it'll do us no good."

Els couldn't argue, he knew Lorist was right. He had himself heard the slaves

clamoring for a weapon and demanding a chance to kill their captors and masters. Some even claimed satisfaction with an equal exchange, their life for one of the enemy's, anything more would be a bonus. It took Blademaster Shuss and his gold-ranked companions quite a bit of time and persuasion to calm them down. If not for their careful work, the Norton soldiers would have long since been robbed of their weapons and equipment.

"Ah, Els! You're back!" exclaimed a joyful voice. It seemed that Tarkel had just woken and was glad to see his friend sitting with Lorist as he descended the stairs.

"Those bastards spent almost the whole night drinking… I had to accompany them until I vomited twice. Darn, I still feel hung over…" complained Tarkel as he walked over.

He took an open seat at the table and asked the innkeeper to bring him something to eat.

"Milord, did you find Knight Charade and the rest?" whispered Tarkel.

There was a glint of sharpness in his hungover expression as he asked Lorist. The latter nodded ever so slightly and waited for the maidservant serving the food to leave before he recounted his trip. At first, Tarkel received the news just fine, but when Lorist came to the part about helping the slaves secretly take over the dueling grounds, Tarkel spat out all the ale he drunk.

"Mi-milord… Your excursions always bring unexpected results," resigned Tarkel.

"Unexpected my ass. I already have a huge headache and haven't the slightest idea what to do. Even though the 1000 slaves would be a decent addition to our force, the problem right now is how we'll keep this force hidden until the rest of the household troops make their way over," said Lorist as he knocked his head repeatedly with his wrist.

Els described the slaves' situation.

Tarkel gave it some thought before he said, "So Milord intends to keep these slaves hidden until the attack, then use them to deliver a crippling blow to the defenders to ease your entry into the city?"

Lorist nodded.

"That's the idea, but we lack the supplies necessary to last that long, and the equipment to make the slaves useful. Even if we manage to procure it, we won't be able to move it into the dueling grounds. Well, it's not that we'd be able to source the supplies so easily anyway. Els's idea to ambush the Snowshame army's campsite is the best option we have.

Tarkel furrowed his brow and spun his mug of ale around.

"Milord, you've forgotten to take into account another important piece of news. Didn't Drei say yesterday that King Lud III would organize another large-scale show at the dueling grounds during which the Snowshame Army will pit the slaves against one another as a sacrifice to Singwa? That ceremony marks the boundary of the amount of time we can hide the slaves in the city for. If the Snowshame army finishes forming, the current state of affairs will be revealed.

"Additionally, given that the supplies at the dueling ground are so lacking, there will be a resupply run every two or three days. We don't know if the guards will be changed either. If either of these things happens, everything will be exposed. It's hard to say whether we'll be able to hide this for another two or three days, let alone until our forces arrive."

"You're saying that we should take the initiative? So you also agree with Els's suggestion to ambush the slavers and mercenaries?" asked Lorist.

"I do, Milord," said Tarkel, "After all, the Snowshame army's purpose is to reinforce our enemy. If we can inflict a lot of damage we could incapacitate them and it'll be another burden off our minds. our forces will be able to breach the capital with more ease and fewer casualties as well. The only thing we have to consider is how to preserve the slaves' fighting strength so they can deal as much damage as possible."

The scene of the alley where several drunks laid sprawling flashed into Lorist's mind.

"If we can make everyone in the camp drunk, then everything will work out…"

The plan sounded wonderful, but it was completely impractical. There were at least 20 thousand people in the camp, Lorist had no idea how much alcohol would be needed to get them drunk.

The door to the inn opened and four garrison soldiers marched in. After they talked a bit with the innkeeper, they came to Lorist and the rest and one of them asked, "Do

you people know Kalik?"

"Oh?" Tarkel mused as he stood up, "Yes, Kalik was the one who fled to the capital with me. I guess you can consider him my friend. He left yesterday night and still hasn't returned. Did something happen?"

"Well, your friend went to the noble's sector and threw a drunk fit. He even cursed Viscount Timba for forgetting the kindness he was shown. In the end, he was pummeled badly by the servants and locked up in the garrison. When he regained consciousness this morning, he begged us to deliver this letter to you. He wanted us to ask you to help him get out of there," said the soldier as he rubbed his thumb and fingers together in a wanton gesture.

"Oh, so that's the case. I am indeed Tarkel, thank you for your troubles," said Tarkel as he handed the soldier a gold Forde before he had the innkeeper cook up some good dishes for the four.

The soldier stared at the coin in his hand with a beaming smile before he hurriedly stashed it into his pocket.

"Friend, how should I get Kalik out of lockup?" asked Tarkel.

The garrison soldier smiled and said, "You can always spend some money. Otherwise, Kalik will be sent to the dueling grounds. The king has already ordered that those who escaped from Nupite to the capital be drafted into Snowshame. People like Kalik who haven't reported to their station yet will be sent to the dueling grounds. Any deserters will face the same fate. The more fearful of death they are, the sooner they'll die. Naturally, nobles are an exception."

"Then, friend, can you help me and take us to Kalik?" Tarkel asked.

Seeing the soldier look at his three companions enviously as they were served their food, Tarkel smiled and said, "Friend, I will have another table ready for you. Your satisfaction is guaranteed. I have a huge reward waiting for you if you deal with this matter properly."

The moment he heard about the huge reward, the soldier felt his waist pocket and wet his lips before he responded, "Alright, I'll go with you."

Tarkel left with the soldier and returned half an hour later with a haphazard-looking

Kalik. He had a bruised and dirtied face. At that moment, Drei, Chelwar and a few other mercenaries got down from upstairs and laughed at Kalik's sorry state, saying that there was no way that kissing that viscount's ass was going to do him any good. Fortunately, Tarkel had interfered and bailed him out. Otherwise, his life would definitely be over.

No longer being able to stand the humiliation, Kalik snapped and said, "Is there anything wrong with trying to get on Viscount Timba's good side? After all, I was one of those who accompanied him during our trip to the capital. As long as he put a word in for me, I wouldn't have to give my life…"

Tarkel hurriedly ordered more dishes for the soldier that had accompanied him before walking over and saying, 'Kalik's right. With but a word from the viscount, he wouldn't have to report to serve the army. But I heard that the viscount wasn't in his residence last night. He was held back at the palace by his elder sister. That's why Kalik was just a little unlucky last night. He had visited when the viscount wasn't around and ended up drunk to the point of causing a fit. He can hardly be blamed considering all he went through."

The rest continued to laugh. Kalik blushed intensely and shut up.

Tarkel shook his head and said, "Well, Kalik still has to report to the army today or he'll be dealt with as a deserter. Chelwar, since you're his friend, make sure to see to it that he doesn't end up too badly. But don't worry, Kalik. I will visit the viscount's mansion this afternoon to deliver a message to him on behalf of my guild. If he returns and sees the letter, I'm sure that he'll send someone over to invite us there. I'm sure we can ask the viscount for a favor and get you guys out of Snowshame. I only have the few of you left of the friends I've made, so I hope that nothing bad will happen to you."

The words made Kalik tear up and also caused Chelwar, Drei and the other mercenaries to praise Tarkel for his camaraderie. Tarkel brushed the praises off before having the innkeeper prepare some more food. In the end, Tarkel ended up reporting to the army camp completely drunk with Chelwar's aid.

With the inn finally quieting down, Tarkel returned to Lorist and Els's table.

"Is this how you spend the funds the house provides for you? What's the benefit of making friends with those hoodlums?!" Els said, contempt laced in his voice.

Tarkel smiled without giving Els an answer.

"Milord, let's visit Viscount Timba after having a change of clothes. The garrison soldier informed me that the viscount has just returned to his residence. I have an idea that can get us out of our sticky situation."

"Let's hear it," said Lorist, raising an eyebrow.

"We can use the name of Viscount Timba to get large amounts of food and wine into the army camp. We can say it's to bolster the army's morale. When they're drunk and passed out, we can mobilize the slave fighters for an ambush. Not only will we be able to cut down on casualties, we'll also be able to get what we need," explained Tarkel as he mimed a cutthroat gesture when no one else was looking.

Lorist's eyes widened before he said, "The crucial part is convincing the viscount to go along with our ploy…"

"We can use the Peterson Merchant Guild's name to make a business proposal to the viscount which he can profit from without any financial investment on his part. I'm sure the viscount would also love it if the deal can benefit his sister and brother-in-law at the same time."

Lorist stood up and said, "Well, time's running short. Let's visit Viscount Timba right away."

Chapter 291
The Persuasion

Lorist noticed that Els seemed rather downcast.

"What's wrong?" asked he.

Els looked at Tarkel. The man was calling a carriage to head to Viscount Timba's residence.

"Milord, don't you think Tarkel is a little too sneaky? He was getting along so well with Chelwar and Kalik, and yet he so easily comes up with a plan that dooms them at a moment's notice. I'm a little apprehensive about befriending him; he might just turn his knife on me when I least expect it…"

Lorist was speechless. Els might have served as a syndicate boss in the past, but that was mainly because his subordinates had forced him into the position. He wasn't like your typical syndicate boss, he treasured camaraderie and was a man of principle. Tarkel, on the other hand, had muddled in the lowest depth of society and had seen much of the deceit and duplicity it had to offer. He appeared friendly and generous - as a good man should - but there were few lines he did not dare cross to achieve his goals.

At Geldos he had suggested Lorist use the families of Count Cobry's soldiers as hostages to force their surrender. Lorist had rejected the proposal outright. He was a principled man from a military house. He would never resort to such dishonorable designs. It was a shame neither he nor his house would be able to live with.

His suggestion had caused Lorist to take true note of Tarkel. He had a rare adeptness at making friends and connections, and was deft at intelligence gathering. These traits resulted in his forced relocation to The Northlands. Lorist understood that the house would require both virtuous and vicious talents to develop and thrive, so he did not mind -- and even appreciated -- Tarkel's insidious nature. Lorist was not averse to using Tarkel, as long as he was obedient and loyal.

It seemed now that Tarkel was far better than Els at intelligence gathering. Els'

behaviour had slowly aligned ever closer to that of a standard household knight ever since he joined Lorist's personal guard. he prioritized chivalry and honor over results. Lorist could only console Els by patting him on the shoulder.

"Like it or not, I have no choice but to use these methods to save Charade and the others this time," said he.

Their visit to Viscount Timba's residence proceeded very smoothly. The viscount had his aura of wealth and nobility restored. He received Tarkel and the rest with joy. Tarkel mentioned Kalik's case after some pleasantries, but, perhaps because the viscount had heard of Kalik's visit to his residence, he only hummed in agreement. Tarkel quickly changed the subject to the state of the conflict.

Viscount Timba asked, "Why are you that concerned about the war?"

"Hahaha, well, we have been traveling for more than a year already, but because we've been trapped here by this war of yours, we have yet to visit many places, nor have we been able to set up our trade network in the kingdom…" answered Tarkel.

"Please, you don't need to worry," the viscount chortled, "Start a trading firm in the capital for the time being. I will act as the guild's guarantor so no one will dare cause you any trouble."

"That's amazing, then, why don't I give you thirty percent of the shares of our upcoming venture?" offered Tarkel.

The viscount was surprised but felt that he could not possibly receive such a huge benefit for not doing that much. In the end, however, he found himself unable to refuse Tarkel's kind gesture and settled for a third of the venture's shares.

"I've seen the state of Snowshame's troops. I can't help but feel a little worried. The army is already made up of mostly just mercenaries and slavers, so they can't match up to the royal defense army, but it seems they also lack the will to participate in the upcoming counteroffensive. Their morale is incredibly low," warned Tarkel.

"That's right," the viscount conceded, "Snowshame is still far from having enough troops and their morale is also rather low. That's a given since most of those who were enlisted just escaped from Nupite. They have continuously complained and caused trouble ever since they were conscripted. Even the garrison soldiers are having a lot of trouble dealing with that lot…"

"I feel His Majesty has been a little too hasty with the conscriptions. He should've settled the refugees first. Those with significant contributions should have been promoted and rewarded -- it would have roused the ambitions of the others. it would have been ideal if he had baited the refugees into volunteering.

"The main difference between volunteers and conscripts lies in their combat strength and rate of desertion. These are crucial factors to success on the battlefield; they are the difference between whether a unit breaks or holds in a dire situation. If Snowshame's soldiers desert or break, they are completely useless to the kingdom, and might even end up being assets to the Nortons," expounded Tarkel.

"That's what I think as well. However, the King himself is unable to come up with a method to raise their morale…" agreed the viscount.

"There are ways. It only depends on whether His Majesty is willing to execute them. Our guild once had to assemble a strong combat unit at short notice. We built up their moral and improved their determination with only three things. We gave them lots of meat and alcohol, promised hefty rewards, and enforced strict military discipline. Even though we had far less time to train and prepare our unit than proper armies would, at the end of it they were still able to compete with regular military forces of similar size and armament.

"The meet and alcohol provide the nourishment and enjoyment the troops need, thus strengthening their bodies and improving their morale. Well-fed and satisfied soldiers are grateful soldiers. Grateful soldiers become loyal soldiers. And loyal soldiers become soldiers willing to die for your cause.

"Rewards must also not be limited to money. Coin is important, yes, but not everyone yearns for money alone. Some yearn for fame instead, give to them honors and praise. Some yearn for peerage, grant them titles and land. Anything that will make the soldiers more willing to take the field on our behalf, and obtain victory in our name is a worthy reward.

"As for enforcing military regulations, that's pretty much a given. The soldiers who feast and drink from your purse, who are given the chance to rise in the ranks must earn their keep through loyal service. Kill a few of those who wish to receive without giving and the other will fall in line. They must understand that rewards and benefits go only to those who earn it with their blades, shields, bows, and axes."

Tarkel's detailed explanation successfully roused the viscount's interest and they continued to debate how they would reshape the army.

"If someone had come up with this suggestion earlier, Snowshame wouldn't the mess it is now!" grieved the viscount, "It's too late for my brother-in-law to rescind his orders and accommodate the refugees properly…"

Tarkel's lips twitched, eager to spill the words swimming in his mouth. Though he kept quiet, the twitch couldn't escape the viscount's notice.

"Please, feel free to speak your mind,"

"This is actually a good opportunity that you must not miss, no matter the cost," Tarkel encouraged, " I've come to understand that you are someone with excellent ingenuity and great foresight. It's a shame that many people treat you as a noble that's only relying on the name and prestige of your elder sister, the regent consort, and overlook your talent. Your sister's status is far too great; it easily eclipsed you in the eyes of others…"

Viscount Timba nodded softly. Tarkel's words resonated with his deepest thoughts an hidden feelings.

"This is the opportune moment for you to shine, for you to show others what you are capable of. Surely you understand what I mean. Snowshame has already disappointed your brother-in-law, the king and, as you have said, a sudden change in approach isn't possible anymore. That's the root of the problems Snowshame has right now.

"But what if you make an appearance to reshape things? Given your status as the regent consort's younger brother, and your experience fleeing Nupite without any gold-ranked knight or large escort, your words hold much more weight than those cowards who discarded their arms to flee. As long as you are willing to deal with the mess that is Snowshame, I'm sure that the king will be more than happy," said Tarkel without restraint.

"That's true, you speak sense. But I do not wish to lead Snowshame into battle," agreed the viscount with a troubled expression.

"No, Lord Viscount, you misunderstand my meaning. How could an exalted noble such as yourself march onto the battlefield? That is not permissible. Heck, the loss of even one strand of your hair is a huge loss for the kingdom; you will play a huge role in

making the kingdom's future prosperous. All you have to do is whip Snowshame into shape. There will be others to lead it into battle."

Good lord, Tarkel, your flattery knows no bounds, thought Els and Lorist.

They were incredibly embarrassed to hear the shameless and cringy words. Viscount Timba, in stark contrast to their attitude, seemed to be enjoying the attention he was given. His eyes sparkled like two bulbs of crystal in a stream. Every word that entered his ear lowered his guard towards Tarkel that little bit more.

