

Summoning Millions of Gods Daily, My Strength Equals Theirs Combined

Chapter 16: Chapter16-Nock Has Gone Mad

"I truly underestimated you!"

Butler Brown's brows knit tightly, his anger boiling over. The deaths of his two students ignited a fury within him unlike anything he had felt in years. They were not simply apprentices—they were his protégés, his disciples, the proof of his status within the Unicorn Trading Guild.

And yet they had been butchered like animals before his very eyes.

How dare these puppets! How dare the hidden master behind them! Did this shadowy puppeteer not understand the weight of his actions? Did he not fear offending the Unicorn Guild?

Very well. If that was the path chosen, then Butler Brown would show no mercy.

Gripping his longsword with both hands, he inhaled deeply. Though his Awakener gift lay in weapon manipulation, his family lineage had long cultivated swordsmanship, passing it down for generations. He had not abandoned tradition. Instead, he had fused it with his own ability, achieving a fearsome blend of steel and power.

This synthesis had elevated him above his peers, earning him the seat of Deacon within the Guild. And now, he would unleash its full might.

"Watch closely," he growled, his voice a low promise of death. "This is your execution."

With a snarl, Butler Brown shifted his stance, holding the blade crosswise. The air shuddered. His sword blurred, splitting into countless afterimages, each one trailing light.

Sword Technique: Sword's Purgatory.

A roar of energy surged across the blade. Its steel flared red, its light dazzling, as though molten fire had been drawn into its core. With each slash, waves of sword aura cascaded outward, merging together into a sea of scarlet blades.

The energy built into a vision of hell itself—a purgatory wrought of endless swords, blazing crimson and screaming with lethal intent.

In the blink of an eye, that purgatory spread outward, swallowing half the castle.

Walls cracked and shattered beneath the onslaught. Furniture splintered. Statues were reduced to rubble. The devastation was indiscriminate, annihilating everything it touched.

Some unfortunate guards, too slow to flee, were caught within the storm. They were shredded instantly, reduced to pulp and fragments of flesh beneath the relentless waves of energy.

The Elemental Assassins, however, did not panic. They fell back in perfect unison, their movements cold and methodical. They did not meet the storm head-on. They knew better.

Even for them, Sword's Purgatory was too great a force to withstand. Their strategy was patience. Avoid the edge of the inferno. Wait for the flame to burn itself out.

Butler Brown's eyes gleamed with killing intent. He did not relent. His longsword flashed again and again, each stroke unleashing a tide of destruction. He would drive the shadows into the open, strip them bare, and cut them down without mercy.

Yet the assassins remained hidden.

Expert Rank he might be, but even his senses could not pierce their veil. That was their strength—the silence, the invisibility.

Unless one reached Hero Rank, unless one's spirit itself had transformed, one could never fully unveil the Elemental Assassins.

Still, even they did not dare to clash with him directly.

Elite Rank and Expert Rank—between them yawned a gulf as vast as heaven and earth. The energy one could command, the laws one could bend, the sheer scale of their power—none of it compared.

Thus they waited. They lingered in the dark, biding their time.

Butler Brown's rage carried him further. The more energy he poured forth, the more his movements slowed. The air around him grew thick with the suffocating density of sword aura. The ground trembled beneath the weight of it.

Yet no assassin emerged. No figure was forced into the open.

"Still hiding? Vermin in the sewers!" he spat, laughter dark and sharp.

With a roar, he swung downward. His sword erupted in a cataclysm of power. For an instant, the world itself seemed to dim, as though night had deepened within the castle walls. The wave of sword energy surged outward, covering the entire fortress in a dome of crimson death.

But then—movement.

Four assassins materialized at his back, their daggers flashing, their strikes aimed for his spine and throat.

"Damn it!" Butler Brown cursed, his instincts snapping taut. He twisted, slipping aside from the deadliest stroke. The dagger hissed past, grazing his robes.

But instead of retreating, the assassins pressed forward, their strikes relentless, precise, each one aimed to kill.

Nock and the few surviving guards could only stare, horror etched across their faces.

This was Butler Brown—their mighty patron, an Expert Rank Awakener, a force they had thought unstoppable. And yet here he was, driven back, harried by mere constructs, his power challenged, his pride shredded.

How many of these puppets existed? Four? Ten? Fifty?

