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Her Majesty's Swarm

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Eastern Trade Union and Known Territories



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The Merchants' Country

“So the Popedom of Frantz has fallen.”

In the Empire of Nyrnal's capital stood the majestic Imperial castle, Noie Vejya. Inside, Emperor Maximillian sat at his office desk, having just received a report from Chief Cabinet Secretary Bertholdt von Bülow regarding the fate of the Popedom. The Arachnea had defeated Frantz and turned the conquered nation into its vassal.

“What are we to do about the army we sent to invade the Popedom, Your Imperial Majesty? Shall I have them punish the Popedom's people?”

“No need,” Maximillian replied. “If we defeat the Arachnea, Frantz will crumble to ash. What of the former Maluk territories?”

“Our troops have just reached the Dukedom of Schtraut. The Arachnea has abandoned all the kingdom's former territories, but they've been reduced to no-man's-lands. There's nothing left worth taking.”

What had once been the mighty Kingdom of Maluk was now nothing but wasteland. There were no people to reign over it, no resources to collect. All that remained was an expanse of barren, unpopulated soil.

“Is the Dragon Roost up and running?” Maximillian asked.

Bertholdt nodded. “Yes. We've begun producing lindwyrms. But our resources are lacking, and having only one Dragon Roost impacts our production rates. It will take time to amass the forces we need.”

What were Dragon Roosts? And lindwyrms?

“There's not much to be done about that,” Maximillian said. “Few people can move inside Gregoria's heritage. Everything about that place is complex—incomprehensible, even. The palace mages have a hard time just wrapping their minds around it. Having more Dragon Roosts would be beneficial, but it's just not a possibility.”

Gregoria was a neutral faction of dragons featured in the same game as the Arachnea. How could this name have left Maximillian's lips?

"Have our soldiers buy time until we have enough dragons. We'll need them if we're to oppose the Arachnea's insects. We can gather all the heavily armored men we want, but the enemy will simply send out more powerful units. We've no business fighting this war without dragons."

Maximillian began checking the papers sitting in front of him.

"Oh, right. What about the Eastern Trade Union?"

"They intend to officially reject our call for an alliance," Bertholdt reported. "They say they will protect their country with their own strength."

The Eastern Trade Union was situated between the Empire of Nyrnal and the Popedom of Frantz. They had likely begun arming their adventurers and hiring mercenaries in preparation to oppose the Empire, which had launched invasions of all the countries the Arachnea had conquered.

"War funds are becoming an issue too," Maximillian said. "I intended to ignore it for the time being, but we may have to consider invading the Union as well to gain the funds we need. That country is abundant in riches, after all. Besides, we're defending mankind from the threat of the Arachnea; we deserve a reward for our efforts."

"As you wish. I could have some of the army bound for Frantz relegated to the Eastern Trade Union. Fifty thousand men should be enough to sink them."

"Don't underestimate our predicament. The Arachnea could be considering the same thing. After fighting Maluk, Schtraut, and Frantz, they may be lacking in war funds themselves. Though far be it from me to know if those bugs require salaries..."

After that spot of gallows humor, Maximillian gazed down at the map.

"No, that won't do, Bertholdt. If we overlook the Eastern Trade Union, we allow the Arachnea to use it as a bridge to us. The defensive line with Frantz is cut off by the lower banks of the Khalkha River. Leaving this unresolved could cause us problems later."

“Then do we stage some kind of military operation?”

“Just hold off for now. The enemy’s bound to notice eventually, but until then, let them think that place is a glorified treasure vault. If the situation changes, however, we’ll have to make a move. How many rats did you sneak in there, Bertholdt?”

“Countless rats are working for me. Give the word, and I’ll have them begin snooping around immediately.”

“Not yet. For now, let them bask in transient peace. We’ll collect the price for it when the time comes—and it will be with steep interest.”

Maximillian scoffed before getting to the rest of his paperwork.



“Frantz has fallen! The Popedom has been defeated!”

“What do we do? What are we supposed to do now?!”

The Senate of the Eastern Trade Union had gathered in the capital city of Khalkha, where they were holding a loud, animated debate.

“Silence! I will have order in these halls!” roared Ventura Breton, chairman of the Senate.

Ventura was an aging dwarf with a bushy mustache. He had acquired a great fortune through his skillful management of mines. This, in turn, had propelled him to his position as leader of the Eastern Trade Union.

He went on, “Our enemies are no longer just the monsters that toppled the Popedom! Nyrnal declared that they would protect us, and now their soldiers are stationed at our borders, demanding we let them in! They want to build a military base outside Khalkha!”

“That’s a load of hogwash!” countered a mercenary captain. “That would be occupation!”

This man was Konrad Crevlas, captain of the One-Eyed Black Wolf mercenary company. It was a particularly large group that stood out among the rest. Konrad, who was in his thirties, had fought against Nyrnal during its war to unify the south. His experiences had given him a deep hatred for the Empire.

“The question is how we handle this situation. Can we really defeat a force that destroyed the Popedom without relying on Nyrnal’s help?”

These words came from Honnoson Alphtel, president of Alphtel Bank, the largest institution of its kind on the continent. He backed many of the Eastern Trade Union’s guilds and companies, which were often so successful that he hardly struggled to collect his dues.

“We just need to ally with another country that hasn’t surrendered to the Empire or been devoured by those blasted insects!” Konrad declared in a booming voice. “We’ll form a new union, one that’ll fight for true freedom!”

“What are you saying?!” shouted the leader of the Carpenters’ Guild. “Most countries have already surrendered to Nyrnal! I can count the few that haven’t on my one *bad* hand!” He held it up, showing the three fingers he had left.

Indeed, after the Arachnea had conquered the Dukedom of Schtraut, the Nyrnal Empire had annexed most of the small countries and free cities. Their pretext for it was that they were protecting those countries from the Arachnea, but in reality, the Empire had simply occupied them. The kings and queens of those nations had no choice but to abdicate their thrones as Nyrnal hoisted its banner and enforced its national policies. Seeing this, the Eastern Trade Union had refused to let Nyrnal’s army take even a single step onto their land.

Fifty years ago, the Eastern Trade Union had declared independence. The merchants and guildmasters were small in number, but they had ample funds. Using that money, they had cleared and cultivated the land, forming a new nation.

Their independence hadn’t been easily bought, however. The Popedom of Frantz had interfered constantly with their affairs, and the Nyrnal Kingdom—which would develop into the Empire later down the line—had often gotten in their way as well. Many different countries had called the Union’s existence into question.

Still, wielding financial power as their greatest weapon, they had fought through their many obstacles by hiring mercenaries. With their help, the nation had finally become a free agent. Those mercenary groups would go on to become some of their most influential citizens.

This turbulent past still fueled their fervent insistence on *staying* independent. All the members of the Senate were men of indomitable spirit who refused to submit to another country. They wouldn't relinquish their hard-earned freedom so easily. Doing so would be betraying every single citizen in the Eastern Trade Union.

Ventura raised his voice, as if forcibly changing the subject. "Adventurers' Guild! How goes your research into the monsters?!"

The one to answer his call was a woman: Keralt Ruano, leader of the Adventurers' League, a large, independently functioning guild of adventurers separate from the rest. They operated strictly out of the Eastern Trade Union. Keralt was known for being a capable guildmaster who had single-handedly organized and coordinated the rowdy adventurers. The Adventurers' League had more than a ninety percent completion rate for its requests, which was a testament to their skill.

"The Adventurers' League has looked into the faction that conquered the Kingdom of Maluk, the Dukedom of Schtraut, and the Popedom of Frantz. Allow me to report our findings," she said, clearing her throat. "These bug-like creatures are indeed monsters, but unlike the demonic creatures we often see, they possess advanced intelligence. As a group, they display a more complex social structure than orcs or goblins."

"Are you saying those *things* are strongly united?" Konrad asked.

"Calling it unity wouldn't be apt," Keralt replied. "Each individual monster moves as part of a singular whole—you could say it's reminiscent of a human army. Every monster, which is individually called a Swarm, has its own role and function within the greater group."

Worker Swarms built frontline bases and siege weapons, while Ripper Swarms served as scouts and patrols. Genocide Swarms were frontline units, while Toxic Swarms were the rear guard. Each Swarm had its appointed role and worked obediently to fulfill it.

"They call themselves the Arachnea, and their entire army is commanded by a queen by the name of Grevillea, a girl who appears to be roughly fourteen years old. She's presumed to be human."

“The fact that the monsters have a leader makes things that much harder,” Konrad said. “All that power has a human mind at the helm; that explains their efficiency.”

Keralt’s adventurers had come quite close to the Arachnea and gathered a great deal of information. Her command of the greatest adventurers’ guild on the continent was not without merit.

“So if we kill this queen, Grevillea, will the enemy group collapse?” Konrad asked.

“It’s unlikely,” Keralt replied, shaking her head. “There are at least three other humanoids besides Grevillea within the enemy ranks. In the event the queen dies, those monsters will most likely take command of the enemy forces and try to exact revenge. I honestly dread to think of such a fate.”

“But if those monsters have a chain of command,” Honnoson piped up, “wouldn’t it be possible to negotiate with them?”

“What, do you intend to offer them a favorable loan to avoid the war? Don’t be stupid,” Konrad spat.

“Perhaps not a loan, but there are plenty of things we can offer. If we’re not fighting mindless creatures, but something akin to a nation, then there are probably many things they have a shortage of. They may need food or supplies of some kind.”

“So you’re saying we should treat this collection of monsters, the Arachnea, as another nation?” Ventura asked.

Honnoson offered a nod. “If so, we may be sacrificing less in the long run. They could even become our allies. We can all agree that we detest Nyrnal’s insidious methods, so if we must ally with someone, let it be with the Arachnea.”

He paused to take a breath, then added, “Of course, that all depends on their attitude. Even if you *would* count the Arachnea as a nation, they’ve already destroyed Maluk, Schtraut, and Frantz. They’ve acted just as brutally as Nyrnal has. Whether they’ll actually be interested in joining forces is questionable.”

“We’re actually considering joining forces with monsters here,” Konrad

muttered. "The end times must be upon us."

"They very well could be," Honnoson said bitterly. "Three nations on this continent have been ransacked, one after another."

"It seems like the Popedom of Frantz made some kind of peace treaty with the Arachnea," Keralt remarked, turning her eyes on Ventura. "That suggests there *is* room for negotiation. We'll continue to look into the Arachnea so that we can make a more informed decision."

"An alliance... Yes, if we can make an ally out of the Arachnea, we should be able to oppose the Nyrnal Empire. But right now, we have no guarantee that the Arachnea are any more trustworthy than Nyrnal is. I agree; we should dig a little deeper."

Ventura looked around at everyone present, then said, "If the alternative is to kowtow to Nyrnal, we may as well trust those insects."

"No, if you ask me, Nyrnal might be more open to negotiations."

The tumultuous meeting concluded without a concrete decision. Would they ally with the Arachnea or let Nyrnal occupy them instead? The time for the Eastern Trade Union to make its choice was fast approaching.

Facing West

Three days had passed since we'd toppled the Popedom of Frantz. The Empire's forces had attacked the border with the Popedom, forming a field fortification. Between the soldiers and the wyverns swooping down from above, the Arachnea were at a loss as to how to push Nyrnal back. We decided to give up on expelling Nyrnal's forces from the Popedom and come up with another solution. There were more important issues to handle at present—namely, Sérignan's condition.

“Sérignan! Are you all right?”

During the battle with Metatron, Sérignan had been gravely injured. I'd placed her in a Regeneration Pod so we could wait for her to recover. Her armor had been in tatters, and she'd coughed up large amounts of blood. I'd feared that she might not ever recover, but that morning, she had finally stepped out of the Regeneration Pod and presented herself to me.

Her armor was whole again, and her skin was unblemished. *Is she really back to normal?*

“Yes, I'm fine, Your Majesty. My apologies for causing you concern,” Sérignan said, bowing to me with solemn eyes.

“Just so you know, I'm not upset that you weren't able to finish the job,” I assured her. “The Genocide Swarms couldn't have defeated it without your help.”

Yes, our victory back then was all thanks to Sérignan. She had fought bravely and earnestly as a hero unit, and because of that, the Genocide Swarms were able to slay Metatron with minimal losses. That was what had allowed us to vassalize the Popedom.

“I see the war with Frantz has ended,” Sérignan remarked.

I nodded. “Yeah. It's over, but the Nyrnal Empire is still at large.”

We had won the war with the Popedom of Frantz, but our battles were far

from over. Nyrnal had appeared out of nowhere and struck us from the flank, and we still needed to beat them back.

“What is our strategy, Your Majesty?”

“We’ll open hostilities from Frantz’s territories. On the other side of the map, the enemy’s gotten as far as Schtraut, so if we only fight them from this front, they could try to attack us from behind. We’ll have to hold the line at Schtraut’s borders too. It’ll be difficult.”

The enemy had launched a blitz, occupying the former Maluk territories like a storm, then used that as a foothold to march into Schtraut. If we let them take Schtraut and pincer us from both directions, it’d be game over for us. The blame for losing those territories fell on me and my ill-preparedness. I hadn’t predicted Nyrnal would go on a frontal assault that easily.

“So we will divide our armies?” Sérignan asked me.

“It’s not an ideal move, but we’ll have to. Thankfully, we have plenty of resources stored up from taking down the Popedom. I’ll have to speed up production of Genocide and Toxic Swarms in Schtraut’s territories and have them face off against the enemy.”

When one had a surplus of soldiers, concentrating them into a single army was the go-to strategy. Sometimes, however, the situation called for a war on two fronts.

“Our army in the Popedom will be designated the First Division, and the one in the Dukedom will be the Second Division. We’ll oppose Nyrnal’s invasion that way. Still, our main army will be the one in Frantz. It’ll take time to mobilize.”

We already had large numbers of Swarms inside the Popedom, but to reach the Dukedom from there, they’d need to travel through the Indigo Mountain Range, and that would take too long.

“We’re going to have to be wary of two things,” I said, holding up two fingers. “We need to stop the enemy from attacking the elven forest, and we have to prevent them from invading the Dukedom. That forest connects Nyrnal to Maluk, Schtraut, and Frantz. If we don’t keep them out of there, there’s a chance the elves of Baumfetter might get caught up in the fighting. We must

avoid that at all costs.”

“But, Your Majesty, the Empire’s forces have set up tight defenses around their border with Frantz. Is that really possible?”

“It might not be. The enemy has wyverns on their side, and their ground fortifications are strong. The Swarms won’t be able to topple them easily with numbers alone.”

Nyrnal’s army had stopped its charge into the Popedom, instead settling down to tighten their defenses. This was problematic for us; the wyverns offered aerial support, and the defensive lines easily pushed back our attacks. It wasn’t unlike the trench warfare of World War I.

“Perhaps we should conduct a more forceful maneuver this time,” I said, placing a finger on my chin. “The enemy force in Schtraut has larger numbers, but their defenses are a lot weaker. Attacking them might be an option.”

Rather than constantly throwing Swarms at the enemy and taking needless casualties, we could take our time fighting a battle we had a better chance of winning.

“There’s not much we can do without knowing what the enemy will do next,” Sérignan said, her tone grave.

“Yeah, no kidding. My guess is that the enemy’s going to place their main force in Schtraut. Then again, I could be wrong, and the enemy’s already sending its forces from the Dukedom our way. There’s no point in trying to predict the Empire’s movements.”

The Nyrnal Empire had already launched a two-pronged attack on Frantz and the Arachnea. I wasn’t sure how to deal with them. I had a feeling that defeating them wouldn’t be easy.

“Well, we’ll work something out. A narrow mountain road makes entering Schtraut from Maluk a challenge, so we can build a defensive line along the Maluk-Schtraut border. While we hold the line there, we’ll need to head west and invade Nyrnal’s mainland.”

I decided to commit to this plan. Flip-flopping between strategies would just result in confusion. So long as there were no unforeseen changes, we would

have to stick to it.

“How will we get through the enemy’s fortifications?”

“We go around them,” I replied, looking down at the map. A perfect route was laid out before me. “I know just how we can do it too: we go through the Eastern Trade Union. That will allow us to circumnavigate Nyrnal’s defensive line, and we’ll be sacrificing far fewer Swarms in the process.”

The Eastern Trade Union was a neutral power that existed between the Empire of Nyrnal and the Popedom of Frantz but was unaffected by either. This country had a paved, serviced highway leading straight into the Empire. A river cut through their territories, but a bridge had been built over it.

“Yes, we’ll contact the Eastern Trade Union,” I said. “We need to ‘convince’ them to cast aside their neutrality and side with us.”

First, we’d send Masquerade Swarms into the Eastern Trade Union. Once we had a grasp of the political situation there, we’d make contact with the appropriate people. Then all that remained would be swaying them with the Swarm’s tried-and-true persuasion techniques.

“We should get moving. The faster we do this, the better. I’m sure the enemy knows their border with the Eastern Trade Union is a weak point. We have to march before the Empire suppresses them.”

Our enemy wasn’t stupid. They would either launch an invasion on the Eastern Trade Union or ally with them before we could. Either way, they’d make *some* kind of move.

“Why don’t we slaughter them instead? The Eastern Trade Union is tiny and weak; the Arachnea could make swift work of them. We can take advantage of their territory as a road to the Empire after that.”

“No, Sérignan, bad,” I chided her. “We have no reason to destroy them. I want to avoid needless massacres whenever possible.”

I’d made a promise to Sandalphon; I wouldn’t forget my human heart, and I would remain calm at all times.

“Besides, making an enemy out of the Eastern Trade Union would only be in

the Empire's favor. If we make them ally with us, we avoid unnecessary battles and have fewer enemies to contend with. The more allies we have on our side, the stronger we will be. And the fewer enemies we have to face, the weaker the opposition becomes."

We wouldn't gain anything by launching a preemptive attack on the Eastern Trade Union. If we attacked them, the Union might abandon its neutral stance and seek help from Nyrnal. That would make it even easier for the Nyrnal Empire to use the Eastern Trade Union as an open path to march on us and invade the Popedom.

"I see," Sérignan murmured, her expression thoughtful. "You're probably right; picking fights may not be wise. In that case, how will we get them to agree to an alliance?"

"We'll figure something out," I said with a thin smile. "We have our ways, after all."

With this, our plan of action was set. We'd hold Nyrnal's invasion back on one front by defending the border with Schtraut. I decided to leave Roland in charge of that, as he was most familiar with the region. In addition, we would bypass the Frantz-Nyrnal border by going through the Eastern Trade Union.

"I just hope this goes well," I muttered to myself.

I still didn't know what kind of country the Eastern Trade Union really was. I could only hope for the best until my Masquerade Swarms returned with their reports.



The Masquerade Swarms soon blended in with the refugees from Frantz and made their way to the Eastern Trade Union. Their task was to investigate what the Eastern Trade Union was like, who their leaders were, and what their diplomatic approach was. Of course, since they were presenting themselves as refugees, the Masquerade Swarms weren't in a position to gain any in-depth information.

Back in my world, you could analyze a country with the help of intelligence agencies and open-source information. Naturally, their work was never as

thrilling or action-packed as media featuring organizations like the CIA, FBI, and MI6 depicted.

We had nothing of the sort, but that didn't hinder our ability to gather intelligence. Thanks to Lysa and Roland, whose language skills were now shared by the Swarm, the Ripper Swarms had become capable of reading. As such, I had also acquired the ability to read and write the language of this world.

"The Eastern Trade Union is torn between alliance and independence, huh?" I whispered as I read a report the Masquerade Swarms had sent me. "Ventura Breton, Chairman of the Union Senate, is considering an alliance with Nyrnal despite knowing that the Empire has aspirations to conquer them. Even so, he's being cautious about it. Another senator, Konrad Crevlas, firmly rejects the idea, arguing that it would threaten the Eastern Trade Union's independence."

It seemed the Eastern Trade Union was viewing the Nyrnal Empire with some trepidation. *Hmm. Not bad.* If we had to hold back Nyrnal from this side, too, we'd have no choice but to build a defensive front here in the Popedom. That wouldn't be in our favor.

One can only stay on the defensive so long as they have some kind of plan to break the deadlock. That could mean waiting until the enemy is exhausted and effectively bleeds out, staging a counterattack, using the defensive line as a decoy while attacking from another direction, or otherwise. Defending *without* a plan would just mean staving off an inevitable defeat.

I just had to hope things went as planned. We had to be wary of provoking the Union and to seize power there as quickly as possible. After that, we could use them as a passage into Nyrnal's lands. That was the best plan we had, in my opinion.

While it did feel like a good idea, I couldn't shake the feeling I was overlooking something.

Right. Would they even trust us?

After all, we had destroyed Maluk and Schtraut, and we'd taken over Frantz to boot. Would they *want* to ally with us? Would they let us safely pass through, or was I hoping for too much?

The only silver lining was that, while we had conquered the Popedom of Frantz, we hadn't destroyed it altogether. We'd signed a peace treaty with them and brought the war to an end, which should have boosted our reputation. It gave the impression that we—or rather that I, leader of the Arachnea—could be reasoned with. Even though they had become our vassals, the conflict had ended peacefully.

"Your Majesty, it's time to eat," Sérignan called out, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Oh, thanks. I kind of got caught up in my work."

I headed to the dining hall of the frontline base built at the Union border. With Frantz's permission, we had made use of a fortress that belonged to the Popedom. They had also allowed us to set up a Fertilization Furnace and Conversion Furnace inside the walls.

I had bases set up all across the land, but I would never have done something so inefficient in the game. At the very least, I had a nice, fluffy bed in my room here. The Worker Swarms had made it from real feathers; it was a premium product.

Worker Swarms didn't appear much during battles, but they proved to be considerate in all sorts of ways outside of the battlefield. They were good Swarms, and I liked them quite a bit. If it were peacetime, I could start a furniture store and sell the things they made. That was a real market we could potentially tap into.

With those idle thoughts in mind, I walked into the dining hall, where Lysa was waiting for me. Having been made into a Swarm, she didn't need to eat for sustenance. Regardless, she, Sérignan, and Roland had grown accustomed to eating before they had become Swarms. Roland wasn't here, though, since he was commanding the battles in Schtraut.

"So what's on the menu today?" I asked.

"Icefish meunière and elf-style white stew!" Lysa replied cheerfully. "Oh, and salad too! I made the stew, so look forward to that."

"I see. You made it yourself, eh? Good on you," I praised her. "Maybe I should

cook something next time.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly have you do that!” Lysa gave a gentle shake of her head. “Let us handle the chores!”

I just wanted to help, but she insisted on taking care of things. Then again, I had never heard of a queen handling the cooking. If I walked into the kitchen, everyone might freeze up from the shock.

Maybe it’s for the best.

“You hear that, Sérignan? Lysa cooked today. I can’t wait.”

“Yes. Though to be honest, I helped her a little.”

Grr. Now I feel left out.

“I suppose I’m glad you get along,” I said as I took a seat. “I think the Arachnea are about the only ones who are on such good terms with one another. The other countries are plagued by treachery and scheming; it’s just awful. Thank goodness we don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Have you decided how we’re going to handle the Eastern Trade Union yet, Your Majesty?” Lysa asked me.

“Not yet. We’ve gathered enough information, but I’m honestly not sure when to make contact with them. If we don’t time it right, we could cause serious mayhem. The Union is different from us, for better or worse. Their senators are chosen through elections, and they’re the ones who handle politics. Basically, in their country, the leadership has to listen to what the people say.”

Right now, many of the members of the Senate held a negative view of the Empire, but if I contacted the Union at the wrong time, they could feel threatened and turn to Nyrnal for help. It was like walking a tightrope; with everything balanced so precariously, I wasn’t sure whether to move.

“I’m not sure who to send into the Union either. The other side’s more likely to trust Arachnea that look human, but we’ll need someone who can handle negotiations too. Should things get dicey, we should feel comfortable leaving them deep within enemy territory.”

This was a real conundrum. It felt right for me to go there personally, but if the enemy thought they could stop the Swarm by killing me, the queen, I'd just be marching to my grave. Pain—let alone death—was not something I was too keen on trying.

Then again, I wasn't sure if sending Sérignan or Lysa would be much better. They were unique and irreplaceable units. I cared for all the Swarms, of course, but they were particularly special to me; they were my friends. I couldn't just throw them into enemy territory as though they were expendable.

"If it's Lysa and myself, we'd be able to fight back even if we were surrounded," Sérignan suggested.

I shook my head. "You don't know that for sure. What if they have some secret weapon like the Popedom did?"

Frantz had commanded the hero unit for the Marianne faction, the Archangel Metatron. Just like the Arachnea, the Marianne had been in the game I once played—yet its hero unit had appeared here, in this mostly realistic world. With that in mind, who knew what other units from the game might be hiding. After all, the Nyrnal Empire used wyverns, an aerial unit that belonged to the game's Gregoria faction.

"Anyway, enough about that; let's eat. I'll put my thoughts of work and war aside so I can focus on enjoying lunch."

Sérignan agreed. "An excellent idea. You shouldn't let anxiety and concern weigh so heavily on you, Your Majesty."

The icefish meunière was exquisite, and Lysa's stew conjured pleasant memories of our times together in that underground base. I made sure to eat the salad too. *Gotta stay healthy.*

"By the way, who made this meunière?" I asked Lysa.

"I think it was one of the people we control with the Parasite Swarms. Eli...something?"

She meant Elizabeta.

"Ah, right. We could use *her*."

With that, our path to success came into view. As it turned out, I just hadn't been looking in the right places.

Contact

Finally, we endeavored to contact the Eastern Trade Union. We would need to go about it carefully. First impressions were crucial, after all. Once I had carefully combed through the information the Masquerade Swarms had delivered, I decided today would be the day. However, it didn't go as smoothly as I'd intended.

"Halt! The capital city of Khalkha is past here! Present your entry permit!"

The Arachnea messenger I'd sent was accosted by a guard outside Khalkha's walls.

"My. You'd demand something like that from someone of my lofty station?"

"Hrm. Who are you, miss?" the guard asked her, suspicion written on his features. "That's quite a fancy dress you've got there. Are you some rich family's daughter?"

"Hey, hold on," said another guard, giving him a nudge. "Look closer."

After a beat, the first guard's eyes widened in surprise. Of course he'd be shocked; my messenger naturally attracted that kind of attention.

"That coat of arms belongs to the Maluk royal family! Are you Princess Elizabeta?!"

I'd chosen Elizabeta because I believed she'd be ushered into the country and permitted to meet with the Senate quickly enough. Even if things escalated, and I had to abandon her there, I wouldn't grieve her loss very much. She was the perfect messenger for us.

"Indeed I am. I've come to meet with the Senate—in confidence, if possible. Could you show me the way? But remember, this must remain strictly between us. Not a soul must know of my presence. Understood?"

"Well, err, we'll have to ask the man in charge. Please, be patient."

One guard went to consult their commanding officer, who would pass the

information up the chain of command until news of Elizabeta's arrival and her request reached the ears of the Senate.

That would take some time, though. Until then, Elizabeta would have to sit and wait. I was grateful it wasn't me there.

At last, the words I'd been hoping for came. "You have permission to enter. Come, right this way. The Senate has agreed to meet with you."

"Thank you kindly."

Good. Now we can make contact with them.

"Follow me, Your Highness."

A guard guided Elizabeta through the city, eventually bringing her into a large, bustling brothel.

"Please wait here. My apologies for bringing you to such an unsightly place, Your Highness, but I was told this meeting was to be confidential."

True, this place was probably ideal for a discreet meeting, but I couldn't help but wish they'd have picked somewhere a little more tasteful. Elizabeta was led into a spacious room that appeared to be the brothel manager's office, where she took a seat on a chair. All that remained was to wait for the Eastern Trade Union's higher-ups to arrive.

Elizabeta spent an hour there before someone finally showed up. It was Ventura, a well-built dwarf who was the chairman of the Senate.

"Welcome to our fair country, Princess Elizabeta. I was told you've come seeking a private meeting. How can I help you?"

I imagined he must have been especially busy with his duties during these tumultuous times.

"You may be under the impression that I am Maluk's princess, but that's not the case," Elizabeta replied. "Right now, I am one of the Arachnea."

Ventura's brows lifted in alarm. "The Arachnea, you say? You mean, you're one of those...monsters? Whatever do you mean?"

Elizabeta was known far and wide as Maluk's princess, and she had been

Maluk's representative during the last international conference. Yet here she was, suddenly admitting her allegiance to the monstrous faction that had viciously overrun several countries. From Ventura's perspective, this was a baffling development.

"The Kingdom of Maluk has been conquered, myself included," Elizabeta continued. "However, my mistress does not wish to see the Eastern Trade Union meet the same fate. Doing so is perfectly within her power, but right now, the Arachnea are different than they were when they took over the kingdom."

"Hmph. I assume the war with Nyrnal is what changed your way of thinking, then," Ventura remarked. "I hear you're in quite the predicament."

"I believe you're in an equally unfortunate position, no? If I may be so bold, it seems your country is in a rather sorry state, pressed as you are between the Empire and the Arachnea."

"You're well informed. I suppose you would be since this isn't something we can very well hide. Indeed, being sandwiched between two threats is giving us quite a bit of grief."

Oh, I know. The Eastern Trade Union is currently in a critical position when it comes to both military and external affairs.

"The Empire cannot be trusted," Elizabeta said firmly. "They took advantage of our occupation of Frantz to launch an invasion. They stabbed their fellow men in the back. Are you going to permit that?"

Ventura gave a shake of his head. "That doesn't mean the *Arachnea* are trustworthy. True, the Nyrnal Empire did take advantage of a war to stage an invasion, but it was you Arachnea who started that war. No, you aren't worthy of our trust."

Talk about a harsh judgment. The Arachnea were the ones who had plunged this continent into war, that much was true. But we did have our reasons for it.

"With the Kingdom of Maluk, the war began because the elves' right to exist was being threatened. As for the Dukedom of Schtraut, there was an act of treachery among the leaders of the country, who opened hostilities against us.

We only fought the Popedom of Frantz because they declared war on us first; we even worked to ally with them. We do not attack other nations indiscriminately.”

That’s right. I won’t allow any more needless slaughter. I made a promise to Sandalphon.

“Let us assume I believe you,” Ventura said. “What do you want from us?”

“An alliance,” Elizabeta replied. “The Arachnea seek an alliance.”

At last, they’d moved on to the main topic.

“An alliance with *you*?” Ventura asked with a dubious look. “The Adventurers’ League reports that your creatures have sentience and intelligence, but are you really smart enough to ally with us like a human nation would?”

“Absolutely. We do not simply massacre the nations we defeat. If you look at the situation in the Popedom of Frantz, that much should be clear. We signed a peace treaty and concluded that war through conversations and understanding.”

Letting out a snort, Ventura retorted, “I’m not so sure about that. Frantz wasn’t destroyed, by the looks of it, but I heard they’ve effectively been vassalized.”

“Of course they were,” Elizabeta said coldly. “They lost a war.”

Maybe I should have made Frantz’s conditions a bit more favorable.

“Regardless, there is no bad blood between you and us at the moment,” she continued. “We can come together as equals. The same can’t be said of the Nyrnal Empire.”

“So it’s either you or the Nyrnals. We’ve been debating this very topic in our Senate meetings. Many of our countrymen have a strong anti-Nyrnal sentiment, but few senators are in favor of joining forces with you.”

I could understand that. They hated Nyrnal, but that in and of itself didn’t make the Arachnea much more of an appealing ally.

“Then perhaps I can persuade more of your fellows to support an alliance with the Arachnea. If I won’t do, my mistress may be able to convince them.”

“By your mistress, you’re referring to the Arachnea’s queen?”

“Indeed.”

If it would help cement this alliance, I was prepared to enter the Eastern Trade Union.

“I see. Yes, I believe that would be most beneficial. Emperor Maximillian asked that we allow him to station his army within our borders, but he never made that request directly. If the Arachnea’s queen will come in person, we will consider your offer more seriously.”

“You have our gratitude. Let us iron out the details of the upcoming negotiations, then.”

Thus, we’d decided to negotiate for an alliance with the Eastern Trade Union. The meeting would be held not here, in this brothel, but in a high-class hotel in Khalkha. There, I would meet Ventura and the other members of the Senate. After discussing some of the conditions, the senators would hold a vote.

I felt like things were going well.

The one term we couldn’t back down on was the Eastern Trade Union serving as our route into Nyrnal’s territory, but we could compromise on just about anything else. Having devoured most of the continent already, our faction was stocked to the brim with resources. There was no need for us to skimp out.

We’d seize the Eastern Trade Union at any cost, be it through bribery or seduction.

Who would handle seduction, though? I’m too tiny for that. Buxom as she is, Sérignan’s just too bashful.



I crossed the border into the Eastern Trade Union with Sérignan, Lysa, and a Masquerade Swarm in tow. As was our usual tactic, we walked among the refugees before slipping away and heading for Khalkha.

Unsurprisingly, we were stopped by a guard outside the city. “Halt! The capital city of Khalkha is past here!”

“Could you take a look at this?” I asked, holding something up. Unfortunately

for him, I had a surprise today.