"I feel you should start to reorganize Snowshame. It will cost you a teensy bit of money, there's no way around it, but in exchange, you will greatly improve your reputation, everyone will see you in a better light, much less His Majesty. There's no doubt in my mind whatsoever that your sister will also be very proud of you. A most ludicrously profitable trade. I can already imagine the day I hear praises sang in your name in court. Oh revered Viscount Timba, it almost brings tears to my eyes. If I can still gain your support in my venture when you are so highly regarded, my trip here would have been worth it."

"How much do you think this will cost? Tarkel, do you have an estimate?" inquired the viscount hesitantly.

"Implementing everything won't cost a lot," Tarkel affirmed, "I've already made some estimations. Providing the 20 thousand soldiers with meat and alcohol is not that costly; it'll only cost around 800 gold Fordes per feast. According to my calculations, feeding one soldier to the brim only costs 50 coppers, only half of a large silver. An average baked potato costs less than 15 coppers and a large serving of ale is only around 10 coppers. A soldier will be more than satisfied with a baked potato and a large serving of ale. Add 30 coppers' worth of delicious meat to each man's meal and you have one satisfied man ready to serve you.

"One gold Forde is worth 20 large silvers, so each gold Forde is enough to feed 40 soldiers. Even 20 thousand soldiers will only cost you 500 gold Fordes. If you up the spending to 800 to improve the quality of the alcohol and have some surplus meat to be shared around the soldiers will be even more pleased. This is a big step up from their usual black bread and vegetable soup. I am certain many of them are sick and tired of such bland meals. As long as you treat them well this once, these soldiers will be grateful from the depths of their heart.

"You should first ask your sister if its fine for you to do this. Your sister's approval is tantamount to the king's tacit approval. With this in place, it'll be easy for you to reorganize the army and to claim credit for their improved performance. If you can show your talent today, then no one will be able to criticise you for enjoying the King's favor."

"So, it will be around 800 gold Fordes in total?" hesitated the viscount.

"You can rely on the Peterson Merchant Guild to give you a hand. We will donate 500 gold Fordes as a sign of support," offered Tarkel.

"Oh?" Viscount Timba mused with surprise, "Tarkel, tell me honestly. Why are you willing to help me out this much?"

"I'll be frank with you, Lord Viscount. While I call it a donation, I will easily get the money back as long as you agree to do this twice," snickered Tarkel.

"Oh? How so?" asked the viscount, intrigued.

"Lord Viscount, will you refuse to let me supply the meat and alcohol if I donate the 500 gold Fordes?" asked Tarkel.

"Of course not. I would be more than willing to let you handle this business given your generous donation," replied the viscount.

"The meat and alcohol business will actually be a very profitable transaction for me. The price per soldier I mentioned earlier doesn't take profit into account. We can make it up by selling all that in large volumes, especially by buying some old or dying goats that are incredibly cheap. After all, we're only feeding the common soldier. All we have to do is cook the meat in a large pot and nobody would be able to tell the meat's quality.

"Additionally, if we can get our hands on some expiring smoked meat, the price will be even lower. In other words, I'll easily be able to earn 400 gold Fordes in profit for every feast you organize for the soldiers. If you do this twice, we will be able to earn the 500 gold Fordes back," explained Tarkel, revealing the secret to his profitable formula.

"I also understand that after escaping to the capital without your belongings, you're a little tight on finances. If your sister accepts your proposal, you might even be able to request a 1000-gold-Forde budged for each feast. You should ask for a budget for three feasts from the get-go. As for the meat and alcohol, let me serve you on that front. I

will definitely ensure that the accounts for each feast would be flawless. That way, you will also be able to solve your financial shortage. What do you think?" asked Tarkel in a low voice.

"Very well," Viscount Timba beamed, "your proposal is magnificent. I will visit my sister at the royal court right away, so I hope you three can wait here for a short while. When I return, we'll discuss the details of the plan. Is that alright with you, Tarkel?"

Tarkel stood up and bowed respectfully before he said, "Lord Viscount, it is my honor to be able to serve you. We will wait here for the good news."

Chapter 292
Termination

Tarkel's efforts were extremely effective. Word spread that very night that Viscount Timba had received the King's approval to reward Snowshame.

The soldiers made merry all night. The garrison forces and the royal defense army's exclusion made them very jealous; the night was a rowdy one.

The following day was even more hectic. Barrel after barrel of ale was moved from the taverns all over the capital. Jarred baked potatoes and sliced beef, mutton and pork were brought to the campsite. Tarkel also had Chelwar, Drei and the rest hire some cooks and purchase all sorts of fruit and decorations to prepare for the festivities.

More than 700 men joined the army in less than a day after word got out. At the thought that the army would be at full strength in just five days at this rate, Lud III couldn't help but smile.

Viscount Timba was also overjoyed that he managed to siphon 5000 gold Fordes out of his brother-in-law's pocket. Despite that, all he gave Tarkel for three days' worth of food and drink was 1000 gold Fordes.

Tarkel did not disappoint him either and only spent small amounts to bribe the warehouse managers around the western warehouse sector for part of the necessary supplies. He instructed the chefs to whip the stored grain into bread and other pastries and purchased lots of salted fish. All the preparations were completed about an hour before sunset. The atmosphere around the army camp was one of merriment and jubilance.

As the main sponsor of the event, Viscount Timba came over to have a look. He toasted the soldiers and promised that anyone who managed to distinguish themselves in the upcoming battle would be heavily rewarded. He also announced that military regulations would soon be enforced. However, the latter part of the viscount's announcement had largely slipped out of the soldiers' minds as they stared wide-eyed at the servings of smoked meat, fresh fruit, crunchy vegetables, steamed fish, baked potatoes and a filling cup of ale, as well as the mountain of dried rations like bread and

other pastries.

As the viscount approached, Tarkel had the impression that he thought the food wasn't enough and prepared to explain, but, to his surprise…

"This feast is far too much for the likes of them! Why would you bother serving them fresh fruit, vegetables, and fish? Isn't it simply a waste to prepare that much bread and dried food? Heck, we could've decreased the portion of meat by half… As for the baked potatoes, they should have been mashed and mixed with some water. That way, one serving can be made into three… If my house's butler were to be put in charge of this, he would've been able to save another 500 gold Fordes. Sheesh, spending this much on these brutes is nothing but a waste."

The angry viscount had shown Tarkel yet another side of slaver nobles. He couldn't help but chuckle.

Hmph, he thinks that 20 thousand people's worth of food costs that little? I had to add 400 gold Fordes from the funds the house gave me to prepare this feast! Oh well, since this will be their final meal, they deserve at least this much…

The gates closed as evening came, but a few soldiers from the other forces managed to sneak inside, not that Tarkel minded. He had prepared enough foodstuffs and alcohol to accommodate a few seeking death. An hour or two before midnight the came slowly fell silent. The soldiers, satiated, fell into a drunken stupor, which quickly turned into a dead slumber. There weren't even enough soldiers to organize patrols. In the whole capital, not a single alert soul could be found.

In this silent darkness, the slaves emerged from their hiding places. Els opened the rear gates and, under Lorist's guidance, the slave fighters launched the boundless massacre.

Blood seeped into the ground and ran streams into the underground tunnels and ducts. The place had fallen from heaven to hell in less than an hour. Just sixty minutes earlier the camp was a paradise, now it was purgatory. But, unlike the scene might suggest to the casual observer, those that died did so with smiles on their faces.

Vomit soon replaced the blood on the ground and washed it from the gutters. Even the slaves who had sworn to reclaim their debt in blood began to hesitate. Killing helpless unarmed sheep was hard on the soul. Many even vomited when the true nature of

their actions struck them.

It was no feat to kill a drunken opponent. It was far too easy. A single, gentle, horizontal wave was enough to bring them eternal peace. Despite the ease and efficiency of the dispatch, or perhaps because of it, a few dozen such dispatches softened even the hardest hands.

These were humans, not livestock. What had been a devil that all the slaves reviled and hated in common, in its drunken slumber, had become a helpless infant.

"This is no battle… It's cold-blooded murder," one of the slave fighters lamented as he dropped his sword, "I'd rather face them in battle than claim their lives without making a single sound…"

"You only think that because you consider yourself a warrior," Lorist said in a clear, low voice as he appeared before the slave, "You are wrong. Those drunk unconscious fools are no innocents. They are beasts with hands steeped in blood and sin. The weight of the souls of innocent women and children they killed, or doomed to a fate worse than death, crush whatever innocence they might have had left. Think, how many times have they snuck into villages to kill, plunder, pillage and rape? How many of your loved ones have they deprived of their freedom? In their eyes, you are not humans like they are. They only see you as sheep. You are nothing but livestock to them, tools to fatten their wallets!

"Think about your loved ones who died by their hands; your comrades forced to fight each other for their entertainment. Are you still able to hold any mercy for them in the face of their crimes? Wield your blade, warrior. It is your responsibility to fight alongside your comrades. Those sleeping on the ground are nothing more than savage beasts. For each you kill, at least one innocent soul will be spared torture…"

The man hung his head, picked up his sword, and continued the slaughter.

"You, at the front, move faster!" cried an urgent-sounding voice from behind, unsatisfied with the hesitance and relatively low efficiency of the slaves in front. More than a hundred Norton soldiers, wearing the equipment of the royal defense army, marched forward. They didn't wear helmets, only expressionless faces as they slaughtered those at their feet industriously.

A cloud hid the silver moon, the goddess unable to stomach the sight laid bare beneath.

The blood moon beside her, however, glowed lustily.

Even an hour of slaughter was only enough to finalise the slumber of a third of the camp. It was no wonder Charade had rushed those at the front. He had been put in charge of just over 2000 youths. They were emptying the stores at the back of the camp and scouring the eternally slumbering for equipment. He was most worried about the enemy coming to realize what was happening before he had taken what he needed.

The 2000 youths were the result of his efforts on the day before. Their residential area was situated right behind the dueling grounds where the family members of more than 600 slaves lived. It was built right in front of the northern wall, which was garrisoned but a full regiment. From their vantage point, they could observe all the movements of the slaves within their residential area.

Even so, Charade sent a few trustworthy gold-ranked slaves to bring back all the slaves they could. They managed to bring about 3000 people to the dueling ground via the underground waterway.

Lorist zoomed about the campsite and waved his longsword with great ease. Starlight glinted off his blade as he took the lives of hundreds in moments.

Unlike the slaves, Lorist felt no strain nor guilt for killing these drunks. To him, it was like one of the video games from his past life. The drunks were inconsequential NPCs. Unbeknownst to him, however, his eyes gradually turned blood red. He radiated the unmistakably acrid smell of blood. It disturbed the already unnerved around him. All he could sense, however, was that his vision gained a slightly crimson tint.

Lorist came to a standstill. His consciousness flowed across the slaughterfield however he wished. It did not take him long to sweep across the entire campsite. He quickly found 200-odd men yet to fall asleep. They sat at a circular arrangement of tables and benches, preparing to roast a wild boar on the spit beside a bonfire in the middle. A few soldiers were in a hut off to the left. They rubbed their backs, preparing to sleep. To the right, a few cooks were making some food for themselves. Off in the distance, Lorist could also sense a pair of slaves who had secretly snuck off with some bones that still had a few strips of meat attached.

Wierd, why do I feel so similar to how I felt when I killed the 300 or so men back on the ship? It feels as if everything my consciousness can touch is within a piece of space that I

have complete control over... I can even predict how every person is going to move. I wasn't in control of my body back then, but now I am?

Lorist squatted, stood straight up, stretched his hands and waist, lowered his head, tilted his body, and even stretched all his fingers high up into the air. He made sure that he could move however he wished.

It must have been the dire situation I was in back then that forced me into this red world. Right now, however, it only took the death of a few drunks to get me back here. I didn't even really exert myself... How did this happen? Why am I still conscious and feeling more refreshed than ever?

Unable to figure out more about his current state, Lorist put it to the back of his mind.

Since I'm already in this blood-red world, I might as well make the most of it.

With but a slight leap, Lorist's form vanished into thin air. When he reappeared, he was already at the frontmost bonfire in the camp. He twisted his body. Countless flashes appeared all around him, like ethereal blades they reaped the lives of everyone near him. The two hundred soldiers may not have been asleep like their brothers were, but they fell just as soundlessly. The one closest to the fire dropped the cup of ale he had been holding. It fell, mouth fire-wards, and spilled its contents on the coals. The liquid boiled away in moments and the fumed burst into a ball of light momentarily.

The ten or so cooks nearby raised their heads to look. But the moment their vision landed on the corpses, their expressions paled. Just as they were about to cry out in terror, a silhouette materialized in front of them. Their last sensation was cold and metallic. It slipped into the mouth and burst out of the back of the neck at the base of the skulls.

With the cooks crumbling like the bread they had baked earlier in the day, Lorist recalled the two slaves. Moments later his form materialized next to the stove. He raised his head and saw the two slaves gnawing at the bones. Their shoulders bore the brands that made them property.

The flat of his blade tapped the slaves' heads. If he wanted to spare them, they would have to sleep for a while. If they were given a chance to glance at the hell that had opened up outside, their sanity might not survive, and Lorist couldn't have the two

emptying their lungs noisily.

The slaughter finally ended two hours on the other side of midnight. The world through Lorist's eyes regained its normal hue. But, although he didn't feel that he'd need to sleep for several days like the last time, his face was still pale.

Blademaster Shuss came to Lorist. His face rivaled Lorist's.

"Tired?" asked Lorist.

"I don't feel physically tired, but I don't feel any joy at the sight before us. I don't understand why, but after killing so many of those slavers I hated, I don't feel any rush of relief or satisfaction. In fact, I almost feel sick of killing those poor sods…" pondered he.

Lorist laughed with a raspy voice.

"True. A thousand have killed 20 thousand. This result would be nothing short of amazing if this were a battle. And we didn't even part with a single soul… We only feel like this victory is unearned because the enemy didn't even have the chance to try and put up any resistance. We are warriors, not slaughterers, it's only right that we find such killing distasteful. Why don't you bring the slave fighters back first? The massacre tonight was no doubt a huge shock. They'll need the time to recover."

Lorist pointed at the slaves around him as he spoke. They were lamenting their actions. Some stood empty-eyed and stared into the distance, some at the corpses on the ground. Other sat on the ground - they buried their heads in their arms in failed attempts to hide the tears they were shedding.

Shuss looked to the Norton soldiers behind him.

"Milord, your household troops are truly the cream of the crop," he awed, "They're incredibly well-trained and resolute. It's like the slaughter just now never happened."

"They believe their actions just," Lorist appreciated, "Killing these lowlives is like killing magic beasts. Actually, it isn't any different. Just like the magic beasts, they invaded our territories, trampled our homes, and disturbed the peaceful lives we were leading. They know they can only protect those they care for by killing as many of them as possible. The people of House Norton don't mourn for the enemy. It's their honor to die by our blades. Besides, the only good enemy is a dead enemy."

"'The only good enemy is a dead enemy,' huh? Well said!" praised Shuss.

"Come, let's go check out the back," Lorist instructed tranquilly, "Charade must have finished moving everything by now. Oh, you two over there, come here. There are two slaves near the stove there. Bring them to the dueling grounds for now."

"Yes, milord," replied the two guards nearby.

Chapter 293
The Death of a Nation

Two whole days passed from the start of the dueling grounds' takeover to the completion of the Snowshame's massacre. Actually, occupying the duelings grounds was a rather trying act for Lorist, Charade, Blademaster Shuss and the rest. Fortunately, in the time between the takeover and the massacre, only two messengers were sent to the grounds. The first brought news of the impending change of shift for the royal defense army. The other delivered instructions for the grounds' occupants to collect the requested supplies.

The messenger asked uncomfortable questions when they noticed a marked absence of familiar faces, and so, to keep the grounds' state a secret, they had to be silenced, even the questions were only asked in passing. Fortunately, the feast hosted by Viscount Timba had caught the attention of everyone within the capital, so no one bothered to find out where the messengers from the royal defense army and the storehouses had gone. For all they knew, the two had gone to the feast to stuff themselves.

When the sky brightened, the slave fighters retreated. All they had to do was wait for chaos to break out when the massacre was discovered and defend their station at the dueling grounds until the main Norton forces come to relieve them.