Nock's mind reeled. The emperor—Aurek—had created this army in secret. A man they had all dismissed as weak and incompetent had somehow hidden an arsenal that defied comprehension.

When had he done it? How had he concealed it from even Archbishop Austin?

Had everything from the beginning been an act?

Nock's blood turned cold.

Butler Brown, too, felt the sting of disbelief. These were puppets, yes—but they fought with a persistence, a subtlety that overturned every law he knew. They were not mere machines of war. They were something more.

But then his eyes narrowed.

He had noticed something.

Each time they struck, a breeze stirred. Subtle, faint, but there.

The key.

If there were no wind, they would lose their veil.

Butler Brown's lips curved into a grim smile. He knew what to do.

Channeling his energy, he wove a sword net around the chamber, sealing the space in strands of power. The air within was locked, stilled. Not a breath could pass.

"Inside!" he shouted. "Everyone, into the room behind me!"

Nock and the remaining survivors wasted no time. They scrambled through the doorway, fleeing into the sanctuary beyond.

Butler Brown's confidence swelled. Let the shadows try their tricks now. Once the doors and windows were sealed, once the air was closed, there would be no breeze. No hiding. No escape.

Leaping back, he was the last to enter. His energy surged as he slammed the doors shut. Darkness enveloped the room, oppressive and deep.

But he was unafraid. At Expert Rank, his senses pierced the night like day. He stood calm, blade ready, his eyes scanning.

The assassins would appear now. They had no choice.

Or so he thought.

Pain lanced through his shoulder, sharp and sudden. He staggered, eyes wide, as a dagger protruded from his flesh.

"Damn it!" he bellowed, swinging wildly. But before he could retaliate, a second blade stabbed deep into his thigh.

Agony tore through him. His body faltered. Blood poured freely, staining his robes, spattering the floor.

And then he realized—the stench in the air was not just his own. It was thicker, heavier. The blood of others mingled with his.

A whisper slid into his ear, cold and merciless.

"Even without wind, you will never find us."

The words sank into him like ice, unraveling the last of his composure.

"No... no, it's impossible!" His voice cracked into madness. "This cannot be! Aurek's puppets cannot be this strong! What power have you hidden, emperor? What nightmare have you unleashed?!"

Before he could finish, his body convulsed. A blade pierced his chest with brutal precision, sliding straight into his heart.

Expert Rank or not, the heart remained the greatest vulnerability. Once pierced, there was no salvation.

His energy unraveled in a storm of sparks. His longsword clattered to the ground with a ringing chime, its light fading into nothingness.

"Butler Brown... dead?"

The words tore from Nock's throat. He stood frozen, his body shuddering violently, his mind breaking under the weight of what he had seen.

"This is impossible," he whispered, his eyes rolling. "This isn't real. I must be dreaming. Yes... yes, it must be a dream!"

His laughter cracked, rising into hysteria, his whole body convulsing with madness.

The mighty Minister of War, Nock, had finally lost his mind.

Chapter 17: Chapter17-Frenzied Level-Up

Nock's emotions had completely collapsed. At this moment, regret surged within him like a tidal wave, almost suffocating.

If only he had known that the Emperor was secretly hiding such terrifying strength, why... why had he risked everything to save Wood?

Originally, Nock had firmly believed that it was the Grand Marshal and his faction who controlled the parliament, and by extension, the entire empire. That was the foundation of his arrogance, the root of his ambition. Yet now, looking back, he realized how utterly wrong he had been—wrong to an almost ridiculous degree!

The Emperor's words outside Valoria Palace still echoed endlessly in his ears:

"If you take him away today, then bear the consequences yourself."

So that was the meaning behind those words. So this was what "bearing the consequences" truly meant?

What a merciless emperor. How cruel, how ruthless! He actually had the heart to do this... to destroy everything—his woman, his child...

Meanwhile, Butler Brown had not perished immediately after his heart was pierced. As an Expert Rank awakener, his vitality had already reached astonishing levels. Though his fate was sealed—the destruction of his heart meant certain death—he still retained tremendous power in the brief window before his life burned out.

"Die with me! All of you, die with me!"

Butler Brown roared like a mad beast. Violent energy erupted from his body, surging out in uncontrollable waves. The entire castle trembled violently, as though an earthquake had struck.