His eyes grew wide as saucers. “M-My word, this is an entry permit from the chairman himself!”

“I take it we may enter, then?”

“Erm, yes, of course.” The Khalkha guard had a rather swift change of attitude. “Please, right through here. My apologies for the holdup, miss.”

Once we were inside the city walls, I handed the Masquerade Swarm a map.

“Go to this hotel, Maska. Here’s how you get there.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

Of course, specifying an address or giving them a map wasn’t necessary; I could have just transmitted the information through the collective consciousness. And yet, my habits from when I was a normal human still lingered; at times like this, I acted as I would have back in the real world.

I decided to make more use of the collective consciousness going forward. Even when I wasn’t going out of my way to do so, it still proved beneficial. While I was here in the Eastern Trade Union, for instance, I could keep up with the war situation in Schtraut in real time and instruct our forces directly. No other country could match the speed at which we exchanged information.

On the Schtraut front, Roland was making good use of the mountain road to overwhelm the Empire’s troops. The Swarm collapsed cliffs, set up ambushes, caused the road to crumble beneath the enemy’s feet—any possible way to impede Nyrnal’s army.

Still, something about this was worrisome. The Nyrnal forces along the Schtraut border were simply too small. They only had four, maybe five divisions, markedly fewer than what they had used to take over Maluk.

There were three possible explanations for that. They were either hiding additional soldiers from us, going through the elven forest, or shifting their main focus over to Frantz. Maximillian was a fearsome man, though, so he could’ve had an entirely different plan up his sleeve. If we didn’t regain the initiative in this war, it wouldn’t be long before the situation started going

downhill.

“Aah, there it is.”

As I pondered the war situation, the hotel came into view.

“Let’s head inside,” I said. “This will decide the future.”

Can we win over the Eastern Trade Union or not? This is where my skills will be put to the test.



We were led to a royal suite. As I opened the door, I found three people already sitting there. The only one I recognized was Ventura. Assuming the other two weren’t assassins, they must have been members of the Senate.

I introduced myself with the best smile I could manage so as to make a good first impression. “A pleasure to meet you all. I’m Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea. This is my knight, Sérignan, and my guards, Lysa and Maska.”

“Hey, Keralt,” said the man I didn’t know, nudging the woman at his side. “Is that the monsters’ leader? I heard she was a queen, but she looks completely human. So do her guards.”

“As I reported, Konrad, the queen is a young woman who appears to be roughly fourteen,” she replied. “We don’t make mistakes. This is the Arachnea’s leader, the one who unites them. If you can’t accept that, you’re welcome to pretend this is all a dream, go back home, and crawl under the covers.”

To my surprise, they started bickering as soon as I’d introduced myself. Not very polite, as these things go. Of course, even without their introductions, I recognized their names. Konrad was the head of a mercenary company, and Keralt was the guildmaster of the Adventurers’ League.

“It’d only be polite to introduce yourselves, you two,” Ventura told them, perhaps seeing irritation in my eyes.

“Oh, pardon me. I’m Konrad Crevlas, leader of the One-Eyed Black Wolf mercenary company. Pleasure meeting you, Queen of the Arachnea.”

He spoke that last part in a tone that sounded almost questioning. I supposed he still didn’t believe I was the Arachnea’s ruler.

“I’m Keralt Ruano. I serve as guildmaster of the Adventurers’ League. We’ve looked into your group and noted that you have intelligence similar to us humans. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

I couldn’t quite get a read on Keralt. Something about her seemed suspicious.

Ventura’s gaze fell on his companions. “I’ll turn it over to my fellows for now.”

“You seek to forge an alliance with us?” Keralt said, cutting right to the chase.

“That’s right,” I replied. “We have a common enemy. I heard your country doesn’t find the Nyrnal Empire to be trustworthy. Is that true?”

“We’ve had it up to here with Nyrnal, that’s for sure,” Konrad spat. “All the Empire cares about is grabbing more territory, and that’s a problem for us. While Frantz was attacking a so-called enemy of the continent, Nyrnal decided to attack them from behind. That’s just vile.” He took a deep breath and added, “But that doesn’t mean we’re keen on joining forces with monsters.”

“We’re nothing like the monsters you know,” I assured him. “We are a sentient, intelligent army. If you agree to ally with us, we’ll regard you with respect and dignity.”

They still thought the Arachnea were a bunch of mindless monsters. I couldn’t call it unreasonable, given what we’d done in the past, but I now had complete control over the Swarm. I didn’t want them to be seen as savage beasts.

“An alliance between us is sure to apply pressure on the Nyrnal Empire,” I continued. “The only thing we’d ask is that you allow us to march our army through your territory. We don’t intend on placing you under military occupation like Nyrnal does, however; do keep that in mind.”

“Nyrnal has taken advantage of this war to forcibly occupy several countries, and they’re trying to do the same to us,” Konrad said with a grim nod. “That’s the arrogance of a military powerhouse for you. Ever since they annexed the southern countries, they’ve let their pride go to their head.”

Ooh. It looks like Konrad’s getting on board with my idea. I’ll just need to make one more push!

“I’m afraid I can’t be so optimistic about this,” Keralt interjected. “You’re still

an inhuman species, and unlike the elves, you haven't been in this world since ancient times. You recently appeared out of nowhere and seized multiple countries through conquest. You may not have the animalistic nature most monsters do, but you do have an intellect that's on par with ours. That's something we need to be wary of."

She glared at Sérignan and me with distrust.

"Besides, even now you're trying to hide things from us. Did you really think you could hide that woman's true nature? Or that girl, Lysa's?"

"That's a very disrespectful way of putting it. I just chose the method that would make it easiest for me to interact with humans. But fine, if you insist. Sérignan, Lysa, undo your Mimesis."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"As you wish."

At my order, the two of them revealed their true forms as Swarms. Sérignan's lower half morphed back to that of an insect, and she sprouted a pair of wings. Likewise, insectile legs and wings popped out of Lysa's back.

The sudden transformations left Ventura and Konrad shocked.

"So that's what they really look like," Keralt muttered, narrowing her eyes.

"This form just makes these kinds of conversations more challenging," I said through gritted teeth. "It's got nothing to do with the way they behave."

I knew it. This Keralt woman is trouble.

"I-I'll admit, I didn't expect you to turn into such monsters," Konrad stammered, taken aback. "This is hardly what we discussed, is it?"

"Again, we're *not* monsters. We're bright, self-aware life-forms. Please don't assume that the way we look is a reflection of our personalities. You hate Emperor Maximillian so much, but he looks human, and the things he does are *at least* as terrible and callous as anything we've ever done."

Monsters wouldn't need motives to go to war. They wouldn't seek to forge alliances and broker peace. The fact that we've done this is proof that we're not monsters!

“That much I’ll agree with,” Konrad said. “That bastard Maximillian, he’s a *real* monster! All he does is fatten the Empire, claiming anything he can get his greedy hands on. The way he’s taking advantage of this war is just proof of that.”

Konrad’s a pretty reactive sort. He backs up my words without a hitch.

“But the same can be said of you,” Keralt argued. “You took over the Kingdom of Maluk, the Dukedom of Schtraut, and the Popedom of Frantz. Your invasions and massacres put you on equal footing with the Nyrnal Empire.”

“Like I’ve said before, we had reasons for every war we started,” I said, placing a hand on the table. “We don’t go around indiscriminately attacking other nations. Consider that when making your judgments.”

Keralt shook her head. “The Empire comes up with reasons to start wars too. When they attacked Frantz, it was to defend the continent from you. When they annexed the southern territories, it was so they could form a large nation that would stave off internal interference.”

This woman really is difficult to deal with.

“Then let me ask you this, Miss Keralt. Considering your country is pressed between the Nyrnal Empire and us, what should you do?” I needed her to come out and say what she was getting at. “It’s just a matter of time until Nyrnal tries to take over the Eastern Trade Union. If you refuse to resolve the situation through dialogue, the Arachnea can resort to force if we have to.”

“I’m not rejecting an alliance with the Arachnea,” Keralt replied. “But I’m not rejecting an alliance with Nyrnal either. I’ll do anything if it means our country can survive. That’s how the Eastern Trade Union has hung on so far.”

“That’s called sitting on the fence, and it only means you don’t have trust in your own country,” I continued, lashing out at her. “If I were to ask a country I’d just fought with yesterday for their help today, I wouldn’t expect them to extend a friendly hand.”

Keralt’s stance might have worked from an adventurer’s perspective, but it didn’t suit an entire country. Without rational, coherent diplomacy, a country couldn’t trust other nations.

“I know that, but it’s different when everyone’s trying to ally with us. Both you and Nyrnal are trying to keep each other in check and take control of our country. That alone makes for a strong bargaining chip.”

Why does she have to make things so complicated?

She had a point, however; we and Nyrnal both wanted the Eastern Trade Union on our side. Each of us needed it to invade the other. This gave the Union the initiative to pick one or even neither of us.

“You can’t do that,” Konrad refuted. “Siding with Nyrnal when it’s convenient for you, siding with the Arachnea when that’s the easier option—you can’t handle diplomacy that way. If you do, *both* countries will take advantage of us. They’ll think we’re too weak to defend ourselves.”

He wasn’t wrong either. Trying to be everyone’s friend could backfire and get everyone to hate you instead. Given the impression each of the countries held of one another, politics couldn’t be handled in such a noncommittal fashion.

“We’ve got three choices,” Konrad said, lifting three fingers. “One, we insist on protecting our country by ourselves without relying on another country’s power. Two, we yield to Nyrnal and give them the right to station soldiers in our territory, letting them take everything we have in exchange for protection. Three, we side with the Arachnea and see if it’s possible for mankind to coexist with these creatures.”

He turned his eyes on Keralt. “Well? Which choice sounds best to you?”

“That’s difficult. Allying with Nyrnal is likely out of the question, but we lack the military power to defend our country alone, especially against the two most dominant forces on the continent. Still, we can’t tell for sure whether the Arachnea are trustworthy.”

Trust was shaping up to be the central issue here.

Konrad offered his own choice. “Well, *I’m* willing to gamble on the Arachnea’s help. Nyrnal’s officials one-sidedly demanded we give them the right to bring their army here, and Maximillian never cared enough to ask us himself. Meanwhile, the Arachnea’s queen personally came to discuss things with us. That makes them more trustworthy in my eyes.”

It looked like my coming there in person had an unintended but positive effect. As it turned out, being willing to go out of your way earned you trust. A lesson to remember.

“Considering she came here of her own accord, I do want to trust her,” Ventura chimed in. “But humans have discriminated against the elves, mocked the dwarves, and looked down upon the demi-human races for far too long now. With a horde of monsters on our doorstep, asking to be our ally, will our people really consent to that?”

Indeed, the elves were just one of the ostracized races in this world; many of them were treated poorly by mankind. My original world had also been host to terrible examples of racism. The Swarm, which weren’t even humanoid enough to count as demi-humans, obviously wouldn’t be welcomed with open arms.

“If we’ve got no other way, we ought to ally with these bugs,” Konrad argued. “We have a dwarf for a chairman, we trade with the elves, and we even try to domesticate monsters. I doubt *this* is what will shatter our tolerance.”

Ventura gave a shake of his head. “I’m afraid I don’t share your optimism.”

They weren’t seeing eye to eye. The question of whether they could trust us was key, but I had no words to sway them with. If Roland were here, maybe he’d have been able to improve their opinion of us, but he was too busy with the situation in Schtraut.

I guess it’s time for my last resort.

“You can hold me hostage for the duration of the alliance, then,” I declared.

“What?!” Konrad’s eyes widened.

Meanwhile, Keralt furrowed her brow.

“I’ll serve as collateral to prove we’re trustworthy,” I explained. “I promise we won’t stab you in the back. As allies, we’ll fight alongside you. If you need a reason to trust us, I’ll just have to offer myself.”

Thankfully, I could command the Swarm from afar. Being held hostage didn’t make things harder for me in that regard.

“Y-You can’t, Your Majesty!” Sérignan protested. “What if they decide to sell

you out to the Nyrnal Empire?!”

I shrugged. “If that happens, come and save me.”

True, I had no guarantee they wouldn’t sell me out to Nyrnal. I simply had to place my trust in the Eastern Trade Union.

Just then, Konrad burst out laughing. “Aha ha ha! I wouldn’t expect that kind of recklessness from our queen of conquest here! But I like it! I get the feeling you and I will get along just fine, missy. Better than I’d get along with Maximillian, at least!”

“I appreciate the compliment,” I said.

It felt like he was mocking me, but what I’d said *was* actually pretty laughable. It did prove how serious I was about this, though.

How’re you gonna respond to that, Keralt? I thought, leveling my gaze at her.

“I’m getting the impression you’re trustworthy too,” she said. “You’re far more human than I thought. With that kind of humanity, there’s certainly a chance for mutual understanding between the Arachnea and us. So long as we have that, an alliance is possible.”

It seemed my reckless offer had won Keralt over too. *Oh. Maybe I have potential as a villainess, after all.*

“I take it you both view the idea of an alliance favorably now?”

“Yes. My faction should be in agreement,” Konrad answered.

“I’ll convince my people of it as well,” Keralt said with a nod.

That meant I had at least some of the senators on my side.

“What about you, Ventura?” I asked.

“I’ll abstain from making a decision right now. The day after tomorrow, I’ll introduce you to another one of the senators, Honnoson Alphtel. If he agrees to the alliance, it will be as good as decided.”

“I appreciate that.” I bowed my head.

As soon as the alliance is set in stone, I’ll have my forces cross the Eastern Trade Union into Nyrnal’s land. Then, we’ll finally end this war.

“That concludes the talks for today,” Ventura announced. “I’m glad this conversation has been beneficial for both sides.”

With that, he left the room.

A Look around Khalkha

Yesterday, I'd been able to get Konrad and Keralt on my side, bringing me one step closer to an alliance. Tomorrow, I would discuss matters with Honnoson Alptel, an influential senator, which could cement the decision. So for today...

"How about we have a look around the city, Lysa?"

"Yeah! Can we?!"

We were cooped up in the hotel's guest room, but upon seeing Lysa gazing longingly out the window, I suggested we go outside. Lysa had spent her life in the forest, so a big city like this was probably a new experience for her. When we'd seen the sea in Marine, she had been the most enthusiastic out of all of us.

By comparison, Sérignan was handling it more maturely. She and the Masquerade Swarm were taking shifts standing guard.

"Sérignan, we're going outside for a bit," I said, intending to invite her along.

"Is that so? I shall accompany you, then."

The suite was nice, but spending a whole day there still felt suffocating. With the big meeting I had coming up tomorrow, I also didn't want to tire myself out.

"We'll be back."

We left poor Maska to hold the fort and went out to have a look around Khalkha.

Put simply, Khalkha was a lively city. It was our first experience walking through the peaceful streets of a country's capital. Maluk was in ruins, we had charged into Schtraut's capital, and Frantz's capital had been silent upon our arrival because of the heretic hunts.

Everything in sight was unique and unfamiliar. The street stalls sold all sorts of curiosities. One vendor sold some kind of meat skewer. Another sold a kebab of sorts made by smoking and cutting off lumps of meat. A third offered meat fried

in sizzling oil on the spot.

Have I just been looking at meat this whole time?

“Are you hungry, milady?” Lysa asked me, noticing my covetous gaze.

Right now, she wasn’t allowed to call me “Your Majesty.” The various adventurers’ guilds of this country had already learned about me. Back in Schtraut, no one had known of me, so there hadn’t been any point in going out of our way to hide my title. This time around, we needed to be discreet.

Keralt had guaranteed my safety, but if the guilds’ information were leaked, the Nyrnal Empire could dispatch assassins to kill me.

Seriously, being a despot’s pretty hard.

“Yeah, I actually am a little hungry,” I admitted.

“Then let’s get something to eat.” Lysa grinned. “I’m sure we’ll find someplace nice.”

I wasn’t even doing anything in particular, so why did I have to go hungry? At this rate, I’d just get fat. Imagine that: a round, chubby Arachnea queen. More like an Arachnea piggy. Forget “Your Majesty”; they’d be calling me “Your Portliness” then. I was really jealous of the Swarm since their figures never changed no matter what or how much they ate.

“Erm, milady?” Sérignan eyed me with worry. “True, our figures don’t change, but I don’t think you are gaining any weight.”

I sighed. “You don’t know that. I haven’t been exercising one bit recently. I could be well on my way to being fat.”

Sérignan and Lysa had the privilege of not gaining any weight, so they didn’t understand how I felt.

“If you stick to an elven diet, you probably won’t get fat,” Lysa suggested. “It’s mostly based on vegetables.”

“Yeah, but there’s one problem, Lysa,” I said, my voice wistful. “I love meat.”

The food we had eaten back in Baumfetter was very healthy, but it had left something to be desired. Every now and then, I got the craving for some nice,

juicy meat. But once that mean protein went down the hatch, it was bound to turn to needless flab. I hadn't been particularly fat before, but I still had to worry about my eating habits.

"Then let us go to a place that serves meat, if that is what you desire," Sérignan said. "Consuming what you want when you want it is a good way of preventing fatigue. Besides, you have an important meeting tomorrow, so you should treat yourself to a pick-me-up!"

"You're tempting me like the devil, Sérignan. But I'll allow it since I'm really craving here. Are you okay with meat too, Lysa?"

Making peace with the inevitability of my unhealthy diet, I decided to get some meat. What about Lysa, though? She was an elf, and they didn't usually like meat that much.

"I'm fine with it." Lysa offered a faint smile. "People think elves never eat meat, but we incorporate meat into our dishes pretty often. The only exception is when it's a closed season for hunting."

"Let's find a place that serves some good meat, then!"

"A steak would be good," Lysa said cheerfully. "Or maybe one of those Hamburg steaks I've heard so much about."

I was virtually salivating at the thought of munching on some fine meat.

Lysa pointed at one small establishment. "That place looks nice!"

It was small and snug, but it looked clean. A tantalizing smell wafted from the inside. I supposed it was a coffee shop that doubled as a restaurant. It seemed just like what we were looking for.

"All right, let's give it a try." I approached the menu plastered on the nearby wall. "Today's specials are..."

Beside me, Lysa read it aloud. "A mixed grill meal and a Hamburg steak combo."

Hm. Think I'll go with the Hamburg steak. But the mixed grill sounds nice too.

"Our senses are connected through the collective consciousness," Sérignan reminded me. "So don't worry. I can eat the mixed grill, and you can have the

Hamburg steak. That way, we'll be able to experience both."

"Yeah, we could do that. But I kind of want to eat it directly, like a human. Shrug it off as a whim of mine, would you?"

Which should I pick, though?

Just then, Lysa came up with the perfect solution. "Let's share! I'll get the mixed grill, and you can order the Hamburg steak, and we'll sample each other's orders."

Oh, Lysa to the rescue with the good ideas!

"Sounds good. And if Sérignan orders something different, we can try that too."

Looking a bit bashful, Sérignan murmured, "D-Dining with you is too great an honor for me, milady, if these are your orders."

As always, she approached everything with the formal stiffness of an ancient samurai. *But that's part of what makes her cute.*

"C-Cute?" Sérignan stammered, sensing my thoughts.

"Ah, yeah. You're cute, Sérignan."

The collective consciousness had its perks, but it was a bit of a downside that my thoughts were leaked to the Swarm.

"I think you're very cool, Sérignan," Lysa chimed in as Sérignan flushed crimson. "The way you protect our lady, the strength of your will... I've always admired the way knights can be so determined!"

"That's right." I nodded. "I can sense your will too."

"I'm quite honored," Sérignan said sheepishly.

She really was an admirable knight.

"Now, let's go inside and appreciate the local cuisine."

Urged along by my grumbling stomach, I led everyone inside.

A cheery waitress in a cute outfit greeted us. "Hello! Table for three, ladies?"

"Yes, do you have any available?" I asked.

“We do. Right this way!”

Thankfully, the place was only half full. There weren't too many people around, which was good since we were trying to lay low; it wasn't empty to the point of being uncomfortably deserted either. It had just the right balance of customers.

“I'll have the Hamburg steak.”

“I'd like a mixed grill meal!”

“Hmm. The steak, please.”

We soon decided on our orders, bunch of carnivorous girls that we were.

“So a Hamburg steak, a mixed grill, and a steak. Coming right up. Would you like anything to drink with that?”

Drinks, huh?

I wasn't sure if this country had coffee. As I scanned the menu, I ran into all sorts of drinks with unusual names, but I did manage to find coffee listed there.

“I'll have coffee,” I said, making the safe choice.

“Tomato juice, please.” Lysa went with a veggie option, which was typical for her elven background.

“And I'll have a, erm, Nabreej Mint.” Sérignan took a risk and chose a more daring option.

“All right, it'll be out shortly.” The waitress left with our orders.

Once she was gone, Lysa turned to me. “There's something I've been meaning to ask you, milady.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What are you going to do when this war is over?”

“When the war's over?” I parroted.

Right. I've been so caught up with trying to finish this war that I forgot to think about what I'll be doing next.

“Well, actually, I've been thinking the Arachnea could have the Worker

Swarms make clothes and furniture. We'd travel around to different countries and sell them. I think we've had enough wars for a lifetime. Plus, I..."

I...

"I need to find a way back home. I want to go home."

This isn't where I belong. Sérignan and Lysa mean a lot to me, but that apartment back in Japan is my true home. I think my parents are really worried about me, and I'm worried about them too. I have to find my parents, calm them down, and then go back to my college life.

"You want to go home?" Sérignan asked. "The Worker Swarms could build you a worthy castle, milady."

"That's not what I mean. I have a home I need to go back to."

That's right, I—

"You killed her, you monster."

Pain shot through my mind.

Samael said that, but how can it be? My parents should be fine, right? I mean, it wasn't too long ago that I passed the entrance exams and we went out to a barbecue place together to celebrate. They can't be dead.

"Are you all right?" Lysa asked, noticing my pained expression.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry about it." I shook my head as if to banish my thoughts.

Just a little headache.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'll eventually have to leave you two and go back to where I belong. That's why I want to enjoy this now."

"No! I don't want you to leave!" Sérignan exclaimed.

It must have been painful to hear that. Sérignan was serving as my loyal knight, but I had been set to leave this world from the get-go. Lysa was looking pretty bummed as well. It hurt me too, of course. But I had to go back.

"Then let's do as you say and enjoy this moment together, milady," Lysa said, putting on a brave face. "I'll do anything to help you go back home. So please,

never forget the times we spent together!”

“Of course I won’t. I’ll never forget you, Lysa.”

I couldn’t possibly forget about you. Your tears were what inspired me to grind an entire kingdom into dust.

“What will become of me once you leave?” Sérignan asked me, clearly on the verge of tears.

“Keep our faction safe,” I told her. “Now and forevermore. Support the other Swarms until you’re ready to retire.”

“By your will. I, Sérignan, will devote myself to protecting the Arachnea even after you’ve left us.”

“I’m counting on you, Sérignan.”

If I leave them in her capable hands, everything should be fine.

“Can we come visit you?”

“I dunno, Lysa. That might be a little difficult,” I admitted with a frown. “It’s a whole other world. I don’t think this world and mine can normally connect.”

It would have been really interesting and fun if I could freely go between this world and that one, but I didn’t think it would be that simple. The game’s world and my reality weren’t meant to be connected.

“Here you are!” the waitress announced, breaking up our somewhat gloomy atmosphere. “One mixed grill, one Hamburg steak, and a steak for you! Eat it while it’s hot!”

The appetizing smell completely distracted me from what we were talking about.

“Okay, let’s share! You two, have some of my Hamburg steak.”

“Here, try a bite of the grilled chicken,” Lysa said, handing us some skewers.

“Help yourself to my steak,” Sérignan offered.

And so, the three of us had our girls’ day out.

I couldn’t help but sing the chef’s praises. “Oh, this Hamburg steak’s great.

Whoever made this is a pro.”

“The chicken’s so soft and tasty!” Lysa chirped.

“This is a fine steak. It does have the succulent feel of meat.”

We had taken a chance on this place, but it turned out to be a really good restaurant. I made a mental note to thank Lysa later for spotting it. We enjoyed our food and left the place roughly thirty minutes later. For the record, their after-dinner coffee was pretty good too.



With full stomachs, we made our way to the bazaar next.

“They sure sell a whole range of things,” I observed.

“There’s so much variety! I’ve never seen these kinds of products before!” Lysa said cheerfully.

The bazaar had all sorts of merchandise for sale, most of which I didn’t recognize at all. There were things that looked like equipment for a hookah and weaving appliances, but there were also crackling crystal balls and rings that seemed to spin continuously in place. I couldn’t wrap my mind around those.

“You’re an elf, aren’t you, miss?” one stall owner called out to Lysa as she examined his wares.

“Huh?!” Lysa blinked in surprise.

“I see you’re hiding your ears with your hair, but it’s clear you’re from the boonies,” he added with a smile. “My hunch tells me you couldn’t be anything but an elf. Am I right?”

“Hm... That’s a secret,” Lysa muttered. She was still rather anxious about the outside world.

“Could I ask you not to bother my companion, sir?” I said to the merchant. “If you oblige, we’ll consider buying something.”

“Ooh, that’s a tempting offer.” He smiled thinly and gestured toward an accessory. “Well, I can recommend this for your ladies.”

It was a cheap-looking bracelet inlaid with what looked like rubies and glass

beads. Not exactly fancy, but it could make for a good memento of this trip.

Maybe having matching souvenirs with Sérignan and Lysa to take home isn't such a bad idea.

"I'll take it. How much?"

"Thirty rupinas for three. I'm cutting you a real bargain here."

I didn't know what the market prices were, but I did have money. I handed him the thirty rupinas and took the bracelets.

"Could you tell me about Khalkha's specialties?" I asked.

"Specialties?" The merchant frowned. "Well, that'd be the pleasure district, but I doubt you ladies would have much to look for there. Nothing else really comes to mind. Oh, but the clothing stores in the pleasure district are pretty fancy. I mean, they outfit the people working in that part of town."

They've got clothing stores, huh?

I wasn't particularly interested in the pleasure district. It gave the impression of a place with a lot of shady establishments, and I wanted nothing to do with that. Clothes were something I *was* interested in, though. Sérignan and Lysa could put them on, after all, and I felt like dressing them up. Sérignan was always in that suffocating armor, so seeing her in something cute would be a nice change of pace.

"Erm, milady, I don't mind this armor at all. I also have the dress you had made for me in Marine," Sérignan said nervously, sensing my intentions.

"Clothing stores it is, then," I said, ignoring her reservations.

The merchant told us about an area in the pleasure district that housed all the clothing shops, so I made my way there.

"Oho!" I exclaimed upon seeing the place. "This is impressive."

There were all sorts of clothing stores lined up around the block. Some places handled evening dresses, others sold everyday wear, and others still had clothes for special and unusual occasions.

"Let's start with dresses, then. Are you ready, Sérignan?"

“Yes, milady...”

I had her take off her armor before we entered, so she was currently wearing an everyday dress I had prepared for myself in case I needed to lie low. It was too big for me at present, but I’d gotten it in case I regained my normal height or ended up going back to Japan.

“Don’t you think that dress would look good on her?” I suggested, pointing at one piece in particular.

Lysa nodded. “Yeah, I think it looks nice. It’d be pretty sexy on Sérignan’s figure.”

The two of us were looking at a dress with a dangerously deep neckline and an open back down to the waist. It had a slit that showed off one’s thighs too. If Sérignan were to wear this, it would be an alluring sight indeed.

“I-I personally prefer this one...” Sérignan gestured toward a very modest piece. It was shaped like a Vietnamese ao dai dress and decorated with a corsage.

“How about this one?” I offered another one resembling a cheongsam.

Sérignan shook her head, looking uncomfortable. “No, milady, that one shows off too much of my legs.”

This dress also had a deep slit that would highlight her healthy thighs. They were a far cry from my scrawny excuse for legs...

“My lady, please don’t bully me too hard...”

“I’m not bullying you, though?” I said matter-of-factly. “I’m just picking out a dress for you.”

We ended up buying all three dresses. I looked forward to seeing Sérignan in them. She was absolutely adorable when she got all teary-eyed.

“Next we’ll need to get you some everyday dresses. You’re always in armor, and that could draw attention. So you should have a set or two of casual wear.”

Sérignan was almost always in her armor. It was technically part of her body, but it looked menacing, and we sometimes needed to keep a low profile. Having a casual outfit would help.

Besides, Sérignan is a girl.

“Whoa, that one’s cute!” Lysa pointed at a blue apron dress designed like something out of Alice in Wonderland.

I agreed. “Oh, yeah. It is.”

A smaller girl could wear it and pass as an Alice lookalike, but Sérignan was a bit too big for it, and she would probably come across as some kind of maid.

“What kind of dress do you want, Sérignan?”

“Oh, no, I could never want for anything,” she said, ever modest.

“Ah, come on. It’s not every day we get to go shopping. Enjoy it with us.”

Sérignan was definitely a bit of a late bloomer when it came to these kinds of things, which could take the fun out of it.

“What about this outfit, then?” Sérignan pointed at a man’s suit.

“It’d look good on you, yeah, but that’s men’s clothing,” I said.

“But compared to a skirt, pants would be easier to move in if need be,” she argued. “After all, I must guard you at all times.”

Sérignan, as it turned out, preferred practicality to fashion. I couldn’t very well force her to change her personal tastes. Also, she’d look good in a suit.

“All right, let’s ask for a suit for women, then. We’ll find something that’ll look good on you.”

We then went on to deliberate for quite a while about what kind of suit would work for her. In the end, we went with one that incorporated a black shirt and jacket. She tried it on, and indeed, it fit her perfectly. Sérignan was pretty impressive, all in all.

“Let’s pick something for Lysa next.”

“I-I don’t need one. I like my current outfit just fine.”

Lysa already had a set of casual clothes and a dress too, but we couldn’t walk out of here without getting her something as well. Besides, Lysa’s figure was similar to mine, so picking a dress for her was fun.

“Okay, we’ll find you something! How about that apron dress you said was cute earlier?”

“It *was* cute! But I don’t think it’ll look right on me...”

“Oh, hush.” I waved my hand, dismissing her claim.

That settled the first choice.

“Next we should find you something sexy.” I hummed as I picked out a dress for her. “You might be young, but I know you can show you’re just as charming as she is.”

Even if the dress didn’t show off much cleavage, one with a nice slit could be nice. That would be plenty alluring. I always used to buy my clothes at big-box stores, so I wasn’t exactly one for fashion, but still.

“This one with evening gloves might be good, milady,” Sérignan suggested.

I praised her choice. “Good eye, Sérignan. Now for some lingerie.”

Thus, we had Lysa play the part of a dress-up doll for a while. In the end, we got her an apron dress, a ladylike dress, and a gown complete with evening gloves, a garter, stockings, and more.

“Phew. Now we won’t have to worry about your wardrobes.”

Once we’d finished shopping, we walked down the streets with bags full of clothes in our hands and satisfied smiles on our lips.

“Yeah, that’s true. But should we really be wasting our time shopping here?” Lysa asked with a hint of concern.

“Well, I kind of feel bad for Roland since he can’t be here, but things seem to have stabilized over on the Schtraut front. Nyrnal hasn’t been able to break through the mountain road there, so our defenses are solid.”

Roland was busy commanding the Swarms on the Schtraut front. Nyrnal’s army seemed to have given up on breaking through the mountain road and was instead trying to climb the cliffs. That way of invasion was obviously reckless, and Roland was quashing their efforts.

The mountain road in Schtraut was littered with the corpses of Nyrnal

soldiers. The Ripper Swarms drove away the crows, hounds, and other scavengers trying to pick at the bodies. Once they were all rounded up, the Worker Swarms could turn them into meatballs. The situation was still challenging overall, but our future prospects weren't too bad.

Lysa gave a nod. "Roland's really trying, huh?"

"Well, Schtraut *is* his homeland," I said, placing a hand on my chin in thought. "It makes sense he'd be dead set on defending it. What I'm worried about is that it's possible the Nyrnal army will try to invade Schtraut via the elven forest."

The elven forest was set right between the borders between the Kingdom of Maluk, the Dukedom of Schtraut, and the Nyrnal Empire. Now that Nyrnal had invaded Maluk, they had the elven forest surrounded on two fronts. We had no way of knowing when Nyrnal might try to use the forest as an alternate route into Schtraut.

"So there's a chance my homeland's going to become a battlefield?" Lysa asked, sounding anxious.

"We don't know that for sure," I replied. "That's why I'm producing lots of Genocide Swarms and sending them there. I promised I'd protect Baumfetter, and I intend to keep that promise."

I couldn't let a peaceful place like Baumfetter turn into a battlefield. The elves there wanted nothing more than to live peacefully. Letting that place get mixed up in the war because of a large country's ambitions would be unforgivable. I'd sworn to keep them safe no matter what.

"Still, it might be for the best if the citizens are prepared to evacuate just in case," I went on. "I keep getting these really bad vibes from the Empire."