Els made use of the darkness brought on by the obscured moon to leave Hamidas. He made his way to the light cavalry scouts who were sweeping the plains around Hamidas and informed them of the goings on in the city. Their new orders were to finish off the deployed forces and move on the capital as soon as possible.

The moment the Hanayabartakingdom lost Snowshame, it's fate was sealed. There were only the royal defense army and incongruous mobs of mercenaries left to defend the capital.

Around midmorning, the next day, the two squads of royal defense army troops on their way to replace their comrades at the dueling grounds noticed the stench of blood coming from the royal defense army's camp. The squad leader felt something was amiss and quickly ordered his men to investigate the situation. Two soldiers

scampered up the walls to see what was going on. They peaked over the top and found themselves back on the ground moments later. Their half soulless bodies tried to explain the glimpse of hell they had gotten, with little success.

The gates were forced open. As the sight inside was revealed bit by bit through the crack between the solid gates, those who realized what they were seeing, turned to stone. From sand to wall to rooftop, from knife to stool to stove, everything was dyed crimson. The air itself was acrid and the sweet, pungent stench of metal brought vomit to everyone's mouth.

The capital's bells were finally rung. News of the silent extermination of Snowshame spread throughout the capital. Panic reigned supreme.King Lud III pulled the terrified Viscount Timba off his carriage and asked whether that was the result of his 'reward' to the army before he beheaded him almost right away.

Investigations later revealed clues that pointed, invariably, to the dueling grounds. Two squads were sent to check. None of them returned.

The dueling grounds loomed like a giant beast over the city. Not only did it swallow slaves by the hundreds and thousands every year, now it also swallowed soldiers wholesale.

No one dared to get close to the place. The capital's force reserves were completely depleted. It only had 4000 garrisoneers, 2000 royal guards, and under 2500 men from the royal defense army responsible for protecting the warehouses. The dueling grounds were clearly occupied by someone or something hostile. And it was not something to be trifled with either -- it had already exterminated two blademasters and several gold-ranked soldiers without anyone's notice, and had thereafter exterminated 20 thousand soldiers -- in a single night. The enemy had come prepared, and struck where it would hurt the most.

Lorist recalled a saying from his past life that amounted to meaning 'one's territory should never be encroached upon by others'. That was the current situation for King Lud III. After he beheaded Viscount Timba, his anger gradually turned into terror as he stared at the 20 thousand corpses in the camp before he lost his wits altogether in a panicked fit. Given that the enemy was able to kill more than 20 thousand people in a single night, how long would they take to storm the palace and take his head?

The more the king thought of the possibility, the more fearful he became. He had

everyone that could fight guarding him at all times. But the loss of the two squads that had entered the dueling grounds had been the last proverbial straw that broke camel's back. The king slowly lost his sanity, he frequently gave nonsensical orders.

First, King Lud III wanted to conscript his citizens as soldiers; he wanted every male between 16 and 50 in the armed forces. He also mobilized the regiment of troops guarding the northern sector of the city and the palace to the dueling grounds to prevent any attempt at a surprise attack.

Additionally, he ordered the slaves to clear the corpses in the campsite and demolish the camp and every building within it so that the ballistae on the walls had a clear line of fire on the dueling grounds. All the ballistae were also ordered to move to the lower section of the dueling grounds.

Third, King Lud III ordered all the nobles to gather their forces and assault the grounds. The order, however, crossed the line for many of the nobles. Furious bickering followed, which gave Lorist and his forces the time needed to rest and recover.

When the king gave his orders, Lorist, Shuss, and the three gold-ranked fighters -- Jades, Messen, Sendhank -- were seated together at the topmost audience seats of the dueling grounds, chatting listlessly as they monitored the situation outside.

"So, what are you guys going to do after the kingdom's extermination?" asked Lorist.

Shuss did not respond. He seemed rather lost. He had been sold to the slave kingdom and was a slave fighter for more than 20 years. All the slave fighters that had joined at the same time were dead; it would not be a stretch to call him the illegitimate child of the Wargod given the luck he had for surviving this long. Not only did he not die, he managed to train all the way to the blademaster rank despite being only a silver rank when he first joined. He had never bothered to think about what he would do if he were ever given his freedom. He only ever focused on his survival.

Jades was someone from the former Krissen Empire. In fact, he used to be a knight of the imperial family. However, his ill fate caused him to faint from an injury during his maiden battle and he was looted by scavengers on the battlefield. Fortunately, he was rescued by a person of good heart. Only to be captured later by slavers and sold to a mining establishment where he mined copper for four years. By the time he managed to recover from his injuries unbeknownst to his captors, he lashed out in frenzied

murder to exact revenge. However, he was unfortunate enough to encounter King Lud III and a rank 3 blademaster, Locksy Kabia, who had come to check on the mines. He was defeated in moments and was sent to the dueling grounds.

Messen had been the leader of a mercenary band, but his band was destroyed because of a conflict with Duke Gouffman's slavers. He was sold to the dueling grounds and had been fighting there for the last five years. His biggest wish was to kill Duke Gouffman with his own hands. He had never thought about what he would do thereafter.

Sendhank wished to return home to exact revenge for the tragic events he had suffered. He used to be a noble of the Symleis kingdom. But, due to his fanatic passion for the martial arts and his youthful ambitions to breakthrough to the gold rank before marrying and settling down, he traveled far and wide often, at the cost of his fiancee. In the end, she had an affair with his younger brother. He was drugged with force-dispersing toxin during one of his short stays at him and, by the time he woke up, he had been sold as a slave. His younger brother took his place in the line of succession.

"Well, I'll welcome you should you at any time wish to serve House Norton or live in the dominion," offered Lorist,

This was the first time he asked them to join his side.

"I will gladly join the house, Lord Locke. I only ask that I be allowed to observe it for a year or two before I swear fealty," accepted Shuss.

"Naturally," agreed Lorist.

Jades and Messen said they would consider the offer. but wished to return to their homes first for a time. If they found family, they would bring them along.

"I'm sorry, Lord Locke, but I can't accept your offer. My home lies far south of the former empire, within the Romon Empire. I want to return home and pay back my fiancee and brother for their treachery. I also want to retake my rightful position as the head of my house…"

"I understand, Sendhank, there's no need to say anymore. I also had to offer up a life in Morante to return and take my place as the head of my house. I wish you nothing but fortune and good luck on your journey and beyond. May we meet again sometime, in situations more fortunate than these."

"May we indeed."

On the 3rd day of the 10th month, the extermination of the 20 thousand men of Snowshame had plunged the whole of the Hanayabarta kingdom into chaos. Apart from the initial two squads that were sent to inspect the grounds, no other offenses were made.

On the 4th day of the month, the kingdom finally made their move. They sent out all six of their blademasters. It was the only force left in the capital that could pose Lorist some threat. It was led by the rank 3 blademaster Locksy Kabia. Since he was both a protector of the royal family and Lud III's swordsmanship instructor, he had to do something about the situation for the sake of the kingdom. Accompanying him was the commander of the royal guards, rank 1 blademaster Viscount Sakri and four other blademasters of noble employ that had escaped from Nupite.

What Blademaster Locksy did not expect was that he would be at a disadvantage fighting Lorist the whole time. Even when Viscount Sakri joined him, they still only fought to a draw.

What surprised him most, was that the other blademasters struggled just as much as he did in their own fights. Shuss fought the only rank 2 blademaster in the group, the one that had chased Josk and Yuriy all over the hilly area. As the battle progressed, Shuss began to gradually gain an edge over his opponent.

Jades, Messen and Sendhank desperately fought against a rank 1 blademaster each. It did not take long for them to realize that the three rank 1 blademasters were mere pushovers. After an hour or so, the three blademasters were worn to the bone and barely holding on.

The three gold ranks, however, were more spirited than ever. They traded inconsequential wounds to land savage strikes on their opponents. In the end, the three blademasters crumbled. Two escaped, but the third was ended.

The rank 2 blademaster fighting against Shuss was also forced into a corner. He, too, eventually retreated. Sakri followed suit soon after.

The first assault on the dueling grounds ended in Lorist's victory. Only five of the six blademasters managed to escape alive.

On the 5th day of the 10th month, the kingdom once against launched an attack, but

with more forces at their disposal than five blademasters. Accompanying the five blademasters were more than ten gold-ranked knights and swordsmen, with a few thousand more soldiers from the nobles' to the nobles' levies. This time around, they did manage to put Lorist in a precarious position. While he did manage to kill almost a hundred in the early hours of the fight, which included just over 5 gold-ranks, his power alone was not able to sway the tide. Shuss, Jades and the rest were forced to the first basement. Lorist soon followed.

During the second assault, the kingdom managed to force Lorist and the insurgent slave fighters down to the first basement. Messen and Sendhank were both heavily injured, tough Shush only suffered light injuries, luckily. Lorist was fine, apart from expending a little too much energy.

On the 6th day of the 10th month, the kingdom resumed their assault and attacked the first basement. Much to their surprise, however, Charade had filled the empty food sacks they took with mud and had stacked them up all over the first basement, turning it into a maze. No matter how many were sent in, none returned. Not only that, Lorist and Shuss were both able to move freely around the maze. Even Blademaster Locksy was forced to retreat.

The excursion ended, once again, Lorist's triumph.

On the 7th day, the kingdom's forces changed their tactics and gathered up to a thousand slave laborers instead to start digging from the top. They intended to collapse the whole first basement. But at noon, the first report of their defeat arrived. It appeared that the only cavalry unit of the kingdom had suffered a sudden ambush from an enemy cavalry unit that numbered a thousand when they were suppressing the slave revolt at one of the manors of the royal family. All but seven of the 1800 men were dead. The forces of the enemy, scouts of House Norton, had already entered the lines of sight of the soldiers defending the walls.

That afternoon the kingdom's forces assaulted the basement ferociously. With the dueling grounds being occupied, it would almost be impossible for them to fight properly against the enemies outside the city. Only by removing the tumor that was the insurgents in the dueling grounds would they be able to protect the capital.

The fighting continued well into the night. The kingdom attacked non-stop, and Lorist and his comrades resisted valiantly. Quite a number of holes in the ceiling of the first basement was visible, with droves of the kingdom's troops dropping in from them.

The ground was littered with layers of corpses. By the time Lorist and the rest were finally forced into the second basement, it was already far into the next day's morning.

Both sides sustained heavy casualties, with more than 70 of Lorist's household troops dead or injured alongside 300-odd slave fighters. However, the kingdom's forces fared even worse; more than a thousand were dead and a thousand more injured. They had lost almost all their able-bodied fighters.

There was no battle on the 8th. Neither side made any offensive moves.

On the 9th, however, yet another report arrived. It stated that the royal defense army had been lured into the hilly area and surrounded. The army was completely decimated and the king's uncle was dead. The already crumbling capital fell apart completely at the news.

On the 10th, the Norton cavalry scouts encircled Hamidas. Some element of the scouts could be seen from every vantage point on the walls.

On the 11th, the rest of the Norton forces arrived along with tens of thousands of liberated slaves. They began setting up camps and defense lines all around the capital.

The 12th saw Lud III forcing the capital's people to man the walls and sending a messenger to request a cease of hostilities, which Fiercetiger Loze refused outright.

At eight that night, Lorist led the slave fighters on a surprise attack against the northern walls and managed to occupy it completely. Droves of Norton troops flooded into the capital and the royal capital fell in mere hours.

Afternoon on the 13th, following the decapitation of Rank 3 Blademaster Locksy Kabia, the despairing Lud III killed his three consorts and his nine-month-old newborn son before setting his palace on fire. The slave kingdom, Hanayabarta, founded little more than a century earlier, had truly come to an end.

Chapter 294
Arrangements

Lorist lay on a luxurious bed lazily. He had just woken up after sleeping for a whole day and night. He felt drowsy and didn't want to get up yet.

His laziness was not because of a weakened constitution, however. He was pondering the blood-red world he had once again entered. The previous afternoon he had led an assault on the palace and had faced off against the rank 3 blademaster Locksy Kabia. Locksy should logically have been far weaker than the blademaster Zarinan - the man who'd been sent to assassinate Lorist. Zarinan was considered a quasi-swordsaint by many, which meant that his sword techniques had to be very close to that of a true swordsaint. Blademaster Locksy, on the other hand, was not particularly strong, even though he was still quite formidable.

Kabia was, however, a very stubborn person. He managed to keep Lorist occupied for more than two hours. He would retreat from time to time and have the archers protecting the palace fire volleys in Lorist's direction. The most annoying part was that Locksy's swordsmanship attribute was not particularly weak against Lorist's own. Locksy's was very similar to Lorists - sneaky chill. In fact, he thrived off the cold temperatures generated by Lorist's swordsmanship.

The fight caused Lorist to enter the blood-red world once again. Lorist's speed, agility, strength and other bodily qualities were doubled or tripled in the world. Thanks to the boost, he managed to decapitate the blademaster in ten strokes.

The moment Lud III saw Locksy's death, he knew that he no longer had any hope of delaying the inevitable. That was when he began setting his palace on fire. Lorist receded from the world a few moments after, incredibly exhausted. He laughed when he heard the guards report that the palace was on fire and collapsed.

Lorist pondered the nature of his blood-red world. As much as he would like to call it a swordsaint's domain, it was a little different from what he had heard. He also felt his swordsmanship was not up to a swordsaint's standard. He was as skilled as Zarinan had been at best.

The most documented domain was that of the Kalia kingdom's windstorm swordsaint. He had once deployed it publicly so others could experience it. Those lucky enough to be present during the demonstration described the experience as being put directly into a storm. The wind and rain made it impossible for them to open their eyes. Most people would be completely unble to fight in such a situation. There would be nothing left to do but wait for death.

That was the reason Lorist thought that even if he were to break through to the swordsaint level, his domain would be one of snow and ice. That opinion was also shared by the blademasters that had faced him in combat.

What, then, is this blood-red world anyways? Even if it's not a domain, I feel absolute control over my environment after entering it. I could even kill rank 3 blademasters like they were livestock. In this world, with but a thought, I can appear wherever I want. Given how deeply this resonates with my soul, it feels like a domain, if not anything else…

However, Lorist could not be assured of two points. First, he had never heard of any swordsaint that had managed to master two different domains. Second, given how his swordsmanship wasn't too much trouble for Locksy, it was apparent that Lorist's skills were still far from that of a swordsaint. Should it have been the opposite case, he would have defeated the old blademaster in less than 50 exchanges.

But Lorist suddenly remembered that he was not training properly in the battleforce technique he learned in his current life. Instead, he was using battleforce to cultivate the aquametal technique. Perhaps, it had boosted or altered his domain? Thinking back at the insane boost in abilities the world afforded him, it felt almost like a buff in a video game that boosted his abilities. That was why Locksy was unable to take more than ten of his empowered strikes and fell at the eleventh one.

This world should be a domain. When I am in that state, my abilities should rival that of a swordsaint's. It must be why I suffer some fatigue as well.

Guess I should name this world. What should I call it? Bloodred Domain?

Lorist shook his head and recalled the night he engaged in slaughter with bodies littered all over him in the camp.

Since a slaughter always succeeds the manifestation of the domain, let's call this the Slaughter Domain. I should work on familiarizing myself with this ability as soon as I

can. Perhaps, I should adjust my training to focus in that direction and try my best to train my body until the state is within the domain.

Upon concluding his thought session, he felt rather relaxed and called out, "Hey, anyone?"

Jim came in and asked, "Milord, what do you need?"

"Oh? Why are you here? You're still injured. You should rest up," said Lorist.

"I'm fine, Milord. The military herbalist gave me a checkup yesterday and said that my body has recovered completely, thanks to the medicine Els brought to the dueling grounds. I only need a few more days of rest for a complete recovery. Also, I'm the vice leader of your personal guard. I am only fulfilling my duties as soon as possible," replied Jim.

"Fine, suit yourself. Just make sure you don't overwork yourself," Lorist said, "Who's in charge of the situation right now?"

"Sir Charade is, Milord. Sir Loze passed on the duties the moment they met and took charge of the security of the capital," reported Jim.

"I see," Lorist said as he nodded, before he instructed, "Get me some food and drink. I'm starving."

Charade entered the room with a stack of folders just as Lorist finished gulping down two pieces of bread.with a thick stack of folders.

"Milord, you're finally awake," said he.