Fragile chambers collapsed in an instant. Heavy stones crashed down, smashing the once luxurious rooms into piles of rubble. The Minister of War's castle, which had stood as a symbol of authority and wealth, was now on the verge of total ruin.

The chaos inevitably drew the attention of the powerful individuals residing within Eryndor City. Curious, wary gazes probed in this direction, their senses extended to investigate what had transpired.

Butler Brown, however, cared for none of this. He had only one thought—to drag these Elemental Assassins down with him into death.

Unfortunately, no matter how fiercely he struggled, he was already like a fish laid out on the butcher's block. Under the precise, ruthless coordination of the assassins, fresh wounds continued to appear all across his body.

In the end, a sudden dagger flashed from the shadows, cleanly severing his head.

"Butler Brown—dead!"

The surviving guards within the castle had long since been driven into panic. Terrified beyond all measure, they howled in despair and scattered in every direction, trying desperately to escape.

Yet no matter which path they chose, Elemental Assassins lay in wait like hunters by a rabbit hole. The moment any guard neared an exit, a blade would silently flash, taking their heads in an instant.

In the time it took for only a few breaths, the entirety of the castle's defenders had been annihilated. When the killing stopped, only Nock remained alive among a mountain of headless corpses.

"Hahahaha! Dead! They're all dead!!!"

Nock howled hysterically into the night.

"Aurek! Even if you kill my whole family, what of it? Do you think this changes anything!?"

"Your empire is already finished—ruined beyond salvation! To dream of saving it now is nothing but fantasy!"

"I'll be watching from Hell itself, watching as you fall deeper and deeper into despair, step by step!"

"Come then! Kill me! If you have the guts, kill me now!!"

Driven completely mad, Nock stood upon the ruined battlements, shrieking toward the heavens.

The Elemental Assassins ignored him entirely. Their master's orders had been clear—do not kill Nock, at least not for now. And so, they remained utterly indifferent to his provocations.

With their mission accomplished, the assassins swiftly turned to clean the battlefield. They stripped Butler Brown of his equipment and valuables with cold efficiency before once again melting back into the formless darkness.

When he realized they were leaving, Nock's bravado collapsed into panic. He staggered after them, his voice breaking in desperation.

"Bastards! Why won't you kill me?!"

"Come on, do it! Kill me now!!"

"What do you want from me? What are you planning!?"

Not long after, powerful figures from all across Eryndor converged on the ruins of the castle.

Seeing the devastation before them, they frowned deeply.

No matter what, this had been the residence of the Minister of War. For it to be reduced to rubble overnight—what in the world had happened here?

"Rescue survivors! No matter what, saving lives comes first!"

Under the direction of the Prefect of Police, waves of officers and guards rushed into the wreckage.

It didn't take long before they stumbled across the broken figure of Nock.

The once-arrogant, tyrannical War Minister now sat motionless amidst the sea of decapitated bodies. Behind him lay Butler Brown of the Unicorn Trading Guild, his limbs severed, his head hacked away—his death grotesque and horrific.

"That's... Butler Brown? From the Unicorn Trading Guild!?"

"How is he dead here, in the War Minister's castle?"

"He actually reached Expert Rank? But even so, he still died here..."

"Who could it be? Who had the strength to kill an Expert Rank powerhouse?"

Gasps echoed through the gathering crowd. Everyone sucked in sharp breaths of disbelief.

They had all heard of Butler Brown's power and reputation. For such a man to die like this, cut down in another man's home—it was almost unthinkable.

Who had this kind of terrifying ability?

At that very moment, within the Emperor's residence in Valoria Palace...

A glowing prompt suddenly appeared before Aurek's eyes:

[Successfully slain: Expert Rank Lv.1 awakener, along with multiple other awakeners.Reward: Emperor Points +1210.]

Aurek blinked in surprise.

"The Elemental Assassins... actually killed an Expert Rank?"

It was simply unbelievable.

After all, Elemental Assassins were only Elite Rank, an entire major tier below Experts. Within the whole Crossbridge Empire, Expert Rank awakeners stood at the pinnacle of power—respected and feared by all.

And yet, such a figure had fallen to the blades of assassins that were supposedly far weaker.

Aurek had already held them in high regard. But even then, it seemed he had underestimated them.