I hadn't seen the full extent of what Nyrnal was capable of. They knew how to get involved in wars at just the right time, and they had the strength to take over the former Maluk territories in the blink of an eye. They had powerful field fortifications and wyverns at their beck and call. I had to be wary of all those factors, but at the same time, I couldn't assume they were showing all their cards.

“For now, we have to keep their attention fixed on the Schtraut front. I’ll order Roland to allow the enemy to break in a little. We can’t let the deadlock in Schtraut seem too firm; we don’t know how Nyrnal might react to that.”

If our defensive lines proved to be unyielding, their generals might try to come up with different ideas—storming through the elven forest, for one, or sending reinforcements to the Frantz front.

“For now, everything’s stable there. Nyrnal’s not making any suspicious movements. The fact we don’t know what they’re planning is unnerving, though. We need to send in some Masquerade Swarms or infest people with Parasite Swarms to gather intel.”

Nyrnal wasn’t accepting refugees, so getting Masquerade Swarms to infiltrate was proving difficult. Things would be different if we got people under the thrall of Parasite Swarms to open the gates for us from the inside, but pulling that off would be a trek and a half too.

“If only we could’ve kept the Nyrnal Empire’s invasion stalled inside the old Maluk territories, we’d have been able to complete the Aerial Flesh Nest to make some Flap Swarms and gain air superiority.”

The Aerial Flesh Nest was the structure that produced the Arachnea’s airborne units. Honestly, the Arachnea was pretty weak when it came to aerial combat. The Flap Swarms would likely be no match for the wyverns. Nevertheless, having eyes in the sky would be a major advantage.

“I hope we can win this war,” Lysa said.

I nodded firmly. “Agreed. We need to end this.”

Yes. We need to end this war.

If I could make an alliance with the Eastern Trade Union and destroy the Nyrnal Empire, it would end the war on this continent. We could live in peace and do whatever we pleased.

Suddenly, Lysa shouted “Your Majesty!” and shoved me away.

I pitched forward and fell to the ground, where I felt warm fluid splash across my cheek.

Blood. Red, crimson blood. But whose blood is this?

Sérignan raised her voice in a battle cry. “Haaah!”

Then, I could hear the sound of a sword being drawn and a man screaming in pain. More screams echoed all around us. The entire commercial area had devolved into a state of chaos.

What’s going on here? I got to my feet, looking around.

The first thing I could see was Sérignan, holding up her blood-stained longsword. She was scanning the area, looking sharp and cautious. At her feet was the dead body of a man. He was lying face down, having been slashed across the shoulder. And...

“Lysa?” I uttered. “Lysa!”

Lysa had been stabbed. There was blood gushing from her stomach, forming a large puddle on the floor. She was still alive, but she was breathing heavily, her shoulders heaving.

“Lysa! Hang on, Lysa! Sérignan, what do I do?!”

I asked the question in a frenzy. I was panicking.

“You must keep her wound closed! Hold it down, hard!”

Right. That’s what they always do in action movies. When someone gets shot, they hold the wound down as hard as they can.

Mimicking what I remembered to the best of my ability, I applied pressure to Lysa’s stab wound.

A few moments later, a Khalkha guard hurried over to us. “What happened here?!”

“This man stabbed my friend!” I said. “Please, get us a doctor!”

“Understood!” The guard hurried off.

Meanwhile, I held down Lysa’s wound as hard as I could.

It’s too soon for her to follow in Linnet’s footsteps. I still have so many things I want to do with you, so don’t die on me!

Soon, the guard returned with a stretcher. “The doctor’s over there! Put her on the stretcher!”

I placed Lysa on it, still keeping her wound closed, and we ran in the direction he’d told us to go. Sérignan followed us, keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings.

Lysa, please... Don’t die...

The Witch's Blow

"It seems she's been poisoned," the doctor said.

Lysa was lying on a bed, moaning in pain and sweating profusely. Seeing her like this pained me, but I didn't have the right to look away; she had taken this blow for me. Since I accepted this truth, I knew it was my responsibility to keep my eyes open to the reality of this situation.

"Poison? What kind of poison?" I asked.

"It's probably a drug called the Witch's Blow," the doctor replied. "A powerful toxin that puts the victim in a catatonic state, which gradually worsens until it leads to death. Assassins often use it."

The doctor then turned to look at us.

"There is an assassins' guild in this country that's famous for using the Witch's Blow. Have you done anything to earn someone's ire?"

Dammit.

I had an idea of who was responsible for this, of course: the Nyrnal Empire. They probably realized we were trying to ally with the Eastern Trade Union and had that assassins' guild dispatch an agent. I was the intended victim, but Lysa had covered for me and taken the poison instead.

To hell with you, Nyrnal. You really pissed me off this time.

"Is there an antidote?"

"Not here. The assassins' guild might have it, but you won't find it in any ordinary hospital. The ingredients to concoct the antidote don't exist in this country."

There wasn't even an antidote. I could feel fear creeping in on me. Was Lysa going to make it?

"Where can we find it, then?" I asked.

“In the Nyrnal Empire, and the Nabreej archipelago.”

One of them was that despicable country, but I was unfamiliar with the other.

“The Nabreej archipelago, you say?”

Going to the Nyrnal Empire to get the ingredients was out of the question. Still, I didn’t have the first clue where the Nabreej archipelago even was. The only thing I did know was that the nation on those islands wasn’t under Nyrnal’s control yet—it was a free country of merchants, like the Eastern Trade Union. But that was *all* I knew about the place. Everything else was a huge question mark.

“Let’s go, Sérignan. We can leave Maska to look after Lysa, and we’ll go hunt for the antidote. First, I have to talk this over with Ventura.”

“Very well, milady. It’ll be all right. Lysa shouldn’t die.”

I could only pray that she was right. Pray to the ones looking over us...



“The Nabreej archipelago? Honestly, it’s a pretty strange place,” Ventura said with a scowl after I explained our situation. “They aren’t trading with us right now, although they used to. Maybe they just want to avoid getting involved in the war, but they’re insisting on an embargo so they can stay friendly with Nyrnal.”

Considering the Eastern Trade Union had previously been hostile toward Nyrnal, the Nabreej archipelago decided to keep its distance from them and stay out of the war.

Great. Just what we need at a time like this.

“Can’t we go there and get the antidote ourselves?”

“The ports at Nabreej will only accept ships from Nyrnal. That’s part of the embargo. Besides, a country that’s trying to toady up to Nyrnal isn’t going to sell anything to the Arachnea.”

Their embargo was thorough, but there had to be a loophole somewhere.

“How strong is Nabreej’s military?”

“Their military?” Ventura replied with some hesitation. “Well, their navy is decent, but their ground forces aren’t impressive. I think they have about three infantry divisions.”

“Hm, that’s not much,” I murmured. “With an army of that scale, they shouldn’t have many heavy infantry.”

Ventura’s face paled. “Don’t tell me you’re planning on attacking Nabreej.”

“I’ll do anything if it’ll save my friend’s life. If they won’t give us the antidote, we’ll just have to take it by force. If they’re only willing to trade with Nyrnal, it means they’re effectively a colony of the Empire.”

I’m not letting Lysa die. I’ll do whatever it takes to save her. Should they withhold the antidote from us, I’ll have to regard it as an act of aggression against the Arachnea.

“If they’ll declare that they’re not a colony of the Nyrnal Empire, I’ll lend them an ear. But if they don’t, I’ll see them as an enemy colony and launch an attack. We’re at war with Nyrnal, after all.”

We’ll get you that antidote, so hang on, Lysa.

The Arachnea were naturally resistant to poison, but maybe that poison, the Witch’s Blow, was special somehow. Still, it shouldn’t kill her that quickly. At least, I hoped it wouldn’t.

“There’s also the matter of the man who attacked us.”

“You’re suspecting the assassins’ guild, correct?” Ventura asked.

I would hunt down the ones who had caused Lysa so much suffering and have their heads on a pike.

“We’re looking for both the assassins’ guild and the person who hired them. We’ll tear them limb from limb. However, there’s a fundamental problem here.”

Only a few people should have known that the Arachnea had people inside the Eastern Trade Union. For starters, there was Ventura, Konrad, and Keralt. There was also Honnoson Alphtel, whom I hadn’t met yet. Whoever was behind this had to be one of them, or someone related to them. Of course, we were

trying to ally with the Eastern Trade Union, so we couldn't very well make enemies here. Still, whoever had done this to us had to pay.

Ventura began, "I'll handle the investiga—"

"No," I interjected. "We'll handle it."

I couldn't leave this in Ventura's hands. He was one of the suspects, after all.

"How, exactly?"

"I can't answer that right now."

If he knew how I was going to look into it, he might find a way to avoid it.

"Anyway, we'll make our way to the Nabreej archipelago," I declared. "We'll do it in a way that won't reflect badly on your country."

"What do you mean?"

Without sharing my plan with him, I took my leave. At this point, I couldn't trust anyone. The only ones I could believe in were the comrades who'd been with me every step of the way. We'd have to open the way forward on our own.



"You want me to sail out to sea?" Gilbert asked.

I'd contacted him for assistance. Gilbert had once let me ferry Ripper Swarms on his ships, and he'd helped me hold a memorial service for Isabelle. His ship was currently moored in the Popedom's harbor.

"That's right. I need to get to the Nabreej archipelago. Can you take us there?"

He frowned. "You want to go there? That's honestly a bit of a dangerous stretch."

Apparently, the Nabreej archipelago's navy was constantly patrolling, and now that trade had been virtually shut down, there weren't any ports that would accept a ship that wasn't from Nyrnal. Any pirate who dared approach was promptly chased away by the navy.

"Gilbert, please," I pressed as earnestly as I could. "A friend's life is on the line here. We need this antidote. Just take us there and back, that's all I'm asking."

We'll handle everything else. I don't want to lose another friend. *Please.*"

The Swarm knew how to handle a ship now, but they didn't have the sailing techniques needed to avoid the navy and the dangerous current around Nabreej. Gilbert knew this. If he just agreed, we'd be able to charge the archipelago.

"Raise your head, Your Majesty," Gilbert said. "You took revenge for Isabelle. I owe you a great debt, so of course I can't ignore your request. My crew and I will take you to Nabreej and back. You can rest easy. We've smuggled contraband there a few times already."

"Thank you, Gilbert." I let out a sigh of relief. "You have no idea how much that helps us."

Gilbert was a good guy. We'd only fought together once, but he trusted us. Mourning Isabelle together helped him harbor that trust, and I was grateful for it.

"So will you two be our only cargo?" he asked.

"No, it'll be a little crowded. Well, not crowded with people, though."

"Bugs, huh?" Gilbert cracked a bitter smile. "Oh well. I've got room in the cargo hold."

I was going to take Swarms with me. They'd help me break through Nabreej's gates.

"Well, let's strike while the iron's hot. We'll set sail as soon as possible, so do what you need to do, Your Majesty."

"Right. I'll be done soon."

With that, we'd secured a ship to take us to Nabreej. All that remained was selecting the right Swarms for the job. I took one Worker Swarm, three Genocide Swarms, and one Toxic Swarm. That would do. As soon as we landed on Nabreej, I'd have the Worker Swarm get busy.

I was ready for war.

"Sérignan, we're going."

“Can’t we place Lysa in a Regeneration Pod, Your Majesty?”

“A Regeneration Pod can only restore lost stamina,” I replied. “It can’t remove status ailments. Each faction has to produce special medic units to cure those. And right now, we don’t have one.”

The Arachnea faction was usually the one to *inflict* status ailments. It was rarely on the receiving end of poison and the like. Their medic unit wasn’t unlocked until late into the game, and we hadn’t gotten that far. So, I still didn’t have those units in my army.

“Then we must get that antidote at all costs,” Sérignan concluded.

“Right.” I nodded firmly. “No matter what it takes.”

Steeling our resolve, we boarded Gilbert’s ship.

Just you wait, Lysa. We’ll be back with that antidote before you know it.

The Nabreej Archipelago

Gilbert's ship, the *Muet*, deftly avoided the Nabreej navy's patrol lines and approached the archipelago. There were some close calls, but we made it there in one piece.

"Do the pirates ever attack Nyrnal's ships?" I asked Gilbert shortly before we were due to land.

"Some do. My crew does too sometimes. With Frantz's noose gone from our necks, we can hit Nyrnal's vessels. Besides, hardly any ships sailing out of Frantz are worth raiding these days."

Indeed. Since we'd laid waste to the Popedom, my pirate acquaintances were no longer interested in their trade ships. Many of them had switched over to ransacking the Nyrnal Empire's ships instead.

"Still, some of our folks are afraid of Nyrnal, so they avoid messing with the Empire. They'll only attack ships coming from the Nabreej archipelago."

Even the pirates are afraid of Nyrnal?

"Occasionally, crews will attack the ships that sail between Nabreej and the Portario Republic. The Republic has precious merchandise from the new continent, so any pirate who can take that back to port safely can sell it for double its price. Although heading over to the new continent is a pain to begin with..."

"Portario Republic? New continent?" I echoed, confused. "This world has other continents?"

"You didn't know? Portario is a nation on the new continent discovered far to the south. They're in the middle of some war down there, though, so no one really wants to get involved with the conflict."

So, there was another continent. I was curious as to what it was like, and if it was more peaceful than this one...or just as war-torn. As interested as I was, I didn't have time to dwell on it any longer.

“Are we almost there?”

“Aye.” Gilbert nodded. “We found an inlet we can take to shore, so we’ll weigh anchor there. It’s a bit off the beaten path, but it should be outside of their navy’s patrol lines.”

Finally. Hopefully, we can find the antidote for Lysa here.

“All right. Over there! Get ready to weigh anchor!” Gilbert ordered his crew.

“Aye aye, sir!” the pirates shouted back.

This part of the island looked deserted, but the inlet was just large enough for a ship to hide in; I wondered if it was man-made. The *Muet* slipped into the inlet with skillful maneuvering, then dropped anchor. We’d made it.

“The closest town from here is Litight,” Gilbert told me. “Head straight west, and you’ll get there. There shouldn’t be any checkpoints, but if you do end up getting inspected, use these.” He handed me two slips of paper. “Fake passage permits. Should fool them; it’s a first-rate forgery.”

“Thanks, Gilbert,” I said. “You really thought of everything.”

“No, we owe you. You took revenge for Isabelle. Pirates never forget a debt.”

Gilbert had really helped us out. Without him, we never would have even set foot on the archipelago.

“Good luck, then.”

“Yeah.” I offered him a wry smile. “I’ll probably need it.”

Sérignan, my Swarms, and I watched Gilbert’s ship sail away after dropping us off. I sincerely hoped they wouldn’t run into any of Nyrnal’s ships on the way back.

“All right, Sérignan, let’s start the operation. Lysa’s counting on us.”

She gave a sharp nod. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

And so, we set off on our mission to get Lysa’s cure. We swore in our hearts that we would definitely save her.



I ordered a few Worker Swarms to start building some structures, and then Sérignan and I made our way west of the inlet, as Gilbert had instructed. Forty minutes into our walk, a large town surrounded by walls came into view. That was probably Litight.

We cast our eyes to the city gates, where we ran into two soldiers standing guard and looking awfully bored. There would be a check after all, it seemed. I hoped Gilbert was right about the forged passes being convincing.

One of the loafing guards looked up at us. “Oh, folks from the east? That’s unusual.”

“Yes, I’m here on personal business. Can I pass?”

“You’ll need to pay the entry fee, then. It’ll be four romas for each of you.”

Oh, they just want me to pay?

“We’ll pay eight romas,” I said with a smile. “In exchange, there’s something I’d like to ask.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve heard they’re selling an antidote for a poison called the Witch’s Blow here. Is that true?”

“An antidote for the Witch’s Blow, you say?” The guard considered it, then shook his head. “Haven’t heard of any vendors here selling that.”

Ugh, that means this trip is a bust. Still, we could go inside and gain some information.

“There, eight romas. Will this do?”

“Yes. Enjoy your visit to Litight. See you!” The amicable guard saw us off with a wave.

He was a nice guy. I’d hate to have to kill him later down the line.

“Sérignan, what do you think we should do now?” I asked.

“We should inspect the taverns and inns, or other places where information spreads easily.”

Taverns and inns were places where people gathered, meaning lots of gab.

They were ideal sites for collecting information.

“Let’s start with an inn, then. We need to find out whatever we can as quickly as possible. Lysa can’t wait for us forever.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Lysa is in pain; we must make haste.”

I could feel Lysa’s agony through the collective consciousness, and it was terrible.

“Let’s hurry,” I whispered.

We walked out onto the city’s main street and scanned the area.

“There,” I said, pointing to a sign for an inn. “That one looks pretty big.”

It was a pretty sizable establishment, so hopefully that meant we’d be able to find the info we needed.

With Sérignan in tow, I stepped inside. “Excuse me.”

“Welcome to the Sea Breeze Arbor!”

A jovial girl had welcomed us. She wore what appeared to be a uniform, so she was probably an employee.

“Are you here for a room or to just sit down and eat?” she asked, flashing us a winning smile.

“We’d like something to eat,” I said. As the girl led us to our table, I added, “We’d also like to get some information, if possible.”

“Information, huh?” the girl parroted. “Sure, shoot! News and rumors are always flying around here!”

Talk about a cheerful gal, I thought to myself.

“Is there a shop in this city that sells a cure for the Witch’s Blow?”

“A cure for the Witch’s Blow? Oh, is *that* what you’re here for?”

Her response sounded promising. Had we hit the jackpot already?

She beamed brighter. “If you have pain in your lower back, go to the Custodio Pharmacy! They’ll have something to make that pain go away!”

“Er, no, that’s not our problem. We need an antidote for a poison,” I

explained, rubbing the bridge of my nose in frustration.

Is she really going to be useful?

“Poison? Right, I remember now. The king forbade the sale of antidotes for certain poisons.” A pensive look came over her face. “I don’t know this ‘Witch’s Blow’ you mentioned, but why would they ever take antidotes off the market?”

“I think that’s relevant to our interests,” I told her. “Could you point us in the direction of someone who knows more about this ban?”

The only reason the monarchy would forbid selling antidotes was to make sure any relevant poisons would kill their targets.

“Raloooo!” she hollered to a man sitting behind the counter. “Do you know if the antidote for a poison called the Witch’s Blow is on the list of the ones that got banned?!”

Apparently, this Ralo was the innkeeper.

“Huh?!” he shouted back at her. “The Witch’s Blow? Someone’s asking about that lethal poison again?! Yeah, its antidote isn’t on sale. I don’t know why. Probably for some no-good reason. The king’s been getting involved with Nyrnal’s cronies recently.”

He shrugged and took on a more businesslike attitude.

“So, what will you be ordering?”

“The omelet rice meal and the fried oyster meal,” I said, pointing at the menu.

I already knew what Sérignan wanted, thanks to the collective consciousness.

“Coming right up; wait just a moment!” Ralo said and disappeared behind the counter.

“You’re quite the connoisseur to ask for the Sea Breeze Arbor’s omelet rice!” the waitress chirped.

“Is it good?”

“Very!”

Hmm. Now wasn’t the time to sit down and chow down, but I didn’t feel comfortable grilling these fine people without ordering anything.

Some minutes later, Ralo reappeared with our dishes. “Here you are: one omelet rice meal and one fried oyster meal!”

The omelet rice smelled great, but I was too worried about Lysa to really enjoy it. I’d have preferred to eat this with her. Just then, I noticed a slip of folded paper under my plate. I looked around to make sure no one was watching and opened it.

It read: *“Come to the back of the store after this.”*

I see... I guess the innkeeper knows more than I thought.

Rebellion's Hand

Sérignan and I went to the back of the inn once we finished eating, as Ralo's note had requested.

"Aah, there you are." Ralo greeted us, the air about him markedly different compared to earlier. "You're the Arachnea's queen or one of her lackeys, right?"

"What makes you say that?" I asked, taken aback.

I didn't know how he knew who I was, but it certainly made me uncomfortable.

"The Arachnea's queen is about the only one who'd be looking for an antidote to the Witch's Blow right about now. News about it is already out; a minion of hers was poisoned by the Witch's Blow. Our intelligence network reaches as far as the Eastern Trade Union."

Really, now? I guess it was naive of me to think I could keep it under wraps.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked him coolly. "Hand me over to the authorities?"

"As if." Ralo shook his head. "I want you to help us change this country."

He wanted my help with *that*?

"Our current ruler, King Alfonso IV, is completely under Nyrnal's thumb. He has an embargo set up that blocks off everyone but Nyrnal's ships. In fact, the only thing he seems to care about is licking Nyrnal's boots."

That matches what I've heard before.

"The Nyrnal Empire's merchants use that to their advantage and put ridiculous prices on merchandise from the continent. They're lookin' down on us is what they're doing. But if we can resume trade with the Eastern Trade Union, we can put a stop to that."

I see. If Nyrnal is their only outlet for trade on the continent, their merchants

can basically do whatever they want. This means that the Nabreej archipelago is basically a latent colony of Nyrnal's.

"If you're the Arachnea's queen or her messenger, we want you to lend us your military strength. With your help, we'll be able to attack the castle and force King Alfonso to abdicate. Then we'll resume trade with the Eastern Trade Union. If you don't, we won't be able to fight, and our country will end up becoming one of Nyrnal's vassals."

"I see. So you want to stage a revolution."

They wanted to depose an incompetent king and stop his harmful policies. Not a bad idea. Plus, cutting off one of Nyrnal's friendly nations would contribute to our own war effort.

"How can you prove this isn't a trap?" I asked, staring straight at Ralo.

"I...can't prove that. But I do want you to believe me. If we can get the king to abdicate, we'll get you the antidote you need."

Well, this was quite a pickle. I wasn't sure if I should get on board with the revolution.

"What about the king's guards?" I asked.

"There are two companies of soldiers in the castle, and another one set to guard the capital itself. Our country's army is poor in both size and quality."

So basically, it was just one battalion's worth of soldiers. Even if they were heavy infantry, we wouldn't struggle much.

"Fine." Heaving a sigh, I agreed to comply. "We'll have our soldiers ready by tomorrow, and we'll regroup with you. Where do we meet up?"

"I'm grateful to ya. We can meet up on the fork of the highway leading up to the capital's west gate. The guard captain watching over that gate is from our rebel faction. He should open the gate for us."

They even had double agents. This regime was already on its deathbed.

"Are you ready to stage your uprising tomorrow?" I confirmed.

"Yeah, tomorrow is fine." Ralo nodded. "We're basically always ready; we just

needed more troops.”

Hmm. Still, they hadn’t truly kicked off the rebellion yet, so I wasn’t sure how much I could rely on them.

“I’ll prepare my troops, then. I hope your revolution succeeds.”

“Aye. I’ll pray to the God of Light.”

Well, I won’t.



“The Worker Swarms are finished, I see.”

After leaving Litight, I headed back east to our base, where I’d left the Worker, Genocide, and Toxic Swarms on standby. By now, the Worker Swarms had completed building our power source and Fertilization Furnace.

“Everything is ready for your use, Your Majesty,” the Worker Swarms told me, assuming their obedient pose.

“Thank you. We’ll need to bolster our forces, so let us begin production in haste,” I ordered. “Produce Genocide Swarms.”

Thankfully, our structures functioned on something similar to the game’s mechanics, and we could utilize teleportation magic to move our stock of meatballs over. This saved us the bother of having to gather resources here on the island. This also allowed us to evacuate all the resources we’d gained from destroying Maluk, despite the land being currently occupied by Nyrnal. Convenient.

I started by producing twenty Genocide Swarms. The enemy had one battalion, and some of them were inevitably going to switch sides, so I didn’t think I’d need that many soldiers.

“Produce Toxic Swarms.”

Once I was done with the Genocide Swarms, I produced ten Toxic Swarms. Our current domain offered us a trickle of incoming resources. However, it wasn’t as large as when we destroyed Maluk, so I had to be conservative about how I used our stockpile. Nevertheless, this battle was the first step to saving Lysa, so I couldn’t hold back either.

“Your Majesty, are you sure we should trust them?” Sérignan asked me as I was working.

“We have to. Or do we want to waste time going to the capital and hoping we can find a place that’ll sell us the antidote? I think helping the rebellion is about as aimless as going on that wild goose chase, but if they’re telling the truth, they really will procure us the antidote.”

I didn’t fully trust Ralo. Maybe his rebellion had other objectives in mind. Maybe Alfonso IV was actually a kind king. In any case, none of that mattered to me. My only interest in this country was the antidote that would cure Lysa. Their future was none of my concern. My stance was to let them manage themselves however they liked, so long as they didn’t ruin their own country.

“So that’s your position on the matter,” Sérignan said, sensing my thoughts. “Understood. I will abide by your words, Your Majesty. Order me as you see fit.”

“Yeah. I’ll be counting on you, Sérignan.”

We’d be going into this operation with small numbers, so I’d need Sérignan to carry the fight for us. I wasn’t sure whether thirty Swarms—even if they were upgraded units—would be enough to take down a battalion-sized force. The enemy probably didn’t have many heavy infantrymen, but I had to account for unexpected developments, lest the situation spiral out of control.

Even with all the disadvantages, I had to do it. This revolution had to succeed if we were going to get that antidote.

To make that happen, I focused on making more Swarms. I compared our influx of resources and our reserves to calculate how much I could spare. Once preparations were complete, I slid into bed and went to sleep.



Morning dawned, and I reached our agreed-upon meeting place. I approached it cautiously, staying alert in case it was a trap.

“There you are!”

Thankfully, it wasn’t. There was a group of armed men and women waiting there. Their gear was mismatched, and the only uniform thing about them was

the white armbands they wore. They were clearly more of a civil militia than a real army.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting,” I said. “I’m ready. What about you?”

“Ready whenever you are,” Ralo replied. “But, uh, wow... Some company you’ve got there.”

The revolution army was visibly terrified of my Swarms. I’d brought them along since he had asked me for an army, so I didn’t much appreciate their reaction. They should have been more welcoming.

“So, what’s our plan?” I asked, moving things along.

“We’ll pass through the west gate and storm the castle. Once we take that, the other rebels hiding in the Ritsuka—the capital—will rise up to join us. A simple plan is best, right?”

So long as it’s not simple to a fault, I thought, but I kept it to myself.

“All right. We’ll open the way,” I told them. “Follow us.”

“Roger that. We’re counting on you.”

I wasn’t comfortable letting this militia go up against real soldiers, so I’d decided we would handle this. Mainly, I was hoping they wouldn’t end up stabbing us in the back.

“Sérignan, Genocide Swarms, Toxic Swarms, cut open a path to the castle. Defeat anyone who stands in your way,” I ordered them.

“By your will, Your Majesty!” Sérignan shouted.

Sérignan led the Genocide and Toxic Swarms ahead and crossed the western gate. The guard captain stationed there really was on the revolution army’s side, and he left the gate open for us.

“Wh-What are *those*?!”

“Monsters!”

The people of Ritsuka saw the Swarms as monsters marching through their streets. Their judgment wasn’t too far off, but they sure were quick to brand anything that wasn’t human a monstrosity.

“Guards! Guards!”

Ritsuka’s citizens called out for the guards, and about 180 guards showed up to stop us. They were cavaliers—a pesky opponent. Their charge could end up slaying the Swarms. But I wasn’t going to let that happen.

“Sérignan, defend.”

“By your will.”

The Genocide Swarms entered a defensive position as well. This maneuver was all we needed to intercept the enemy.

As it turned out, I had nothing to worry about. Just seeing the Swarms struck fear into the hearts of Nabreej’s soldiers. The speed of their charge fell, and most of them stopped before they could clash with their targets.

Sérignan cut down those pitiful soldiers. Their heads went flying, like they’d been waiting for Sérignan’s blade to set them free. Blood gushed from their necks in an almost artistic display.

Then the Genocide Swarms launched a counteroffensive. They charged the cavaliers, slaying horse and rider alike, tearing into them like flurries whipping living flesh into the air.

“Enemy cavaliers suppressed, Your Majesty,” Sérignan reported.

It had taken only a moment. The cavaliers’ terror had cost them their lives, and now they were nothing but piles of flesh. No one could save them. No one could change their fate.

“Good work, Sérignan, Genocide Swarms. Now we invade the castle.”

We began to march on the castle in the heart of Ritsuka, where King Alfonso IV waited. Once we had him, we would gain the antidote that would save Lysa from her agony. We moved in pursuit of that goal.

Ralo and his comrades followed us, horrified by the havoc we left in our wake.

That’s no good. If you’re trying to revolutionize this country, you have to be proud. As proud as I am when I sow chaos and discord in this world.

My Arachnea troops and Ralo's revolution army stormed the castle.

"Guards! Guards! The enemy's approaching!"

A trumpet was blown to signal our presence, and soldiers gathered from all over the castle. The whole group was roughly the size of two infantry companies, meaning the information we'd been given was accurate. The problem was that one of them was made up of heavy infantry.

I turned toward my trusty knight. "Can you handle them, Sérignan?"

Sérignan nodded, as confident and unyielding as ever. "It won't be a problem."

"Ralo, is everything ready on your end?"

"We're ready," Ralo replied. "This is a battle to take back our country. We've got everything we need."

"You won't take another step, you dogs!" the enemy commander hollered. "Taste the power of our Mystery Furnace!"

With that, he sent a signal to someone behind him. Voices of an eerie chorus singing a holy hymn arose seemingly from nowhere. The space around us began to warp and shift. This was bad. It was the same as when the Frantz Popedom had summoned the Seraph Metatron.

"Sérignan, watch out. Something's coming," I warned her.

"I can feel it too, Your Majesty."

Just as we finished our exchange, the space completely distorted, and a force of angels burst forth—low-ranking units summoned by the Marianne faction! These angels were capable of flight and had high attack power.

Maybe Alfonso IV and his cronies clung to the Popedom and bought technology from them before they turned over to Nyrnal's side... What a drag.

I began rattling off orders: "Genocide Swarms, enter defensive formation! Toxic Swarms, prepare antiair fire! Sérignan, we're counting on you! Attack freely!"

"By your will, Your Majesty!"

I watched as the battle unfolded. The angels singled out the Genocide Swarms, who couldn't hit aerial units, but were picked off by the Toxic Swarms' stingers. Upon getting hit by the stingers, they shattered into particles of light and disappeared.

Seeing this, the angels instead pivoted to the Toxic Swarms, cutting into them with their longswords. Unfortunately, the Toxic Swarms' firing rate wasn't that high. They were cut down one by one as they reloaded their stingers.

Dammit, this is going south.

I hadn't expected the Toxic Swarms to take so much damage, so I hadn't produced many of them. If they kept getting taken out like this, it'd be a major blow to our army.

"Everyone, cover for them!"

Ralo and his group moved in to help us. They turned their weapons on the angels, firing their bows and slashing with their swords. Of course, a human militia wouldn't deal much damage to angels, but even so, Ralo's group desperately resisted with all their might.

However, that just made things worse—the angels switched targets from us to the militia, who were helpless against them.

They'll wipe us out at this rate!

But just as I shuddered at that premonition...

"Haaah!"

A black blade cleaved through three angels at once. Sérignan.

Right, she's still fine!

"Sérignan, cut them down!" I commanded.

"By your will!"

Sérignan was a hero unit, and standard units like these angels wouldn't beat her. Relying on her felt like I was pummeling my way through this, but given my limited number of units, I had no choice. I had to treat this like a single-player campaign mission this time.

“Take that!” Sérignan sliced through an angel right in front of me.

Her blade sword tore through the angel’s flesh, reducing them to particles of light. As their heads and limbs were cut off, the angels let out howls of agony and died one by one. The tide of the battle was turning in Sérignan’s favor.

“We will cover for Lady Sérignan!”

“All hail the queen!”

The Toxic Swarms bravely fired, covering for her. Their stingers whizzed through the air, slaying the angels attacking Sérignan. It was an impressive display of coordination.

Sérignan launched her attack on the last remaining angels.

“Haaaaah!”

Her unholy sword moved through the air, cutting the last angels in half. The angels plummeted to the ground and exploded into particles of light.

“It can’t be! That’s impossible! How did our angels lose?!”

“What do we do now?! What can we do?!”

The remaining soldiers panicked.

“No need to lose your nerves,” I murmured and ordered the Genocide Swarms to advance. “All you have to do is die.”

The Genocide Swarms charged at the soldiers and started rending them to shreds, as if dead set on taking revenge for the Toxic Swarms that had died helping them. They cut off the soldiers’ heads, tore off their limbs, and pierced through their chests. Before long, the Genocide Swarms stood in a sea of writhing flesh and blood.

“That takes care of the guards,” I said lightly. “All that’s left is to capture the king.”

“R-Right...” Ralo replied, taken aback. “You Arachnea really are astounding...”

Well, that’s us holding back, actually.

Normally, we’d have hundreds upon thousands of Swarms pushing forward. It was almost a shame we had so few troops this time.

“Onward! Down with the oppressor!”

“Death to the oppressor!”

With the guards out of the way, Ralo’s rebel army surged through the castle like a wave, aiming for the king’s residence. At least they were in high spirits...