"Aren't you handling things just fine?" asked Lorist as he picked up another piece of roast chicken.

"Ugh," Charade groaned, "Locke, I was originally going to thank you for coming into the dueling grounds alone to rescue me, but it seems you did so just so I could take over most of the work again!"

"Fatty, aren't you the one who likes desk jobs the most?" Lorist laughed, "Why did you change your mind all of a sudden after being taken captive?"

"Actually, I want to take a break," sighed Charade.

"What for?"

"Thinking about the household soldiers who had died protecting me at the dueling grounds, like Knight Fad, I know this can't go on any longer. I want to take a break to properly train and break through to the gold rank. If… If I had been a gold rank, there would have been far fewer household soldiers who had to sacrifice themselves for my sake. At the very least, that rat-faced blademaster wouldn't have used me to threaten Els. I've caused so much trouble because I neglected my training," grumbled he.

"That's not your fault. You're the chief knight of the household and it's only right for the household soldiers to protect you. However, I do agree that it's about time you raised your abilities. I'll agree to let you off on a break, but only after we return to The Northlands. You still have to help me deal with the bulk of matters here for now," conceded Lorist.

"We won't be staying here for too long. I promise you we'll return to Silowas by the end of the month or early next month," added he.

"What will happen to the archipelago?" asked Charade.

"We'll make it one of our overseas territories."

"We don't have a mandate from the Andinaq royal family. I'm afraid we can't make this place ours, Locke," countered Charade.

"No worries," Lorist said as he waved, "The second highness didn't care about us when we mobilized our forces. Additionally, the kingdom we exterminated isn't officially recognized by any other nations. They're nothing but pirates gathered up in one lair. If we leave these islands be, it might actually become the home of real pirates in the future. We can't leave this place lawless and unattended. Forget about a mandate. I don't care if others don't acknowledge this archipelago as our overseas territory. If anyone objects to our claim, they can come and take it from us."

Since Lorist was dead set on keeping the archipelago under the house's control, Charade no longer advised against it. After all, there were benefits to having another overseas territory.

"I understand. Oh, and, make sure to sign these documents," said Charade as he passed

over the stack of folders.

"What are these?" asked Lorist.

"The forms for distributing food and other supplies, rewards for distinguished soldiers, and a list of items the fleet will be sending back to Silowas. Also, there are some distribution permissions for weapons and equipment for the new local defense forces."

Lorist sighed and began signing the documents.

"Aren't you going to look them over?" asked Charade.

"The fact that you brought them to me for a signature means that you've already given it a good look. There's no need for me to spend that much effort rechecking everything," replied Lorist.

"Alright, thanks for having so much trust in me. Actually, I still have another thing I want to discuss with you," said Charade.

"What's it about?"

"It concerns the slaves. Currently, there are more than 100 thousand slaves settled in the capital. Apart from the 30 thousand or so that are under our command, they are mostly those that worked in the manors of the royal family. If they are left to their own devices, they'll be nothing but leeches on our food and resources. Additionally, the wheat in the manors' fields are ripe and ready for harvest but are so far left alone. I believe that it won't be too good an idea to force the slaves to do so. What should we do about this?"

Charade felt rather troubled that perfectly good wheat was being left to rot as well as the fact that they were feeding the 100 thousand slaves for nothing in return. The sight of food being moved out of the warehouse to the unattended slaves around the capital pained his heart. But there was nothing he could do to the slaves, they had answered the house's call for rebellion.

"How much goods did we get from this place?" asked Lorist without even answering the earlier query.

"It's not completely tallied yet," Charade said as he flipped open a brown-colored

folder, "This is Hector's report on Nupite. More than 5 million gold Forde coins were confiscated from the city. The silver and copper Fordes amount to an additional 3 million gold Fordes. There are also millions worth of luxury goods. Hector says in his report he's formed a slave scavenging unit to dig up the nobles' and traders' underground warehouses. He believes we'll have another couple million gold Fordes' worth of goods by the end of the month.

"Also, we unsealed the three treasuries of the royal family and there are at least 1 million gold Fordes' worth there. I believe after we scour the noble sector, we will have even more. Locke, our lack of funds is practically solved. The funds we got from the kingdom alone is enough for us to continue development for ten more years."

"Hehe," Lorist chuckled, "I was the one who said it first. Money comes fastest when it's taken from the hands of a kingdom. Naturally, that only applies if we can win with the least sacrifice. The only sad part is that the dominion is far too remote. Our neighbors are all poor or troublesome. Sometimes, I really wish our dominion was located at the Falik Plains next to a juicy piece of meat like the Teribo kingdom. Just the thought makes me drool…"

Charade laughed and said, "Milord, we're nobles, not bandits! Don't say these kinds of things in front of others. Also, you said that we attacked the Hanayabarta kingdom as an act of retaliation against their slavers and slave traders. We are perfectly in the right for fighting back and exterminating their kingdom. We did not do this out of a need for money."

"No worries, I know. Earning money is just one of our side goals. Everyone understands this," Lorist said with a laugh, "Since we earned so much this time around, we can afford to be a little lenient on our spending. Post notices all over the capital later stating that we are recruiting the slaves for the wheat harvest. We will need to put the fields at the plains near the capital to good use and plant winter wheat after the current harvest. Even if we have enough stockpiled food, we can't count on it completely.

"Those who help with the harvests will be guaranteed food, shelter, and good clothing. We will also pay them a salary. I believe that the freed slaves would love to start accumulating wealth of their own. Those who work hard will be compensated a small silver a day. It will entice lots to join in.

"Also, from tomorrow onwards, the slaves that refuse to help us out will only be served

two bowls of porridge a day with no bread or meat. Those who don't work don't even deserve food in the first place, and our provision are already more than we're obligated to provide. We don't have any special relationship with them, so there's no need for us to feed them well."

Charade stared wide-eyed.

"That won't be too good, right Milord? I don't recall you asking the light cavalry scouts to announce that when you were riling them up for revolt."

Lorist shook his head with a smile.

"No. All we promised in exchange for their help in resisting the royal defense army's oppression was freedom. Right now, they are free to go wherever they want and do whatever they please. No one will look at them as slaves anymore. We have already fulfilled our end of the bargain. We're not obligated to sustain them for the rest of their lives, understood?

"If these free men are willing to work for us in exchange for other benefits, they are more than welcome. Our house requires hardworking people who are willing to work for their own livelihoods, not parasites who don't want to do their part. If there are any that oppose our decision, we will show them the wrath of the Raging Bear!

"Also, you can make it known that we will soon be recruiting from the slaves to expand our army. Make sure to spread the word that we aren't looking for the fittest or strongest, but rather those who serve us the best."

Charade understood Lorist's intentions immediately.

"Understood, Milord."

"Good. There are over 400 thousand slaves here and most of them are youths not tied to any family. If we use them wisely, they will grow our manpower greatly. If we don't manage it well, they will become very troublesome instead. I plan to leave around 200 thousand slaves here and give them farmland and houses. They will live here as my subjects.

"Other than that, I plan to recruit ten brigades of soldiers. Coupled with the ten brigades already formed at Nupite, there will be more than 60 thousand soldiers. It should make up for the distance separating the archipelago and our dominion. In

chaotic times, one must have enough might to protect oneself. As for the rest of the slaves, those who don't wish to return to their homelands will be allowed to move to Silowas to replace our losses. We need to restart our development there as soon as possible. That's the rough outline of my plan. What do you think?" asked Lorist.

"That sounds appropriate, Milord," replied Charade.

Chapter 295
Dread's Monument

The most prominent building in Hamidas, which also served as the center of power for the kingdom, was where Lud III would summon his nobles for meetings or wave to the adoring masses.

There were 36 huge pillars supporting the great hall. They were all made of a green and gold stone. On them were engravings of intricate patterns and murals that depicted the various legends and folktales of the era. The building was called Herbitra and was also known as the Palace of 36 Pillars.

At the moment, droves of people made merry within the great hall. Lorist was hosting a large celebratory feast to commemorate House Norton's victory and the Hanayabarta kingdom's extermination which fulfilled his promise that 'those who slight the Nortons shall be put down, far as they may be'.

"Let me dedicate this first toast to the heroic soldiers and fighters that have sacrificed themselves to wash away the humiliation of the house and to liberate the slaves!" announced Lorist before he poured the cup of wine onto the ground.

The hundreds of fully-armored knights and ten other elaborately-dressed officials within the hall did the same.

"This second cup shall be dedicated to the slaves who have suffered for the past century under the tyrannical reign of the Hanayabarta kingdom. They have been subjugated, emasculated and enslaved. Despite that, they were the ones who built this kingdom from the ground up. Do you see the 36 majestic pillars in this hall? Who would think for a second that those were built at the cost of countless numbers of corpses?! They have lost their freedom here and became nothing more than animals. In the eyes of the demonic slavers, they are no different from livestock!

"But that has changed with our arrival! House Norton has already exterminated this sinful nation! The slaves are finally free and their dignity has been restored, as all humans deserve. However, we did come a little too late, there are many others who we were unable to save. Let us mourn and grieve for their suffering. This toast is made

in their honor."

Lorist poured the wine once again on the ground. While Lorist's true reason for attacking the kingdom was to gain the resources gathered over the century by the kingdom, he had to pretend that saving the slaves from suffering was his main goal in the interest of maintaining the facade of honorable intentions.

Lorist did not care for the liberated who would not join the Nortons' forces or help out with the harvest. He had given them freedom, so it was up to them to decide their futures. As long as they did not obstruct the house's operations, they were free to do whatever they wanted.

However, all the resources around the archipelago, down to the smallest grain, was the de facto property of the house, not to mention the ships that would be required to send those slaves off to their hometowns. Without Lorist's permission, not one of them would be able to leave the archipelago.

There were some free slaves that remained within the camp that had gotten sick of eating nothing but porridge and wanted to get some farming tools to harvest some wheat for their own consumption. They were stopped by patrolling guards right away. Almost all the property of the slavers was already in the hands of the Norton house.

The slaves were dissatisfied and argued that they deserved a share of the wheat because they had a part in cultivating it. It did not take long for them to be brought to the main camp and showed the corpses of near a thousand Norton soldiers who had died fighting the slavers. The slaves were given 20 canes each thereafter to ensure they understood the reason the wheat belonged solely to the house. The fortunate thing was that they no longer had to worry about starving, as they were punished to help out with the harvests for their transgressions.

All was according to Charade's plan to spread word that the Hanayabarta kingdom had fallen only because of the house's huge sacrifice to liberate the slaves. 'That's why everything on the archipelago belongs to us. Without us, you would still be slaves and your lives would be subject to the whims of your masters. Even though you're now free men, your freedom came at the expense of House Norton. We're under no obligation to sustain you any longer.'

The Norton soldiers were rather convinced by Charade's arguments. Additionally, House Norton did not leave the slaves to their own devices for survival. They did offer

opportunities for the slaves to work for proper meals, clothing, shelter and even payment. Not only that, the slaves were not required to do anything remotely threatening to their lives. That was why the Norton soldiers despised the slaves that did not help out even when being given the chance. They considered them thankless and shameless fools.

"This third cup of wine is dedicated to the slave fighters who fell before the coming of dawn," Lorist said before he gave Blademaster Shuss and the other slave fighters a glance, "Without their painstaking resistance, our house would never have been able to occupy the capital with so few casualties. It was their life and blood that limited the enemy's ability to launch a last-ditch resistance against us, defending the dueling grounds until our forces arrived. This toast will be in honor of the brave warriors and their sacrifice."

After the three toasts, the atmosphere within the hall reverted to its former merriness. Everyone began to celebrate again. A group of young and beautiful female slaves with varied talents put on a magnificent show of dancing, sleight-of-hand tricks, and performances for the conquerors of the Hanayabarta archipelago.

As it was a celebratory occasion, the soldiers received a great number of bonuses. Those who participated in battle were awarded ten gold Fordes. The injured received double the standard bonus. They were also treated to a sumptuous feast. As for the volunteers that helped out, they received a large serving of ale and a huge piece of smoked meat. Even the slaves who did not contribute got two pieces of black bread sandwiching a piece of meat.

On the next day, Lorist gathered the house's knights and important officials for a meeting about the archipelago's fate.

Nobody had any objection to making the archipelago one of the house's overseas territory nor Lorist's plans for the 400 thousand slaves there. Some had differing opinions about what to do with Hamidas, however.

Hector and some other administrative officials believed that the capital should be kept intact, especially a palace as magnificent as Herbitra. While it did have a tainted history, it was still a magnificent building that should be cared for over the generations.

Blademaster Shuss and two gold-ranked slave fighters, Jades and Messen, who were

attending a meeting like this for the first time, stressed that the capital had to be demolished, especially the dueling grounds. It reminded the slaves too much of their painful past. Countless comrades of theirs had fallen there and only the demolition of the symbol of their pain would appease them.

Potterfang, on the other hand, believed that the capital's demolition would allow them to gain favor more quickly with the slaves. During his time in charge of the slave camps' security, he had learned that all the slaves had a deep hatred for Hamidas. Some even called it a devil's den, while others thought it no different from hell. The slaves would definitely be more obedient following its demolition.

Malek thought that demolishing the capital would save them quite some trouble when they excavate for the slaver nobles' hidden riches; they would no longer have to ensure the integrity of their buildings during their operations.

Charade approached the matter from a different perspective. He thought that demolishing the capital would be far more beneficial for the house's administration at the archipelago. For one, Hanayabarta was quite far away from the main dominion and maintaining a castle as large as the capital would definitely put quite a heavy burden on the house's finances. Since the house would not be moving their headquarters to Hanayabarta, there was no need for the capital to be kept.

Herbitra alone would cost at least 300 gold Fordes annually to maintain. While the annual amount was by no means astronomical, over decades or a century the upkeep would be staggeringly high. That way of spending was no different from dropping gold coins into the sea; one would not even hear the coins reach the ground.

Not only that, given how far Hanayabarta was from the house's dominion, an enemy attack on the island was only a matter of time. As a measure of precaution, the capital's demolition would make it easier for the house to rule over the various islands and their forces would not incur as many casualties to quell any revolts or chaos.

Also, while there would be over 100 thousand slaves staying behind, it would require farmland and houses, only a brigade of soldiers would be left to defend the area at most. The area that had to be defended had to be decreased. In future, the area around the capital would only serve two purposes. It would be a trade center and a storage hub for food and other resources.

The reasons Charade brought up cemented the decision to demolish the capital. Lorist

decided that apart from the business sector, which would be retained and expanded, the capital would be demolished. It would only happen after Malek and the rest finished scouring the noble sector and royal sector for their treasures, however.

Lorist also managed to convince them to retain the 36 pillars and the half of the dueling grounds' audience seats to serve as a reminder to future generations about the two buildings that were the cornerstone of the slaves' suffering.

Upon deciding Hamidas's fate, Lorist declared Hector the first governor of the archipelago. His first term would be five years. His primary duty was to ensure that the 100 thousand slaves were given farmland and houses so they could settle into their new lives and become the subjects of the Norton house.

Josk and Yuriy would check the manors at the plains around the capital once more to capture any subject of the Hanayabarta kingdom that might have escaped. None of them were to be spared. They were also tasked with the transport of all the goods found at the manors to the capital.

Malek was put in charge of the scavenging of valuables within the capital as well as the transportation of the goods found in the city's western sector. Apart from some food and other supplies, the rest were to be brought to Nupite to be shipped to Silowas.

Fiercetiger Loze would command half of the Norton troops that would stay behind and assist Malek with the resources' transportation. He would also guide the rest of the slaves to Nupite. Only those who wanted to stay would be allowed to remain at the plains near the capital. The rest had to leave. However, the house did promise those who wished to return to their homes that they would be guaranteed safety and transport to the mainland for no fee at all.

Lastly, Lorist made Jades and Messen aides to Potterfang. The three were given only three tasks: the formation of the ten new brigades via the recruitment of the 16 silver-ranked and 400 other bronze or iron-ranked slave fighters, the transport of the 100 thousand plus subjects of the Hanayabarta kingdom to Nupite, where the other captives were held, as well as the the battlefield's cleansing. The last task involved the decapitation and embalming of the enemy corpses' heads. They would be sent to Nupite. The corpses themselves were to be cremated.