More than the shock, however, was the delight surging in his heart. The Emperor Points he had just earned totaled 1210!

What did that mean?

If he used them to upgrade the Emperor's Scepter, that would be enough for twelve full levels!

If he spent them summoning assassins, he could instantly field an army of twelve hundred Elemental Assassins at once!

Aurek couldn't help grinning—this was a fortune, an absolute windfall!

It became clear to him now: the stronger the enemy slain, the more Emperor Points were gained.

The realization filled him with exhilaration.

After a brief moment of consideration, Aurek made his decision. He split the rewards in half, pouring roughly six hundred points directly into strengthening himself.

A torrent of energy instantly swept through his entire body, crashing like a tidal wave. His awakening surged upward at a breathtaking pace.

In the blink of an eye, he had broken through the limits of the apprentice stage—his power soaring higher and higher, with no signs of slowing.

Apprentice Rank 1.Apprentice Rank 2.Apprentice Rank 3...

His level climbed ceaselessly, his power surging like a storm.

By the time the transformation finally came to a halt, Aurek had reached Apprentice Rank 9—just one final step away from Elite Rank!

Feeling the raging energy coursing through his veins, Aurek exhaled slowly, a deep sense of intoxication spreading through his heart. This sensation—the pure exhilaration of strength overflowing within him—was addictive.

In Aurek's eyes, no matter how many allies or subordinates one controlled, nothing compared to the security of one's own raw power.

True, if he had used all 600 points to summon more Elemental Assassins, it would have seemed like a greater boost to his forces on the surface. But he also knew well that enemies lurked in the shadows. If he himself were too weak, then even if he commanded thousands of assassins, he would still remain vulnerable to a single expert's strike.

Only by becoming stronger personally could he guarantee survival.

And besides, as an awakener, being able to directly convert Emperor Points into his own cultivation was far too profitable an exchange to ignore.

In that moment, Aurek smiled.

This path—the path of power—was worth every step.

Chapter 18: Chapter18-Striking It Rich

As for the remaining 600 Emperor Points, Aurek had no intention of squandering them on himself. Instead, he deliberately set aside 500 points to further strengthen the artifact that symbolized his imperial authority—the Emperor's Scepter.

[Emperor's Scepter: Activated]

[Current Level: 6]

[Remaining Emperor Points: 110]

[Current Troop: Elemental Assassin (Cost: 1 point)]

[Level-Up Reward: Element Affinity (SS-Rank), Shadow Swift (SS-Rank)]

Aurek's eyes lit up. Leveling up grants extra rewards? He had half-expected nothing more than a boost in raw stats, but this was far beyond his imagination. He quickly opened the detailed descriptions, his heart pounding with anticipation.

[Element Affinity (SS-Rank): You now share the Elemental Assassin's elemental affinity. You can merge with the elements themselves.]

The emperor's breath caught in his throat, his heartbeat skipping two beats in stunned excitement.

By the gods... the Emperor's Scepter is too powerful! It actually bestows upon me the ability of Elemental Affinity itself!

He knew very well why the Elemental Assassins were feared across the battlefield. Their greatest strength was their ability to blend seamlessly with elemental forces, slipping into fire, wind, or shadow until they were practically undetectable. That was why they could assassinate even Awakeners without leaving a trace.

And now, Aurek had inherited this ability himself.

He willed the power to activate, and in the next instant his figure vanished. It was not the crude invisibility of illusions, but a profound merging with the surrounding elements. To himself, he still felt as if he stood in place, unchanged. But to any observer, he had melted into thin air, becoming part of the environment itself.

The sensation was marvelous—like stepping into a higher order of existence.

Aurek chuckled under his breath. This skill is extraordinary.

He then turned to the second reward.

[Shadow Swift (SS-Rank): Instantly exchange positions with any Elemental Assassin under your command.]

The emperor froze, his breath catching once again. Then his eyes widened in sheer exhilaration.

Shadow Swift... this is without a doubt a divine life-saving ability!

If a fatal strike ever came his way—something unavoidable, something impossible to block—he could instantly switch places with one of his assassins. In a blink, he would be whisked out of danger, leaving his loyal soldier in his place.

Today truly is my lucky day. Aurek could not help but feel that fortune was smiling upon him.