“Your Majesty, aren’t those creatures similar to the enemy we fought in the Poppedom of Frantz?” Sérignan asked.

“Yes, that’s right. These are low-ranking summonable angels from the Marianne faction. I don’t know why they’re here, but I guess we’re not the only ones being influenced by the game.”

We’d seen the Marianne’s hero unit, the Seraph Metatron, and now their summonable units, the angels. In that case, did the Nyrnal Empire’s wyverns mean they had technology from the Gregoria faction? If they did, that was bad; the Gregoria was a faction we’d have trouble against.

Their combat units sacrificed speed for firepower, making it difficult to bring them down with numbers. They had a unit called the lindwurm, which could be impossible to defeat even when one rushed them with large numbers of Swarms.

It would be especially difficult for us now, since Sérignan was still only halfway through her evolution.

“Be that as it may, we should go watch our allies grasp victory,” I told Sérignan, and we ventured into the king’s residence.

The rebel army had made a beeline for him, not bothering to destroy any of the decorations and fixtures in their way. I would’ve expected them to pillage or something, but they were evidently more orderly than that.

“King Alfonso!” I heard Ralo shout just as we entered a hall. “You’ve become a dog of the Nyrnal Empire and jeopardized the Nabreej archipelago’s independence! Your sins are grave, and they can only be atoned for with death!”

Ralo dragged the king over to a balcony.

“You fools! You just don’t understand!” the king screamed desperately. “You

don't know anything! I'm not obeying Nyrnal blindly! If the Empire doesn't unify the continent, destruction from the new continent will wash over us! That's why I'm helping them!"

Destruction from the new continent? What is he saying?

"So you're not denying that you did all this to help Nyrnal?!" Ralo roared.

"I did it for all of us!" Alfonso IV howled with tears in his eyes. "If those great armies from the new continent flood in, we'll all be finished! The continent needs a strong nation to lead it!"

Hmm? What's going on in the new continent? What is he so afraid of?

Was this why the Nyrnal Empire had adopted a policy of aggressive expansion? I wanted to hear Alfonso IV's explanation. But before I could say anything...

"You betrayed your own country! Your punishment is death!"

Ralo swung down his longsword, and Alfonso IV's head rolled.

I wouldn't be getting any information out of him now.

"Victory is ours! Our country is free!" Ralo shouted, holding the king's severed head aloft like a barbarian.

The masses gathered before him cheered. "All hail us! All hail the Nabreej archipelago!"

Once it was all over, Ralo approached me and bowed his head. "We're grateful for your help, Arachnea queen. Thanks to you, we defeated the despot. We found the antidote you needed in the medicine vault. It's yours." He handed it over to me. "Truly, thank you. The people of Nabreej owe you a debt of gratitude."

"I didn't do that much," I told him. "But I'll accept the antidote. Thank you, Ralo."

Honestly, I'd have liked to question Alfonso IV about the new continent...but it was too late for that. Regardless, we finally had the antidote. With the trade embargo lifted, Gilbert's ship would be free to pick us up and return us home.

Just wait a little longer, Lysa. We'll be right there!

Whodunnit?

We returned to the mainland on Gilbert's ship and hurried back to Khalkha. Our carriage blitzed ahead, the horse gasping for breath. We practically stormed through Khalkha's gates, jumped out of the carriage, and hurried into the hospital where Lysa was resting.

"We have the antidote!" I said.

"Did you really go all the way to the Nabreej archipelago?!" the doctor asked, shocked.

"Forget that. Hurry up and treat Lysa already!" I beseeched him, my shoulders trembling. "We did what we had to; now it's your turn. Please!"

"Right, leave it to me. So long as we have the antidote, I can treat her."

The doctor took the antidote's bottle and injected it into Lysa's IV drip.

"How long will it take before the antidote kicks in?" I asked.

"She should recover within two or three days. It might take longer, though, given how long she's been under the influence of the Witch's Blow."

Please, Lysa... Wake up...

"Your Ma—I mean, my lady. What do we do next?" Sérignan asked.

"We find the people who did this to Lysa."

That was the only thing on my mind. The ones who'd subjected Lysa to this suffering had to pay.

"Apparently, there's some kind of assassins' guild. We'll choke them out...*thoroughly*. We do not need mercy. The only thing we need is the desire to crush the enemy."

I'd already decided. We'd bury this assassin guild and find out who hired them too.

"But how will we find them?" Sérignan asked.

“I was their original target, and they never killed me, so they’re bound to try again. We’ll use that to our advantage.”

Lysa had only been poisoned because she’d protected me. So if I went around in the open, it should spur the assassins to act.

“You can’t do that!” Sérignan cried. “It’s too dangerous! There must be another way!”

“They tried to get me once, meaning they ought to reveal themselves soon. I planned for this already—I figured I’d serve as a decoy once they figured out they didn’t get me the first time.”

I could understand why Sérignan was against it, but it was the only solution. I’d already made my play, and they were bound to counterattack. All that remained was to take advantage of the situation and beat the enemy to the punch.

“Sérignan, I need you to protect me with all you’ve got and capture the ones who did this to Lysa. All right?”

“If you say so, milady...”

Our plan was set. By the time Lysa woke up, we would catch the ones who hurt her and make them pay dearly for what they did.

Everything was fine. I still hadn’t forgotten my human heart.



The operation began.

Sérignan and I walked around Khalkha. We delayed our exchange with Honnoson Alptel for his own sake. Ventura arranged the delay so as to not get Honnoson caught up in any possible assassination attempts aimed at me.

And so we meandered around Khalkha, through the eateries, commercial district, bazaars, and pleasure districts. I had Masquerade Swarms spread out, ready to protect me from any direction, while I walked around openly like I was begging to be attacked.

The enemy didn’t bite, though. They probably assumed they shouldn’t launch an attack on me so soon after their initial failure. I purposely went into crowded

areas, expecting an assassin to strike there. But the enemy didn't attack at all, making me wonder if they'd possibly given up.

That would be bad.

Eventually, I made my way back to the high-class hotel room prepared for me in Khalkha. "Nothing today, huh?" I murmured to myself.

"The enemy is exercising caution," Sérignan noted.

Days of wasted effort were beginning to grind on my nerves. I bid Sérignan good night and got into my bed.

It was only after I went to sleep that I noticed the disturbance. I jolted awake and sat up in surprise.

"Stay quiet," a voice told me as a dagger was held against my throat.

"Members of the assassins' guild, huh?" I whispered.

I could see my assailants. The one holding the dagger against my throat was a young woman. The dagger was probably laced with Witch's Blow. Even if it wasn't, she only needed to drive it into my throat to kill me.

There was also a middle-aged man warily holding a dagger and keeping watch over the area. I could see one of the hotel's porters lying dead on the floor. They'd probably taken his key and used it to enter my room.

"Don't think foul of us. This is just work," the female assassin told me.

"Who hired you?" I asked sharply.

"We can't tell you that."

"I'm dead either way. The least you could do is tell me," I said, trying to buy time.

"Fine," he sighed, folding with surprising ease. "I suppose I should listen to your last request. From what I know, it was some higher-up in the Senate. We're talking *way* high up. But that's all I know. Ready to die now?"

"There's one more thing I want to know," I said. "How much did your client pay you?"

Buy more time. Even a second longer.

“They paid the guild 500,000 rupinas, I believe. Not to us specifically, though. The two of us are just the ones sent to kill you.”

“Is that right? Then what if I offer you a million rupinas to call off this hit, then?”

I could only hope buying them off would get me out of this.

“Sorry, but no. Breaking a contract would sully our guild’s reputation. I do feel bad for you, but you’re gonna have to die.”

“I see. Well, that’s a pity.” I smirked. “A pity for you, that is, since you’re the ones who’ll be dying here.”

The assassin woman eyed me suspiciously for a moment but tore her eyes away as a battle cry echoed throughout the room.

“Haaaaah!”

The male assassin’s head went flying.

“What?!”

“Get your filthy hands off Her Majesty, you vulgar assassin!” boomed a familiar voice.

It’s about time, Sérignan.

The woman cursed under her breath. “Dammit! You still had guards?!”

“Enough,” I said.

Pulling a Toxic Swarm’s stinger—a lovely little thing full of paralyzing poison—from under my pillow, I stabbed it into the assassin. The woman collapsed to the ground, convulsing as the paralyzing toxin circulated through her body.

“Now then, we have our assassin. What do we do with her now...?” I murmured, eyeing the quivering body.



We discovered the assassins’ guild headquarters thanks to Sérignan’s merciless interrogation techniques. The assassin remained tight-lipped at first, but after we employed torture methods a human never could, she eventually broke down in tears and exposed the location of their HQ.

She was of no use to us after that, so we used a Toxic Swarm's stinger to reduce her to a puddle of molten flesh.

The assassins' guild headquarters was hidden in a restaurant. It was a pretty aged building that looked like it could crumble any day now. It hardly saw any foot traffic, and it didn't look like a place that turned a profit. Using such a dilapidated business as their front actually felt like a poor move to me. It looked so bad that it begged the onlooker to question how it functioned as a business.

"What do we do now, Your Majesty?" Sérignan asked. "Do we storm their base?"

"Not yet." I shook my head. "We need definitive proof of who sent them after us first. Then we crush them. Once we have the proof we need, we can take our time to find the right way to cook them alive."

An assassins' guild getting cooked in a restaurant, eh?

"Then for now we focus on gaining that definitive proof?"

"At all costs."

Crushing the assassins' guild meant we'd be safe in the immediate future. But if we left the person who'd hired them at large, it wouldn't be long before they got adventurers desperate for money or Nyrnal operatives to attack us. We needed that proof to snip those attacks in the bud.

"Well, for the time being, let's have the Masquerade Swarms keep watch. The enemy's bound to make a move now. They failed to get me twice, after all."

With that said, I had the Masquerade Swarms handle surveillance on the enemy. We rented a room in a nearby inn and continued waiting for the enemy. Ventura did ask us why we changed inns, and I told him we had our reasons. I didn't tell him something serious happened, though.

"Your Majesty, a man has just entered the restaurant. It's our target."

"Good work, Maska. All right, the target moved, so let's get going. It's time to launch our raid."

I thought to myself that we should leave his judgment to this country's people.



We closed in on the assassins' guild base. Maska joined us along the way, offering us extra protection. Three thugs stood in front of the building. As we approached, they turned to look at us.

"Hey, ladies. Sorry, but the place is rented out for today. Hit up somewhere else."

Oh?

I was under the impression that the guild knew what we looked like, so I thought they might try to attack us on sight. Apparently not, though.

"No, I think we'll stay here," I said. "Sérignan, go get us a seat."

"Very well, Your Majesty," Sérignan said, drawing her blade.

The next moment, the three thugs sank to the ground in a pool of blood. Sérignan had slashed at them as she drew the blade, an impressively swift technique that had cut them dead before they even realized what happened.

Sérignan turned to me, continuing our little charade. "Now then, please take your seat."

"Yes, I think we'll have dinner here today," I replied coolly.

With nasty smiles on our lips, Sérignan and I kicked down the doors to the restaurant. That was our way of giving a hearty hello.

"Wh-What?!"

"It's that woman and her guard! Charge 'em!"

The men huddled inside the restaurant panicked upon seeing us. All of them were armed.

Talk about a shady establishment.

"Sérignan, Maska, handle them," I ordered.

"By your will, Your Majesty!"

Sérignan blitzed through the restaurant faster than the eye could see, cutting down the men filing into the place. Blood splattered, painting the walls with a

layer of red ink. The Masquerade Swarm used a shortbow to shoot them down. It used the arms of its Mimesis form to accurately wield the bow, and each of its arrows pierced through the chest of an assassin.

“Maska, undo your Mimesis.”

It gave a solemn nod. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Maska’s head split open into a pair of large fangs. Insectile legs burst out of its back, and its human legs turned into a pair of stingers. The assassins’ guild members watched its transformation, their faces turning a hilarious shade of blue.

“M-Monsters! Monsters are coming!”

“Goddammit, no one said they used monsters!”

Once they lost their composure, the battle was all but over. To think I was ever frightened of these people... That these people were the ones that had hurt Lysa. It would have been funny if it weren’t so infuriating.

“H-Help!” one of them called out.

“Don’t falter! They’re just using monsters; this doesn’t mean—”

The other man never finished his sentence. Sérignan lopped off his head, and the Masquerade Swarm sank its fangs into his stomach.

It was a massacre. A one-sided slaughter. The assassins’ guild members were helpless to stop Sérignan and the Masquerade Swarm. Maybe it wasn’t that surprising. After all, they’d made assassination their livelihood, so they might not be skilled at close-quarters combat. The only thing these filthy assassins were good for was stabbing people in the back.

“We’ve taken care of them, Your Majesty,” Sérignan reported.

“Good work, Sérignan. But this is a bit of a pickle. We don’t have anyone to take our orders, do we? I might have to file a complaint to the management about the service here.”

With Sérignan and the Masquerade Swarm in tow, I headed to the back of the restaurant, where we found the manager’s room. This was the place for sure.

“Just don’t kill them, Sérignan. Capture them alive,” I reminded her.

“Understood, Your Majesty.” Sérignan swung her leg to kick the door open.

“Aah!”

“How did you get in here, you bastards?!”

Inside the room, we found a hulking bald man—and one other.

“Hey there, Ventura.” I greeted the familiar face. “Fancy running into you in a place like this.”

The chairman of the Senate, Ventura, was in the assassins’ guild’s headquarters.

“So, what were you discussing?” I asked, my voice laced with sarcasm. “Picking the method for your next attempt on my life?”

“N-No!” Ventura stammered. “I came here on...on business! Other business!”

Oh, Ventura. You can’t hold a poker face to save your life.

“Well, I’m sure this bald guy here can back up your story and tell us what business you have with this guild. You’ll talk, won’t you, big baldy?”

“Who’re you calling bald?! I won’t say a word! The assassins’ guild takes pride in—”

A severed head rolled in front of him, and he immediately fell silent. The moment my question had left my lips, Sérignan had pitched it his way. Old Baldy stared at the disembodied head of his comrade, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“Your scummy friends are all dead,” I told him. “Keeping your mouth shut won’t get you anywhere. If you won’t talk, we’ll *force* you to talk. And then we won’t lend an ear to your circumstances, and you’ll end up being a severed head, just like this.”

I’d have loved nothing more than to kill this guy where he stood, but he was just a tool, a means to an end. My real target here was the man using him. If I wanted to take revenge for Lysa, I needed to get back at both the assassins’ guild and the man—or rather, the dwarf—who had hired them. Ventura.

“You can keep quiet, and then Ventura will foist all the responsibility onto you. Only you’ll end up hanging if that happens. If you’re fine with that, you can stay quiet.”

“Goddammit,” the bald guy cursed. “This guild’s done for anyway... Fine, I’ll talk. He hired us to assassinate you.”

I’m glad you catch on quick.

“Th-That wasn’t what we agreed on!” Ventura squeaked. “You promised full, unconditional confidentiality!”

“Well, you’re out of luck. Nothing more I can do for you,” the bald man replied matter-of-factly.

“Let’s get going, then, Chairman of the Senate. We’ve got so much to talk about.”

He’d pay after what he put Lysa through.



“Ventura got arrested?!” balked the members of the Senate.

Thanks to our “investigation,” Ventura and Old Baldy—who was named Kinnit—were apprehended by Khalkha’s local militia. Their charges were homicide, being an accomplice to a homicide, et cetera.

“That’s right,” I replied. “Ventura’s behind bars. I mean, he tried to get me killed.”

“Ventura tried to have you assassinated? What was he thinking?!”

“Oh, that’s simple,” I explained. “In his mind, teaming up with the Arachnea was such a bad idea that he preferred to join forces with Nyrnal instead.”

From what he’d said, Ventura hated nothing more than the idea of joining forces with the Arachnea. He didn’t believe an alliance between humans and monsters like us was possible, and the moment it failed, Nyrnal would take over. He preferred going turncoat for Nyrnal and securing their position as an ally over that.

There was some logic behind his actions. The Arachnea were inhuman

monsters. We didn't quite count as a nation, and allying with us made him anxious. But if that was the case, he should have just refused our offer outright.

However, there was a reason he didn't. After investigating his estate, we discovered a letter from Nyrnal addressed to him. He'd probably forgotten to dispose of it. The letter said that if Ventura were to successfully assassinate the Arachnea's queen, the Nyrnal Empire would accept the Eastern Trade Union as their vassal while allowing him to govern it under favorable terms.

In other words, he decided to have me assassinated in the name of securing his status in this country.

"That conniving bastard! He tried to sell the Union off to Nyrnal!" Konrad shouted.

Keralt sighed. "And we believed him without suspecting a thing..."

At first, I'd thought Keralt was behind the assassination. She had accepted the alliance begrudgingly, and her guild's adventurers had died while trying to investigate us. It wouldn't have been strange if she'd tried to get back at us for that. But my suspicion was off the mark, and I felt guilty about it.

"Now, then. We finally get to meet, Honnoson Alphtel," I said, turning to face the one person I didn't recognize here.

"Yes, a pleasure to meet you, Queen of the Arachnea."

Like Ventura, Honnoson was a dwarf with a bushy mustache. He was a banker and president of the major Alphtel Bank, which granted him a great deal of influence over the Senate. With Konrad and Keralt willing to ally with us, I only needed Honnoson to agree, and I'd basically have the Senate's approval that our alliance was in effect.

"Honnoson, is there anything you'd like to ask? I'm sure you have your doubts about us and what kind of creatures we are."

"There's a lot I'd like to ask, yes." He nodded. "Despite appearances, I'm very much a bookworm, and I've read quite a few books on insect biology. I've read that insects live in caste-like societies. Is that also true for the Arachnea?"

"Well, to an extent," I replied. "I, the queen, stand as their core. Each strain of

Swarm has its own skill sets and aptitudes, which gives them different roles within the collective. Some Swarms act as builders, while others are optimized for different kinds of battle. I'm not sure if this division of roles counts as a caste society, though."

"So they have no freedom of choosing their professions," Honnoson said pensively. "I suppose that alone makes it close enough to a caste system. I wonder how the Swarms regard that..."

"All Swarms are born into their roles. But they're not denied future possibilities per se. They simply use the abilities they're born with. The Arachnea isn't one to deny individual freedom."

Swarms fulfilled the roles appropriate for their natural capabilities. I had no intention of preventing them from being something else if they so desired, but they simply complied with the division of roles dictated by the game's logic.

"I would love to believe your words, but how can you back them up?" Honnoson asked.

"There's a girl called Lysa. She's a relatively new member of the Arachnea, but we treasure her for her skills. Once she wakes up, you can talk to her and see if the Arachnea cares for castes and classes."

"I'll believe your words...for now," he replied, his tone grave. "We don't have the time to delay our decision until this Lysa wakes up. We've received reports that Nyrnal's army has begun moving toward our borders."

"The Nyrnal Empire..." I muttered.

They were finally marching on this country, it seemed.

"What do you want in exchange for allying with us, Queen of the Arachnea?"

"The right to pass through your territory and to trade with you. That's all."

"Oh, so you want to trade with us?" Honnoson raised a brow. "That's unexpected. Do you have anything to sell us? Items you've pillaged from the countries you conquered?"

"That's part of it, but we can also produce new things on our own. For example, this dress I'm wearing was made entirely by the Arachnea," I told him,

showing off my ensemble.

The Worker Swarms had spun the threads that made this dress, making it as soft as silk, but at the same time difficult to tear. It sold very well in the town of Leen, so I hoped I could sell it here too.

On top of that, the Worker Swarms had recently mastered carpentry. I had them learn it so they could make furniture for me, and they'd produced some promising results. They were also capable of processing the gemstones we mined across the continent. I truly believed their products could open up all sorts of business chances for us.

Once everything was peaceful, we wouldn't need to pillage or barter. We could really start running an economy. And to do that, we'd need to produce things of value, things people would be interested in buying.

"That's a fascinating prospect," Honnoson said. "Would you accept an investment from us?"

"We'll consider it. Once we get to the point of distributing our goods, we'll probably need the extra capital."

After all, we'd need a storefront of some sort to sell our merchandise and connections with other merchants. We'd require a lot of funds to finance that. But right now, any gold we had needed to go toward unlocking new buildings, so we couldn't afford it.

Honnoson gave a satisfied nod. "I think it'd be quite profitable."

"So, do you agree to be our allies?" I asked, bringing the conversation back on track.

"Of course. I'm still curious as to your societal structure, but that's not the matter at hand." Honnoson chuckled. "All right, we will join hands with you monsters—no, with the Arachnea—and try to thrive together. It's surely better than joining forces with Nyrnal."

"Then our alliance is decided," Keralt said firmly.

"So long as you don't try to eat us. That wouldn't be funny!" Konrad joked with a bit of black humor.

“We won’t eat you. We only devour our enemies, and right now, that’s the Nyrnal Empire. If the Empire falls, we won’t have to devour anyone else. Unlike me, the Swarm doesn’t need to eat to survive.”

The thought that I’d finally managed to form an alliance was a calming, comforting one.

“Who’ll be taking over Ventura’s place as chairman of the Senate?” I asked.

“That’ll be Vice-Chairman Paul. He’ll devote himself to running the Senate. Our alliance is as good as confirmed.”

Great. Now we have a way into Nyrnal.

Or so I thought.

Suddenly, one of Keralt’s adventurers burst into the room. “This is terrible!” he cried, hysteric.

“What happened?” Keralt asked him.

“The Nyrnal Empire’s invading! Their army crossed our border and attacked our country! They broke through our border defenses and have reached as far as the Granite Mountain Pass!”

“The war has finally begun,” Honnoson muttered under his breath.

“I suppose we sealed this alliance at just the right time,” Konrad said and turned his eyes on me. “Surely you’ll help us out, ally?”

“Naturally.” I nodded. “The Arachnea won’t allow Nyrnal to occupy your country. We’ll leap to your aid, as per our agreement.”

“Then let’s fight this war,” Keralt declared, rising to her feet. “We can’t avoid it any longer.”

“Leave the mercenaries to me,” Konrad said. “We’ll show them the Eastern Trade Union won’t fall that easily. I’ve fought those Nyrnal bastards plenty of times, and I won’t lose now.”

“I’ll manage the Adventurers’ Guild and gather the nearby mercenary bands,” Keralt said. “Guild contracts include special wartime stipulations we can apply at times like these. Adventurers aren’t suited for fighting other people, but

they'll be useful for reconnaissance."

"I'll take care of financial aid," Honnoson added. "We'll put all we've got into military funds. Nyrnal will just seize all that money anyway if they occupy us."

I cracked a smile. "You're a reliable nation."

"And you're a reliable ally, Queen of the Arachnea. We'll be counting on your reinforcements," Konrad replied with a smirk.

The war in the Eastern Trade Union was finally getting started. At this point, I was feeling pretty attached to this country, and I wouldn't let Nyrnal destroy it.

Let's give them a fight they'll never forget.

"Sérignan, it's time for battle. Let's go."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Come at me, Nyrnal Empire. I'll kick your sorry asses to next Tuesday.

The Battle for the Hapul Wetlands

Northwest of the Eastern Trade Union was a strip of wetlands called Hapul. It was an area abundant with nature but ill-suited for an army. The soldiers' boots would sink into the swampy terrain, slowing the army's march.

This greatly slowed down the Nyrnal army. Their soldiers were all heavy infantry meant to fight effectively against the Swarm, and the weight of their armor easily dragged their legs down into the squishy soil. Presumably, this would be the most difficult obstacle in their way.

"Why are we even spreading our army thin like this?"

"Hell if I know. The higher-ups told us to."

Nyrnal's own foot soldiers didn't know why their country was so obsessed with expanding their borders. The Empire had claimed the former Kingdom of Maluk and was in the process of invading the Dukedom of Schtraut. Nyrnal had also attacked the Poppedom of Frantz, and now the Eastern Trade Union.

The Empire was launching too many wars. As powerful as Nyrnal's military might be, it could only fight on so many fronts.

"Walking through these wetlands is so difficult."

"I think the elephants feel the same way."

Nyrnal's army included a unit of battle elephants. Their bodies were covered in heavy armor, and they marched as a symbol of unrivaled strength. But now, their legs were sinking into the muck, and they couldn't advance properly.

"Yeah. I wish this war would just end already..."

"I wanna go home. I've had it with having to march through foreign countries for so long."

Even as they complained, Nyrnal's soldiers obeyed their orders and marched on.

Just then, a soldier paused. "Hey, did you just hear something?"

“You must be hearing things,” his comrade replied. “I didn’t—”

Before he could finish, a shower of arrows rained down on the battlefield, gouging into the Nyrnal soldiers’ flesh. Even the heavy infantry couldn’t fully defend themselves from the arrows.

“Don’t falter! Keep going! The enemy’s close by!” the commander called out, ordering Nyrnal’s infantry unit to keep marching.

But neither the soldiers nor the battle elephants could move quickly in this terrain. The arrows continued raining down on the army. The infantry toppled over, and the battle elephants rampaged blindly in pain. Their stampede trampled the Nyrnal infantry underfoot. Chaos reigned over Nyrnal’s lines.

“What are you doing?! Keep moving! March!” The commander desperately barked orders, but they fell on deaf ears.

“March, march!”

One group of heavy infantry managed to break through the wetlands, barely holding on to their shields to block the incoming arrows. When they emerged, it wasn’t the Swarm who awaited them.

“One-Eyed Black Wolf Brigade, charge!”

Instead, they were met with a group of mercenaries—light infantry armed with halberds. The mercs formed a line and charged toward Nyrnal’s soldiers.

“Fight back!”

“They’re just infantry! We’re not up against the Arachnea here! Crush them!”

Nyrnal’s soldiers were relieved to see that they weren’t fighting the Arachnea, but that feeling was short-lived.

“Teach Nyrnal’s dogs to fear us! Charge!” ordered their leader, Konrad.

The mercenaries thrust their halberds on Nyrnal’s soldiers. Even heavy infantry couldn’t completely block an attack from such heavy weapons. The halberds tore into their flesh, sending them toppling to the ground.

“Why are you so slow?!” the Nyrnals’ commander barked at them. “The enemy’s right in front of us!”

“But sir! We can’t move that quickly with this heavy armor!” a soldier replied.

Indeed, the heavy infantry were essential units for keeping the Ripper Swarms in check, but they were too slow for typical close-quarters combat. Their inability to move swiftly allowed Konrad’s men to take them out one by one.

“Crossbowmen! Pelt them with bolts!” Konrad shouted to his ranged mercenaries.

The crossbowmen deployed behind the halberdiers, taking aim at Nyrnal’s soldiers.

“Fire!”

At Konrad’s order, the crossbowmen unleashed their bolts. Their barrage swooped down on Nyrnal.

“Gah!” a soldier called out as a well-aimed bolt pierced his skull.

“Those dogs! What are *our* crossbowmen doing?!”

Crossbows had proven effective against the Ripper and Genocide Swarms, and they were just as lethal against heavy infantry. Some soldiers toppled over with their heads shot through. Others were shot through the heart and collapsed, puddles of blood pooling beneath them.

The Nyrnal commander’s subordinate turned toward him. “Our own crossbowmen are still in the back row! They’re still trying to wade through the wetlands!”

“Then have them hurry up! At this rate, they’ll wipe us out!” the commander howled in frustration.

“Now it’s time! Cavaliers, charge!” Konrad shouted, his horse letting out a loud neigh.

“Cavaliers?! Mere mercenaries have cavaliers?!”

The cavaliers Konrad led were lightly armored and carried simple lances. The sound of their horses’ hooves thundered as they charged at the Nyrnal soldiers who’d only just emerged from the wetlands.

“Assume anti-cavalry maneuvers! I repeat, anti-cavalry maneuvers! Surround

them!” the Nyrnal commander ordered as the cavaliers sprang into action.

But by now, Nyrnal’s infantry unit was so greatly weakened by the halberdiers and crossbowmen that they couldn’t defend themselves properly.

The cavaliers raised their voices in a battle cry. “Chaaaarge!”

“Raaaaah!”

They charged into Nyrnal’s infantrymen, thrusting their lances to skewer the enemy soldiers. Blood danced through the air. Even the soldiers who held up their shields to deflect the cavaliers’ charge were eventually stabbed from behind. They fell to the ground, their corpses trampled by the horses.

“Commander, our crossbowmen have arrived!”

“It’s too late already. Far too late!”

By the time Nyrnal’s crossbowmen arrived on the scene, the heavy infantry had been wiped out.

“At least bring the battle elephants over! They’ll make these curs pay!”

A few of Nyrnal’s battle elephants escaped in the chaos of battle, but even so, there were still over a hundred of them left. If they were to charge into the enemy lines, they would trample the soldiers. The halberdiers wouldn’t be able to block them.

“Crossbowmen, prepare to fire! Battle elephants, forward!” Nyrnal’s commander ordered.

At his order, the Nyrnal crossbowmen began firing and the battle elephants surged ahead. The elephants threatened to crush the Eastern Trade Union’s soldiers with their tremendous bodies. However...

“All forces, evade!”

At the last second, the halberdiers moved away, avoiding the battle elephants’ charge.

“What?! They dodged them?!”

Unlike cavaliers, battle elephants couldn’t make sharp turns. Once they began charging, they could only keep moving in one direction. Evading an attack with a

clear trajectory was mere child's play.

"Hit them from the flanks! Take out the elephants!" Konrad cried.

The halberdiers pierced the elephants' hides. The war beasts trumpeted in pain and fell to the ground, thrashing.

"I saw you use battle elephants plenty of times during when you unified the south, so I know all about these things." Konrad sneered at the Empire's men. "Try something new for a change, you Nyrnal shitheads. Go on, what's your next move?"

With both their heavy infantry and war elephants wiped out, the Nyrnal army had only its crossbowmen left.

"Dammit! Retreat! Find a way around!"

"Roger!"

And so, Nyrnal's army began retreating. The crossbowmen fired at the Eastern Trade Union troops to keep them at bay, and then fell back to the wetlands again.

"Don't let them get away! After them! Teach these Nyrnal bastards a lesson!"

Unlike Nyrnal's heavy, sluggish infantry, Konrad's mercenaries were lightly armored and swift on their feet. They ran off in hot pursuit of the enemy crossbowmen. Once Nyrnal's soldiers found themselves slowed by the bog yet again, their fate should have been sealed...but things weren't that simple.

A howl shook the sky as something swooped down from above.

"Dammit! Wyverns! Aerial defenses! Set up aerial defenses!"

Wyverns, the Nyrnal military's pride and joy, descended on Konrad's mercenaries. The mercenaries held up their shields, bracing themselves to block the attack from above.

The impact of their attack shook the air. Twelve wyverns blew fire at once, roasting the mercenaries alive. Their fire breath couldn't be stopped by a mere shield. Their jets of fire set the ground aflame, burning the halberdiers and crossbowmen to a crisp.

“Crossbowmen! Fire!”

Having finished their nosedive, the wyverns soared back up to the sky as the mercenary crossbowmen shot in their direction. A few of the bolts hit their targets, causing the wyverns to shriek in pain and shake off their riders.

Still, the damage they took was relatively insignificant. As the wyverns flew away, largely victorious, the Nyrnal crossbowmen threw away their weapons and fled.

“Damn those wyverns,” Konrad cursed under his breath. “We’ll lose this war if we can’t handle them.”

“We’re supposed to handle those things?” blurted a panicked soldier beside him.

“Yeah. If it weren’t for them, the fight would be even, but we can’t shoot those things out of the sky without a ballista. And having to assemble ballistae on the field all the time is basically impossible.”

Hearing those words, the Arachnea’s queen smirked at Konrad.

“Then it’s our turn,” she said.

Fall Gelb

The Nyrnal Empire launched a sudden invasion of the Eastern Trade Union. The Union consolidated its forces to push back. They holed themselves up in fortresses, hired mercenaries, and closed down the highways. Able-bodied common folk volunteered to fight and made their way to the battlefield.

The independence of the Eastern Trade Union hung in the balance.

“It seems to me like you’re having quite a bit of trouble,” Emperor Maximillian said during a war strategy meeting. He looked around at the generals in attendance, all of whom were pale with fear. “Fifty thousand men. That’s the army I gave you to destroy the Eastern Trade Union—an army I honestly thought was needlessly large. Excessive, even. And yet, the Union hasn’t fallen yet. How could this be? Would you care to enlighten me, Marshal Bronberg?”

Having said this, Maximillian turned his eyes on an aging man.

“The reason is twofold, Your Imperial Majesty,” the man answered. “Our men are struggling with both the terrain and the very nature of the enemy forces. Konrad Crevlas, who commanded a mercenary group that fought us during the unification of the south, is their leader.”

“I see,” Maximillian said curtly. “So you’re saying that our generals are incapable of reading a map or winning a battle against an opponent we’ve fought once before. How regrettable.”

With a scoff, Maximillian narrowed his eyes at Marshal Bronberg and continued in a terribly cold voice.

“Now listen to me, Marshal. The Eastern Trade Union’s army is a mere ten thousand. If you fail to defeat a force of that size with fifty thousand men, be aware that you will be hanged for your failures.”