Some felt that Lorist's order to keep the enemy's heads was a little weird.

"How will we deal with the 100 thousand captives?" asked Charade.

Lorist stayed silent for a while with a gloomy look on his face.

"Behead them all," answered he finally.

The answer shocked everyone. Hector and Charade jumped in terror.

"Milord, you can't do that! That's a hundred thousand lives!" shouted they.

"They are not human, merely animals wearing human skin," Lorist said, thumping heavily on the desk, "They have never seen the slaves as fellow humans. They are the demons of this sinful kingdom. Even if they are commoners, they have lived in prosperity thanks to the slaves' blood, tears and death. Not only that, I've made an oath to bury 100 Hanayabartans alongside each of our dead soldiers. The 100 thousand we have is not enough to make amends for our comrades' deaths. My decision is final, and I will shoulder all the consequences!" exclaimed Lorist, before he left, signaling the end of the meeting.

On the 24th day of the 10th month, Year 1773, Count Norton Lorist ordered the beheading of 100 thousand Hanayabartans at the shore around Nupite. He used 176243 heads to build a 33-meter-tall pyramid. It became known as Dread's Monument.

Right before the beheading, the governor of Hanayabarta, Hector, had kneeled to Lorist and begged for seven whole hours before he finally received permission to spare the lives of 12 thousand young women. They were to be made the wives of liberated slaves. The Hanayabartan Genocide was deeply imprinted in the hearts of many.

During the 3rd and 4th months of Year 1774, when many of the slaves that left the archipelago to return to their homes, word of Lorist's use of more than 170 thousand heads to build a pyramid spread across the nations of the continent. Almost overnight, the name of the Roaring Raging Bear became the go-to tale that mothers told their misbehaving children.

In the 5th month of Year 1774, word of the Hanayabarta kingdom's extermination spread to another island-based nation -- the Shyarsia kingdom. The queen of the nation so famed for their spice production, who was also the younger cousin of Lud III, cried until she fainted. Her son, the young prince, instantly ordered his royal uncle

to mobilize their troops against the Hanayabarta's occupiers.

The army the kingdom deployed numbered 18 thousand. They left with a fleet of 40-odd ships. It was the latter half of the 6th month by the time they arrived at Nupite. It was noon when they arrived, the pyramid was the first thing that caught their attention. At that time, Nupite was defended by a brigade of 3000 soldiers and the defenses were still incomplete. As the garrison's knights prepared for battle, something incomprehensible happened.

The fleet turned around just offshore from the pyramid… and left. They left just like that. It was as if they had just come to see the pyramid for themselves. Not one soldier came ashore, not a single blow exchanged.

In the 8th month, Senbaud's Oceanic Legion arrived at the archipelago with six sail-powered, cannon-equipped warships to patrol the area. The moment Senbaud heard of Shyarsia fleet's arrival, he set off for the kingdom. When his fleet arrived, before they could even fire the first volley, the kingdom raised a white flag over the castle. He came to hear much later that the entire kingdom was terrified out of their minds by the pyramid. They feared, more than anything else, the erection of something similar in their kingdom, so they surrendered immediately.

The Shyarsia kingdom became the first nation to willingly bow to House Norton and become their vassal. With this, came the beginning of a new era.

A tall tale, this is not.

Chapter 296
Garrison Division

"You two are as close to me as blood brothers. Don't be so tense around me. Relax," said Lorist.

His words didn't have the desired effect.

They looked each other in the eye and said even more respectfully, "Milord, if you have any instructions, we will definitely see it done even if it'll cost us our lives."

Lorist let out a troubled smile and sat back down on his swordtooth tiger skin seat, taking a deep breath. He realized that ever since he did not heed the advice of the others around him, ever since he insisted on killing the 100 thousand prisoners and using their heads -- along with those of the dead enemy soldiers -- to build the 33-meter-tall pyramid, all the household knights and soldiers looked at him with deep, fearful respect.

One time, when Lorist saw Els daydreaming, he secretly approached him and patted on his shoulder playfully. The moment Els turned back and realized that it was him, however, he was so shocked that he jumped almost three feet high. Charade also stopped interacting with him on an informal basis and maintained the demeanor of a proper subordinate; he refused to call Lorist by his nickname, 'Locke'.

Additionally, the slave fighters who had originally intended to return home had changed their minds almost instantly when Lorist asked them to reconsider joining the Nortons. Even those who did want to go home promised gingerly that they would bring their family members to the dominion before joining the house and stressed that they were not trying to run away from returning the grace he had showed them.

Sigh, guess I've become the demon king… Well, Dread's Monument was probably a big part of it.

Even the situation at Nupite was completely in order. Despite housing over 400 thousand people, everything went without a hitch. All of the liberated slaves obeyed the policies and directives of House Norton without so much as starting a street brawl.

Everything looked eerily peaceful.

Sol, it seems that the liberated slaves fear me more than they did their former slavers.

Lorist was at a loss about what to do. It was one thing to kill the 100 thousand combatants they had captured. But Lorist's hatred for the pirates and slavers' descendants had driven him to kill off the civilians as well. The move made sense, he wanted to remove the seeds of vengeance from the get go so that they would not cause any trouble in the future, but that didn't mean it wouldn't strike fear into the hearts of others. One could even say the unintended consequences were beneficial; Lorist had wanted to deter others from making trouble for him in the future, and this did achieve that aim. It was just that his chosen approach seemed to be a little too effective. It had isolated him from even his own men.

The two, both of whom were technically Lorist's seniors -- his father's two illegitimate children -- Molocinque and Wellickson, were on edge regardless if what he said. They behaved like they were walking on ice that shouldn't even be able to support their weight.

"Norton Molocinque, three-star-silver-ranked household knight and current regiment leader of the heavy-armored division's third brigade, you have shown true heroism and your troops adore you.

"Norton Wellickson, two-star-silver-ranked household knight and regiment leader of the light cavalry scouts division's third regiment, you have defended your station with bravery and courage despite your injury."

Lorist tossed the folder in his hand onto the table.

"Eight years have passed since I returned to the dominion and become the head of the house. As my elder brothers sharing the blood of my father, you have performed incredibly well. I am incredibly appreciative and have allowed you to bear the family name. I have asked you two to come because I intend to discuss the archipelago's defense with you.

"I believe you are well aware that the archipelago is now our overseas territory. I intend to form a garrison division for the archipelago comprising five brigades. Molocinque, I want you to be the division commander. Wellickson will be your aide."

Both Molocinque and Wellickson were shocked. It was already incredibly

magnanimous of Lorist to see them as equals, given their illegitimate heritage, but now he was giving them such a responsibility, such a chance to prove themselves? This was not something they could have hoped for, much less expected. In other noble households, illegitimate children were usually oppressed and looked down upon, but here they had not only been made official members of the household, but were even being given a chance to make some contributions and build a name for themselves.

"Don't think too much about this. It is my fortune to have two talented brothers. In fact, I expect you to rack up more contributions house. My hope is that you will eventually be given noble ranks and enfeoffed land of your own so you can form your own branch families. This is the only way to grow House Norton's might stably. I've decided to give you this chance for this very reason. I hope you will use this opportunity to take charge and refine your abilities to manage and command. You must build a stable foundation for your future efforts," continued Lorist.

He rolled open a beastskin map of the archipelago.

"Come over and look. I'll brief you two on the strategy for the archipelago's defense," he called.

Once the two were leaning on the table and staring intently at the map, he began his brief.

"The garrison division the house is going to form will have three land-based brigades and two maritime brigades. Each will be made up of three thousand men. Their loadouts will be similar to the local defense brigades. The three land-based brigades will be stationed at the capital, the hilly area and Nupite respectively. We'll also construct several citadels at these locations."

Lorist tapped on the map as he explained.

"The two maritime brigades will be stationed at Nupite. They will have 16 armed ships under their command with which they will patrol the waters in and around the archipelago. Wellickson, you shall report to Senbaud right after this and begin learning the ropes of sailing and training your troops at sea. There's no rush, you have three years, so take your time to learn properly and train your troops well. My hope is that, starting three years from now, the archipelago will supply the house with a thousand elite soldiers annually.

"As for the three land-based brigades, Molocinque, they're yours to command. You also have three years to finish the three citadels' construction. Maintain order around the archipelago and cooperate with Hector to ease the liberated slaves into their new lives. I hope that the archipelago can be self sufficient within five years.

"Nupite's inner city will be given to Governer Hector as his main base of operations. He will form another city defense brigade there and it'll serve the governor's office directly. Remember, the governor's office is separate from the military's command structure. The garrison has no control or say over the city defense brigade, understood?"

"I understand, Milord. I will definitely help Governor Hector out to defend the archipelago," saluted Molocinque.

Lorist nodded and said, "The detailed plans for the division is with Knight Charade. While the governor's office has power over the garrison division, that is only limited to annual supply and inventory checks. It doesn't mean they can direct military affairs. I believe you two won't let me down and taint the Norton name. Go now and report to Knight Charade to discuss the details and difficulties of the new divisions formation."

"Understood, Milord. We'll take our leave now."

In actuality, the largest benefit obtained from the Hanayabarta kingdom's extermination was not the wealth and resources, it was the manpower. The main reason Lorist had been unwilling to expand his military by recruiting civilians from his dominion was that he did not want to deprive the dominion of the manpower it needed to develop. The Norton forces were mainly two umbrella units, namely, the standing assault units, and the defense units that defended the towns.

The assault units consisted mainly of two heavy-armored divisions, two spear cavalry divisions, one carroballista division, one wheelbarrow ballista division, and a mounted archer brigade, scout brigade, the Thunderbolt Brigade, guard brigade, knight brigade, the female brigade and five other local defense brigades. There were 43 brigades totalling roughly 120 thousand people.

The defensive units consisted of the new recruit brigade, five police brigades -- formed mostly from retired soldiers from the main force and responsible for the defense and security of warehouses and factories as well as the transport of resources -- and the various garrison units of the towns and villages. They totalled 60 thousand men. The

defense brigades don't receive as many benefits as those in the assault brigades. For example, the police brigades only pay half the salary of the assault brigades, and garrison soldiers got only a third of that. In essence, both the police and garrison units were considered half soldier and half civilian. Those in the new recruit brigade did not receive any salary at all, only an allowance and a few menial benefits.

With Lorist's formation of the new Oceanic Legion, which already had more than 17 thousand personnel, the Norton's forces totalled more than 200 thousand men. With the total civilian population of the dominion and its overseas territories being little more than 1.1 million, the soldier-to-civilian ratio was around one to five, which was already quite excessive. To expand the military even further would be utter madness.

Even so, Lorist had his reasons. While the number of troops was no less impressive, only around 80 thousand men from the assault brigades could truly be mobilized. For instance, the mobilization of only 45 thousand soldiers almost bankrupted the house. Despite all that, the military's expansion was an inevitability, with its growing influence and territory, and the prisoners whose term of service were expiring soon.

Slightly over 30 thousand youths had been taken captive after the Duke of The Northlands' defeat, and, after three years of service, their terms had expired. Around 10 thousand had been fit for military service and with their inclusion, the houses forces grew to 80 thousand. The house had no choice but to recruit them. It would've do them no good to have the released prisoners join and serve other noble families. Following the defeat of the second prince's 100-thousand-strong army, more than 60 thousand captives had been taken in. Coupled with the civilian youths who had wanted to join the military over the past few years, the house's forces had gradually grown to their present size.

In the first place, Lorist's recruitment of the released captives was so that the dominion's civilian population would grow. Given the benefits joining the military entailed, the captives that joined the force would definitely bring their families over to the dominion and settle down, inflating the population in the process. Not only that, those who qualified to join the military already had their battleforce awakened, so refusing them was akin to pushing them to serve other noble houses. Only idiots would push away such a great deal.

Apart from the captives, the house made no attempt to recruit soldiers from the civilian ranks, save for the formation of the Oceanic Legion, because that would adversely affect the dominion's development. Given its thriving state, manpower was

in short supply and the liberated slaves were just what it needed.

Apart from the 40 thousand refugees and six thousand islanders abducted from Silowas, there were another 410 thousand slaves liberated, including over 100 thousand women and children. Of all of them, 170 thousand elected to stay at the archipelago. Most of them were second or third generation slaves that had been born there and had come to see the archipelago as their home.

Among the remaining 240 thousand slaves, 30 thousand wished to return to their homelands. Apart from that, most were able-bodied youths who had lost their families and had no homes to return to. Most were civilians of the former empire. They were either sold into slavery by their dominion lords or had their villages raided and pillaged by the slavers. Lorist ordered Potterfang to pick out 60 thousand to form 20 police brigades. He also intended to form a garrison division and a city defense brigade. This left only 120 thousand, whom Lorist intended to bring back to The Northlands to hasten its development.

The military's expansion was motivated mainly by the lack might required to defend the dominion. It was currently an era of chaos, so conflict was never in short supply. The second highness was currently leading his force across the Redlis kingdom. By the time he manages to reunite the empire, it would be entirely possible that he would set his sights on The Northlands. Lorist had already warned Count Kenmays, Baron Felim, and Baron Shazin to strengthen their military in preparation. The Nortons would not hide behind their allies either. They will stand together with them, side-by-side on the battlefield.

"Milord, Sir Senbaud has returned," reported Jim as he entered the tent, breaking Lorist out of his train of thought.

Senbaud was incredibly busy as he had to manage more than 300 ships for the transport of resources from the Hanayabarta archipelago to Silowas. He had already made more than two trips during the 9th and 10th months, but only a tenth of the resources had been transported so far.

Lorist was currently rather reckless with his financials given that the wealth of the whole Hanayabarta kingdom had just been added to the treasury of the Nortons. Putting other things aside, the money the kingdom had already amounted to 17 million gold Fordes. More than six million had come from the underground treasuries under the palace burned down by Lud III much to the shock of everyone.

Lorist did not really understand why the descendants of those pirates liked to bury their stuff underground. It only took some simple questioning on the servants of those slaver nobles for the underground vaults to be determined, easily netting them millions of gold Fordes' worth of goods. Looking at all the goods he unearthed, Charade smiled greedily with satisfaction and knew that all that would last the house for at least the next two to three decades to come.

"Have every knight and those above the regiment leader rank head to the main tent for a military meeting to discuss our future plans," instructed Lorist.

All those who were summoned did not really understand the reason for the meeting, given that the Hanayabarta kingdom had already been eliminated. All within the tent wondered whether Lorist intended to start another war.

"Silence! The Lord Count is here!" announced Els, causing the rest within the tent to quiet down and get into order hurriedly.

Lorist entered the tent with two blademasters, Engelich and Shuss, followed by Jim and Tarkel from behind.

"We pay our respects to our lord!" called out the household knights as they saluted.

"Alright, take your seats, gentlemen," said Lorist as he waved his hand dismissively, before he headed to the tigerskin chair. Engelich and Shuss stood at the sides of Lorist while Jim, Els and Tarkel all stood behind him.

"Tarkel, report the intelligence you gathered to everyone here," instructed Lorist.

"Understood," Tarkel said as he stepped forward and opened a folder in his hand, "The northern fleet of Chikdor Merchant Guild travels to the Hanayabarta archipelago to engage in trade every 5th and 10th month. Their fleet includes around 40 to 50 ships, among which are 16 to 20 large-class, long-distance cruisers with the rest being middle-class armed ships. Their crew number around six thousand men and there is one rank 1 blademaster among them.

"During every one of their trips, the northern fleet of the Chikdors would first travel to the Shyarsia kingdom to trade for spice before making their way to the Hanayabarta kingdom for trading and ordering daily goods, weapons, alcohol and fashion or luxury goods. It is said that the yearly profits obtained by the northern fleet amount up to 400 thousand gold Fordes annually.

"During the end of the 5th month this year, the third young master of the Chikdors, Moribak, had traveled to the Hanayabarta kingdom and revealed to the slavers during a banquet about our recruitment of more than 60 thousand refugees to Silowas to aid in development, which ended in the slavers' invasion of SIlowas, causing us to sustain major damages."