At that moment, a sudden gust of wind stirred the courtyard. Before him appeared twenty Elemental Assassins, materializing out of the shadows. Their forms, however, were not pristine. They were ragged, scratched, and some bore injuries that seeped dark blood.

They knelt together.

"Greetings, my liege!"

Aurek's gaze swept over them, noting their battered state. He could easily imagine the intensity of the battle they had just endured.

One assassin spoke, his tone respectful but weary.

"My lord, Expert-Rank Awakeners are indeed formidable. Their vast reserves of energy make them exceedingly difficult to handle. Yet our agility and patience prevailed—we drained him until he collapsed."

Aurek nodded lightly, understanding dawning in his mind. Elemental Assassins specialized in concealment and attrition. In a war of endurance, they could slowly chip away even at an Expert-Rank opponent. It would take time, but victory was inevitable.

If any outsider had been present to witness this, their jaws would have dropped in disbelief. The emperor—without lifting a finger—had orchestrated the death of an Expert-Rank Awakener. And not through equal combat, but through the terrifying coordination of his subordinates, effectively achieving a cross-rank kill.

Among Awakeners, such a feat was considered nearly impossible. Each major rank represented a gulf in strength as vast as heaven and earth.

Another assassin stepped forward and presented a bundle.

"My lord, these are the belongings of the Expert-Rank we slew."

Aurek opened it, curiosity gleaming in his eyes. Inside he found manuscripts on energy control, training methods, and several manuals detailing sword techniques. Judging from their seals, these had been treasured heirlooms of the Brown family.

Besides those, there were several mana stones and two mysterious artifacts.

The emperor's lips curled upward in satisfaction. Excellent. This is exactly what I needed.

In this world brimming with supernatural power, Aurek had long harbored the desire to become strong himself. But his court and retainers were, frankly, inadequate. Even William, the most capable of his side, had reached Expert Rank only thanks to the resources lavished upon him by his noble family. His strength was shallow, not comparable to someone like Butler Brown, whose power was honed through genuine combat.

But now Aurek possessed Butler Brown's spoils—especially the sword techniques. They were priceless treasures to him.

One technique in particular caught his attention:

[Sword's Purgatory (S-Rank): A sword technique of devastating might.]

Just from the description, Aurek could sense how terrifying this move must be. To him, it was a godsend.

Almost instantly, he resolved his future path. He would study these techniques, master them, and rise as a true combatant.

Then he examined the two mysterious artifacts. As soon as he touched them, glowing text appeared before his eyes.

[Awakener Tools: Equipment made exclusively for Awakeners. Each tool carries unique power.]

[Sleeve Blade (C-Rank): A deadly hidden weapon, controllable through energy manipulation.]

[Sealing Stone (B-Rank): Upon energy infusion, temporarily suppresses an opponent's abilities.]

Aurek raised a brow. So this Expert-Rank had indeed prepared contingencies. Had he lived long enough to activate these Awakener Tools, perhaps the battle's outcome would have been very different. But for whatever reason, he had been slain before he could unleash them.

And thus, all of it now belonged to Aurek.

He let out a soft laugh, the corners of his mouth rising. His gaze then drifted to the pile of mana stones.

[Energy Stones: Stones infused with raw energy. Can be absorbed to strengthen an Awakener's power.]

Aurek exhaled in delight. Tonight, I have struck gold. Truly, I have fattened my coffers in a single sweep.

After savoring the victory, he schooled his expression back into calm authority and issued new orders.

"Continue monitoring Nock."

He had spared the minister's life not out of mercy, but because he had other plans for the man.

His tone softened slightly as he addressed his weary assassins.

"Those of you who are injured—rest and recover well."

With that, he dismissed them and withdrew into his residence.

Now, more than anything, he was eager to begin studying the newly acquired sword techniques. Especially Sword's Purgatory—its description alone made his blood burn with anticipation.

What's more, he had just gained Shadow Swift. If he combined that with Sword's Purgatory, he could unleash devastating feints—appearing here, striking there, trading places with his assassins in a dizzying flurry. It might well become his ultimate trump card.

Yet when he sat down to begin, he quickly realized the challenge ahead.

Awakeners classified all skills into strict tiers: from SSS-Rank at the top down to D-Rank at the bottom. The reason Sword's Purgatory had caught his eye was that it was an S-Rank technique. But lofty rank also meant extreme difficulty.