“Y-Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.” Marshal Bronberg nodded hastily, his face drained of energy. “We will do everything in our power to win.”

“And? Did the Arachnea show themselves?” Maximillian asked, switching

gears.

“No, not yet,” the marshal said bitterly. “We’ve sent some aerial units to scout the situation, but they never returned. We can only assume the enemy had some way of attacking airborne units.”

Knowing the Arachnea might intervene in the Empire’s takeover, Bronberg and his fellow officers had dispatched troops to conduct a preliminary aerial reconnaissance of the enemy’s forces. As he’d told the emperor, none of the wyverns had made it back.

“So they have a way of holding our wyverns in check,” Maximillian mused. “I suppose our only choice is to send out the lindwyrms, then. Marshal Bronberg, I will place sixty lindwyrms under your command. These should be enough to crush the Eastern Trade Union and the Arachnea.”

“We’re grateful for your assistance, Your Imperial Majesty!”

But what *were* lindwyrms?

Maximillian spread out a map and placed a few pawns on it. “Let’s hear your proposal. How do you plan on attacking them?”

“Traversing the northern wetlands is extremely difficult. If we attack from Nyrnal’s center, the Phros River will similarly impede our progress. As such, I believe that if we apply pressure on them from the Phros as a diversion, we’ll be able to successfully strike at the Union’s northeastern fortress line.”

By deploying a decoy force and attacking the fortress line where the Union bordered the Popedom, the Empire could avoid marching its troops through the wetlands *and* catch the enemy off guard.

“You think you can break through?”

“The wyvern unit should be able to handle it if they maneuver skillfully enough. Their fortifications aren’t built to defend against an attack from the sky. A few of them have ballistae, but they’re not optimized for attacking airborne units.”

The fortress line along the northeastern border of the Union had been built to defend the Union’s border with Frantz. Given that the Union wouldn’t expect

wyverns to come from that direction, it was the perfect place to strike.

“I very much hope your gamble pays off. You do know what will happen if you fail, yes?” Maximillian said coldly.

“Y-Yes, I’m well aware...”

Maximillian had already beheaded commanders who’d failed him in the past. The emperor wasn’t merely blowing smoke; he was deadly serious.

“Then let us name this plan. We will call it ‘Case Yellow’—or ‘*Fall Gelb.*’ A simple name should make it harder for the enemy to catch wind of it. After all, we don’t know who might be eavesdropping on us.”

He was not far off. Keralt had already mobilized her adventurers, ordering them to spread out and gather whatever information they could. Some of them were hidden among the soldiers, whereas others used their swift feet to scout the Nyrnal Empire from the outside. Already well aware of this, Maximillian figured someone could be listening in right now.

“I look forward to hearing of your success, Marshal. Because failure will not be tolerated.”

“I understand full well, Your Majesty.”

The contents of this strategy meeting leaked to Keralt’s guild, which reported it to her three days later.

“The enemy will come from the northeast.”

The information spread like wildfire across the Eastern Trade Union. As the Union army fortified its defenses around the river Phros, it also consolidated troops along the fortress line.

The Arachnea, perhaps the very cause of this war, also participated in those preparations.



The Nyrnal army launched its Case Yellow operation.

First, the Empire’s troops attacked the Phros River in a diversion. The Eastern Trade Union sent a vast force to keep them in check. A large-scale battle took

place between the Nyrnal forces trying to cross the Phros and the Union soldiers trying to stop them.

The Eastern Trade Union's mercenaries launched and loaded catapults from the opposite bank while also raining arrows upon imperial soldiers who tried to cross. The river ran red with blood that day, and the Nyrnal forces had to abandon the attack.

A runner hurried into the Union's primary camp. "I come bearing a message! The attack in the northeast has begun!"

"Finally," Konrad whispered under his breath.

Even this intense defensive battle had been nothing but a diversion. The Nyrnal Empire's true aim was to invade via the fortress line to the northeast.

"This unit is to keep the enemy from crossing the Phros!" Konrad shouted. "Even if this *is* a diversion, the Union's in danger if we let them on our shores. Put everything you've got into keeping those Nyrnal dogs off of our soil!"

"Yes, sir!" The mercenaries' resounding cry was filled with vigor.

Knowing that they were fighting to keep their bitter enemy, Nyrnal, out of their beloved homeland really upped morale.

"Will the fortress line last, though?"

That was the real problem. Those fortresses were built to guard the border with Frantz, and they were equipped accordingly. They weren't suited to handle Nyrnal's army. They had very few ballistae capable of shooting upward, and they were open to attacks from the sky.

One had to wonder if they'd last in a battle against Nyrnal, and the Eastern Trade Union's higher-ups seemed to share this concern.

"It's not a question of if the line will hold. It has to," Konrad said firmly. "If they manage to march in from the north, they'll have a direct path to Khalkha. And if Khalkha falls, we'll have to surrender. We can't let them do that. We'll show Nyrnal just how stubborn the Eastern Trade Union can be!"

"That's right! We'll kick Nyrnal's asses and drive them out of our land!" the mercenaries cheered.

“That said, where’s the star of the show, the Arachnea’s queen?” Konrad asked, looking around.

“She’s been in a northeastern fortress the whole time,” one merc replied. “She said the enemy would definitely strike there.”

Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea, had believed Nyrnal would attack the fortresses from the very beginning, since no other point of entry was as accessible. According to her, the northern wetlands made it difficult to utilize their heavy infantry, and the Phros River to the west was too much of an obstacle. This left the northeast fortress line as the only viable way into the Union.

Her predictions were right on the money.

“A commander who can read the enemy’s intentions, eh? Not bad. That’s the kind of ally we need.”

With a smile, Konrad got on his horse and led his mercenary force northeast, toward the fortresses. The decisive battle was about to begin.



My first impression of the place was that it was an unimpressive fortification. Its walls were imposing, but the place didn’t have full cover, and it was completely exposed from above. Its towers were low and didn’t offer a far enough line of sight. They had clearly been built during a budget deficit, making the whole fortress pretty unreliable.

“Sérignan, the enemy’s coming. The Ripper Swarms I sent out to scout ahead report the enemy’s approaching.”

“We are ready any time, Your Majesty.”

Ripper Swarms couldn’t match heavy infantry, so I put their superior mobility to use by having them act as scouts. They stealthily slipped behind enemy lines, hiding in the vicinity to transmit information to me through the collective consciousness.

“The wyverns are the real problem,” I muttered.

Wyverns. In the game, the Gregoria faction used units called wyverns too.

They were flying units with relatively high firepower, making them a tricky opponent for the Arachnea, whose meager aerial units were frail.

On top of that, the game's Marianne faction would shoot all the Arachnea's aerial units out of the sky, making things even harder. Just remembering it pissed me off. The Gregoria was tricky for us as it was. The hardest faction for us was the Necrophage faction, with their necromancer leaders, but the Gregoria was definitely a close second. The Necrophage sacrificed mobility for superior defense and firepower. They were a definite headache.

"How's the fort's reinforcement going?" I asked.

"It is nearly complete," Sérignan told me. "We've set up Eyeball Spires in all of our important positions."

I'd found the Eastern Trade Union's fortresses lacking, so I'd decided that we would improve them ourselves. I had informed the Union's leaders of my intentions, of course, and they'd told us to go ahead. In anticipation of the Nyrnal Empire's army, we'd added a second layer of walls and built Eyeball Spires. I stationed Toxic Swarms in the Eyeball Spires, allowing them to easily dispatch lightly armored units from a distance.

This gave me an impromptu response against the enemy's aerial units. I also posted large numbers of Toxic Swarms on the walls, granting them enough elevation to shoot down enemies below. The Genocide Swarms would wait inside the walls for if and when the enemy penetrated the fortress. Should that happen, they would go and cover for the Toxic Swarms.

As the enemy approached the walls, the Toxic Swarms would whittle down their numbers, softening them up so the Genocide Swarms could make short work of them once the fighting began in earnest.

"Do you think the battle will go well?" Sérignan asked me.

"Who's to say?" I replied with a shrug. "In any case, we have to do this. If the Union falls, it'll have lasting repercussions on our tactics. Besides..."

I paused, taking in the horizon.

"I like this country."

Assassins may have come after me, but apart from that, I enjoyed shopping here. Lysa was still bedridden, but hopefully she'd recover soon, and then we'd be able to enjoy the sights in Khalkha again.

I haven't forgotten my human heart, Sandalphon.

"Huh?!"

Just then, a Ripper Swarm sent me a message that betrayed my expectations.

"They didn't!"

The Gregoria was ruled by draconic creatures. They had wyverns and dragons to fly through the air, sea serpents and leviathans to dominate the sea, and lindwyrms and behemoths to conquer the land.

Of those units, the lindwurm was a relatively tricky opponent for a standard unit. Lindwyrms performed like heavy tanks, and their high defenses meant normal attacks wouldn't dispatch them easily. They could also function like battering rams and had high offensive stats. I had many bitter memories of lindwyrms busting through my defenses.

Right now, there was a force of sixty lindwyrms marching on the fortress lines. The issue was that both lindwyrms and wyverns were sentient creatures capable of acting on their own. They took orders of their own volition, but they would heed their masters without question even if it meant their deaths. Wyverns only had riders so they could be ordered in the heat of battle to take the most effective action in a given scenario. And if wyverns landed, they could independently fight on the ground.

The same could be said of lindwyrms. They didn't require riders, as they were accompanied on the battlefield by commanders who could issue them orders. The Nyrnal Empire must have used the Gregoria's heritage to produce dragons, and just like in the game, these dragons obeyed their masters.

But this time, they were not lorded over by dragons of old like in the game. Their current master was Maximillian, but they were just as loyal. It was the same as how the Swarm were loyal to their queen.

"Sérignan, this is really bad," I said. "They'll probably break the fortress line easily, and through multiple points at that. We'll need your strength."

“Understood, Your Majesty.” She knelt before me. “Order me as you wish. As an Arachnea knight, I will accomplish your will.”

“Good. Then I have something I need you to do.” In my mind’s eye, I helplessly watched the Ripper Swarms’ transmission. “Kill those giant serpents. All sixty of them. They have heavy armor, and they can sweep away anything they run into. Somehow, some way, I need you to stop them all.”



The Empire’s army showed up three hours after the Ripper Swarms’ warning. Since we knew they’d be bringing lindwyrms to the front, I had as many Carrion Cannons as possible arranged along the walls. The lindwyrms had hard scales, but there was still flesh underneath them, and inflicting them with poison would cause continual, residual damage.

As they oozed that chip damage, I’d send in Fire Swarms to bomb them. I could have used them to spew fire on the enemy as well, but the heavy infantry could easily defeat them.

Once the other Swarms weakened and cut down the enemy numbers, Sérignan would swoop in to slay them.

If only that unit would get here in time, I’d bring them into the battle too...

Still, there were sixty lindwyrms. They were among the toughest, most durable standard units in the game; even the Carrion Cannons’ continual poison and the Fire Swarms’ explosions might not be enough to stop them. And once the army reached the walls, bombing wouldn’t be an option anymore.

If there were fewer of them, even just forty, we’d have an easier chance of winning. But sixty was just too many.

“You can count on me, Your Majesty,” Sérignan told me, sounding confident. “I will slay the enemy serpents for you.”

Right. A commander acting timid would have a negative influence on the rest of the battle. I had to believe in our success.

“They’re coming!” a lookout called out from one of the watchtowers.

The nightmare was coming into view. Sixty serpents. They were quadrupedal

reptiles with large, winding tails. The enemy was dead set on crushing us right then and there.

“Can we defeat those things?!” Konrad uttered, his eyes widening as he saw the horde of lindwyrms.

His mercenary band had arrived on time. I had them stationed on and inside the walls to aid the Toxic and Genocide Swarms.

“They’re not undefeatable, but you should be prepared for some casualties.”

“Well, don’t worry about that,” Konrad told me. “A mercenary’s always ready to lay down their life.”

I found the man’s tough disposition encouraging in this trying time.

“Can we use battering rams against them?” he asked me. “Maybe we can put a few together with the materials we have here?”

“I never tried it, so I can’t say. But it doesn’t hurt to try. Anything will do so long as it can deal damage.”

At this point, I wasn’t going to be picky with what we used in the fight; our enemy was too troublesome for such trifles.

“Our folks’ll craft a battering ram, then. I just hope we win.”

“We have no choice *but* to win,” I replied.

If we didn’t, the lindwyrms would push through, and there’d be nothing to stop them from burning Khalkha to ash. I couldn’t let that happen.



The lindwyrms crept ever closer, the embodiment of an approaching catastrophe. To stop them, I had my Swarms attack from atop our unreliable walls.

“Carrion Cannons, open fire!”

My Carrion Cannons fired at the enemy all at once, blasting the lindwyrms with polluted, rotting flesh. It had no visible effect on them, but they were definitely poisoned. By pelting them with poison, we diminished the enemy’s stamina, ensuring they’d be weakened enough for us to defeat by the time they

reached the walls.

“Your Majesty, they’ll be in the Fire Swarms’ attack range shortly.”

“Yes, I know, Sérignan.”

As the Carrion Cannons continued blasting the enemy units, we ushered in Fire Swarms to bomb them. I didn’t like using them as cannon fodder, but I wasn’t at liberty to do otherwise. We had to stop those serpents from closing in on us, no matter what.

Forgive me, Fire Swarms.

I projected that thought into the collective consciousness as I sent them the order to self-destruct. The Fire Swarms, which lay hidden underground, blew up with thundering explosions. Sediment went flying through the air, and their blasts shook the lindwyrms. The gigantic serpents faltered, and though it didn’t kill them, they took visible damage.

The suicidal attacks didn’t stop there. A second and third wave followed, each one staggering the lindwyrms. But it wasn’t enough to defeat them. They really were among the toughest units in the game. Fighting them was so irritating.

With all the Fire Swarms dead, the lindwyrms surged toward the walls—our final line of defense. And then...

“Sérignan, you’re up!”

“By your will, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan jumped down the walls, landed with feline delicacy, and charged at the lindwyrms. Noticing the approaching enemy, the lindwyrms began breathing fire at her. But their fire breath was only as strong as the wyverns’, if not weaker, and it did nothing to stop Sérignan.

She lunged at one of the lindwyrms and thrust her longsword into its neck. For a second, it looked like its thick scales would deflect her corrupted holy sword, but Sérignan came out the victor. Her sword sank into its throat, releasing a gushing spray of blood from the reptilian’s neck.

Even though she had wounded that lindwurm, however, the rest kept storming along, paying no heed to their fallen comrade.

“Sérignan! You think you can do this?!” I shouted, feeling my heart sink.

“I shall try!”

Don't panic. Sérignan can handle this.

As powerful as they were, lindwyrms were still standard units. They'd always lose in a one-on-one battle with a hero unit. Sérignan would never lose to a lindwurm. But the problem wasn't whether she could beat them. It was whether she'd be able to beat them *fast enough*.

The lindwyrms were already closing in on our walls. It would only be seven or eight minutes before the foremost lindwurm would make contact with our defenses. But just as that thought crossed my mind...

“I did it, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan had slain one of the lindwyrms, but there were still fifty-nine of them left. The situation was hopeless. Longsword raised, Sérignan slashed at another lindwurm's neck. Her attack was initially deflected, but after a few attempts, she was able to rend her target's flesh. All the while, the rest of the lindwyrms continued their march uninterrupted.

Suddenly, I felt a violent quake beneath my feet. The wall opposite the one I was standing on had been bashed by one of the lindwyrms and was crumbling into shattered stone. The lindwyrms had begun their destructive charge in an attempt to destroy our walls.

Oh, not good. They're going to break through.

The Toxic Swarms rained stingers upon them, but the dragons' tough scales rendered their shots mostly useless. The most they could do was chip away at their stamina.

“Are you ready, men?!” a voice rang out over the walls, yanking me out of my pessimism.

“Yes, sir!”

Konrad and his men had built an impromptu battering ram and towed it close to the lindwyrms. Those men were surely about to die. The lindwyrms' attacks were powerful enough to shake the walls, after all. A human wouldn't be able

to withstand the force of their charge. They'd just turn to red stains on the ground and nothing would be able to stop the lindwyrms then.

I saw that they were doing everything in their power, and it inspired me to do the same, lest I bring shame to my troops. The Arachnea wasn't a weak enough faction to be chased away by a bunch of stupid snakes, after all!

"Toxic Swarms, open fire!"

At my order, the Toxic Swarms hidden behind the two layers of walls fired their stingers at once. The storm of stingers hit the lindwyrms, and while some of them were deflected, many penetrated the reptilians' flesh. Those lindwyrms could effortlessly deflect one or two stingers, but not such a dense barrage.

Even then, they stayed on their feet and continued their assault on our walls.

"Haaah!"

Meanwhile, Sérignan downed a third lindwurm, which had already been weakened by the Carrion Cannons and the Toxic Swarms. It looked like she was killing them fast and faster now. Had the poison finally started debilitating them?

"Let's go, boys!"

"Kill those stupid lizards!"

Konrad's men joined in with their battering ram. They bashed it into a lindwurm, shaking its large form. They didn't kill it, but they did manage to stall it for a little.

If we can just keep going... If we can just keep hitting them...

"Wyverns incoming!" yelled a lookout.

Oh, no. Not wyverns, not now!

I quickly shifted my attention to the aerial enemies. "Toxic Swarms, focus on the wyverns! Shoot them out of the sky!"

"By your will, Your Majesty!"

If the wyverns were to breathe flames on them from above, Sérignan and Konrad would be in danger. Sadly, the Toxic Swarms were my only units capable

of firing into the air. Their stingers zoomed through the sky, but the wyverns deftly dodged them as they dived toward the earth. Several wyverns took direct hits from the stingers and fell to the ground, but a handful managed to get through the barrage.

“Keep shooting!” I cried, cheering the Toxic Swarms on. “Keep Sérignan safe!”

Encouraged by my words, the Toxic Swarms unleashed another intense wave of stingers. Their attacks shot down two-thirds of the wyverns swooping down on us, but the remaining third were nearing the ground. There was no time to shoot another volley.

The wyverns opened their jaws and sprayed the ground with fire, along with the lindwyrms standing over it. A sea of flames swelled up from the earth. The lindwyrms were mostly unaffected, so the majority of the casualties were Toxic Swarms.

Thankfully, Sérignan and Konrad weren’t in the wyverns’ line of fire. But the enemy wyverns were swooping down for a second attack, and my Toxic Swarms readied their stingers once more, even within the flames.

As the fight raged on between heaven and earth, the battle over the fortress was moving along too. Sérignan had killed seven lindwyrms, and her slaying speed just kept picking up. Konrad’s men were using their battering ram to stagger the lindwyrms, but the walls looked like they were on the verge of collapse.

At that moment, the balance was broken when a lindwurm shook its head wildly and blew the battering ram back.

Humans couldn’t put up a fight against a monster like that, after all.

After knocking Konrad’s battering ram away, the lindwyrms were free to bash down the Arachnea’s palisades, leaving only a final layer of wall.

In that case...

“Toxic Swarms, fall back! Genocide Swarms, forward!” I ordered.

There was only one thing left to do.

“Raaah! Don’t falter, men!” Konrad roared. “Show these monsters what a

mercenary's pride is all about!"

Konrad's mercenaries managed to pick their battering ram back up and smash it into a lindwurm's flank.

"Groooar!" The lindwurm howled as it took a blow to its relatively unarmored flank.

The creature flailed about, stomping and lashing out at anyone around it.

"Have no fear, men! We're the One-Eyed Black Wolves! This isn't enough to do us in!" Konrad shouted, prompting his men to shove their ram into the lindwurm's flank a second time.

I had to wonder if they could actually take it out, but just then, the walls crumbled once again. To make things worse, another lindwurm turned its head toward the mercenaries and blew a jet of flames at the battering ram.

"Blast it! This is as far as we go!" Konrad said.

Yeah... It was close. You were this close to taking it out all on your own.

"Your Majesty, you must evacuate!" Sérignan shouted as she cut down her tenth lindwurm. "It's too dangerous!"

She was right. I was standing directly in the lindwyrms' path. I had to run. I ran across the walls in an attempt to get down, feeling pitiful every step of the way. The only thing I could do right now was run.

But then the ground shook under me. The rumbling threw my body off the walls, sending me in a free fall toward the ground. My crash landing knocked all the air out of my lungs, and pain shot through my body.

I was sure I had died right there and then.

"But..."

As that happened, I saw something amazing. My ace in the hole—the unit I'd had on standby—had made it here in time.

"Now, come forth, Dreadnought Swarm," I whispered, my lips curling up into a smile despite my aching body. "Crush them all."

The Dreadnought Swarm was basically a ground-based battleship. It looked like a rhinoceros beetle with countless, centipede-like legs. It was four times the lindwyrms' size, and it moved thirty times slower from a Genocide Swarm.

But its offensive power was the highest in the game, outmatched only by hero units.

It was too slow to have been of any use in the battles up until now, but this time was different. We were not here to invade, but to defend. That meant a prolonged fight in one spot. Thanks to that, the Dreadnought Swarm had arrived right when we needed it most.

Having descended upon the ideal battlefield, it charged toward the lindwyrms trying to tear through the walls with heavy, rumbling footsteps. The creatures clashed, creating a violent shockwave.

The Dreadnought Swarm bore down on a lindwurm, pushing it down and threatening to crush it. The lindwurm struggled for a few moments before blood billowed out of its mouth and it was squashed into a splatter of flesh.

"Your Majesty, I believe we have a chance to win now!" Sérignan exclaimed as she finished off her eleventh lindwurm.

I managed a nod. "Yeah, I think so too, Sérignan!"

The Dreadnought Swarm slowly approached the lindwyrms. Realizing now wasn't the time to focus on the walls, the lindwyrms turned their focus to attacking the Dreadnought Swarm. Giant monster clashed with giant monster.

Of course, even the Dreadnought Swarm froze up when it was attacked by nearly fifty lindwyrms at once, but it soon resumed its charge, crushing everything in its path. As the lindwyrms tried to fight back, they were caught beneath the giant insect's feet and crushed under its weight. A few of them tried to come at it from the flanks. But even within the game, the Dreadnought Swarm had a defense stat high enough to put the lindwyrms to shame, and it wouldn't die that easily.

"Go, go, Dreadnought Swarm!" I offered support through the collective consciousness. "Crush them all! Bury Nyrnal's forces!"

A force of wyvern reinforcements joined the battle, plunging down toward

the Dreadnought Swarm. Their fiery breath lightly charred its black carapace, but compared to the Dreadnought Swarm's mighty defense, their flamethrower breath was no more potent than match fire.

"Haaah!"

Sérignan pounced on the lindwyrms crowded around the Dreadnought Swarm. With her help, the lindwurm numbers were steadily shrinking. Blasts of fire shot at her now and again, but she quickly avoided them and cut down the weakened, poisoned lindwyrms.

Using her unique ability, Sérignan produced threads to swing and leap from one lindwurm to another, slaughtering them as she went. The Dreadnought Swarm trampled the others underfoot, and soon the great lindwurm force was reduced to less than twenty.

"I think we won," I said.

My sigh of relief, however, came too soon.

"One of the enemy's big lizards is charging at the wall! It's trying to knock the walls down!"

The remaining lindwyrms made a beeline for the walls. They must've realized that trying to fight the Dreadnought Swarm was a reckless endeavor.

"Blast these lizards! Just let that big bug crush you into paste!" Konrad raged as he walloped a lindwurm with his battering ram.

The creatures ignored him and rushed the remains of the first layer of walls, completely crumbling it to bits. Then they busted through the second layer and finally appeared before us.

"Genocide Swarms, forward! Kill the enemy!"

But I knew a Genocide Swarm couldn't beat the lindwyrms one-on-one. There was somewhere between ten and twenty of them left, so my Genocide Swarms wouldn't win easily. Their strong fangs tore into the lindwyrms' flesh and throats. The lindwyrms shook their heads, trying to force the Genocide Swarms off, but my Swarms held fast.

With the Genocide Swarms chomping on their necks, a few lindwyrms keeled

over. But other lindwyrms walked over their corpses and engaged the Genocide Swarms. This time, the lindwyrms breathed fire, killing the Swarms in their path, but they were eventually bitten to death in much the same manner.

One lindwurm managed to nudge its head just over the breached wall, only for its neck to be bored through by a pair of fangs. It perished. Two more lindwyrms soon stepped over its body. They swept aside the Swarms pursuing them, blew fire from their mouths, and stormed through the Genocide Swarms' line of defense.

"Sérignan, we're short on hands here! Can you come over?!" I called out to her.

"Of course!"

She dashed over to us and swung her sword, slaying a rampaging lindwurm in one blow. After enduring the poison for so long, the lindwyrms had very little stamina left.

"Dreadnought Swarm, take care of any remaining enemies!"

On my order, the Dreadnought Swarm hunted down the surviving lindwyrms. It stomped on them, crushing the reptilians with its hulking weight. There were none left to stop it. Before long, every last lindwurm was wiped out.

"So the lindwyrms are all dead..."

Sérignan, Konrad, and the Dreadnought Swarm had won us this battle.

"Genocide Swarms, forward! Find and destroy all the remaining enemies!"

The Genocide Swarms chased down the remaining heavy infantry. The Dreadnought Swarm was too slow to efficiently kill any foot soldiers, but the Genocide Swarms could easily catch up.

"You won't escape, you measly peons!" Sérignan bellowed.

With fluid grace, she made her way across the battlefield, catching up to two fleeing infantrymen and preparing to cut off their heads. My knight was just so reliable.

"The enemy's falling back, men! Forward!"

“Yes, sir!”

The mercenaries excelled at fighting other humans. They swung their halberds down upon Nyrnal’s fleeing soldiers. They slew one, two, four, and soon eight of them.

“We won,” I breathed when the last of the enemy units had fallen. “A complete victory.”

The enemy had no way of breaking through our defensive line.

We won. Victory is ours. We did it!

My joy rippled through the Swarm, and they clicked their claws together in a gleeful gesture.

“We’ve done it, Your Majesty!” Sérignan said.

“Yes, and it’s all thanks to you,” I told her. “It’s a victory for all of us.”

Upon seeing our combat prowess, Nyrnal’s soldiers had turned tail and fled. It was clear they had no intention of attacking us again.

It’s finally over. We won. We won this war.

At the time, I had no idea that the enemy had left us a terrible parting gift. And in Khalkha, of all places...

The Ravages of War

Just as Grevillea believed she'd turned the tables with the appearance of her Dreadnought Swarm, a force of wyverns appeared in Khalkha's skies.

"Wyverns! Wyverns are coming!"

They took advantage of the city's lack of aerial defenses to swoop in from high above the Phros River. The wyvern formation nosedived down to Khalkha and began blowing fire onto the buildings and streets. Grevillea believed that consolidating one's forces was a basic tactic in war and hadn't expected the wyverns to attack a city so far away from the front lines. After all, even if the enemy attacked a city from the sky, they couldn't occupy it afterward.

"Help! Help me!"

"Aah, it's burning... My shop is burning..."

Terrified civilians ran in search of cover. Shops that had been in business for generations became nothing but cinders. The throngs of people trying to escape crammed Khalkha's streets.

Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea, had positioned herself on the front lines and left the capital practically defenseless. The city's militia fired a ballista every now and then, but there were too few of them to make a difference.

"The shelter's over there! Guide the civilians to safety!"

As the wyverns' fire raged through the streets, the local militiamen guided the civilians to stone shelters underground. But as the people of Khalkha ran toward safety, the wyverns rained merciless torrents of flame upon them. The surface soon became an inferno.

"Over here! Come on! Hurry!" the militia captain shouted.

A mother urged her two young children, "Keep going; we'll be safe soon. Hold on to me and don't let go! No matter what!"

"Okay, mommy!"

The father of this family, like many others, had stepped away to fight in the war. Thus, it was up to the mother to guide her children to safety here and now. They ran through the streets, fleeing for their lives, as the people around them burned in dragonfire.

“Let’s go!” The mother sprinted ahead, pulling her children along.

They ran toward the shelter with all their might. The keen-eyed wyverns noticed them and attempted to blast them with fire, but only the families around them endured the attack. Thankfully, the family of three managed to get to safety.

But just as the mother thought they were safe, a nearby burning house collapsed, falling down upon them.

“Go on!”

The mother thrust her children out of harm’s way and fell to the ground as the house caved in all around her.

“Ugh...”

Although their mother was trapped under the house, the children managed to escape.

“Go! The shelter’s over there!” she called out to them, pointing to the shelter.

“But you said not to let go of your hands!”

The little ones tried to lift the house’s beams and save their mother, but they only succeeded in burning their hands.

“Forget about me! You two have to live on!”

Her children wept, unable to heed her desperate cries. One shouted, “No! I don’t want to leave you!”

Having confirmed that the children were still alive, a wyvern rider urged his mount to finish them off.

But the wyvern’s blast never came.

“Haah...!”

A ballista bolt gouged into the beast, which floundered in midair and crash-

landed on the ground. The rider who'd targeted the children was shaken off its back during the wild descent and fell to the earth, hitting the flagstones with a bone-crunching red splatter. The deadly threat of wyvern and rider had been eliminated in the blink of an eye.

"Go ahead!" yelled Lysa, the one who had slain the wyvern. "Hurry to the shelter! We'll save your mother!" With her longbow in hand, she helped the militia rescue the surrounding citizens.

"Lady Lysa! There's a wyvern on your two!" a militiaman told her.

"I've got this!"

Lysa pivoted a little to the right, nocked her bow, and fired with one fluid motion. The projectile pierced the wyvern and sent its rider plummeting to the ground.

"Where's the next one?!" she asked.

"On your six!"

Lysa shot down the wyverns one by one. The flying reptilians tried to counterattack, but Lysa's sharpshooting was too precise for them to get close. Soon, they realized their numbers were shrinking, and fear settled in the wyvern riders' hearts.

"Wyverns at four o'clock!"

"They're coming in on your three!"

Lysa kept firing at the wyverns, the enhanced strength of her Swarm form boosting her shots.

"We've rescued the woman! Let's move!"

"Roger!"

Seeing that the militia had retrieved the woman from under the house, Lysa dashed over to her next target. She'd sent a distress signal to the queen of the Arachnea, but she hadn't gotten a response yet. She knew Grevillea was in the middle of a decisive battle and couldn't move even if she *was* aware that Khalkha was being attacked. Nonetheless, there was no way the queen would have predicted this.

“Your Majesty, please hurry back! At this rate, Khalkha might...!”

As powerful as Lysa’s sharpshooting was, she had her limits. She couldn’t shoot down every single wyvern attacking the capital, and fifty thousand citizens still had yet to be evacuated—all easy pickings for the wyverns.

And so, Lysa did her best to buy time for them to evacuate. She was still suffering from the aftereffects of the Witch’s Blow, but she fought on just the same. After all, this city was a place where she and the queen had spent time together. A place rife with precious memories...



“I’m sorry we’re late, Lysa,” I said upon arriving in Khalkha.

“No, don’t worry.” Lysa shook her head. “I could tell through the collective consciousness that you were fighting a very hard battle.”

I’d made it here just when the wyverns were about to launch their final attack. The city had already mostly been burned down. As I thought back to how Khalkha had looked before the chaos, I ordered the Toxic Swarms to shoot the wyverns out of the sky. The aerial units melted into liquid, sending their riders hurtling to the earth.

“How dare you do this to our city, you bastards!”

“Nyrral scum!”

Khalkha’s citizens grabbed the fallen riders, their minds set on retribution. These scoundrels had destroyed their city without mercy, and they would have to pay.

I wasn’t going to stop them, of course.

“Hang them! Hang these dogs!”

“I’ll hang them myself!”

As the masses bristled with white-hot rage, they got some ropes from some of the still-intact buildings and strung up one of the wyvern riders. The man tried to resist, but to no avail. He died a slow, agonizing death. But one man’s death wasn’t enough to quell their anger.

“Hang the rest of them too!”

“Hang them! Hang theeem!”

At that point, I felt my own wrath bubbling up. The restaurant we’d dined in was nothing but rubble. The bazaar we’d toured was in ashes. The commercial district we’d gone shopping in was a smoldering heap.

All these people wanted was peace, but Nyrnal had chosen to send their wyverns to Khalkha instead of the front lines and reduce this city to ruins. The cowardice of their tactics enraged me.

Having finished the battle in the northeast, Konrad and his mercenaries entered Khalkha. Upon seeing the burnt remains of the city, they raised their voices and hurled disparaging words at Nyrnal. They were apparently even angrier than I was, which made sense; this *was* their capital.

Families whose homes had been destroyed by wyverns wept, but the mercenaries who should have defended them had done nothing to stop the assault. The mercs’ shame and indignation swirled into tempestuous anger. Konrad was already a hotheaded man to begin with, so he couldn’t stand for the Empire’s craven tactics.

“Listen up, men! We can’t let this keep us down!” Konrad raised his voice, breaking through the gloomy air. “Don’t act like their wrecking of our city is the end of the world! Khalkha hasn’t fallen yet! It’s still in your hands! Nyrnal just set it aflame like the spiteful cowards they are!”