After Tarkel finished his report, he stood back down. Lorist looked at the household knights within the tent, furrowed his brow, and said, "I don't have any evidence whether the third young master had intentionally conspired with the slavers of the Hanayabarta kingdom. But based on the hostile relationship between Chikdor Merchant Guild and the Norton house, we will consider our two parties as being in a state of war. That is the reason I've called for this meeting. We shall discuss whether we should exterminate all of the ships of the northern fleet when they come to Port Nupite without letting a single one of them off!"

Chapter 297
Surrender

"Swerve the ship towards point 26, half sail!" yelled a voice.

"Understood! Swerve ship towards 26, half sail!" replied Kurt loudly as he spun the ship wheel with great strength.

The ship tilted and the world outside slowly shifted. A few well-trained marines hung on the mast and lowered half of the sails adeptly.

Rain drizzled on the ocean. Eventually a series of bumps appeared on the horizon. Eventually the bumps became distinct from the ocean itself. The captain of the ship, Schumak, let out a relieved sigh and ordered his helms to change their direction. The ship corrected its course and headed for Nupity, slowly fading into the chilling drizzle.

It was only a quarter past six in the morning and it already felt like the sun would not be showing itself for the day. All Schumak could hope for was that the drizzle would let up when they reach Nupite, he didn't want the ship's unloading to be delayed. He was not concerned with how slippery the port would be for the slaves transporting the cargo. Rather, his worry stemmed from the fact that his cargo that was not waterproofed properly, making them unfit for moving in times of rain.

Droplets of water rained down upon the greyish-black beastskin rainshield. Schumak raised his head, looked to the sky, and estimated that he would see Nupite by noon. Given his long experience at sea, his estimations were usually rather accurate. Looking back at the fleet of ships of which he was in charge, he could not help but feel a sense of pride. This was the northern fleet of the Chikdor Merchant Guild. in other words, it was the strongest fleet the northern seas had ever seen. Schumak's effort had paid off long ago when he was given the honor of commanding such an impressive fleet.

It required between 20 and 26 days to sail from Hidegold Bay to the Shyarsia kingdom. The kingdom was situated near the southern side of the various island nations. A survey by the Chikdor Merchant Guild found that sailors' psyches would suffer if they didn't see land for more than 15 days. The first symptom they would demonstrate was a steep increase in irritability. At the 20 day mark sailors would begin to suffer from

despair and aggression. The combination of these three malaises meant that fights were frequent and often over the most insignificant of things. It wasn't very rare for the most trivial of disagreements to burst into a fierce fight from which life threatening injury could result.

The fleet stopped over at the Shyarsia kingdom to complete their assignment to trade for spices. When they first set sail, the sailors and other crew members were patient, obedient, and easier to control. While the journey to the Shyarsia kingdom was not a short one, they managed to arrive before any misfortunate incident occurred and the sailors had ten-odd days to rest up before continuing the voyage. The trip to the Hanayabarta archipelago from the kingdom took less than 10 days, so the average voyage shouldn't encounter any problems.

Should one sail from Hidegold Bay straight to the Hanayabarta kingdom, one would have to travel for easily more than 20 days. However, it took no more than ten days for one to travel from the island nations to the continent to Grindia, after which one only had to sail along the coast of the continent back to Hidegold Bay. That did not in any way suggest that prolonged voyages were something to be encouraged; sailors would naturally begin to worry about their families and homes after two months absent. All that knowhow was something the Chikdor Merchant Guild had discovered over the years.

This time around, the journey involved 67 ships. Before they departed, the management intentionally transferred over 22 large-class, long-distance merchant vessels, mainly because of the letter now in in Schumak's room.

The war with the Teribo kingdom had caused the guild great losses. While their armed fleet did not incur any losses, the guild lost two rank 1 blademasters and seven gold-ranked swordsmen, all of whom had received painstaking effort and investment from the guild over the years.

Fortunately, thanks to First Young Master Serihanem's cunning plan, the Twinhead Dragon Merchant Guild's president, Cobleit, started to trust the Chikdors deeply. He enfeoffed the whole Urubaha duchy to the guild as compensation for their contributions right after the war ended.

But whilst they had finally obtained their own dominion, they were in an even deeper pit than before. It was common knowledge that the Urubaha duchy was a poor nation filled with mountainous regions. The most troubling part was that the availability of

cultivable land was so bad that the nation was barely able to sustain its own population. The reason for the formation of the two armies-for-rent was to earn some extra coin for the duchy. All the while decreasing the number of people that required feeding.

As for the civilians, those that wanted a proper diet would become pirates or bandits. The late Duke Urubaha did not care much for their shenanigans. All he cared about was that he be able to collect his taxes. In some instances, his two armies were hired precisely to solve the banditry problem. Either way, he stood to benefit from the situation.

The two armies were absorbed into the Chikdor Merchant Guild when they took over, and was currently a massive burden. Both the Crimson Legion and the Tricolor Sword Legion only had 24 thousand men each, but as a whole package, there were another 200 thousand family members that had to be fed, almost a quarter of the whole duchy's population. The late duke did not care about the families. He only cared about those that could bring him money, and only as far as their ability to make him money stretched. He felt that his giving his soldiers a job with pay was already more grace than they deserved.

Now that Clan Chikdor had taken control over the two armies, they did not wish for them to be as disloyal as they had towards Duke Urubaha. Not only did they have to make them formal standing armies, they also had to ensure their loyalty. They had to enforce military regulation as well as take care of the soldiers' families. However, the War of Glass had caused the prices of food to skyrocket. That was especially the case now that the continent's nations had become cautious towards the Union. Most of the established trade routes had been closed off, with important supplies such as food and metals put under embargoes. The insane prices for food and other supplies within the Union didn't come down as they had expected and hoped, they remained just as high, and even increased.

The Urubaha duchy, required food first and foremost. Only with food could the guild grasp the unwavering loyalty of the civilians within the duchy. For one, Serihanem's plan to develop basic infrastructure within the duchy to rectify its poor state was a step in that direction. Within just two or three years, the guild would be self sufficient with the duchy. It might even begin to see profits.

The main problem was that, no matter how much money the guild had, they were unable to purchase food from the neighboring nations. Even if they did, it would cost

a king's ransom. It was not a price even the rich and mighty Chikdor Merchant Guild could afford. The main motivation behind the transfer of more than 20 of those large merchant vessels to the northern fleet was to procure large amounts of food, at least a million Pors, from the Hanayabarta kingdom. Incidentally, a Por is the unit of measurement used in Grindia. It equates to about 50 kilograms. The measurement and name is derived from the linen sack by the same name and the weight it can hold.

The letter within Schumak's ship cabin was penned by President Chikdor personally. In the letter, the president requested that the guild be sold food based on the years of amiable interactions the guild and the kingdom. The reason the king's explicit permission had to be obtained was the alarming amount of food actually ordered. For that, the president had also prepared lots of exquisite gifts.

The fleet traveled through the waterway leading to Nupite. Schumak looked a at the islands from the deck of his ship a little worriedly.

Did the slaver lords actually develop a conscience and stop their slaves from working in the rain?

It did not take long for Schumak to choke with laughter at his passing thought.

Well, why should I care? The slaves' got nothing to do with me anyway.

Currently, the decks of the merchant vessels were filled with sailors. They were far more excited to be at the Hanayabarta kingdom than the Shyarsia kingdom. Other things aside, merely the 'quality' of the women in the brothels here were far superior to those in Shyarsian brothels. The women who fished for customers at the docks of the Shyarsia kingdom were mostly descendents of fishermen or farmers, it was revealed by their tanned skin. Some sailors were convinced they could even smell the stench of fish and mud on them.

The Hanayabartan harlots were mostly female slaves brought over from all over the continent. Not only were their services cheap, there were more than enough of them to satisfy the sailor's needs for a few days and nights.

After passing by Featherfall Island, Schumak finally spotted a group of slaves. It was a family of three. They stood by a run-down stone house on the island, looking at the ships expressionlessly as they sailed by.

"This is weird, since when has the slaver nobles allowed a family of slaves to live

together?" asked rank 1 blademaster Kuchid.

Originally, the guild was backed by five blademasters. However, with the loss of one during the interception of the Flying Fish of Dawn and two during the War of Glass (one had perished to defend President Cobleit during an assassination attempt and the other was tricked into being killed by Duke Urubaha when he was at his most defenseless), only Kuchid and Udi, a rank 2 blademaster, remained.

Blademaster Kuchid was attached to the mission because the guild would not permit any mishap on a mission as important as it. He had been specially transferred from his original post at the southern armed fleet.

"Hehe, sir Blademaster, you might be unaware, but the Hanayabarta kingdom does allow slaves to form their families," said old Kurt, the helmsman, "Old female slaves are allowed to wed their male slaves as reward. However, most of the female slaves are used ones that have probably been impregnated by the slaver nobles. They allow them to be wedded to the other slaves precisely because it would save them the trouble of having to raise their unwanted kin. Should they ever wish to have fun with the female slaves again, their husbands would have to stand guard outside their house when they get on with their business."

"Haha, it seems that the slaver nobles live quite plentiful lives. With all those slaves running their manors for them, they are able to live carefreely. They can get their hands on anything they could possibly want and they have the slaves' lives in their hands," said Blademaster Kuchid with a chuckle.

Schumak, on the other hand, shook his head with displeasure.

All those fellows consider is how life is from the slavers' point of view, not the slaves. I can only imagine how horrible it must be to be one of those poor souls.

Even so, given his post as the captain of the guild's northern fleet, all Schumak could care about was whether he would be able to complete his mission. He didn't have the luxury of sympathizing with the slaves.

Past Featherfall Island was Goldshark Island and Duck Island. Nupite was already visible far in the distance.

Huh, there's nobody at the port. Must be because of the rain. Those jetties look oddly empty though… Shouldn't there be at least a ship or two over there?

"What's going on? Did something happen at the port? It shouldn't be that quiet around here," said Kurt, slightly surprised.

"Well, the empty port can only be good for us," Schumak said as he rolled his eyes, "we won't have to worry about finding a spot. Besides, weren't we informed that the kingdom's slavers set out to attack Silowas island? You know, that island belonging to some count that the guild wanted to take as its dominion not too long ago? Perhaps the slavers' ships have gone back to attack it again."

That line of reasoning was indeed rather reasonable, so no one bothered arguing.

Even so, as they approached the city, more and more sailors filled the decks of the ships, impatient to get down for some fun.

"Eh? Why did the slaver nobles build that small hill? Is that a pyramid? What's it for?" asked old Kurt.

As they got closer, Kuchid suddenly gasped. Others began chattering incessantly.

"What's going on?" asked Schumak.

"Those… Those are all… hu-hu-hu-human heads… stacked up… pyramid," stammered the blademaster.

"What are you going on about?" asked Schumak, before he turned to look.

He instantly felt a cold wave wash over his body. His whole being felt frozen, as if he had fallen into an icy abyss.

When the fleet was less than a hundred meters away from the port, the 30-odd-meter-tall pyramid entered the sights of those on board. Pyramids were no rare sight. The continent had its own fair share of pyramid-shaped buildings in the ruins of the ancient civilization, but most of them were tombs. The pyramid that was on the Nupite's shores, however, was constructed wholly of stacked human heads.

It was apparent that the heads had been intentionally embalmed. The pale faces still had the despairing, frenzied looks on their faces from the moments of their deaths. Not one, but all the heads wore similar expressions. The shock brought by the sight was unimaginable, especially with the transparent, resin-like material that filled the space between the heads, making the pyramid look like a crystal encasing countless

human heads.

All the sailors on board the ships looked at the shores in deathly silence. All they could feel was the cold numbness that assailed their limbs. It froze them in place as terror crept out of the depths of their psyche and made their teeth chatter and their limbs shiver.

There were quite a number of savage sailors that had seen their fair share of death, some had even crawled directly out of piles of bodies, but faced with the pyramid in front of them, not one managed to maintain their composure. All they did was stare blankly at the structure. They forgot their duties entirely.

More than ten ships actually collided after the helmsmen saw the pyramid. The whole fleet was brought to a standstill.

Just when Schumak snapped out of his stupor and attempted to give the order to get back into formation, he heard the familiar sound of Nupite's horn.

Countless elite soldiers rushed to the port and got into formation. They awaited the fleet's arrival. Some even brought with them countless ballistae to the frontlines.

The expressions on Schumak and Kuchid's faces changed immediately. Subsequently, horns resounded from Goldshark Island and Duck Island and either side of the waterway the fleet was traveling through. Unending rows of soldiers came out and pushed their odd-looking pushcarts. A few minutes later, a horn sound sounded behind the fleet. More than eight large-class ships blocked the waterway the fleet had just come through. The whole northern fleet had become a helpless sitting duck, it could only wait for its fate to arrive.

Lorist brought blademasters Engelich and Shuss as he headed to the port. Facing the fleet, he called out, "Disarm and abandon ship if you want to be spared!"

All the Norton soldiers roared in unison, "Disarm and abandon ship if you want to be spared!"

The northern fleet responded with silence.

Lorist waved his hand and the horns blared once more.

All of a sudden, the rows of catapults launched flaming projectiles at the fleet. The

projectiles crossed over 400 meters of water before falling into the water and beating up countless waves.

Schumak mused with a pale look, "What do we do now?"

Kuchid grit his teeth as he muttered, "We have no choice. There's this blademaster on the port radiating seething killing intent… I'm afraid that I'm not his match…"

Schumak looked at the sailors who were on the deck. Not one of them dared to look him in the eye. It appeared that all of them had lost any will to resist when faced with the pyramid. Given that they had been encircled, all that would follow resistance was annihilation.

Schumak solemnly nodded and uttered his last command as the fleet's captain, "Lower all sails, put up the white flags, and approach the shores slowly! We're surrendering!"

Chapter 298
Shocking News

Lorist only managed to return to SIlowas by the end of the 11th month along with the ten police brigades formed from the liberated slaves. The Oceanic Legion would not have any time to rest in the coming winter. Instead, they would have to continue shipping food and supplies, soldiers and liberated slaves all the way to Silowas. The whole process would continue until the 2nd month of the next year.

Currently, the Oceanic Legion numbered around 45 thousand men, with more than 400 ships spread out over the seas. Lorist ordered the legion's commander, Gold-ranked Knight Senbaud, to reorganize it after completing the transport process. He hoped to form two armed patrol-fleets with cannons as their main armament to defend The Northlands' coast and Silowas. He also intended to have three merchant fleets formed and release around 200 commandeered ships.

As for the 20 police brigades at the archipelago, they would join together with the five local defense brigades at the dominion to form a local defense legion, comprised of five divisions each divided into five brigades. In total, the legion would have 75 thousand men and would be one of the most important defensive forces for the Norton house.

Having benefited from the wealth of the former kingdom, Lorist had more than enough funds to reorganize his army. He not only formed the local defense legion but also intended to form two open field-battle assault legions. Firmrock Legion would be infantry focused, while Tigersoar Legion would serve as a shock troop unit comprised mainly of cavalry.

Time flew during those busy days. During the 3rd month of the next year, Lorist hosted a new year's knight festival at Firmrock Castle and announced his decision to reform their military. Firmrock Legion's formation would involve two heavy-armored divisions, one wheelbarrow-ballista division, and another division formed from the combination of the two scout brigades that were consolidated from the ranks of the mounted archers and light cavalry scout brigades, the Thunderbolt Brigade, and three other logistics brigades. The legion would total 60 thousand men divided into the four

different divisions. It would be headed by Potterfang with Malek and Messen as his aides.

The Tigersoar Legion would be headed by Fiercetiger Loze, with Yuriy and Josk serving as his aides. It would be made up of two spear cavalry divisions, one carroballista division, and another division formed from a scout brigade, the female brigade, and three other logistics brigades. Sixty thousand troops would be part of the legion.

Finally, the local defense legion would contain 25 brigades, around 75 thousand men, with Freiyar as the commander, with two gold-ranked knights, Belnick and former slave fighter Jades, as his aides.

Apart from the three legions, Terman would continue in his post as the commander of the three Knight Brigades, nine thousand men. Lorist himself, on the other hand, would control his own personal guard brigade of three thousand men. Other than that, the Oceanic Legion Senbaud commanded had 18 thousand men. In other words, the total number of troops House Norton had was 225 thousand, and that didn't include the police brigades, garrison legion, and town and village guards that had more than 100 thousand people between them.