Sure enough, when he attempted the forms, he found it gruelingly complex. His body resisted the flow, and progress was painfully slow.

Unnoticed, the night slipped away in endless practice.

Meanwhile, beyond the tranquil halls of Valoria Palace, the city of Eryndor was in turmoil. A storm of rumors swept through the streets.

The Minister of War of the Crossbridge Empire—one of the realm's highest officials—had been annihilated overnight, his entire household erased from existence.

The news shook every faction to its core. Spies, envoys, and mercenaries scurried in all directions, desperate to uncover the truth behind this massacre.

And in a secluded fortress near the palace, a secret meeting was underway.

Inside the dim chamber sat Troy, one of the empire's shadowy figures. Across from him was a man of immense presence.

"Honored Captain Aris," Troy said with deference, bowing his head. "Tell me—what assistance can I render you?"

The guest did not speak immediately. He exuded power without effort, his very stillness radiating oppressive strength.

For this man was none other than Captain Aris, vice-commander of the Leap Mercenary Corps—and himself an Expert-Rank Awakener.

Though he deliberately concealed his energy, his presence alone weighed upon the chamber like an invisible mountain.

Chapter 19: Chapter19-Who Was It?

"Minister Troy, you must have heard about the annihilation of the Blackfish Gang, haven't you?"

Captain Aris fixed his sharp gaze upon Troy as he spoke. His tone was calm, but beneath that calmness was an edge that made it clear this was no casual inquiry.

Troy narrowed his eyes, his mind racing with speculation. So... that explains why Captain Aris came here unannounced. He's here because of that matter.

The silence stretched for a moment before Aris continued, his voice steady and deliberate.

"You are well aware of the ties between the Unicorn Trading Guild and ourselves. The young men who perished in the Blackfish Gang's fall were not mere pawns—they were carefully chosen, nurtured by the Leap Mercenary Corps to become the next generation of elites."

"I came here for one purpose only. To find out the truth. To learn who dared to raise their hand against the Blackfish Gang."

Troy's expression tightened slightly. He, of all people, knew just how delicate this web of connections was.

The Unicorn Trading Guild owed much of its meteoric rise to the silent backing of the Leap Mercenary Corps. Without that behemoth standing in the shadows, the guild could never have attained its current status. Yet their relationship was not one of simple master and subordinate—it was a complex alliance woven from mutual interests, veiled agreements, and shared enemies.

Thus, those fallen youths, though officially under the Unicorn Guild's banner, had in truth been disciples of the mercenary corps—treasured assets, resources in whom great hopes had been invested.

Aris's motives were easy to understand. If someone dared to strike once at the guild's nurtured Awakeners, what would stop them from striking again? If the enemy remained in the shadows, the entire Leap Mercenary Corps would be left vulnerable, forced into passivity.

Yet there was another concern Aris did not voice aloud. A darker possibility that gnawed at the back of his mind: What if this had been orchestrated by Cardinal Austin, the Red Archbishop of the Ordon Theocracy?

For in all of the Crossbridge Empire, there was no figure the mercenary corps feared more than that man. The sheer might of the Ordon Theocracy eclipsed their own; even the Leap Mercenary Corps, renowned across continents, paled in comparison.

If Austin's hand lay behind this, then the implications were dire.

Therefore, this incident could not be left unresolved. It had to be investigated thoroughly—and handled with the utmost care.

Troy, after weighing the situation, finally broke his silence. He laid out the fragments of intelligence he had pieced together.

"From what I've gathered, the killers of the Blackfish Gang were... ghosts."

He leaned forward, his voice dropping lower. "At least, that is what the witnesses say. Strangely, there has been no movement whatsoever from the Red Archbishop. Austin has not shown his face, nor have his agents made a sound. Personally, I believe it unlikely this was their doing."

"Ghosts?"

Aris's brows drew together. A peculiar expression flickered across his face. Even he, with all his years of blood-soaked experience, had never once seen a genuine specter.

"You're certain it was ghosts?"

"These reports come from my informants after questioning multiple eyewitnesses," Troy replied gravely. "Whether the assailants truly were ghosts or merely cloaked assassins, I cannot say. But I've already ordered close surveillance on all movements in Eryndor City. The moment new intelligence arises, you will be informed."

Aris nodded slightly, though his frown remained. Before he could speak again, the doors burst open.