He spoke in an attempt to rouse his people.

“And since they did that, it’s only fair we spite them by rebuilding Khalkha so it’s better than ever before! We’ll make them wonder how a city they once burned to the ground could be so glorious!”

Konrad’s impassioned words weren’t just an attempt at encouragement; he truly believed in his message. This man had the kind of charisma I lacked. I was impressed with his leadership skills.

Your subordinates are lucky to have you, Konrad.

“And we’re lucky to have you, Your Majesty!” Sérignan said, sensing my

thoughts.

“That’s good to hear, Sérignan,” I replied, looking at Konrad. “I can’t make those kinds of rousing speeches, though.”

“Us mercenaries will help as you all rebuild!” he continued. “If nothing else, you can count on the One-Eyed Black Wolves to help Khalkha! For free, if need be!”

Konrad’s words were met with thunderous applause. Those who’d lost everything probably couldn’t begin to imagine how they’d rebuild. But with the mercenaries’ help, the future seemed a little brighter.

“The Arachnea will also help you rebuild Khalkha,” I added. “We have talented workers who will help reconstruct your stores and houses. We, too, have important memories of Khalkha.”

When a single Worker Swarms learned how to refine lumber and metal, that knowledge quickly spread to the entire group. The Arachnea’s power didn’t just lend itself to destruction; we could use it for restoration too. Now was the time to put those skills to use.

People who had lost their homes would need new residences. Workers who’d lost their businesses would need new workshops and storefronts. There were so many things that needed to be rebuilt.

“I knew we could count on you, Arachnea!” Konrad said with a booming voice. “You are our dependable allies! Come on, men! Now’s not the time for moping around! We will reclaim our city with our own hands! We can’t let the Arachnea do our jobs for us, can we?!”

“That’s right!” a citizen called out. “We’ll rebuild the city ourselves!”

“We will rebuild Khalkha!” Konrad said again, pumping his fist into the air. “That’s how we’ll show we’ve beaten the Nyrnal Empire! We’ll make this city into a symbol that proves even they can’t defeat us!”

His words, full of endless optimism, were encouraging to hear. After pitching in my own promises, I couldn’t very well retreat. I ordered Worker Swarms from all around to come focus on restoring Khalkha.

Even if the Worker Swarms didn't know how to construct these buildings, they'd just need to follow a craftsman's example so the rest of them could learn. The collective consciousness allowed them to learn with optimal efficiency.

Soon, one Worker Swarm learned how to build walls. Another learned how to make bricks. Yet another learned how to build ceilings. The knowledge they absorbed quickly spread to the others, and the Worker Swarms all learned the ins and outs of how to create human structures.

Keep it up, Worker Swarms. Work hard!

Meanwhile, we had to prepare for the next battle. In this conflict, we would strike a blow against the source of this tragedy—the Nyrnal Empire.

The Phros Offensive

“So, the operation failed.”

A cold voice echoed through the Nyrnal Empire’s military headquarters.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Marshal Bronberg squeaked. “The enemy introduced a new breed of monster during the battle, and we couldn’t break through the fortress line. But we did show them the steep price for opposing the Empire. We put their capital city, Khalkha, to the flame!”

“Your plan still failed,” Emperor Maximillian said with clear irritation in his voice. “And I’m surprised you have the gall to say that when all you did was give them a reason to join forces with the Arachnea. Remember, I ordered you to succeed in this operation no matter what. I gave you sixty lindwyrms to do it, and you still failed? Yet you think burning Khalkha taught them a lesson?”

“B-But the new creature from the Arachnea was frighteningly powerful, and —”

“That changes nothing. And rather than burn Khalkha, you should have occupied the city. Did that not cross your mind, you senile old man? Thanks to your stupidity, the Arachnea can waltz right through the Eastern Trade Union and invade us. Now we need to do something to stop that. We have to launch a second attack.”

Maximillian looked down at the map.

“The lindwyrms can cross the Phros River. We’ve avoided doing so thus far because of the dangers, but we’re in no position to worry about that anymore. We must cross the Phros and apply pressure to the enemy. And then...”

His eyes trailed to the edge of the map.

“We’ll traverse the elven forest and take control of Schtraut. If there’s no road through the forest, we’ll have the lindwyrms create a path.”

The forest he spoke of was the same one the Arachnea’s queen had promised

to protect.

“But first, we start with the Phros. Whether we can take control will determine whether we can protect our homeland. Capture the Phros, no matter what.”

Marshal Bronberg nodded. “Understood, Your Majesty. We will succeed this time.”

“Oh, you thought I was speaking to you, Bronberg?” Maximillian asked with a raised brow. “No, I think I’ve had quite enough of your bumbling incompetence. You will be court-martialed for your failure, and I will decide your punishment right this minute. With this, your role in this war is over.”

The man turned pale, stammering, “Wh-What do you—”

“You will be beheaded for insubordination. It’s decided. Soldiers, execute him at once.”

“Wait! Please, Your Imperial Majesty, wait! Their new monster was simply that fearsome! Were it not for that, Khalkha would have been ours for the—”

Maximillian’s personal guards arrested Marshal Bronberg and dragged him away to the gallows. The marshal bellowed all the while, claiming that he hadn’t failed through any fault of his own. His screaming only stopped once his head was severed.

“Now then, we’ll need a new commander to establish a bridgehead at the Phros,” Emperor Maximillian said coolly, scanning the attending generals. “General Brauchitsch, would you take command?”

“I would be honored, Your Majesty,” the general said, straightening his posture.

“It’s decided, then. I will give you a hundred lindwyrms and an army of thirty thousand men. The enemy should be careless following their victory, so take advantage of that. May the Empire emerge victorious.”

“May the Empire emerge victorious!”

Thus, the Nyrnal Empire’s plan of attack on the Phros River was underway. While the Arachnea and the mercenaries were still drunk off their victory, the

ever-greedy Nyrnal set forth in pursuit of victory...



The Phros River flowed from the Eastern Trade Union's northern wetlands into the southern sea. Due to its location, it had been the subject of repeated invasions from the Nyrnal Empire. The Empire sought to secure the river as a powerful position from which to defend their country. For the Union, it was an important waterway they couldn't afford to relinquish to Nyrnal.

A momentary calm settled over the river. The apparent central force of the Nyrnal army had been wiped out, so for now, the river seemed safe. A handful of mercenary groups were to guard the place and keep an eye out for any enemy soldiers attempting to cross.

Suddenly, one merc raised his head in alarm. "Huh?! Enemies ahead! And there are...over five thousand of them?!"

"What?!"

The guards blew a horn, alerting the commander and the rest of the soldiers. There were more than just five thousand troops. They were in the tens of thousands. And worst of all, they were accompanied by gigantic serpents—the lindwyrms.

"Send a runner to Commander Konrad! Let them know the Phros is under attack!" shouted the leader of the assembled mercenaries.

"Roger!"

A runner quickly mounted a horse and bolted out of the camp to deliver the news to Konrad. But he didn't make it far before an arrow pierced through his chest. He fell from his horse, coughing up blood.

"Dammit!" the mercs' leader cursed, seeing the runner had died. "They're planning on keeping the river pinned down! But wait...the Arachnea's bugs!" He recalled what he'd been told about the collective consciousness. Turning to face a nearby Ripper Swarm acting as a scout, he shouted, "You there! Contact your queen! Tell her the Phros is under attack! We need reinforcements quickly, or the Phros may fall into enemy hands!"

His words rippled throughout the consciousness and rapidly reached the mind of the Arachnea's queen.



"An attack on the Phros?!" I whispered, shocked. "The enemy's hellbent on keeping up the offensive!"

I'd received the message in the middle of our efforts to rebuild Khalkha.

"I figured they'd attack again at some point, but this quickly...? They must have a lot of soldiers. Or maybe they're under some amateur trying to flood the Union with Nyrnal's troops. Either way, this is bad."

I tapped into the Ripper Swarm's consciousness and observed the situation at the Phros.

"A hundred lindwyrms? You're joking..."

But it was no joke. One hundred lindwyrms were crossing the river along with the Empire's army. That was a much larger force than the one they'd sent to the fortress line. And this time the area had no walls, Carrion Cannons, or Dreadnought Swarms. How were we going to defeat them now?

"Well, we just have to do it, with or without our best assets. If the enemy's attacking, we've got to respond. Thankfully, we have the Worker Swarms right here, so if we take them along, we could build some walls. And from there...I hope we can win somehow."

The Dreadnought Swarm was too slow, and it was still in the fortress line in the northeast region of the Union. It would take dozens of hours to call it over, and we didn't have that kind of time.

"Konrad! The Phros River is under attack! They have a hundred of those lindwyrms!" I called out.

"What?! A hundred more of those things?!" Konrad replied, balking.

"Unfortunately, we don't have any allies to help us this time around. Think you could handle it?"

"Sure we can. Like hell we're gonna hand our land over to them on a silver platter."

He gathered his subordinates, who had been busy with carpentry work, and briefed them about the situation.

“Let’s meet at the Phros. And if possible, let us emerge victorious,” I said.

“Nah. We’ll definitely win, right?”

While one monster after another crossed the Phros River, Konrad and I made our way there as quickly as possible.



The Phros was a long river. Since it was heavily used as a waterway, it was well maintained and had multiple ports. This meant that if one had to cross the river, it was risky but still manageable.

The problem was that this applied to Nyrnal as much as it did us.

Still, even a hundred lindwyrms weren’t nearly enough to completely occupy the banks of this vast river. After landing, the lindwyrms spread out and deployed under multiple commanders to fully exercise their great strength. They broke through the defensive line the Eastern Trade Union had painstakingly set up and marched on the country.

But therein lay our chance.

At present, I was huddled in the riverside headquarters tent with Konrad, Keralt, Sérignan, and Lysa.

“The enemy was foolish enough to split up its forces. This means we can try to take them out one by one,” I said.

“They launched an invasion to stop us from crossing the Phros ourselves, and to do that, they spread their troops quite thin. That means that each individual point is only lightly defended. By contrast, our forces are consolidated here, so we can pick them apart. I think that’s our only chance of winning.”

In this operation to invade via the Phros, Nyrnal had only concentrated their lindwyrms when they initially crossed, then spread them out to expand the size of their front. This meant we didn’t have to deal with a hundred lindwyrms at once, which was good news, to say the least.

“Let’s start by hitting the units at the edges of their formation, since those are

less likely to receive support,” I said. “We’ll have the Worker Swarms build walls as well. After that, when the lindwyrms charge the walls, we’ll use Carrion Cannons and Toxic Swarms to weaken them with poison. This should allow the mercenaries, Sérignan, Lysa, and the Swarms to take them out. Honestly, I’m not sure if we can even win this battle. Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

I looked around everyone present. They all nodded. Apparently, they had my trust.

“What will the Adventurers’ Guild do?” I asked Keralt.

“We’d like to help the mercenaries and serve as scouts,” she replied. “If my assumptions are correct, the enemy might just retreat.”

They might indeed. It was a strange conclusion, given they’d brought a hundred lindwyrms to the fold, but there was a method to her madness.

“All right, everyone. Let us begin. The operation will commence as soon as the Worker Swarms finish building their walls. Take them out carefully, one by one. Don’t go overboard, though. We’re in this for the long haul. Every person we lose will impact our chances.”

“You got it. As you wish, Yer Majesty,” Konrad said with a hearty grin.

With that, our counteroffensive was ready to launch. Would we be the victors in this battle...?



“The first one got caught up in our walls! Our ranged units are hitting it now!”

Thirty minutes after our attack began, the first lindwurm was drawn to the walls. It tried to bust through, but the Carrion Cannons and Toxic Swarms poisoned it, wearing down its defense.

“Sérignan, take it out!” I ordered.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

At my order, Sérignan jumped over the walls and lunged at the lindwurm. Those creatures were so massive, they made Sérignan look like a child by comparison. Despite their size difference, she challenged her opponent with an

iron will.

“Haaah!”

Swinging her black, corrupted holy sword, Sérignan tore through the lindwurm’s sturdy scales and slashed its flesh. The lindwurm howled in agony and twisted its body in an attempt to shake her off.

“Your resistance is futile, serpent!”

Sérignan spewed a thread from her tail, slowing down the lindwurm’s movements. It choked the lindwurm, trapping it in place and exposing it to more of the Toxic Swarms’ stingers. She struck it with blow after blow the whole time.

“Grooooar!”

The lindwurm roared and thrashed its head violently, smashing Sérignan into the ground. For a second, I went pale, fearing that might have killed her, but I could still feel her will in the collective consciousness.

“Sérignan! Tch! Lysa, cover for her!”

“Right, Your Majesty!”

As the lindwurm moved in to stomp on Sérignan with its powerful legs, Lysa shot at it with her bow. Her bolt pierced one of the lindwurm’s eyes, prompting it to scream and shake its head in agony.

“Keep it up, Lysa!” I called out and then looked over at Sérignan. “Can you still fight, Sérignan?!”

“I can keep going!” Sérignan replied, rising to her feet.

She then fired her threads again, binding the reptilian’s legs and yanking the lindwurm off-balance. It wasn’t enough to defeat the creature, however. If we could at least get it to completely topple over, we could deal some major damage!

“It’s our turn, boys!”

That was when Konrad appeared with his mercenaries. They scaled the walls and hurried over to Sérignan’s side.

“Come on, men, pull!”

Konrad and his men grabbed Sérignan’s thread and began pulling it with all their strength, attempting to drag the lindwurm into falling over. Sérignan alone wasn’t strong enough to completely tow the giant lizard’s weight, but perhaps their combined efforts would topple it! I narrowed my eyes, desperately hoping.

“It’s falling over!”

They’d done it! By pulling on Sérignan’s thread, they were able to bring the monster down to the ground. I could feel the rumble of its heavy form hitting the ground from afar. The lindwurm let out a dull howl, its giant body jerking around on the soil.

“Now!” I ordered.

“Now’s the time!” Sérignan’s voice intersected with mine as she bolted toward the prone reptilian.

The lindwurm kicked its feet in an attempt to resist, but Sérignan jumped over it and thrust her black blade into its flank. Blood spurted out, staining Sérignan’s pale armor crimson.

“Keep going, Sérignan!”

She desperately swung at it time and time and time again, hellbent on tearing apart the monster several times her size.

“Lysa! Keep covering for her! Don’t stop shooting, but make sure you don’t hit Sérignan!”

“Understood! I’ll kill this thing, no matter what!”

Lysa kept shooting arrows laced with a paralyzing poison to stop it from moving. And it seemed the poison was starting to kick in, because its movements were becoming sluggish.

“Groooooaar!”

Even as it endured the poison, the lindwurm howled and tried to get back to its feet, swinging its tail to sweep away the attackers swarming it, including Sérignan. Her body went flying, but she spun in midair and held up her

longsword without breaking her stance.

“Are you okay?!” I asked her.

“I am fine! I can still do this! We’re almost done!”

Right, just a little more. Just a bit more and it would die! Between the Toxic Swarms’ venom, the Carrion Cannons’ decay, Lysa’s paralyzing poison, and Sérignan’s persistent attacks, it should keel over at any second now. We’d be in trouble if it didn’t... This was just the first one!

“Haaaah!”

Sérignan stabbed her blade into the lindwyrms’ throat and shoved it as deep as she could.

“Grrrgh...”

With that final, faint gurgling sound, the lindwyrms stopped moving.

“Great! Good work, everyone. That’s one down. There’s still a lot of them left, but we can beat them!”

“Understood, Your Majesty!” Sérignan replied.

Could she really do it, though? Beating just one of them took this much effort, and there were still ninety-nine of them left. Regardless, we had no other choice. If we let the Empire through, Khalkha would be in trouble, as would every city along the way.

“Konrad! The second one’s trying to break through! Can you help?!”

“Sure can! Leave it to me!”

I was already using the Ripper Swarms to scout ahead, and the second lindwyrms were attacking the walls. The walls were built on an angle, and he was breaking through them one by one.

“Get the second one! We’ll be in trouble if you don’t hurry!”

Hurry up, hurry up! We don’t have time!

The lindwyrms’ army was closing in on us, and we only defeated one so far. Considering what was to come, we’d have to defeat at least seventy of them if we wanted to quash the invasion. In other words, we had sixty-nine more of

those lizards to go.

Their invading army was absurdly large. But we still had to defeat them. I'd promised the Swarm victory, after all!



The second lindwurm broke through our walls, and while the Worker Swarms behind it hurriedly built a second layer, it didn't change the fact our first layer had crumbled. This was shaping up to be a fierce battle.

Until we got to the next layer of wall, I had the Genocide and Toxic Swarms attack the lindwurm. They bit into it, swarming it with sheer numbers and tearing away its flesh. It resisted desperately, breathing fire and shaking off the Swarms to crush them underfoot.

They were dealing damage to it, but we were taking heavy casualties. We didn't have an endless supply of Genocide Swarms, and losing too many here could impact future battles. Still, I ordered them to attack and buy us all the time they could, even at the cost of their own lives. They answered my orders faithfully, and as each one died, it chipped away at my heart.

You went too far, Nyrnal. Prepare for dire consequences.

My heart burned with hatred for the Nyrnal Empire as I sat on a Ripper Swarm's back and ordered it to follow Sérignan. Lysa, Konrad's cavalry, and the rest of the Ripper Swarms followed. We were making way for the toppled walls.

We soon found the second lindwurm. The Genocide Swarms had been mostly wiped out, but they'd definitely dealt significant damage. Its scales were torn off, its flesh was bruised, and it was charging forward with a pained howl.

"Sérignan and Lysa, start attacking it! The Genocide Swarms can't hold!" I shouted.

"By your will, Your Majesty!" Sérignan replied.

"The Genocide Swarms have gravely wounded the lindwurm, so you should be able to finish it off. But don't be careless. It's still dangerous, and who knows what the cornered beast might do when it's fighting for its life!"

As I gave that warning, I had the Ripper Swarm carry me to a spot with good

visibility. The lindwyrn was terribly injured, so hopefully killing it would be easier. However, I had to account for the possibility that it wouldn't be that simple. I needed Sérignan to kill the reptile before it pulled any tricks.

"Ready to attack?" I asked her.

"I am ready," Sérignan said. "I can sever that serpent's head whenever you wish."

"Lysa, can you cover for her?"

"I found a good spot, Your Majesty. I'm ready whenever you are."

Lysa was situated on a small plateau, her face facing leeward. A perfect sniping position.

"Konrad, what about your mercenaries?!"

"What else are we supposed to do? Point us in a direction and we'll bash skulls!"

He had nerves of steel, which was always heartening.

"All right, begin! Everyone, attack!"

At my order, Sérignan swooped down on the lindwyrn, readying a slash.

"Haaaah!"

Her blow shook the lindwyrn but didn't quite slay it. The creature set its sights on Sérignan and attacked. It swung its thick tail and gnashed its fangs at her, attempting to bite.

"Guess it really won't be so easy!" I muttered.

As she avoided its attacks, Sérignan couldn't get an opening to attack. Lysa riddled its hide with poisoned bolts, but its assault only eased a little.

"Genocide Swarms, aim at its legs!"

The few Genocide Swarms that remained chomped on the lindwyrn's legs, slowing it down. It tried to stomp them out, but even so, the only thing it could freely move now was its tail.

"Lysa, blind it!"

“Got it!”

Lysa nocked an arrow and carefully aimed it at the lindwurm’s eye. She then fired at the creature’s shaking head, piercing one of its eyes. Partially blinded, the reptile rampaged even harder, thrashing so violently that Sérignan had to momentarily retreat.

“Lure the enemy this way, men!” Konrad yelled.

He and his mercenaries fired their crossbows at the lindwurm, drawing its attention toward them. The creature fell for their taunt and began charging toward the mercenaries.

“Now, missy! Do it!”

Konrad and his men fell back, and at that moment, Sérignan fired a thread that coiled around the creature’s neck. Following the firm thread, she closed in on the enemy and thrust her longsword into its neck.

It couldn’t even let out a death rattle before her blade sank into its throat and severed a major artery. The lindwurm feebly tried to resist, but Sérignan held on tightly and severed its head altogether.

“That’s the second one!” I pumped my fist victoriously.

There were still ninety-eight lindwurms on the battlefield. This battle was far too reckless, and Sérignan was getting exhausted. We were losing Genocide Swarms, and the only one who could still really fight was Lysa. Even if none of Konrad’s men died, they would inevitably get fatigued from all this fighting.

Could we really do this?



The third lindwurm had already broken through the Genocide Swarms’ attacks and was charging the second layer of walls. It was clear they were moving faster than we could handle them.

“Sérignan, hurry up!” I urged her in a panic. “The lindwurm could break through the second layer at any second! If it succeeds, it’ll be free to attack us!”

“Understood, Your Majesty!”

The enemy was moving even faster than I expected. By the time we finally defeated a lindwurm, the one after that was beginning to bust through our defenses. At this rate, we wouldn't be able to hold them at bay. Without at least one more force on our side, it'd be impossible to stop them.

"Make it here, please...!"

Sérignan eventually defeated the third lindwurm with some effort. Lysa and Konrad's mercenaries cooperated to help her too. Their coordination was getting progressively better, but I was afraid it wasn't fast enough. At this rate, we wouldn't be able to stop the lindwurms.

"Hey, queenie! I get the feeling we won't make it!" Konrad shouted at me.

"No, we won't." I shook my head bitterly. "The lindwurms are going to break through. And then we won't be able to stop Nyrnal's soldiers coming in from behind them. But that doesn't mean we're all out of options."

I still had an ace up my sleeve.

"Fire Swarms, self-destruct," I ordered.

The moment the lindwurms thrust their heads through the wall, I had the Fire Swarms hiding behind it self-destruct at once. The shockwaves of the explosion rattled the lindwurms, nearly tearing their heads off.

"Now the second layer is basically gone. I just hope the damage they dealt is enough to buy us more time than the walls did. Because if it doesn't...we lost this battle."

I turned to Sérignan, who was fighting off the lindwurms. The explosion damaged many lindwurms' heads, rendering them dizzy and disoriented. This allowed Sérignan to effortlessly slay them. She bound them with her threads, and Lysa shot at their eyeballs, allowing Sérignan to sever their heads.

When that wasn't enough, the mercenaries used their impromptu battering rams to tear large holes into their flanks. The battle was becoming progressively more organized, and a fourth, fifth, and sixth lindwurm died.

"This is still too slow..."

But even as they made steady progress, I felt panic settle in. The lindwurms

that got bombed were starting to go around and circumvent my forces, and the ones flooding the remains of the wall were exceeding what Sérignan and the others could handle.

“We’ve got no choice... Launch a second attack.”

The units responded to my orders at once. Fire Swarms charged forward, riding on the backs of Ripper Swarms. The Fire Swarms couldn’t move well on their own, whereas the Ripper Swarms were agile and able to carry them. This allowed me to compensate for the Fire Swarms’ slowness.

This wasn’t a tactic I could do in-game, but now things were different. I wasn’t clicking my units and commanding them directly. My heart surged with emotion. The Fire Swarms rode over to the lindwyrms, whereupon they jumped onto the lizards’ backs and self-destructed. The lindwyrms were greatly staggered, and I could tell they’d taken major damage.

But that wasn’t all.

I had the Ripper Swarms and Fire Swarms keep charging into the lindwyrms. The cluster of lizards fell into a state of chaos. Some of them started fleeing into the river, while others had their heads blasted by the explosions. Sérignan managed to sever a few heads herself.

“Sérignan, you’ve done all you could here. Handle the ones over there. Please.”

“As you wish!” Sérignan said.

That’s reassuring.

“I’ll try to get them too!” Lysa exclaimed.

I’m counting on you.

“Ya can count on me!”

I do, Konrad.

“Let’s do it!” I said.

Konrad’s mercenaries and Lysa shot barrages of bolts dipped in paralyzing poison at the lindwyrms’ faces and sensory organs. Blinded, the lindwyrms went

on a rampage, destroying everything in their way. They were unmanageable, so I figured we might have to wait until they exhausted all their strength.

“Haaaah!”

Meanwhile, Sérignan kept up her attacks. She charged the creatures, thrusting her sword into their chests and slashing their throats. Her strength was awe-inspiring. I couldn’t believe the way she fought the rampaging lindwyrms unflinchingly. If I had to face these raging beasts, I’d only be able to run for my life.

Lysa and Konrad seemed to feel the same way because they were watching her fight with eyes aglitter. Even without them helping her, Sérignan cut down one, two, three lindwyrms in quick succession.

“We need to come up with a plan, though.”

We couldn’t rely solely on the Fire Swarms’ suicide bombing and Sérignan’s power; it just wasn’t a viable tactic. We needed a better way of doing this—a way that didn’t push all the fighting onto Sérignan.

“That makes ten!” Sérignan declared as she cut down another one.

That just left ninety more lindwyrms—ninety more rampaging beasts.

“We’ve got wyverns coming from above!” one of Konrad’s mercenaries said.

Of course they had to interfere now of all times, the pests. The lindwyrms forced my Toxic Swarms into retreat, and I didn’t have any antiair units.

“They’re diving down!”

There’s no way we’ll make it! I thought, despair setting in.

Just then, Lysa moved in. “Aaah!”

She fired a bolt that pierced one of the wyverns’ heads, sending the beast plummeting to the ground. She fired again and again, taking out three wyverns one by one.

Right, I still have Lysa!

Still, she could only handle so many. The rest swooped in and breathed their fire. Jets of flame rained down on Sérignan, hiding her from sight.

“Sérignan!” I called out, both with my voice and through the collective consciousness, praying that she’d respond.

“I’m all right, Your Majesty!” she said.

But she wasn’t totally fine. The wyverns’ fire had hit her. Her pale armor was charred black, and her body was burnt in places.

“That’s enough!” I cried. “We’re abandoning this defensive line, fall back!”

“No, I will hold them back here!”

Through the collective, I could tell that we had no more defensive lines prepared. And so, Sérignan raised her sword, ready to hold the line.

“What are you just staring at her for?!” Konrad shouted to his mercenaries. “We’re mercenaries, not rubberneckers! Fight, men!”

“Yes, sir!”

Konrad and his men continued shooting poisoned arrows at the lindwyrms, doing their finest to help Sérignan.

Lysa approached me. “Your Majesty, if I may...”

“What is it?”

“Sérignan’s at her limit. I’ll stall them with my arrows, so use that time to build another defensive line. The enemy’s definitely bleeding. If we can just hold them back for a bit longer, we should be able to get them to retreat.”

She had a point. If we killed this many of their precious lindwyrms, the enemy would recognize the losses they were taking. If I was reading this correctly, the enemy wasn’t *actually* trying to head into Khalkha from here. They had their hands full holding the river.

“All right. I’ll have the Worker Swarms build a third defensive line. They can’t fight directly, so doing this will be their direct contribution to the war.”

With that, I ordered the Worker Swarms to get to work. But the farther we fell back, the longer our walls needed to be, and I couldn’t tell if the Worker Swarms would make it in time. I hoped with all my heart that they’d make it because if they didn’t, Sérignan would be in danger.

“Raaah!”

Sérignan cut down more lindwyrms. They’d grown sluggish because of the poison, while she was swift. But her speed was starting to decline. Lysa was right; she was approaching her limit.

I’m sorry, Sérignan. I forced you into this. But still, hold on. You’re our only hope. Konrad and his men can’t stop the lindwyrms on their own. Neither can Lysa. You’re the only one who can stop those things. So please...

“I am a knight! The Queen of the Arachnea’s knight! No matter what comes to pass, that will never change!”

My emotions seemed to reach her through the collective consciousness, causing her reaction speed to spike. She cut the lindwyrms down one by one, whittling their numbers down at a startling rate.

“Sérignan, are you really...?”

Even if they were weakened by the Fire Swarms’ suicide bombing, these things had some of the highest defense in the game, and slaying them was no easy task. The fact that Sérignan could do it bordered on being a miracle. Yet she persevered.

While the third defensive line was being built, she slew fifteen more lindwyrms. I watched it all from atop a hill.

“Your Majesty,” came a voice. A Ripper Swarm had come to stand beside me. “The Adventurers’ Guild says your prediction was correct.”

“That’s what I thought. Then they should retreat any minute now.”

It had all felt strange to me. Aligning thirty thousand troops and one hundred lindwyrms along the vast Phros River didn’t make sense. If they really wanted to seize the Phros, it would have been more efficient to focus their forces and push the enemy into towns they couldn’t defend. But aligning their soldiers in a uniform line? Surely they wouldn’t be able to occupy the river that way.

It had occurred to me then that the enemy must have a different goal.

All at once, the remaining lindwyrms suddenly turned around and returned to the river. There were no foot soldiers in sight. The reptilians entered the water

with a splash, pushing their way against the stream and reaching the other coast.

The lindwyrms couldn't cross water in the game, but this was reality.

"Huh...?" Sérignan looked on with shock as the lindwyrms retreated across the river to the other bank.

A moment later, an explosion shook the air. Flames rose up in the floodplain, and stones audibly smacked the ground.

I knew it...

I could make out shouts from Konrad's mercenaries over the roaring flames.

"The ports are on fire!"

"Great boulders are blocking the river!"

"Your Majesty, what is this?" Sérignan asked me, flustered.

"All along, the enemy intended to render the Phros River uncrossable, so I wouldn't be able to invade them through there," I explained. "Their army wasn't going to march on Khalkha to begin with."

This was their true objective. They wanted to burn down the ports, block off crossing points using boulders, and torch the boats so we wouldn't be able to cross the river. If we hadn't gotten in their way, they might have decided to march into Khalkha as well. Our efforts weren't in vain, at least; we'd minimized the damages to just the Phros River.

"But this means the enemy can't cross the Phros normally either. Is the Nyrnal Empire trying to end the war with this?"

With the river blocked, they had no way to invade us. The alliance we'd made with the Eastern Trade Union hadn't actually helped us march into Nyrnal's homeland, but what could the Nyrnals be thinking? Now they had to move all their supply lines and armies over to the Hapul Wetlands. The fighting would die down.

What was Emperor Maximillian up to? I had to figure that out right away.

Victory Celebration

I wasn't sure if the Eastern Trade Union had really won the war with Nyrnal, but the people wanted to celebrate their victory. This small country hadn't yielded to the powerful tyrant and had managed to defend its independence. That was probably enough of a victory for them.

When I thought about it that way, I could understand the desire to celebrate. They'd won this victory through much hardship, after all.

And so, they began their victory celebration. It was held in Khalkha, which was still in the midst of being rebuilt. Despite some of the buildings still being burnt, the streets were spectacularly decorated. People had set up shops in tents. The Senate's assembly hall, which had escaped the fire, was converted into a tavern for the festivities.

At present, Lysa, Sérignan, and I were walking through the bustling streets together.

"The skewers look great!" Lysa said.

"Well, you two can eat all you want, since you won't gain weight..." I grumbled. "How are your wounds, Sérignan? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I'm fine."

After the battle, I'd put Sérignan in a Regeneration Pod to heal her injuries, but I was worried that she hadn't healed properly. This wasn't the game world anymore, after all.

"For now, let's celebrate our victory. We've beaten the Nyrnal Empire, and we should take pride in what we did. We've taken revenge on them."

"Yeah, we did."

The Nyrnal Empire had retreated to the other bank of the Phros and solidified their defenses there. It would be extremely difficult for them to cross the river now, so in a way, we'd successfully pushed them away. I wasn't sure whether

that was part of their plan or they had to go back to the drawing board after the failed offensive. Either way, we'd made them pay for their sneaky attack on Khalkha. That was good enough for now.

Nyrnal had annexed the former territories of the Kingdom of Maluk, which made their territory even larger. Even so, I had no intention of surrendering to Nyrnal. I'd oppose them to the very end.

"Let's eat and drink and have fun!" Lysa said.

"Yeah! I just wish the other Swarms could join us," I nodded, my voice sounding a bit morose.

Seeing them would be a little too shocking for the citizens, so we had them wait outside Khalkha. But Konrad's mercenaries recognized the help they'd offered during the battle and had carried food out for them to eat. I thought that was quite nice of them.

Any enjoyment we experienced would be transmitted through the collective consciousness, so it wasn't like we were hogging all the fun for ourselves.

"Sérignan, you put in the most work in that battle. Do you have any requests?"

"I'd like to eat meat. Any kind of meat will do." Sérignan was a real carnivorous woman.

"Then let's try those skewers Lysa mentioned," I said.

"They do look good."

As we stuffed our cheeks on meat skewers and fried food, we enjoyed the celebrations in Khalkha. People whose businesses had been burned down were out and about, selling their wares. The place where we'd eaten Hamburg steaks and mixed grill dishes before had converted into an open-air cafe, so we tried out all the dishes we hadn't tasted yet.

We decided on some sweets for dessert. We had a cold treat that was lightly sweet and similar to ice cream, some donuts, and other confections. I consumed a week's worth of calories that day. But it also meant I'd probably get fat, so I had some mixed feelings.

It's fine. It's not every day we get to celebrate like this. I should cut loose and have fun.