Firmrock Legion would be the main infantry assault force and would be stationed at Silowas. Tigersoar Legion would be stationed between Salus and Redriver. Given that The Northlands was desolate and mostly empty, it was the place where cavalry troops could shine with their advantage in mobility. The 25 brigades of the local defense legion were stationed at different locations. The first local defense brigade was assigned to Firmrock Castle, the second brigade to the port city, which was named Northsea by Grandmaster Ciroba. The third and fourth brigades were stationed at the citadels at Hidebull Mound and Tortoise Hill respectively to defend against any potential barbarian invasion.

As the western part of The Northlands had already become the Nortons' livestock-rearing area, Lorist agreed to Charade's suggestion to reinstate the smuggling path through the Bladedge Mountains. It was the path that the troops of Duke Loggins, led by Chevany and Hennard, used to sneak into the territory of the Nortons. With the passing of almost seven years, the vines that had been set aflame had long grown back and could be used again to construct another suspension bridge.

With the new path, the livestock produce of The Northlands did not have to be shipped

through a large detour pass at Firmrock Castle into the dominion. Instead, they could be brought straight through the smuggling route at Bladedge Mountains into the dominion within only two days. Lorist did not plan to have a proper bridge constructed as he planned to have a vine bridge built based on the ancient bridges of Sichuan he saw in a documentary in his past life. He intended to build a citadel near the cavern where Chevany died and defend it with the fifth local defense brigade.

The remaining 20 local defense brigades would begin training within the dominion in things such as battleforce awakening, military engine training, and other martial training. Lorist informed his household knights that he hoped the Norton house would have an elite force, unparred in the whole of Grindia, that was fitting of the name 'Roaring Raging Bear' within the next two years.

Following the announcement of the military reorganizations, Lorist began to talk about the last year's developmental results. With the development of Redriver and Northsea concluding in the current year, the only development project that remained was Nico Academy, with the exception of the restoration of the smuggling path and the construction of the citadel nearby. Lorist assigned Shadekampf the task of maintaining the dominion's roads, which included widening and flattening them so that transportation within the dominion would improve.

The plan for Silowas' development would proceed as previously envisioned and the main workforce would stretch into the tens of thousands. Coupled with Firmrock Legion's aid, the development should be complete within the next two years. The main supervisor of the house's census department, Hansk, was appointed to be Silowas' governor.

Lorist found himself some free time after the meeting and headed to visit his disciple, Howard. When he left for the Hanayabarta kingdom, he had stopped Howard from accompanying him despite the latter's insistence. Given the dangers involved, Lorist would not be able to spare extra effort to look after him. But Howard had maintained that, given that he had broken through to the iron rank, he would be more than capable of defending himself from some random soldiers.

Lorist had merely smiled at his disciple's response and had got Reidy to start training him to develop dynamic vision, which Lorist stated was one of the main requirements a disciple of his had meet. Given that Howard was already an iron rank, Lorist advised him to take the chance during his absence on the expedition to develop dynamic vision.

Howard left with Reidy in the end. When Lorist returned to the dominion, Reidy reported to him that Howard had indeed successfully developed dynamic vision. However, given the difference in physical traits between Howard and Reidy, it took the former half a month before he got used to the vertigo-inducing ride on the spinning chair, the embarrassment of which prevented him from coming to see Lorist himself.

When Lorist arrived at the training grounds behind Firmrock Castle, he saw Howard training. It was apparent that his swordsmanship had improved quite a lot following his development of dynamic vision. Lorist was rather satisfied with the results. Howard would be more than capable of taking on silver ranks in another two years.

Apart from guiding both his disciples, Lorist went to pester Telesti on occasion or visit his concubine Irina to relieve his sexual needs. Two months later, both Irina and Telesti were pregnant once again. Irina was more than delighted at the news, but Telesti was furious beyond belief, given that she had to focus on the construction of Nico Academy in the following year. Thus, she declared Lorist an unwanted guest and refused to let him visit her.

Having no other choice, Lorist returned to Firmrock Castle and happened to meet Charade, who was preparing to submit his request for vacation. Charade intended to enter secluded training with Blademaster Engelich's personal guidance for two years to break through to the gold rank.

It was a matter Lorist had agreed to back when they were in Hanayabarta. After accepting Charade's request, Lorist opened a few bottles of wine, ordered some snacks and drank with Charade for one last time before his seclusion.

After a few drinks, Charade finally asked, "Why did you launch such a large military expansion effort right after exterminating Hanayabarta? Do you have another target in mind? Given the current number of troops, the military costs have long exceeded the income generated by the dominion. It would cost more than a million gold Fordes to maintain our military. I'm worried that this will become a huge burden for us in the coming years."

Lorist chuckled before he brought over a map of the Madras duchy, thumped his fist on it, and said, "No worries, the Madras duchy will be ours in less than two years."

When Charade wanted to ask more, Lorist had already slumped unconscious onto his sofa.

It did not take long for Charade's absence to cause a chain of problems of its own. Before ten days even passed, Dulles, Els, Jim, Waxima, Pajik, Pete and a few other silver-ranked household knights submitted their own leave requests, with the same reason as Charade. Even former bandit Ovidis of the Thunderbolt Brigade joined in.

"What the hell are you guys up to?! Are you going to go on leave too?" barked Lorist angrily at Ovidis.

Ovidis said in a troubled tone, "Milord, didn't you give me a high-ranked fire attribute battleforce manual when you first took me in as a household knight? Back then, I was already at the three stars. I've already familiarized myself with the contents and am at the peak of my rank. I feel that I will be breaking through soon, so I had to ask for a one-year leave."

"Ugh…" Moving closer to Ovidis, Lorist did, in fact, feel that he had the aura of peak three-star silver rank.

Right away, his rage turned into joy as he patted on Ovidis's shoulder and agreed, "Alright, I'll approve your leave. Work hard and make your breakthrough soon. The sooner you become a gold rank, the sooner the house will have another gold-ranked knight. I already have a manor at Redriver ready for you."

On mention of the manor, Lorist suddenly understood the reason for the sudden rush to take leave by all the three-star silver ranked knights. With the eight manors at Salus already given to Potterfang, Loze and another six gold-ranked knights, and three manors at Redriver assigned to Senbaud, Jades, and Messen who joined not too long ago, only five manors remained. All the three-star-silver-ranked knights were worried that they would be one step too late to claim a manor for themselves.

"Gosh, these bastards… Why are they all in such a hurry? It's not like the house is short on manors! There's no point in rushing to see who's first!" exclaimed Lorist. Despite that, he agreed to let the knights take their leaves. It did not seem that the house would be in any conflict in the next two years.

He opened a map of The Northlands and contemplated which part of it too develop next.

On the 23rd day of the 5th month, Lorist returned from his visit to the gunpowder research lab.

Before a suitable metal alloy is developed, there's no point in developing firearms. It seems like the age of firearms won't come anytime soon. All we are able to make now are bronze cannons; focusing too much effort on smaller firearms simply isn't beneficial in the long run. After all, Grindia is a world of battleforce, and cold weapons are far better than firearms for warfare under these circumstances.

Other things aside, the steel ballista House Norton developed could fire up to 300 meters away, whereas the firearms they made could only shoot up to 150 meters away. In a line formation, ballistae still far outperformed conventional firearms.

Howard knocked on the door, entered, and said, "Milord, there's an urgent report from Northsea that states that the Flying Fish of Dawn has returned from Silowas with news of the latest developments in the wars. The Forde Trade Union has already conquered the Redlis kingdom's Kanbona province. The 170 thousand soldiers led by the second highness is trapped in the kingdom's three remaining provinces and has already lost contact with the Andinaq kingdom. Additionally, the Chikdor Merchant Guild's first young master, Serihanem, has just arrived at Silowas. He says he's come as an ambassador of peace and wishes to have an audience with you. Supervisor Hansk had him wait at Silowas and is waiting for further instructions."

"What?!" exclaimed Lorist.

During the 9th month of the previous year, the report he received about the second highness's campaign concerned his successive losses at the Majik province. At that time, however, he still had more than 200 thousand troops at his disposal, not including the 100 thousand he stationed at the Andinaq kingdom and the various provinces he conquered. Lorist thought that, with the number of soldiers the second highness had, victory was only a matter of time.

Upon his return, the first thing he heard of the second highness was that he was still entangled with Majik's nobles. Second Highness Auguslo had sent 100 thousand troops to the Handra and Farkel duchies to demand that the four central duchies relinquish their status as sovereign states and swear fealty to the empire.The four dukes, however, refused and formed a combined army to resist him. They even started supporting Majik's nobles. Lorist had been more than happy to hear about the second highness finally facing the consequences of his actions, he knew that anything was now possible.

He thought back to their meeting at the imperial capital. The second highness had

announced that the four central duchies' dukes were still loyal to the empire and would soon join his ranks. But now, things had started going south. While Lorist was part of the Andinaq kingdom, he understood that Second Highness Auguslo was more than wary of the military force of his house, to the point that he had never summoned them to join the war. Lorist, however, had felt that the second highness would be able to hold on despite the odds so he didn't pay it too much attention either. Sending soldiers to meddle in the conflict without a formal summons could be considered treason, after all.

Given that he was under no obligation to send any forces, Lorist holed up in The Northlands once again. He didn't expect that, with the passing of half a year, not only was the second highness's attempt at exterminating the Redlis nobles' forces unsuccessful, he was also stabbed in the back by the Union and lost Kanbona and contact with the Andinaq kingdom. Currently, Frederika, Anderwoff and Bodolger, which he occupied were considered the Redlis kingdom's territory. Coupled with the chaotic front at Majik, the second highness was in a precarious spot. With his supply line broken, it was a huge uncertainty whether he would even be able to hold his ground.

"Weird, where did the Union get that kind of force?" Lorist mumbled as he stood up.

He turned to Howard and said, "Pass the news down: I intend to make a trip to Silowas."

Chapter 299
Reconcilliation

"Respectful greetings to you, Lord Count. This one is Serihanem of Clan Chikdor. I have come to express our peaceful intentions on behalf of the Chikdor Merchant Guild."

The one dressed in the standard noble attire of the Union, who had introduced himself as Serihanem, bowed respectfully to Lorist before he presented his list of gifts.

Howard received the list and placed it on a small table beside Lorist, who gave it a glance. He saw assortments of jewelry, fashionable clothing, high-quality armaments, wine, and even four zeno horses. All of which, combined, was easily worth over 30 thousand gold Fordes. Lorist thought back at the times when he toiled so hard, only to earn a little more than eight thousand gold Fordes a year. To think that Clan Chikdor's gifts would easily rival the wealth amassed by a silver-ranked swordsman over 30 years of hard work…

"Please, take a seat," Lorist said waving his hand, "I wonder what business you, the first young master of Clan Chikdor, have with me that you would make such a long trip."

Serihanem smiled bitterly.

"Lord Count, you should know best why I've come. To be frank, my third brother's reckless actions have caused your house huge losses and put us at odds with one another. Back then, the guild was mainly focused on the war with the Teribo kingdom and didn't have any opportunity to make it up to you. This is why our misunderstanding grew even deeper, which have led to even further losses.

"I have come in hopes of resolving our differences and forming an amicable relationship. I hope that you will be forgiving and release our northern fleet's crews. The guild is more than willing to pay ransom to get them back. Lord Count, please don't refuse my earnest request. I understand that House Norton has exterminated Hanayabarta and performed a most righteous deed in liberating more than 400 thousand slaves. I hope you will be able to extend the same mercy to our honest and hard-working sailors as well. Our two sides might have been at odds at the time of the

incident, but it is a conflict that has nothing to do with the common sailor or soldier. They were only working to make end's meet to feed their families.

"To them, this is only their job, they themselves have no enmity with House Norton. I'm sure their families are eagerly awaiting their return. Lord Count, if you have anything you're dissatisfied with, please don't hesitate to tell me. The Chikdor Merchant Guild will definitely do all in our power to ensure that you are compensated in full. The main reason for my trip is to secure the release of our sailors so they can be reunited with their families."

Lorist looked at the man, no more than a few years older than him, with scrutiny. He presented himself as someone frank, honest, and sincere. He would easily be able to make others feel like they could get along with him.

"Please sit down, Sir Serihanem," Lorist beckoned, "I believe you of all people know why I am so particular about the men of your guild. To be honest, House Norton is practically at war with your guild. The only thing keeping it from being truly war is that no official declaration has been made as of yet. Let me also add that all of this started because of the guild in the first place."

"Please just use my name, Lord Count. I am most undeserving of such a title," Serihanem said, raising both his hands, "I understand your point. Apart from coming here to ransom our sailors, I've also come here in an attempt to resolve our conflict. The Chikdor Merchant Guild does not in any way wish for war with House Norton.

"I believe you know we originally intended to have Silowas as our dominion. But, now that we already have Urubaha, the main cause of conflict between us is no more. I have come here to ask your forgiveness for our actions so that we can start anew with a relationship that will benefit us both, instead of one that will dye the seas with the blood of the innocent."

"Serihanem, you say you don't wish for the innocent's blood to dye the sea, but do you know how much blood the Silowasian have spilled already? Do you know why our house mobilized to exterminate Hanayabarta?" asked Lorist.

"I am well aware, Lord Count. It was because of my reckless third brother. He said what he should not have in the midst of a drunken stupor at a banquet. But I can assure you that the leak about Silowas was purely accidental. My second brother and I have always been against our third brother's plan to take Silowas. To the guild, Silowas is

too far from the southern seas which we control. Apart from its convenience as an island, it is not suitable at all to be our dominion.

"Not only that, we were involved in the War of Glass and have since put our plans for the north on hold indefinitely. It was that which caused my third brother to feel incredibly frustrated and resulted in his trip. It took him to Hanayabarta and it was there that he blurted out Silowas' status. The Hanayabartan nobles set their sights on Silowas as a result of his mistake. This is definitely not something we could envision happening…

"It's not that I'm trying to push responsibility away from us. We were also worried at the end of last year when our northern fleet didn't return from their voyage. We only heard of Hanayabarta's extermination in the third month, and of the matter for which I am now here. My father questioned our third brother and learned everything. At the time, even my third brother was unaware of what was happening. It was the attendants that served him who recalled that he accidentally leaked our plans for the north.

"For that, my third brother has suffered two harsh slaps from my father and has been exiled to the wastelands around the Urubahan mountains. My father said that since it was the fault of my third brother that your house suffered such huge losses, we are willing to give you our northern fleet's ships as compensation. All we ask is that our sailors be allowed to return.

"Regardless of my third brother leaking the information, surely nobody can refute that the slavers have already been targeting the 200 thousand refugees in the Andinaq kingdom's two southwestern provinces. Your house's bringing in of more than 60 thousand of them would have alerted the slavers eventually regardless. All my third brother did, was say the wrong thing in the wrong place. He was merely venting his frustration without the intention of causing trouble."

"Well, aren't you a talkative one," Lorist said as he looked at the round-faced Serihanem, shaking his head, "Well, the matter has already been over for a year, and there's no longer a point in pursuing whether the third young master was intent on causing trouble for us or not. The slave traders and slaver bands have already attacked Silowas and made a hell of it, and the house has already repaid that debt in blood and built Dread Monument.

"As to why we captured the northern fleet, the main reason is that House Norton is

hostile towards your guild. It was your third young master that harbored hostile intentions towards us and dreamt of making Silowas your dominion. Other than that, it was your northern fleet that happened to make its way to Nupite. It's not like we sought them out intentionally. Fortunately for you, they were smart enough to surrender without resistance. All we had in store for them was three years' labor.

"I want to stress that House Norton is capable of being reasoned with. We won't oppress those weaker than us. But, while we appreciate peace, we don't shy from war. If the Chikdor Merchant Guild truly wishes to end hostile relations with us, I am more than happy to allow it. However, I must first see your sincerity through your actions. While it was you who started the conflict in the first place, it's not up to you to end it at your convenience. I would like to know what kind of price your guild is willing to pay."