A soldier strode in hastily, armor clanking with every step. Upon his chest gleamed the insignia of the Leap Mercenary Corps. He dropped to one knee before Aris and Troy, saluting in rigid formality.

"Vice-Commander! An urgent matter!"

Aris's frown deepened. His tone turned sharp. "What is it this time? Speak clearly—why the panic?"

The soldier drew in a breath. "Last night, within the fortress of Minister of War Nock, a massacre occurred. It was a slaughter beyond imagination. Everyone in the castle... beheaded. None were spared."

His next words struck like thunder.

"Even Butler Brown of the Unicorn Trading Guild was seized. His limbs were severed, his body mutilated into a pitiful stump before he died in agony!"

"What did you say!?"

Aris shot to his feet, shock flashing across his features. Though Butler Brown had always been more rival than ally—representative of another faction within the guild—his brutal death was staggering news.

Troy, too, rose abruptly from his chair, his face pale with disbelief.

The Minister of War—one of the empire's highest offices, and Nock, his own staunch lieutenant—had been wiped out in one night? It was unthinkable, a brazen act of defiance against the empire itself.

Who would dare such madness?

Aris's mind whirled. His brows furrowed deeper as he muttered, half to himself:

"This doesn't make sense. For all his flaws, Brown was no weakling. His strength was considerable—otherwise he would never have risen to become steward of the Unicorn Trading Guild. If memory serves, he stood only a single step away from Expert Rank."

"And yet such a man was slain, reduced to a crippled corpse? Do you know who carried this out?"

The soldier shook his head, his expression grim. "We've uncovered no trace of the culprits. I personally scouted the battlefield. The entire affair is bizarre. There were no enemy bodies, no signs of retreating forces. And most astonishing of all—"

He paused, hesitating before dropping the final revelation.

"—Minister Nock did not die."

The room froze.

"What!?" Both Aris and Troy cried out in unison, disbelief etched upon their faces.

"Nock survived? Then what was the purpose of the attack?"

Yesterday, the Blackfish Gang had been exterminated.

Today, Nock's household had been torn apart in bloodshed.

And yet no one knew who the enemy was. No one knew their aim.

Who had the power to butcher an Expert Rank Awakener in silence, leaving no trace of their passage?

Aris's jaw clenched. His voice turned cold.

"Find out. Spare no effort, spare no cost—this must be uncovered."

Meanwhile, at the residence of the Grand Marshal Jacoff, the atmosphere was equally heavy.

Jacoff sat upon a wide leather sofa, a porcelain cup of coffee untouched in his hand. His eyes were dark, his face grave. The report had already reached him: Nock's fortress had been annihilated.

Now, Nock had never been one of his men. In fact, the Minister of War had often stood in Jacoff's way, opposing his plans, undermining his moves. When the first tidings came, Jacoff's initial reaction had been one of grim satisfaction—an obstacle removed.

But when he heard that even Butler Brown had fallen—cut to pieces like livestock—his expression hardened.

This was no mere family feud. This was someone sending a message.

A powerhouse who stood on the brink of Expert Rank had been destroyed without fanfare, and the killers had not hesitated to offend the Unicorn Trading Guild in the process.

Who is stirring the waters like this?

Jacoff's mind instantly leapt to possibilities. Was this the hand of the Ordon Theocracy? Could it be the design of the dreaded Cardinal Austin? Or was there another power moving behind the veil?

What unsettled him most was that Nock had been spared. That detail twisted the entire puzzle into something unfathomable.

Why leave the Minister alive? Why slaughter all others yet deliberately let the man himself breathe?

The more Jacoff pondered, the darker his mood grew.

"Track down the culprits," he commanded, voice low and iron-hard. "I want answers. I want their origin revealed."

He set down his cup with a soft clink and added, "And send word to the Tarris School. Ask if their scholars have perceived any hidden truths behind these events."

A subordinate vanished instantly, departing to carry out his orders.

Jacoff leaned back against the sofa, his gaze drifting toward the distant horizon. His eyes narrowed into slits.

"So... another player enters the board. Someone hungers to claim a share of the empire's feast."

The storm had only just begun.

But the question resounded across the empire, in the courts, in the guild halls, in the mercenary camps, and in the shadows where whispers carried:

Who was it?