I'd endured one too many nerve-wracking situations, so I decided to forget about the stresses of war and enjoy myself.

"Yo, Yer Majesty!" a jovial voice called out to me.

"Konrad," I said, turning to look at him. "I thought the senators were all overseeing the rites over at the assembly hall. Shouldn't you be there?"

The Senate was currently electing its new chairman and holding a ceremony to celebrate our victory. And yet, Konrad was loitering around here instead. I imagined, given his personality, that he was bored with the ceremony, but...

"What are you saying? We owe ya our victory! The Senate hardly even lifted a finger. You're our guest of honor today. Now, come come, everyone's waitin' for you. Don't be late and spoil the festivities!"

"Fine. I just need to show my face for a bit, right?" I asked, a bit tiredly.

"Well, I dunno about that," Konrad said with a grin. "I'm sure the senators will all want to get a look at you."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Guess I have to do it. But I don't need a big welcoming party, okay? I mean, I didn't really defeat the Nyrnal Empire in the end."

"Well, the senators don't seem to feel that way. They think that this war was proof that the Union managed to protect its independence. They see it as a victory."

Yeah, that was what I figured. It was honestly kind of a headache. Honestly, the only thing I did was just nudge Nyrnal's invasion army into a situation where they had to fall back. Otherwise, I could only sit back and watch as this country's assets burned in the fires of the war.

"I'll head over to the assembly hall, then. Sérignan, Lysa, let's go."

The two of them nodded. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Allow me to escort you, ladies," Konrad said with a suave tone that did not suit him whatsoever. He bowed, showing us the way to the assembly hall.

“I guess it wasn’t completely unharmed,” I commented as the building came into view. “I guess that makes sense, given that it was exposed to wyvern fire. It’d be weird if it went unscathed.”

Part of the building had crumbled, and the stonework was charred. Still, it was a well-built structure, and its continued magnificence stood as a symbol for the peace they’d earned.

“Now, go on in. Everyone’s waiting for you,” Konrad said, practically pushing us inside.

So much for his gentlemanly demeanor.

“Attention, everyone!” a voice echoed as I entered the hall. “Her Majesty Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea, the very woman who conquered the Nyrnals, has arrived!” The speaker was a woman sitting in the Senate secretary’s seat. She went on, “The Arachnea proved to be a reliable ally for protecting the Eastern Trade Union’s independence. They stopped Nyrnal’s invasion and protected our homeland. This faction is our only worthy ally!”

Her words were met with cheering from the senators.

“All hail the Eastern Trade Union!”

“All hail the Arachnea!”

“This should push Nyrnal’s attempts to invade us by another century. So long as the Arachnea are on our side, they can’t lay a hand on us. No matter what monsters they bring, we will defeat them!”

“That’s right! We won’t yield to any tyrant, and with the support of our allies, we can oppose them! Glory to the Eastern Trade Union and the Arachnea! May we remain a proud, independent country forevermore!”

They raised their voices, praising the Arachnea and the Eastern Trade Union.

Stop it. I had my own reasons for fighting this war. I respect your independence, but it wasn’t that big of a consideration.

“All hail the Arachnea, our great allies!”

“A speech! Let’s hear your speech!”

All eyes in the room gathered on me. I wasn't good at this, and I didn't think I should say anything. But with all sorts of emotions brewing inside me, I took the stage.

"Hello, members of the Eastern Trade Union. I'm glad to see our alliance has been such a boon to you all. In fact, it's a bit of a pity; I wish I didn't have to involve you in this war. But it's good that we could help you."

We'd both depleted many resources and lost countless soldiers over this war, and we needed to resupply.

"Let's celebrate for now. We can consider this a victory. We pushed Nyrnal's invasion back, and that's a win, in part. We won it with your strength. Your mercenaries and adventurers helped win this war."

Indeed, we hadn't won this war alone. The mercenaries and adventurers helped us, and they should take pride in it. I looked over to Konrad and Keralt, as well as Honnoson, who'd helped lead and fund the war effort. I felt that they should be the ones taking credit for the achievement, not me.

You didn't give up, and that's why I could keep going. The Arachnea and I could only fight because you were there. If you hadn't been, everything might have ended differently.

"We'll pursue further victories," I continued. "We will wipe the Nyrnal Empire off the face of the planet and make them submit to the Arachnea. And if we do that, there'll be no one left to threaten your country's independence. We'll defeat Nyrnal completely, utterly, and thoroughly. We have to."

The members of the Senate listened to me quietly.

"I will win. The Arachnea will triumph. And when we achieve true victory, we can hold a true celebration. I'd like for you to be a part of it too. Same as how you invited me today, I open our doors to all of you for that grand occasion."

Finishing my speech, I stepped down from the podium. I was never really good with speeches. Talking to a crowd as if I were all-important made me feel antsy.

"All hail the Arachnea's queen!"

“The Union’s alliance with the Arachnea is a true union of brotherhood!”

They applauded my speech; apparently, they’d liked it. Which was good. I would’ve wanted to bury myself alive if they didn’t. I could hear the Senate members whispering among themselves.

“The queen is quite ambitious.”

“Yes. We won this war, but she even declared that she would destroy the Nyrnal Empire. Defeating that fearsome country when we’re struggling just to defend our independence...”

“And our independence was greatly threatened this time around. If it weren’t for the Arachnea, Nyrnal would have vassalized us by now.”

“Queen Grevillea.” I heard a familiar voice approach me as I walked down from the podium.

“Oh, hello, Keralt. Does the Adventurers’ Guild need me for something?”

Keralt had a sour expression as always. I couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but by now I’d gotten used to this curt lady. I almost liked her.

“Are you going to leave for the Nyrnal Empire next?” she asked me.

“Yes, we’re still fighting them,” I replied. “This war won’t end until one of us defeats the other. And I’m not going to lose.”

“Then let me warn you. Watch out for the Emperor’s Third Secretariat Division. That’s the Empire’s intelligence agency. I sent a few adventurers to scout them out, but they were captured and went MIA.”

“The Emperor’s Third Secretariat Division... I’ll remember that.”

I wasn’t confident in our ability to fight a war of espionage, but assumed we should err on the side of caution. If they were going to launch such a war on us, we’d need to rise to the challenge. The Swarm was highly united and would never betray me, and we had an ally in the Eastern Trade Union.

Humans could betray one another, but that didn’t apply to the Swarm.

“You said you sent adventurers to infiltrate. Any way we can buy whatever information they got off of you?” I asked.

“Of course. We can sell you any information, barring some highly confidential secrets.”

Good. This way we can learn as much as possible about the Nyrnal Empire.

Despite being such an ambitious hegemon, the Nyrnal Empire seldom suffered leaks. I didn't know how their government was structured. Even if I was going to sneak Masquerade and Parasite Swarms into their country, I could still use more information on them.

“We'll talk money later, then. Thank you.”

“No problem. We'll be waiting for you.” Keralt nodded before walking off. “Also, thank you for winning this war for us.”

Then, someone else approached me. “Miss Grevillea.”

“So this time it's you, Honnoson?”

“I'm sure protecting this country cost you quite a bit of funds. Would you like any financial aid?” the banker dwarf asked me.

I shrugged. “I don't think I'll have money to pay you back with.”

“I didn't mean a loan, but *true* financial aid. Buying one's independence with gold might seem lowly, but in the end, the only thing we can really do is provide money. Please let us help you in what little ways we can.”

Hmm. I'd always thought bankers were greedy, but he proved to be oddly empathetic. Similar to how humans tended to assume the Swarm was a legion of unfeeling monsters, I had my own preconceived notions about certain professions.

“We'll take you up on that offer, then,” I said. “Just don't expect much out of us; our finances are in dire straits right now.”

“I'm just glad you agreed. If you didn't, the guild would have tormented me,” the old banker told me.

I might not pay you back for this in full, Honnoson, but I'll return however much I can. Even if this isn't really a loan. Once we've ruined Nyrnal and things settle down, I'll probably have some money at least.

“Hey there, hero!” Konrad was the next to come forth. “That was quite the speech.”

“How about you handle the speeches next time, then?” I said dryly.

He handed me one of the two glasses of frothing champagne in his hands. I wasn’t much of a drinker, but I accepted it anyway.

“Speeches don’t suit me,” Konrad said with a grin. “Only thing these lips are good for is barking orders. Even after becoming chairman, I never won any arguments. Honestly, I’m not cut out for this job.”

“Well, that’s no good. You should learn how to debate like a good chairman,” I said, smiling softly. “I think your policies are decent, anyway.”

“Well, if you need a little extra muscle, just say the word,” he told me. “We’ll always lend you a hand.”

“I’ll be counting on you. But for now, focus on defending your country.”

If Konrad were to mobilize his mercenaries for us, it could incite another invasion from Nyrnal. They couldn’t take any risks.

“We’ll be praying for your success, queenie.” With that, Konrad left.

Having schmoozed appropriately, I returned to Lysa and Sérignan’s side.

“You were very inspiring, Your Majesty!” Lysa told me enthusiastically.

“The crowd was listening to your words with rapt attention, Your Majesty,” Sérignan said.

“Stop teasing me,” I said, feeling awkward. “I was just saying what I really thought. Anyway, I’m tired for today, and I’ve had enough to eat.”

Thus, the war over the Eastern Trade Union came to an end. My initial plan to use the Union as a way to attack the Nyrnal Empire hadn’t worked out, but there should be other ways to do it. If worse came to worst, we could just use the Dreadnought Swarm to forcibly cross the Phros.

The Nyrnal Empire's Internal Affairs

"We actually lost to the Eastern Trade Union?" Emperor Maximillian laughed scornfully as he read the report. "I really do have an army of cowards. Normally, I'd have expected you to not just take the Phros, but conquer the Union altogether so we can seize their war funds. Well, now we can forget their war funds. They might even demand reparations from us."

"It's quite unfortunate, Your Majesty," said Bertholdt, Chief Cabinet Secretary. "Perhaps the soldiers are simply too used to fighting against the weak."

"So it seems. Our wars up until now were easy ones. With flying wyverns, even a child could win a war. But our generals simply don't seem to understand that we're facing an opponent that's unlike anyone we've fought before."

Nyrnal had heavily relied on the wyverns when unifying the south. They'd won by burning the enemies' ground forces to a crisp. The wyverns were seen as the symbol of Nyrnal's might, and the generals believed them to be infallible.

But this time, things were different. The Arachnea had means to deal with the wyverns, and they couldn't just win by just flying around and breathing fire.

"The enemy won even after we brought the lindwyrms to the battlefield. Honestly, I'm curious as to how they defeated them. I thought no number of people could stop those monsters."

The lindwyrms were the Empire's secret weapon. Maximillian had hoped that their grand arrival on the battlefield would allow his Empire to grasp victory, but the Arachnea had dashed those hopes yet again. Not only could they slay the wyverns, but they were even capable of felling the lindwyrms.

"What will we do about the war, Your Majesty?"

"Have the army we sent to the Popedom of Frantz retreat. We'll need to reconsider our strategies from scratch. Our first priority must be defending the home front, and only then can we consider unifying the continent. It won't be

long before the dead come from the south. We must unify the continent before they do.”

Dead from the south, was it?

“Have the forces we sent to Frantz guard the homeland. Set the defensive line along the Phros, and don’t forget to station ground formations, siege weapons, and dragons. We might be using monsters, but the same holds true for the enemy.”

Maximillian ordered the retreat from the Popedom rather easily. Since the only places connecting the Popedom with Nyrnal were the Hapul Wetlands and the elven forest, this was a reasonable decision.

“Send our main offensive force over to Schtraut, but don’t cross that irritating mountain road. Understood?”

Bertholdt nodded. “Yes, perfectly, Your Majesty.”

“Also...I’ve heard there is a child leading the Arachnea, a so-called queen. A girl of about fourteen, yes?”

“That’s what the Third Secretariat Division reports, but we don’t know if that’s true. It could be some manner of disguise, perhaps?” Bertholdt replied, his expression bitter.

“We’re both big players on this continent. I have matters to discuss with her. Bring her to me,” Maximillian ordered.

Hearing this absurd demand, Bertholdt broke into a cold sweat.

“Your Majesty, she is protected by an army of monsters. It is practically impossible for us to abduct or assassinate her.”

“Well, we have a monster that can kill hers. Use it. This is the perfect time to do so.”

“You don’t mean Georgius?” Bertholdt asked, the color draining from his face. “We’re going to awaken *that*?”

Georgius. A name unlike any mentioned before.

“We certainly are.” Maximillian smirked with twisted glee. “It’s about time we

woke that thing up and put it to work, I think. That's what we have it for, after all—killing monsters. It's the hero of the Nyrnal Empire and the Gregoria, and it must prove its worth. Here are your orders: Withdraw our army from Frantz and have them defend the Phros River. Move our offensive army to Schtraut. Awaken Georgius so he can bring the Arachnea's queen to me."

"Understood, Your Majesty..." Bertholdt bowed his head low. "By your will."

It was his role as retainer to obey his sovereign's orders, whatever they might be. Bertholdt left the room to relay those orders, leaving Maximillian alone in his office.

"Now then, Queen of the Arachnea. It's time we come face-to-face. Tell me what ambition inspired you to attack this continent. Once I know that, the Empire will be able to fix its gaze on the threat coming from the south."

Maximillian spread out a map—a map of two continents.

"The threat from the south will eventually advance north. Both the Holy August Empire and the Portario Republic are but weak walls. The dead will easily surmount them and keep heading north. Once they do, they will become a pertinent issue for this continent."

The south. South of this continent, past the Nabreej archipelago, was another continent. It wasn't terribly far from this one.

"I can only pray—not to the God of Light, but to the God of Dragons—that this continent is united before they come."

As those words left his lips, Maximillian put away the map and returned to his duties, dreaming of his meeting with the Arachnea's queen.



"His Imperial Majesty the emperor has given his orders. We will consolidate our main force in the north. And when we launch our next attack on Schtraut, we are to avoid using the mountain road."

Bertholdt relayed the orders to the military staff headquarters.

One of the younger officers pressed Bertholdt for an explanation. "But, sir, if we don't cross the mountain road, our path to Schtraut is essentially blocked.

Just what were His Majesty's orders, exactly?"

"Now listen here," Bertholdt said, his expression darkening. "His Majesty has ordered us to find another way. Do you intend to oppose him? Should I report your insubordination to the emperor?"

"N-No, that wasn't my intention at all..." the young officer stammered, recoiling from his glare. "I simply meant that if we can't pass through the mountain road, how are we to—"

"Simple enough. He wanted us to use this spot, I believe," a man bearing a general's insignia said, drawing a line across the map.

"Far be it from me to say if that was his intent. But it should allow us to attack Schtraut without having to cross the mountains." Bertholdt nodded. "This way, we will keep working in accordance with his orders."

"The way His Majesty gives his orders can be quite evasive at times." The general shrugged. "He could have simply ordered us to go through here. Doing so would've saved us some time."

"Are you questioning His Majesty's orders, General Hassel?"

"Not at all. I'm a loyal subject to my liege."

General Hassel—full name Helmut von Hassel—was one of HQ's most skilled commanders and, at the same time, one of its most hated officers. He had a tendency to speak improperly when it came to his opinion of Emperor Maximillian.

"Then organize our army to act as such," Bertholdt said, concluding the talks.

"Did His Majesty say how many lindwyrms we are allowed to deploy?" General Hassel asked.

"As many as you need; there's no limit. Think of this as the emperor's kindness toward an army that cannot seem to win a battle no matter what aid it's given. If you were capable of winning this war conventionally, we wouldn't need to rely on these monsters."

"Oh, come off it." General Hassel scoffed at him. "The only reason we need to bring monsters to the fold is because the *enemy* employs monsters. I ask you

not to forget that. We've followed orders to the best of our ability. But we're not used to dealing with monsters that can bite through thick armor and melt human beings in seconds. At that point, humans have no place in such a war."

"Again, are you questioning our sovereign's orders, General Hassel?" Bertholdt asked, glaring at him.

"Oh, perish the thought." Hassel shrugged. "I'm merely bemoaning the absurdity of this world, is all."

"Then do as His Majesty says."

"About that—aren't we going to withdraw the soldiers from the northeast and use them to cross the Phros? If we're going to march through the Hapul Wetlands, we won't be able to avoid losing soldiers along the way."

The Hapul Wetlands were a natural fortress. The heavy infantry struggled to wade through the boggy ground, and the terrain affected the lindwyrms' speed too. The generals all agreed they would rather not traverse them if possible.

"We can't use the Phros. But if you have a better plan, I'll listen," Bertholdt said.

"Well, the upper reaches of the Phros River are in the Hapul Wetlands, so if we go a bit under the wetlands, we should be able to cross. The current is fast, but the lindwyrms should be able to make it, and we can have our engineers set up a small bridge for that."

The Phros was one of the Hapul Wetlands' water sources. The area near the mouth of the river, just below the wetlands, would likely be traversable. As the general had mentioned, the lindwyrms could cross on their own, and the heavy infantry could use a bridge.

"Very well. Do so if you see fit. But you're aware of what happens if you fail, yes?" Bertholdt warned him.

"Maybe it's not my place to say this, but doubting your officers like that will only make them fail in the long run." General Hassel shook his head solemnly.

"Just don't defy your emperor too much, General. Unless you want to chip away at your own lifespan."

“So that’s how you feel, eh?”

Bertholdt had ignored Hassel’s warning, instead doubling down on the emperor’s infallibility.

“Now, the generals in HQ are to draft an operation and ensure you bring victory to your emperor. Do not betray his expectations.”

With that said, Bertholdt turned on his heel and left the headquarters.

Confirming Bertholdt was gone, Hassel asked, “What do you think, Marshal Hammerstein? Do you also believe we should march our army there? Changing our plan at this point is too sudden. After all, we still have our invasion army along the Phros, near the Eastern Trade Union.”

His companion, Marshal Horace von Hammerstein, was a senior soldier of the imperial army. “We have no choice. The emperor has spoken,” Hammerstein said. “We’ll need to mobilize our army quickly and attack Schtraut. But we must make sure the enemy doesn’t notice. The northeastern troops will have to retreat as slowly as possible without giving away that they’re reinforcements. That way, we’ll organize our invasion on Schtraut without the enemy realizing it.”

“Either way, we need to do what we can. The imperial army abides by the Emperor’s orders.”

“I just hope it leads to our victory...” Hassel said.

The war council continued, and they gradually began moving toward their next battlefield. It was the beginning of new bloodshed and tragedy...

The Gregoria's Hero

"Liquid oxygen concentration is normal."

"Vitals are all in order."

Deep underground, beneath a detached building on the Noie Vejya Castle estate, an individual was slumbering in an artificial coma. A hero that had once saved the country, and a terrifying monster that had nearly driven the country to ruin.

"Court magician, how is Georgius?" Bertholdt asked.

"He's still asleep, sir. Sleeping calmly."

After relaying orders to the generals at HQ, Bertholdt had come straight here.

"Can you wake him?"

"If that is what you wish. However, we still don't have a spell capable of controlling this monster. It was for that very reason we put him to sleep in the first place."

"True, we cannot control him. But if we must wake him, we will. The emperor commands that we use this monster to fight the enemy's insects."

"Using a monster to stop other monsters... I don't think that's wise. Once we wake him, countless soldiers will be sacrificed to put him to sleep again. Do you understand?"

Bertholdt glared at the court magician.

"Our orders are clear, court magician. Do it."

"Understood. But don't hold me responsible for whatever comes of this."

Just what was he fearing? What would happen when Georgius came out of his slumber?

"Release the inhibitors on his brain! Pump in ether until he awakens!"

Ether was the catalyst magicians used for spells. It permeated the air, and its

density directly impacted their magic power.

“Releasing inhibitors!”

“Vitals are destabilizing rapidly! Look out!”

Needles nestled in his head popped out, and the crystal monitoring its pulse let out a shrill alarm, informing everyone of approaching danger.

“What do we do? Do we continue?” the court magician asked, panicked.

“Do it,” Bertholdt replied curtly.

“Vitals are still unstable!”

“Target is awake! I repeat! Target is awake! Georgius has awakened!”

The “target”—Georgius—was a hulking man standing nearly two meters tall. There were shackles around his neck and limbs, but the man forcibly wrenched them off and tore them apart. He started with the shackles on his hands, then his legs, and finally his neck and waist. With all the shackles broken, he smashed his containment capsule full of half-transparent liquid and stepped out of it.

He had waist-length, golden hair and the facial expression of a bloodthirsty predator, with a primal glint in his eyes. Georgius dragged his muscular body along, then fixed his gaze on a cowering magician. He reached out and easily caught the man, twisting his neck effortlessly. The magician’s neck snapped with a dull sound, and he crumpled lifelessly to the ground.

“Eeek!” another magician screeched.

Georgius sluggishly approached him and then lashed the magician’s body with one of the chains. The magician fell to the ground, twitching, as fluid spilled from his cracked head. He then went still.

“S-See?! I told you this would happen! I’m not responsible! You take control of this situation!” the court magician next to Bertholdt called out.

But he couldn’t escape the underground facility. The monstrous man bashed the crystal that monitored his vitals into the magician’s skull. The magician fell to the ground, his blood flowing down the staircase.

Finally, Georgius lunged at Bertholdt and landed right in front of him.

“...Oh. It’s you, Bertholdt,” Georgius said, peering into Bertholdt’s face with a bored expression.

Bertholdt nodded. “Yes, it’s me, Georgius.”

“You’ve grown old,” Georgius remarked. “All those wrinkles, and your hair’s gone white.”

“Well, my current job puts me under a great deal of stress,” Bertholdt replied with a thin smile.

“Is the emperor...still Friedrich?” Georgius asked, baring his fangs. “I have some debts to collect from him. Where is he?”

“Sleeping in his grave. Emperor Friedrich has passed on. The current emperor is Maximillian.”

Friedrich was the emperor before Maximillian and the man who’d decided to put Georgius to sleep. He’d ordered that Georgius be shackled and put in a years-long magical coma.

“Oh! So Friedrich kicked the bucket. This world is such a fickle place. The only ones who are as long-lived as I am must be the elves. But the elves are weak. No one in this world can match me.”

Georgius sighed as he regarded his shackles.

“Oh, no, there is,” Bertholdt told him. “Monsters have appeared. Monsters that would be your worthy opponents. That’s why we’ve awoken you: we need you to deal with those monsters. However, you mustn’t massacre them.”

“Heh.” Georgius sneered. “You think you can give me orders? The only ones who can match me are the monsters at the bottom of the Necrophage. What, has the Empire unified the continent already?”

“No. The continent is in the midst of a savage war. It’s an era of conflict, just the way you like it. We’ve only conquered half the continent, but the other half is in our enemy’s hands. They are the Arachnea, a fearsome empire of mutant insects.”

By now, the Arachnea’s name was well-known and feared by all. The Swarm had reduced cities to ruins and destroyed nations with ease. At the mere

thought of them, the people of the Nyrnal Empire shivered in terror.

“Arachnea... I feel like I’ve heard that name somewhere before, but I cannot remember where,” Georgius muttered, as if trying to grasp at some ancient, faraway memory. “But a dragon will easily stomp out mere insects. How have you not destroyed them yet?”

“They defeated our dragons. The Arachnea’s insects are well organized and powerful. If we could deal with them easily, we would not have sought your help.”

“Very well.” A ferocious smile played on Georgius’s lips. “If they can defeat our dragons, they should put up a good fight. Let’s have an exciting battle, one monster against another. Where should I go, then?”

“You’ve only just awoken, so let your body recover first. Once you do, the emperor’s Third Secretariat Division will inform you of your destination. But there’s one more thing I must tell you.” Bertholdt glared at him. “You must capture the Arachnea’s queen alive. She’s a girl around fourteen years old with black hair and brown eyes. She’s constantly guarded, and her soldiers have successfully slain both the Archangel Metatron and our lindwyrms. Don’t be careless around her.”

“Oh, so they got Metatron. That’s interesting.” Georgius narrowed his eyes. “However... Fourteen, with black hair and brown eyes. That reminds me of Katja...” He punctuated those words with a deep sigh.

“What happened to Katja was inevitable,” Bertholdt said. “We couldn’t prevent what happened to her.”

“That’s what I’d like to believe,” Georgius murmured. “Maybe, if I’d have fought harder, she wouldn’t have died.” His expression, momentarily soft, grew serious once more. “Go and get me clothes. And food. Not necessarily in that order.”

“I can certainly prepare you some clothes. Go upstairs and wait there. And don’t kill anyone there just because you’re bored.”

Thus, Nyrnal woke their hero—a creature with the stench of blood hanging over him...

To the Hot Springs

“You found hot springs?” I asked in surprise.

“That’s right, Your Majesty!” Lysa said excitedly. “Apparently, there’re hot springs on an island to the south of the Eastern Trade Union. The view is amazing, and it’s great for your skin. How about we go there?”

An open-air bath with a view... That did sound alluring. Enough to make me want to ditch work and go right away.

“We’ve still got work to do, Lysa,” I told her.

I was absolutely swamped. I had to mobilize our army in preparation for the Nyrnal Empire’s next attack, and I also had Worker Swarms in the Eastern Trade Union to help with the rebuilding efforts. I needed some of them to collect resources to replenish what we’d lost in the battles so far too.

On top of all that, I was studying how to use magic. Nyrnal hadn’t made a peep, but I knew it was a tricky adversary. Now that it had lindwyrms filling out its ranks, who knew which way the scales of this war might tip.

“True... It’s a pity, though.” Lysa’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

I could feel her sadness prickle at me from the collective consciousness.

Ugh. Well, if it makes you that unhappy...

“Fine,” I said, relenting. “Let’s go to the hot springs. Where are they, exactly?”

Cheering up immediately, she produced a map from her pocket. “Right here! There’s the hot springs, and there’s an inn right beside them!”

Apparently, she’d prepared the map ahead of time. It was full of notes and was visibly folded multiple times.

“An island, huh? We’ll need some way to get there. Do you think we can arrange that?”

“I-I think we can probably find a ship that’ll take us there. If we take that, uh,

hmm..."

It looked like our little elf hadn't thought things through.

"Well, if you find a ship that'll take us there within the week, I'll consider it. Either a ship or some other way to—"

Just then, we heard what sounded like a gust of wind flapping against my tent. Lysa quickly readied her bow, and I got in position to run in case something happened.

"Your Majesty! Look!"

As it turned out, though, there was nothing to be worried about. The source of that wind was Sérignan, who was on the back of a griffin.

"Sérignan, is that a griffin from way back when?" I asked.

"It is, Your Majesty!" she declared with a proud smile. "I'd intended to put them in the Conversion Furnace in six months' time, but they had healthy appetites and grew to be this big before I knew it. With them on our side, we can win aerial battles as well!"

Back in Schtraut, we'd acted as adventurers and accepted a quest to slay griffins. At the time, Sérignan had taken in three griffin chicks. I'd left them in her care, hoping to place them in the Conversion Furnace once they matured, but that had happened sooner than we expected.

"Now this could come in handy..." I murmured, connecting the griffins with our hot spring destination. "Can we ride these griffins too, Sérignan?"

"Of course! They're tame and can carry you wherever you need, Your Majesty! Getting around will be much easier with them!"

Sérignan was practically boasting. She'd never raised animals before, and seeing them turn out this successful filled her with pride and joy. The idea that the animals she raised could be useful to me excited her to no end.

"Okay, then it's decided. Lysa, no need to prepare that ship."

"Are we going to...?" Lysa asked, eyeing the griffins.

"That's right. Let's take our trip there on the Griffin Express. We'll be there

and back in a flash. It'll cut down on our travel time for this little sojourn, right?" I said, turning my gaze to Sérignan. She still had no idea what we were talking about.



Soon after, we were half a mile off the shores of the Eastern Trade Union.

"Oooh?! Whoa!"

I flew through the air on the back of a griffin that had been turned into a Swarm. Sérignan was a bit disappointed that the Griffin Swarms' first "battle" was a flight to the hot springs, but it did serve as proof of their usefulness. They were quicker than the Ripper Swarms, very powerful, and could quickly get around regardless of terrain.

"Your Majesty, are you all right?!" Sérignan called out to me. She was riding another Griffin Swarm beside me.

"I-I'm fine... No problems here..." I replied wearily.

We had three griffins, so I figured we could each ride one. Oh, how naive I was. The griffins cantered through the sky at speeds unlike anything I'd ever experienced, and every now and then mine shook, nearly throwing me off.

Why did I think riding this thing alone was a good idea?!

"Your Majesty, gripping the reins too hard might aggravate the griffin! Holding on to them like this should be safe enough!" Sérignan told me, demonstrating her grip.

"A-All right! I'll try!"

So I said, but the griffin seemed to fly smoothly without me having to do or say anything. I tried to keep it restrained, but I couldn't understand what its cries were supposed to mean. Even as I focused on the collective consciousness, the only thing I felt from it was the desire to fly ever faster.

"Fine, I guess I'll just try to hang on..." I resigned myself to just accept my fate.

"This feels so good!" Lysa called out cheerfully. "It's the best thing ever! I never imagined I'd be riding a griffin! Feeling the wind rush past my skin like this is so pleasant... And I can see the sea beneath us! The view is amazing!"

This was Lysa's first time riding a griffin too, but she seemed to be having fun in her journey through the sky. The griffin must've been happy to have such a satisfied rider.

"Having fun, Lysa?" I asked.

"Yes! This is so much fun! I never imagined I could do something so exciting outside the village!"

The elven forest was a secluded place, so everything outside it felt fresh to Lysa. She could find the new and novel in every sight. I was a bit jealous of her perspective.

"Look at how much fun Lysa is having because of you, Sérignan," I said.
"Thank you."

"I'm not worthy, Your Majesty! I simply sought to increase our combat potential. I didn't do this so I could fly in the name of fun!"

Aww, she's being bashful.

"So, how long until we reach the island?" I asked.

"About ten more minutes," Sérignan replied. "Oh, it's coming into view now. It's that island over there."

In the distance, I could see a small island covered in greenery. It had small hills, and there was a visible cloud of steam hanging over it. It was like a miniature version of Japan's Sakurajima.

"Is there anywhere we can land?" I asked as we approached. "If we just land in front of the inn with the griffins, we'll scare the people there. We should probably touch down somewhere else."

"That clearing over there should do." Sérignan pointed at a spot on the island.
"Thankfully, there aren't any farms."

The clearing was vast, but there were no crops in sight. I didn't see any horses or cows either, which the griffins would be inclined to eat. It was a perfect spot to land.

Sérignan and Lysa landed gracefully, but my Griffin Swarm alone was stubborn, refusing to land. After spending another forty minutes circling the

island, it finally touched down in a forest.

I wanted to cry.



“Welcome to the Veitia Home! Are you here for a room? Or would you like to order something to eat?”

Having gotten lost in the lush forest, I’d managed to send Sérignan a distress signal through the collective consciousness, and she’d rescued me thirty minutes later. Now we had at last reached the inn adjacent to the hot springs. Just getting there had been a real struggle.

“We’ll be staying here for three days and two nights. Do you have room for us?”

“Of course! I’ll show you to your room now.”

We couldn’t take a very long vacation, but three days and two nights wouldn’t be that much. We’d been fighting one battle after another, so I really wanted to take my time and enjoy the hot springs.

The innkeeper led us up to the second floor, then to a room in the southern hall.

“Enjoy yourselves!”

Our room had four beds, with each bed having its own dedicated closet and cupboard. The window offered us a gorgeous view of the sea. A truly clean, beautiful sea, unmarred by industrial pollution.

“Let’s go to the hot springs, Your Majesty!” Lysa urged me. “Hot springs, hot springs!”

“Don’t rush me,” I told her. “I just spent almost an hour stuck on that griffin, and then I got stranded in the middle of nowhere. Let me rest.”

Contrary to Lysa’s overexcitement, I was exhausted.

“I’ll wait for you, then!” Lysa swiftly sat on the bed and stared at me.

She stared...and stared...and stared some more.

I can’t sleep with her eyes drilling holes into me like that!

“Fine, fine, let’s relax in the hot spring. Did they tell you where they are?”

“Yes, they gave me a map at the front desk!” Lysa whipped out the map, as if she’d been waiting for me to say that.

Cute.

“Let’s go, then. Do we have soap and shampoo?”

“All set! No need to worry about that, Your Majesty!”

It never hurts to check.

“Did you bring your casual clothes, Sérignan?” I asked.

She couldn’t very well go into the hot springs in her armor.

“Yes, I have the clothes we bought in Khalkha.”

Sérignan took off her armor and switched into ordinary clothes. We then made way for the hot springs. I wore a plain, casual dress so as to not draw much attention. Lysa wore a pair of boyish shorts, knee-high socks, and a black sleeveless shirt. Sérignan was in a long, black skirt and a white shirt.

“Looking awfully girly, Sérignan,” I teased. “You look like a talented secretary or something.”

“H-Huh?! I do? I picked this hoping I wouldn’t look too conspicuous...” Sérignan said dejectedly, pinching up her skirt.