Serihanem took a deep breath before he stood up. At the start of the 3rd month, more than ten ships that had been expropriated returned to Hidegold Bay. Up to a thousand liberated slaves brought word that Hanayabarta had been ended, as well as how the young count heading the house ordered the extermination of the civilians and nobles and had pyramid made of human heads constructed from their remains.

The news shocked the whole Union. Following the gradual release of the expropriated ships, and the slaves that traveled on board them, word of the incidents spread far and wide. It did not take long for the fame, or infamy, of the Nortons to skyrocket.

Wartime massacres were not uncommon in Grindia, but an entire kingdom's civilian population had never been eradicated before. The slaughter committed by the Nortons was nothing short of absolute cruelty. Even the chroniclers, historians, and journalists of the continent were afraid to make their way to the archipelago to see it all for themselves. They feared their own heads might be added to the pyramid.

When one of the Dawn Academy alumni revealed that the current head of House Norton was no other than Iron Locke, the Silver Undefeated, the academy began to swarm with journalists, much to the dismay of Academy Head Levins. In the end, the old fox wrote a recommendation letter for all the pestering journalists and guaranteed that House Norton would definitely not cause trouble for them. They only had enough confidence to head to Hanayabarta after they received such reassurance and the letters.

The journalists found a few of the formerly expropriated ships and traveled to the

archipelago. After a month-and-a-half-long round trip, they began writing article after article on the incident. They covered, extensively, everything minute detail of the whole matter, from how the enmity between Hanayabarta and the Nortons started, to the conquest of their capital. The journalists and scholars were welcomed warmly by Governor Hector and taken on a tour of the island. It caused them to cast the Nortons in a more favorable light.

When they reported on the pyramid made of human crania and drew pictures of it, they did not fail to mention the touching tale of how Governor Hector had begged the count, even going as far as kneeling before him for seven hours, to spare the 12 thousand women. Despite its intention, however, it did nothing but cast Count Norton even more as a cold-blooded despot.

All of the reports were gathered by Knight Lundmorde, who had his own pediatric and gynecological clinic at Morante, and delivered to Lorist. Lorist did not take them to heart. He was well aware that this was the reputation he would gain when he gave the order. Sometimes, only with cruelty would the enemy fear oneself and think twice before causing trouble. Lorist was curious to see whether there were any other enemies who would face his forces with confidence now.

During the whole chaotic affair, the Chikdor Merchant Guild had kept a low profile, they observed from the sidelines. They knew that something was off when their northern fleet did not return at the end of the year. Even the scout ships they sent were nowhere to be found. Actually, the scout ships had run into the Flying Fish of Dawn and the Windstorm when they were on patrol. Three were captured and another two sunk. Not even one successfully return to send word of the situation.

The guild originally intended to send the southern armed fleet to find the northern fleet, but by the 3rd month, the expropriated ships had been returned and they began to grasp the situation. The northern fleet's capture was no secret; many of the expropriated ships' captains were able to provide reliable information on that matter.

Fortunately for the guild, the northern fleet did not incur any losses. They only fell into a trap and were forced to surrender. It was later discovered that they had been sent to Silowas to work as laborers. By then, no one in the guild even dared to mention the northern strategy. Even the third young master, Moribak, kept quiet. If he had known how much might the Nortons possessed, he would never have dared to propose taking Silowas in the first place. They had exterminated Hanayabarta, a full-fledged kingdom! Other things aside, the blademasters that had died by their hand numbered 14, and

the Nortons suffered nothing in return. The news of 170 thousand civilians being beheaded and stacked up to make the pyramid brought chills to the third young master.

When President Chikdor learned that it was his third son that had accidentally revealed the information about Silowas and incited the interest of the slavers, he gave his son two harsh slaps and ordered him to head to their dominion and never leave. He ordered an urgent meeting with the guild's other higher-ups immediately. The result was Serihanem's trip.

"Count Norton, our guild is willing to spend 200 thousand gold Fordes to ransom the sailors as a token of apology. Other than that, we are intent on purchasing 56 thousand sets of equipment of the stainless steel model, 107 variants at your set price of 89 gold Fordes each without any need for discounts over the next three years. We'll pay the sum in full every time we receive a shipment, is that alright?"

Serihanem sighed secretly.

Had it not been for the six million gold Fordes we found in Duke Urubaha's treasury, the guild would not have benefited one bit even though we acquired the whole duchy, he thought, *Sigh, the spice and other goods on the northern fleet, confiscated by the Nortons, easily cost more than 1.5 million gold Fordes, and we still have to spend such a huge sum to ransom our people back… If only we knew better…*

Lorist tapped on the table.

"Have you seen the blueprints of the armor set ordered by the Peterson Merchant Guild?" asked he.

"Yes, we have, Lord Count. We also know that they are produced by your house. It is far superior to those produced by the Wessia Merchant Guild, both in terms of design and defensive capabilities. After making the Urubaha duchy our dominion, the duchy's two armies will be reorganized into a proper garrison legion. This is why the guild is willing to give this business to House Norton.

"Other than that, we are also willing to give up the trade route to the Shyarsia kingdom. In the future, we will purchase spice from your house at Silowas. Additionally, this is one of the plans my third brother devised as part of our northern strategy. With this floating box port plan, I'm sure that the Cursed Coasts would no longer prove

troublesome to you."

Serihanem brought out another document which Howard received and checked before handing it to Lorist.

It detailed a flexible port made by linking floating boxes meant to be deployed in shallow waters around the reef area. Serihanem was correct that it would be able to neutralize the trading troubles along the Cursed Coasts. In the event of stormy weather, the linked floating boxes could even be retracted and made into wave breakers and filled with earth to make a permanent port.

Lorist finally revealed a smile, "Alright then. I am willing to reconcile with the guild. We will cease all hostilities with your guild."

Chapter 300
Refusal

Lorist furrowed his brows as he looked at the sails slowly sinking beneath the horizon. First Young Master Serihanem was aboard. As the northern fleet's 6000-odd sailors would not fit on one ship, Serihanem had casually hired the house's men to transport the ransomed crew back to Morante.

Lorist was not concerned for the safety of the transport ships, there was no chance the Chikdor Merchant Guild would get into conflict with House Norton for the sake of ten-odd measly ships. However, before Serihanem left, he had revealed where the Union's troops, the ones that had occupied Bodolger, had come from. Even Lorist could never have imagined something like that being pulled.

A few days earlier, following his conversation with Serihanem, Lorist had come to know a few more details regarding the Union's internal affairs. Ever since the Union obtained victory in the War of Glass, the nations neighboring them had sealed their borders and erased the trade routes in a kneejerk reaction to the Union's sudden expansionism. But given that it had occupied seven other nations following the war, their territory had expanded at least four or five fold. As long as they allocated and managed their resources well, there was no cause for concern.

However, after the big-seven guilds obtained their own dominions, they refocused their efforts and resources to their own territory. In this situation, their control of the Union itself had waned. At the same time, the sub-council, usually relegated to the sidelines, had increased their influence. The consequences of the War of Glass had begun to show.

The Union's sub-council was made up of mostly elected representatives of the common citizenry, the second-rate merchant guilds, and representatives of craft guilds. The sub council's main purpose was to take care of miscellaneous stuff like enforcing security and ensuring there was a steady influx of immigrants. Following the war, the big-seven had managed to successfully realize their goals to expand the Union. But even though the Union's territory had expanded greatly, most of it was swept up by the big-seven guilds and some other outstanding second-rate guilds. As a

result, there were those who still had yet to have their fill.

In wartime, the short-sighted merchant guilds and mercenaries only focused on plundering the wealth of the nations they invaded and disobeyed the military's orders, much to the dismay of President Cobleit, the then commander of the Union Army. In response, the president decided to get back at the disobedient folk when the time came to split up the rewards. He decreased the benefits they received greatly and kicked a few that were promised noble titles off the list.

It was too late for these guilds and mercenary groups to regret. It did not stop enmity from building up in the sub-council's discussions. But, given that the war had ended, there was no more land they could give. The Wessia Merchant Guild, one of the big-seven, came up with an idea.

The Union had good reason to be wary of the second highness and his army. But, given that he had been entangled with the Redlis kingdom's nobles ever since the War of Glass, the Union had begun to see through the second highness's facade. If the second highness eventually managed to occupy the whole of Redlis, he would proceed to the Lormo duchy and force Duke Lormo to once again come under the empire's banner. This was something the Union would never allow. Since Second Highness Auguslo was bound to be their enemy eventually, the Union did not mind driving the proverbial knife up the second highness's back a bit early.

Other than that, while the big-seven had obtained their own dominions, the nobles who originally controlled those lands were not easy to deal with. This would be a good opportunity to send them to the frontlines to earn achievements.

The military intervention was thus conducted in Bodolger. Only the Wessia Merchant Guild participated. The rest were busy settling down in their new dominions. It did not help that the second highness had made an error. He chose to gather his troops in Majik. He left only a small number of old garrison-troops at the citadels around Kanbona. Perhaps, he had thought that there would be no point in stationing so many soldiers at places so far behind his army.

Second Highness Auguslo never expected the Union to launch a surprise attack and actually manage to conquer Kanbona. Given that the citadels were his only connection to Andinaq, the Union's strategy could be said to have been executed with surgical precision. With but one strike, they had cut off the second highness' lifeline. Not only that, the four central duchies had once more refused the second highness's beckoning

and even formed a combined army to face off against the second highness and reinforce the troops in Majik. The second highness was now completely surrounded.

Lorist breathed a long sigh.

"What are you worried about, Milord?" asked Potterfang.

"The second highness's situation," revealed Lorist.

He did not feel the need to hide anything from his treasured subordinate.

"There's no need for you to concern yourself over this," Potterfang asserted.

Ever since the experience of being manipulated and used by the second highness, he had held a grudge deep in his heart, especially with regards to some of his friends which the second highness had poached.

"Since the second highness hasn't asked us to deploy our troops, there's no need for us to go out of our way to clean up his mess. Even if he's considered our superior, we've always fulfilled our obligations. I believe that Milord shouldn't have sent Supervisor Hansk to the imperial capital. You also shouldn't poke your hands into this affair. It's best for our house to rest up in the coming years and reorganize our military. We should wait for better opportunities."

Lorist shook his head.

"No matter what, the second highness is still my superior. I should at least worry about him a little," Lorist countered, "If the capital requests that we to deploy our troops to rescue the second highness, all we'll do is send our forces and breach the front at Kanbona. As for the Redlisian nobles in Majik, I can't be bothered with them, unless I stand to see the first prince gone for good. Weird, as the Redlis kingdom's sovereign, why is his whereabouts still unknown? It's already been a year and a half since his disappearance…"

Supervisor Hansk returned at the end of the 6th month. Lorist was sparring with Blademaster Shuss at Seaview Manor at the time. After resisting over more than a hundred strikes, Shuss discarded his weapon and surrendered. As Lorist wiped some sweat off his face, he received the letter that Hansk had brought with him.

He could see the letter asked for House Norton to stay put and not involve themselves

in Andinaq's military affairs. The letter was even sealed with the insignia of the kingdom's regent.

Lorist read the letter over and over before turning to Hansk.

"Who's in charge at the capital right now?" inquired he.

"The one who received me was Marquis Reid, Milord. When he read the letter you penned, he respectfully refused our help and said that he had already ordered the second royal local defense legion to barge through Kanbona and arrive at the frontlines to reestablish contact with His Majesty. He then wrote this letter and had me deliver it," replied Hansk.

"Marquis Reid?" Lorist murmured, as he recalled the old man he saw at one of the banquets.

While he could not quite remember how the man looked, he did remember the young son had brought a bunch of other noble youths to occupy Seaview Manor for up to five years. They were only punished for their misconduct and misdeeds with Lorist's arrival.

"Hahaha…"

This old guy is definitely doing this out of spite. Sol, for him to let his private feelings affect his decision on the military matters of a nation and deal with this in such a childish manner… Hmph, you think I wanted to send my soldiers out? You just saved me a bunch of trouble, old fool!

With this letter in hand, Lorist had all the reason in the world to completely ignore the second highness no matter how dire his situation.

"Well, Howard, make sure to keep this letter. This is extremely important," finished Lorist as he handed the letter to Howard.

"Milord, just before I started heading back, Marquis Reid assigned me an escort. When I arrived at Jillin Harbor, I heard the garrison squad leader order that they not let the soldiers of our house take even one step on shore," added Hansk.

"What is the meaning of this? Are they treating us like enemies?" asked Lorist, a question mark on his face.

"Well, I don't know why myself. But that was the order I heard. They were also told to watch our troops closely," replied Hansk bitterly.

"Even if they give such an order, they shouldn't say it in front of you! Did you offend anyone of the escort?" interjected Howard.

"Hmmm," Hansk mumbled, scratching his head in thought, "I don't think so, all I did was stop them from attacking some helpless refugees on the way back… Did they have to offend us just because of that?"

"What's that about the refugees?" Lorist asked, "Tell me about it in detail."

"Well, it all started like this: we encountered lots of refugees during our stay at the capital who were originally from the two southwestern provinces. We even managed to recruit 60 thousand to go to the island and help out with the development. But after the second highness's assault on Redlis' capital, Frederika, he conquered Kanbona without even a single fight. The second highness settled the refugees at Kanbona temporarily. But now that the UNion's forces have occupied Kanbona, the refugees have nowhere to go and came back to the capital," explained Hansk.

"Why would they go to the capital? They could always head to the Union's territory or even Morante," said Howard.

"Because the Union doesn't welcome them. They were all, after all, citizens of the Krissen Empire when it still existed, a scapegoat for the Union's hate. The empire had been at war with the Union for almost a century and who knows how much blood has been spilled. Both sides hate each other. This is a grudge borne for life, it is ingrained deep in their bones. Don't be mistaken about our amicable relationship with the Peterson and Chikdor merchant guilds. They are merchants, and they don't believe in justice or injustice, only profits. However, the civilians under their rule are different. It'll take at least another century for the grudge to begin to fade," explained Lorist as he stroked Howard's head.

Having lived at Morante for almost a decade, he understood the citizens' mindset well.

"That is indeed so," affirmed Hansk, "The refugees told me the same thing. According to them, the soldiers occupying Kanbona would attack them for no reason. There have already been plenty refugees murdered. The refugees simply couldn't stay. Fortunately, they set out on their journey early. Given that the Union's forces have

already arrived at the two southwestern provinces, it won't take long for them to reach the capital."

Hansk clutched his chest in worry, "On our way back, we frequently encountered refugees. My escort didn't hesitate to cut them down. They even cursed the refugees for being cowardly leeches that allowed Kanbona to slip through their fingers."

"Good Sol!" Lorist cursed, "How did knights like them even think that the refugees are responsible for this war? It's not their fault that Kanbona Province was lost! Their brains must be rotting!"

"Too true, Milord. Those knights' behavior got on Sir Reidy's nerves. He walloped them with several good slaps. Oh, now I know… The knights must have been pissed that they lost face. That must be why they announced their orders right in front of us. They were trying to shame our house," said Hansk, his face turning a gentle red.

Both Els and Jim had gone on vacation to break through to the gold rank, so Lorist had Reidy take over as the guard brigade's leader temporarily and accompany Hansk on his trip.

"Haha, they wish to shame House Norton? I'd like to know where they got the guts," Lorist snickered, "Howard, have Senbaud prepare his Oceanic Legion and get Potterfang's first division on board the ships. I want to head to Jilin Harbor to see for myself the one who gave the order forbidding Norton troops to set foot on the kingdom's shores."

"Milord, if you do that, they'll think we're trying to rebel," dissuaded Hansk.

"Worry not, my governor. I won't be stupid enough to actually order our troops to attack Jillin Harbor. All I want is to bring my guards there for a shopping trip. I'd like to see whether the garrison will dare to attack a count of the kingdom. It's well within my rights to bring a guard escort with me around the kingdom. The moment they attack, I'll charge them with treason. We'll be fully within our rights to defend ourselves. I want to see evidence for the order to not let us get on shore with my own two eyes no matter what!" said Lorist.

He did not act rashly like Hansk had predicted, however. He was rather clear-headed instead.

"Lord Locke, let me come along with you for a stroll," chipped in Blademaster Shuss.

"Alright, we'll leave right away. Let's see which fool dares come to cause trouble for House Norton."

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