This gave me a flash of her leg, and I could see she had a dagger strapped to her thigh. So that was what she meant by inconspicuous.

“That said, a long skirt could make it harder to move. Maybe I should have picked a shorter one. But that would have been embarrassing...”

“Always ready for battle, huh? I wish you’d just try to dress up for fun. You’re plenty strong already, Sérignan.” I sighed.

“Perish the thought! Protecting you is what I live for, Your Majesty. I cannot exist otherwise. Please, allow me to keep you safe!” she pleaded, desperate.

“Of course I’m letting you protect me, Sérignan. Just having you around is soothing and gives me courage. Keep me safe.”

“I will, Your Majesty!”

How did we get from talking about clothes to this?

Still, I wasn't lying when I said having Sérignan around gave me peace of mind. She always protected me whenever I was in danger—she and the Swarm. I trusted her to no end.

“Let's get in the hot spring, then,” I said. “I'm looking forward to it.”

“Ditto!”

Lysa and I left the room, feeling eager.



The hot springs were very impressive. An open-air bath provided a wonderful view of the sea, and there was a lie-down bath where you could stretch out and relax in shallow water. Warming up in those waters would be bliss. I wanted to jump in right away, but I figured we'd enjoy the open-air bath first and then try the lie-down bath.

Lysa lit up as soon as she saw the hot spring. “Whoooa! The bath is huge! It's like a lake, milady!”

She'd been traveling with us ever since she left the elven forest, and she constantly marveled at new discoveries. Hot springs were nothing new to me, but it was her first time seeing anything like it. *She's so cute.*

“Hmm??” Sérignan glanced at me. “What are you looking at, milady?”

I, too, was marveling at the sights—namely, Sérignan's breasts. They were *big*. No one in my grade had had breasts that big. I'd been teased for my middle-schooler figure for ages, so knockers like that were a pipe dream.

What did Sérignan do to get this nice figure? I was supremely jealous.

“Urk! I-if I may, milady, I think you're very pretty in your own right!” Sérignan said hurriedly.

“It's not convincing when it comes from the owner of those milk jugs,” I huffed, glaring at her bust.

“Um, aren't we going into the bath?” Lysa asked.

“Yeah, let’s go in. We can see how these things float,” I said dryly, my gaze still nailed to Sérignan’s chest.

As we dipped into the water, its welcoming warmth melted away all my tension and envy.

“Phew... Hot springs are great.”

“The scenery is very pretty,” Sérignan commented.

“Yeah, bathing with a view of the ocean is fantastic.”

Lysa looked around. “Is it just me, or are there hardly any people here?”

The facilities were spacious, yet there was only one other lady bathing besides us. There wasn’t anyone else nearby, so we pretty much had the place all to ourselves.

It made enough sense. There were no ships nearby, and the island had no walls for protection. With the war going on, no one would carelessly come by for an island vacation. Seemed like a bit of a shame, though.

“And there’s that weird rumor going on,” the young woman sharing the bath with us interjected.

“Weird rumor?” I parroted.

“Well, apparently, there are monsters coming in from the south,” she said. “People say the Portario Republic in the new continent is struggling to keep them at bay, but they could break through any day now. And when the monsters take over the southern continent, they’ll cross the island and move north to our continent.”

Monsters from the south? I recalled hearing that before. Someone said as much during the revolution in Nabreej.

“But, I mean, it’s just a rumor.” The woman smiled. “There’re wars going on all the time nowadays, so nobody has the money to go on vacation. I just happen to be a famous banker’s daughter, so I can travel freely, but not everyone has that luxury.”

“I guess that makes sense...”

Few people could indulge in leisure at a time like this, as sad as that was.

After I'd had my fill of gazing at the sea from the open-air bath, I made my way to the lie-down bath. I lay down in the hot water and contemplated the future.

"What are you thinking about, milady?" Sérignan asked.

"Oh, not much. Just about how far we can go."

Just how far should I take this war? Will everything end when I defeat Nyrnal?

It didn't feel that way. A menace in the south was coming our way. Maybe dealing with that was the victory the Arachnea sought. Could we really cross the sea and continue the war on the new continent?

Would we even beat the Nyrnal Empire to begin with? Honestly, until we did that, we didn't have time to consider the new continent. That had to come first, and it was proving to be an immense hurdle.

Where would the Nyrnal Empire strike next? Would they cross the Phros again to strike the Eastern Trade Union? That was plausible, but they could also change course and attack the Dukedom of Schtraut. They might have been tightening their defenses, biding their time.

I imagined countless scenarios, numerous battles, and the sacrifices and casualties that might come as a result.

I didn't want this war to continue much longer. But if I didn't, how could I grant the Swarm the conquest I'd promised them? In the event that I failed, both the Swarm and our allies would be in danger. As the Arachnea's queen, I couldn't allow that. I had to keep on fighting, even if it pained me.

Sérignan, who was sprawled next to me, peered at me with concern. "Are you tired, milady?"

"A bit," I replied with a sigh. "The Nyrnal Empire is a difficult opponent. I can't get a handle on what they're going to do next. They might have some kind of crazy plan in store, and that makes it harder to fight them. I just don't know what they're planning."

War was all about reading your opponent's intentions. To win, the enemy had

to defy our expectations, and the same held true for us.

“Trying to discern the enemy’s malice all the time is honestly exhausting. I’d much rather spend my time surrounded by goodwill, without people making attempts on my life or having to fight a war. I want peace. I want to go back to my world...”

“Hm, you’ve mentioned this world of yours before, but is it different from this one? Can we go there with you?”

“No, you can’t, Sérignan.” I shook my head. “Someday, we’ll have to part ways. But we’ll stay together until that day comes. The time we spend together is truly wonderful.”

This world was different from the game. The heavy infantry in the game were stronger, the ballistae more potent, and the leaders simpler. Here, only some of the heavy infantry could reliably kill Ripper Swarms, ballistae were hard to aim at the wyverns, and the enemy commanders were crafty.

“I wonder if I’ll survive and go back to my world...”

“I will save your soul.”

“You killed her.”

My mother...

A splitting headache assailed me.

Can I...really go back to my world? What Sandalphon and Samael said makes it sound like I’m already—

“Milady?” Sérignan said, her concern seeping into me through the collective.

At some point, my expression had contorted in agony.

“I’m fine, Sérignan. Really. I think I just got dizzy from sitting in the water for too long... I’ll get out and relax for a bit. I’ll be back soon, so you can just relax here with Lysa.”

“Very well, milady. But do be careful. Today you seem...a bit weaker than usual.”

Weaker, eh?

Maybe I did feel kind of feeble. Between the seemingly endless war with Nyrnal and the idea of going back to my world, my resolve had been shaken. Then again, I had fought every single battle thus far without knowing what to do next. So I believed I'd manage going forward too.

Or rather, I had to. *The Swarm is counting on me, after all.*

Having cooled down a bit, I returned to the hot spring and decided to thoroughly enjoy myself this time. I chatted away with Sérignan and Lysa. I had seen Sérignan in the game plenty of times, but only after coming here did I meet her in person. I told her how there were times when I'd carelessly let her die in the game, which made her break into a cold sweat.

Lysa was a dear friend who I'd met for the first time in this world. When I lived in Japan, I never imagined I'd ever meet an elf. Thanks to the elves, we'd been able to live comfortably at the very beginning, and what happened to them had lit the fire of ambition inside me.

Without a doubt, there were all sorts of fun things in this world and things I'd never seen before. Still, I wanted to go home.



After soaking in the hot spring, we returned to rest in our room. I stripped down to my undergarments and got under the covers. Sérignan looked like she wasn't too pleased with that, but since we were on vacation, she let me do as I liked.

It was a welcome day off from Sérignan's advice.

"There are really all sorts of things in the outside world, huh?" Lysa whispered, gazing out at the sea through the window. "Vast hot springs, a sea that spreads as far as the eye can see, enormous ships... I'd never see these things in the elven forest. I wish I could show Linnet this world..."

Lysa still had feelings for Linnet. I knew the elves were long-lived, but they must have let their memories linger for a long time too.

"I'm sure Linnet's watching, Lysa. He sees this world through your eyes," I told her.

“I hope so... Thinking that I’m the only one who gets to see the world like this, and that he’ll never get the chance... It just makes me sad.”

I didn’t see the harm in her embracing this idea. She could believe that Linnet was still with her, residing in her heart. Forcing her to embrace reality might not be a good thing.

“Did you enjoy the hot spring, Sérignan?” I asked.

“Yes, I feel somewhat invigorated. I think I’ll win our next battle with ease! I will emerge victorious for your sake, milady!”

Sérignan only cared about fighting, but that was fine by me. It suited her. And thanks to her, I never felt cornered. I couldn’t imagine fighting a war without her at this point, though relying on her so heavily wasn’t necessarily a good thing. A strategy that was dependent on one unit would fall apart if that unit was lost, and I wouldn’t have a backup plan if that happened. Ideally, I should have strived to achieve certain victory through a composition of multiple units.

But since we were only just beginning to unlock our units, I needed to rely on Sérignan just a little longer.

Fight hard, Sérignan. I’m counting on you.

“I shall, milady. Believe in me.”

Apparently my emotions had leaked over to her through the collective consciousness.

“I will, Sérignan,” I told my trusted, praiseworthy knight as I let my body cool down.



After the hot springs, we got something to eat. The hot springs I was used to served traditional Japanese food, but that wasn’t the case in this world.

“Pick anything you’d like from this menu!” the inn’s employee said, handing us menus and placing glasses of water on our table.

“Hmm, there’s so much here... I can’t decide...”

The menu listed all sorts of tantalizing dishes. All of them were so alluring; I

couldn't settle on one.

Lysa, on the other hand, made her choice quickly. "I'll have the fried seafood dinner set!"

She's decisive, that one.

"I'll have today's recommendation," Sérignan said.

Drat, I'm the only one who hasn't decided yet.

Panicking, I scanned the menu and found something familiar.

"Curry...?"

Like, the curry? One of my favorites, the nice and spicy curry with rice?

"Excuse me!" I called out to the waitress.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"This curry dish—is it spicy, served with rice, and dripping with sauce?"

"Why, yes, it is! It's a famous dish in the Portario Republic, but not many people have heard of it around these parts. Are you from Portario, miss?"

"No, I'm from...somewhere else," I said vaguely.

Curry. Just the thought of it made me salivate.

"I'll have the seafood curry, then," I said, feeling impatient.

It almost felt like a waste, eating Japanese food when I was in a foreign land. But maybe a foreign country's curry would be a little different.

"Got it! Your food will be out in just a bit!"

"What kind of dish is curry, milady?" Sérignan asked me.

"It's very tasty, Sérignan. I'll give you a taste."

Curry. Curry. Curry rice! Mom's curry was so tasty... I'd love to have it when I go back home. She put carrots and eggplants in it, and it was so delicious...

"Thank you for your patience! Here are your appetizers: salad and marinated tuna."

Dinner here was served in courses. After that, they served us soup, and then

we got the curry.

“Here’s your seafood curry! Just be careful; it’s hot!”

It really is curry!

Seeing the pool of amber roux blanketing the rice, I confirmed that it really was the dish I wanted. My heart positively cheered as I brought the first spoonful to my lips. It was a little too hot, but it definitely tasted like curry. It was a bit spicier than Mom’s curry, but the spices were amazing.

Curry really is the best. The pinnacle of human wisdom and civilization!

“I-Is it really that good?” Sérignan asked, a bit awed.

Oh. Sérignan had felt my emotions again, prompting her to eye the curry curiously.

“Have some!” I offered her a spoonful, bringing it to her lips.

“V-Very well, then.” She was already intrigued by the smell of the spices, and my recommendation prompted her to taste it. “It’s quite...stimulating. But I can understand why you hold this flavor in such high regard. I should have ordered curry as well...”

“Just order some tomorrow.”

We were still on our first day of our three-day, two-night vacation. She didn’t have to cram it all in one day. I felt bad for Roland and the other Swarms fighting on the front lines, but at the very least, I could transmit the flavor of this curry to them through the collective consciousness.

That said, the Nyrnal forces that attempted to invade the Popedom seemed to be getting smaller in number, so things were relatively calm on Roland’s side too. He abided by my instructions, creating a detachment as a reserve force. They could move in regardless of whether there was an attack on the front lines or from the rear.

The reserve force was crucial. Knowing when to send them in could decide a war. That was just as true in the game too. Throwing your entire army into a battle wasn’t always the right approach. Having a reserve force set aside gave you a way to handle the enemy’s unexpected actions.

Nyrnal swooping in to occupy Maluk after I'd marched my entire army into the Poppedom of Frantz was a grim reminder of that. I wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"I'll share my fried oysters with you, so let me taste your curry too, milady!" Lysa offered.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Have a taste. I ate this back where I came from, you know. It's a little taste of my world."

After tasting one another's dishes, we had some nice cake for dessert and some coffee. It was a satisfying meal. Everything tasted good, and the curry sparked memories of home.

We took another bath and dipped in the hot springs again, listening to the roar of the waves as we gazed out at the nighttime sea.

Despite the atmosphere, I was feeling anxious. What was Nyrnal planning? They had a navy, after all. I couldn't discount the possibility of them attempting to stage a landing on the Eastern Trade Union, and I wasn't sure if the Union's own navy could stop them.

I could dispatch some Swarms there, since they could operate ships. They weren't as good as seasoned sailors, but they were loyal and brave, and they'd learned how to operate a ship from the pirates.

My other concern was that Nyrnal was using Gregoria units. If it were just the wyverns, I could chalk that up as coincidence, but the lindwyrms were definitely from the Gregoria. I didn't know how the Empire was able to employ them, but that meant there might be behemoths and dragons as well.

Thankfully, my most recently unlocked unit could effectively deal with the lindwyrms. It was faster than the Dreadnought Swarm and could work alongside my other units.

But what if the Nyrnal Empire had the Gregoria hero unit? Georgius the Dragon Slayer was among the strongest hero units in the game. If they were to send him against us, would we be able to put up a fight? If we were to run into him in his final form before Sérignan evolved again, we'd be in trouble.

"Phew. So much to think about..."

The problems were piling up. At least I was able to get some rest and relaxation on this trip. I had my work cut out for me, but for now, I was grateful to Lysa for bringing up the idea. Rather than mull it all over any longer, I went to sleep. *Good night.*



I woke up...only to realize I was in a dream. I was in my room back in Japan.

“Who’s there? Sandalphon or Samael?” I asked.

I could tell this place was fake. It wasn’t my real room.

“It’s me, _____.” A familiar figure in white materialized before me.

“Sandalphon.” I sighed in relief. “I’m glad it’s you.”

Honestly, I didn’t like dealing with Samael.

“Tell me, _____,” Sandalphon said. “How do you feel about that world?”

“That’s awfully sudden, Sandalphon,” I replied, frowning. “And it’s hard to answer.” I contemplated her question for a moment. Eventually, I said, “I’m feeling pretty attached to it right now. Being with Sérignan and the others is fun. But I know that world isn’t where I belong. I’m an outsider. So...I guess I’m not sure how to feel about it.”

“You’re very honest, _____.” Sandalphon regarded my perplexed answer with a kind smile. “Although that might be for the best. It means you haven’t lost your human heart. That’s why I want you to save that world.” Sandalphon fixed me with a somber gaze. “It’s still too soon, however. Samael set up the world, and you won’t be able to leave until you fulfill some kind of condition.”

“A condition...?” I said. “That sounds like something out of a game. Well, I happen to like games, but it’s my first time playing with such high stakes. I don’t like it.”

I couldn’t help but resent Samael for her vileness.

“Are you sure you want to go back to your world, _____?” Sandalphon asked.

“Of course I do,” I replied unflinchingly. “This apartment is where I belong. I’ll

graduate someday, but until then, this is my home.”

“I see. Yes, I understand...” Sandalphon’s voice carried a hint of sorrow. “For now, live on with pride, _____. You will find salvation, I promise.”

As Sandalphon said that, my consciousness began to fade. Why was there such sadness in her eyes? I didn’t know. The only concrete thing was her heartache, plain for me to see.

Building a Village

We finished our vacation at the inn and returned to the Eastern Trade Union. I was satisfied to find that my skin felt a little bit softer.

“Now, we have an issue to resolve.”

While we were on our trip, the Nyrnal Empire didn’t make a move. The forces in the northeast retreated because they couldn’t maintain an effective supply chain there, but I couldn’t predict Emperor Maximillian’s next play.

I set the new Swarm unit along Schtraut’s defensive line and kept a reserve force, watching and waiting. Whether that would enable me to handle whatever came my way was another issue altogether.

For the time being, I had the Worker Swarms collect the resources we’d need for a second Dreadnought Swarm. I had one set to watch over the Phros, and I was considering positioning the second one on the Schtraut front so it could help us break through the Empire’s defenses.

Producing a Dreadnought Swarm cost a massive amount of resources. If a single Ripper Swarm cost one cow’s worth of meatballs, the Dreadnought Swarm cost more than an entire farm. Honestly, between that and how slow it was, I didn’t want to have to produce too many.

“Aren’t we going to go on the offensive, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked.

“I can’t mobilize my forces when I don’t know if they have a trap set up for me.”

I’d sent Ripper Swarms on scouting missions, but I didn’t have enough information to gauge what they were planning. Did they have other Gregoria units besides the wyverns and lindwyrms? If they did, how many did they have? Were they capable of producing more? I had no answers.

“If only we could send more Masquerade Swarms and Parasite Swarms into their nation...”

In past wars, I had Masquerade sneak in among the refugees and infest people with Parasite Swarms. It wasn't a possibility this time, though, since the Nyrnal Empire had closed their borders and wouldn't let any of the refugees from Schtraut or Frantz into their land. By now, those refugees were rushing to the Eastern Trade Union. They had to live in refugee camps, and the living conditions were getting progressively worse each day.

"Right, the refugee camps are becoming an issue. We should do something about that," I remarked.

"Are you saying we should do work for the humans? Why?" Sérignan asked, her face sour.

"They're our allies now, Sérignan," I chided her. "We have an obligation to help them. To prove that we're not just a horde of monsters, but living beings with human sensibilities."

We'd received a great deal of help from the Eastern Trade Union. They had provided us with all sorts of things in exchange for us defending their land, and if we were to keep our end of the deal, we couldn't risk them doubting us. If the Nyrnal Empire were to try to split us up, they'd condemn us as horrible monsters so the Union would dissolve our alliance.

At least, that was what I'd do if I were them.

"The Worker Swarms have finished reinforcing the fortress line along the Phros," I continued. "We can have them learn carpentry techniques so they can build temporary dwellings for the refugees. I'm sure that would inspire trust in our allies."

"Very well. I suppose we cannot let the alliance fall apart." Sérignan nodded, still bitter.

"The question is how we get insider information on Nyrnal. We need to get our Swarms through their borders..."

The Swarms couldn't be super spies like the ones you'd see in movies or video games. They couldn't go on action-packed missions infiltrating enemy territory. But with things as they were, I could think of one way they could sneak in.

"How about the skies?" I asked.

Sérignan shook her head. “The wyverns are patrolling their airspace. The Griffin Swarms might be capable of shaking them off, but they can’t enter unseen. Even if we did make it in, it’d be a very conspicuous infiltration...”

So swooping in from the skies was a no-go. Parasite Swarms were durable, so they could possibly survive a fall from up high, but if the skies were closed to us, we’d need to come up with another way.

“In that case, there *is* another way.”

If the skies are no good, we just have to go the opposite way.

“I’ve got an idea. I’ll need to think about it and experiment a little to see if it’s even possible. Either way, it’ll take a while.” I put my idea on the back burner. “For now, let’s build those residences for the refugees. I’ll have the Worker Swarms move out. They’ve got time to spare, after all... I mean, the only thing they’d have left to do once they’re done is create furniture for export.”

“I will have them move right away,” Sérignan said. “Where will we build the human residences, though? If we construct them in the wrong place, it might anger any existing residents.”

She was right. People were likely to complain if we built them on the outskirts, beyond the walls, but there were so many refugees that it was bound to create friction. That would just worsen the peace and the refugees’ standing.

“I’ll go talk to the new chairman of the alliance. They should tell us where to set up the next refugee camp.”

With that, I rose from my seat and went to meet the person in question.



“A new refugee camp, you say?”

The new chairman ended up being Keralt. She’d won the election and assumed the role.

“Yes. I imagine the refugee situation is a challenge for you, so I thought we might help,” I told her. “This is an offer of goodwill, of course. We don’t expect any compensation. If you want to press me for a reason, I’ll say that all we seek is your trust.”

“Trust,” Keralt echoed. “You already have our trust. We fought side by side to protect the Union.”

“Well, I’m sure the mercs and adventurers feel that way, but the common citizen doesn’t know how we fought for your country. If we’re going to keep dealing with you, we’ll need to gain *their* trust as well. Although if you don’t think building that refugee camp is necessary, we won’t.”

The mercenaries and adventurers had fought with us, so they trusted us. But for the common folk, there was still a steep wall of racial differences. There might never come a day where humanity and the Swarm truly understood each other, but if possible, I wanted them to at least learn a bit about us.

“We don’t mind at all,” Keralt said. “Go outside the walls and follow the highway. You have my permission to build the refugee camp there. But please, no quarrels or disputes. We’re still in the middle of the war with Nyrnal.”

“I see. Nyrnal might cause a stir among the refugees, so we’d best build it away from Khalkha. That way, even if they rebel, it shouldn’t influence you as much.”

There was a possibility that the Nyrnal Empire might try to incite the refugees into rebellion so they could make the Eastern Trade Union collapse from within. None of us wanted that. Civil war would only open up an avenue for Nyrnal to strike.

“Very well, you may do your construction beyond the outskirts of Khalkha.”

“Thank you.” I nodded politely. “By the way, did the Adventurers’ Guild get a hold of any new information?”

“Not yet. Nyrnal is making it hard to learn anything about their internal affairs. The guild’s power doesn’t extend there. We have a small number of adventurers hiding among their ranks and sending us information, but they can only find out so much.”

I was hoping the Adventurers’ Guild would be of help here. I’d grown to realize just how effective they were at gathering intelligence. They could use the guild’s name to enter different countries and send back whatever they learned, from the quality of a country’s food, to how they dealt with monsters,

and even the size of their armies.

Information like that was useful when dealing with an opposing nation. Poorer food quality implied their economy was worsening, and an army struggling to stop monsters could indicate how much military prowess they held.

“Has your guild analyzed what little information you obtained? What did you come up with?”

“It seems the unit that invaded from the northeast, through Frantz, is preparing to retreat. There’re signs of them reinforcing it with new soldiers, though we’re not sure what it means yet.”

So they’re pulling back from the northeast, but reinforcing their numbers...? I had a bad feeling about that. Maximillian was clearly up to something.

“Can’t the guild gather information on how they’re stationing the soldiers?”

“That’d be difficult. My folks are already putting themselves on the line. I’d rather not ask them to stick their necks out any further.”

Right... The adventurers are like family for Keralt.

“Got it. For now, could you share what you know? We’ll need to prepare in case the enemy tries to cross the Phros again. And we need to know if they’re actually retreating from the northeast or if they’re just winding up for some other plot.”

“This is a matter of national defense, and we’re allies, so we can share that much.”

Keralt was as cautious as ever. She would only give me information she was confident in, filtering out any dubious or murky intelligence. That was encouraging, but it also meant we wouldn’t hear any information she decided wasn’t good enough—including things I might otherwise overlook.

“Thank you. We’ll get busy building the refugee camp, then. Can we borrow some of your carpenters?”

“Yes, go ahead. Khalkha’s reconstruction is mostly underway already, as planned. I’m just not sure if the city will end up being a center of trade again.”

That made sense. Khalkha's scars ran deep. Once trust was broken, it took a great deal of effort to reclaim it. Buildings had burned down and thousands had died, and that had hurt Khalkha's reputation as a safe haven for merchants. I couldn't forgive Nyrnal for striking such a painful blow to this city.

"Anyway, I'll make sure things start right away. It's the least we can do, since we're the ones who drove those people out. We'll assume responsibility for that."

"I never thought I'd hear the Arachnea say anything of the sort," Keralt said, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"What, you think we're monsters that guzzle everything up and don't care for courtesy?" I asked dryly.

"Something like that. I mean, until now, you just destroyed everything in your path."

Well. I guess we really made a bad impression on them.

But that was just us reaping what we sowed. We may have had reasons to exercise our violence, but it was still extreme. After we'd rampaged hard enough to wipe a country off the map, I couldn't act like I was unrelated to the refugees' plight and instead blindly prepare for the next war.

I had to make amends for what I'd done. I promised Sandalphon I'd act with such emotions in my heart.



We began building the refugee camp.

First, we needed to secure a water source. People couldn't live without water to drink, after all. So we dug wells to secure water while creating a drainage system to prevent pollution. The Worker Swarms observed the union's carpenters and imitated their methods. Before long, both the wells and the drainage system were complete.

Building houses was also the Worker Swarms' job. They built temporary residences with sloping entrances for the elderly, who struggled to walk up stairs, as well as larger residences for big families. Honestly, they were doing a

good job, even accounting for the fact that the carpenters were guiding them. Maybe I could have them work in construction after the war.

“Those bugs do good work. If they become our competition, we’ll be out of a job!” the carpenters’ boss said, half complaining.

“Don’t worry, we don’t have any plans of stealing your work,” I told him.

I *was* contemplating supporting their budding careers as builders, but not in the Eastern Trade Union. We could go back to Maluk and Schtraut, the now abandoned countries we’d destroyed, and help restore them for the refugees.

We took many lives under our banner of justice, but slaughter alone wouldn’t help a civilization thrive—we’d need to raise people and cattle and crops to make our society blossom. Once we returned to those countries, we could also build newly unlocked Arachnea structures there. It would be a bit different from normal human life, but it shouldn’t be a completely foreign addition. The Swarm consumed, created, and developed, just like humans did. The process might not be entirely the same, but the results were similar.

“Keep it up, and we should have the camp ready in three or four days. Once we have lodgings set up, the refugees will need to secure clothes and food. They’ll have to work for those. I’m sure that with good houses and a large community, they’ll be able to make a steady living for themselves.”

Our wars had forced these people out of their homes. Once the conflict ended, they would no doubt demand to return to their normal lives. Only this time they wouldn’t have to live under a racist king, a cowardly duke, or a pope commanding an inquisition.

History had a way of repeating itself, however, so there would probably be more wars in the future. But now that we were allied with the Eastern Trade Union, we had to keep at least some semblance of humanity.

Should we fight our wars with the intent of crushing everything in our way? Well, when it came to defeating Nyrnal, yes. The Nyrnal Empire had threatened our allies and burned Khalkha down. They would pay for that. If someone cast a stone at me, I’d punch them right between the eyes in retribution. An eye for an eye, I say. And for what Nyrnal had done, I would destroy all of its major cities in response. *Having the Dreadnought Swarms flatten them might be nice.*

Whatever the means, I wasn't going to let the Empire kick back all smug like it was now. As leader of one of the major factions on this continent, I couldn't give those detestable Nyrnals the satisfaction. No matter how many vassals they oppressed, I would defeat them.

"Your Majesty, construction in the western section is complete," Sérignan reported.

I nodded in confirmation. "Great. Check the name register and start letting tenants into the camp. Try not to scare them too much, though."

Sérignan wasn't very pleased with the idea of us building a camp for human refugees. I could feel her discontent rippling through the collective consciousness. At the very least, she wanted them to swear allegiance to the Arachnea first.

I couldn't blame her, really. Up until now, the humans and the Arachnea had been bitter enemies. Telling her to make nice with the enemy would be a tall order. Still, Sérignan was originally a human knight—in the game, anyway—so I figured she'd be a little more understanding of how the human refugees felt.

Apparently, she believed in Arachnea supremacy, which made it harder for her to acknowledge the refugees. At the same time, I could sense that her loyalty to her queen was her one and only justice. Did she forget her background from the game, then? She'd become a Swarm because she protected human heretics?

"Hey, Sérignan?" I asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Didn't you join the Arachnea after being driven out of the knights for protecting heretic children?"

"Yes. I protected children from vile knights and came under the Arachnea's protection. I certainly remember that."

So she hasn't forgotten, then.

"Then you don't have to treat the humans so cruelly, right? There are children just like the ones you saved among those refugees."

“And yet, humans are the enemy. Even the children I saved back then were riddled with the arrows of their pursuers and died agonizing deaths. Humans are terrible, unforgivable enemies. Thus, we must exterminate them before they exterminate us.”

Oh, boy. Sérignan’s being stubborn.

“Going forward, the humans are our allies,” I insisted, putting my foot down. “Don’t you remember how Konrad’s mercenaries fought by your side? You have to trust them a little. Just think of it as a compromise that will gradually improve our relations with the humans.”

“Improving relations with the humans...” Sérignan muttered.

Just then, a tenant approached us. “You there, missy. Can we really live in these houses?”

“Wait, we need to check your name first,” Sérignan said, guiding him to his designated residence. “There’s a slope, so be careful not to trip. Her Majesty has done this out of her consideration for you, so do be careful.”

“Thank you, thank you. If we were in the Popedom, I’d have been caught by the inquisition, and who knows what would have happened to me...”

With Sérignan singing my praises, the tenants entered their new temporary residences.

“That’s the spirit, Sérignan,” I told her. “The way you treat humans is fine.”

“R-Really? I see them as hated enemies...”

She said that, but I got the feeling Sérignan would blend in just fine in human society.

“Wonder how Lysa’s doing?” I mused.

Lysa had grudges against humans too, after all. Knights who’d advocated human supremacy had taken Linnet’s life, and she likely still hated them for that. Besides, that memory was much more recent than Sérignan’s, so I expected her hatred to be much greater.

That being said, when I pried into the collective consciousness, I didn’t sense any hatred from her. Did that mean she didn’t resent the humans?

“Look! This is how you do it!”

Just as that concern crossed my mind, I found Lysa playing with the refugee children. She was using the legs growing from her back to skillfully juggle beanbags. Professional jugglers would pale in comparison. As they watched her, the children cheered, eyes aglitter. They didn’t reject her for being a Swarm or an elf.

“How are you doing, Lysa?” I asked, walking over to her.

“Oh, hello!” she replied cheerfully. “I’m doing great! I finished guiding the tenants to their new homes. Now I’m just entertaining the kids.”

“Don’t you resent humans, though?”

“I...still hate the fact that Linnet was killed, but it’s not like every human is at fault for that. The knights and the king of Maluk were responsible for that. Now that they’re dead, my heart’s lightened a little.”

Right... Lysa doesn’t want all humans dead.

Still, that was enough to trigger a war. It was what drove me to declare my first.

“I don’t forgive Nyrnal’s people yet, though,” Lysa continued. “We had so much fun in Khalkha, and they burned it down with their wyverns. That’s terrible, not to mention inhuman.”

“Agreed.” I nodded. “I hate them too.” Enough to want to wipe them off the map.

“I just wish a day would come where people wouldn’t have to go to war over things like this,” Lysa murmured as she touched her hair, which was still hiding her elven ears. “Like being an elf, or a Swarm, or a human, or a pagan...”

“I’m sure that wish will come true, Lysa.” Leaving her with that note of hope, I headed elsewhere.

Sérignan was gradually blending in with the humans, and Lysa was doing fine too. What about the rest of the Swarm? Dipping into the collective consciousness, I didn’t sense any general hatred toward humans at all. I *did* feel their resentment toward the Nyrnal Empire clamoring through the

consciousness, though. It was like a chorus of loathing.

“We have to destroy the Nyrnal Empire...”

I couldn't tell what Emperor Maximillian was thinking, but he'd already done more than enough damage to justify painful retribution.

You'd better be ready to see a city or two burn, Maximillian. Remember that you were the one who started this damn war.

Still, I had no idea what he was planning. The northeastern detachment that had attacked the Popedom of Frantz was retreating and, at the same time, receiving more troops. I thought it reasonable that they'd try to invade by crossing the Phros River. Still, I didn't think Maximillian would resort to such obvious tactics. If he were that simpleminded, I wouldn't be having so much trouble. He always employed strategies I didn't expect.

It made sense—Maximillian had all the smartest people in the Empire on his side. He had a gaggle of generals offering him all sorts of ideas, which he could carefully consider and pick from. But that meant...

“Right... If he's consolidating his forces in the northeast, then they might try to...”

With the worst-possible scenario coming to mind, I immediately tapped into a Ripper Swarm's consciousness and had it hurry into the Adventurers' Guild.

“Where's Keralt?!” I asked, flustered. The Ripper Swarm transmitted my question.

“Th-The guildmaster is on the second floor!” a receptionist hurriedly replied.

I had it hurry up to the second floor and open the door to her office.

“Keralt!” I called out, throwing all politeness to the winds. “Do you have any adventurers near the elven forest?!”

“I was just thinking of talking to you about that,” Keralt said coolly. “A large force of Nyrnal soldiers is invading the elven forest. They're using those monsters—the lindwyrms, that is—to level the ground and carve a path open. Their army is 450,000 strong, with 80 lindwyrms.”

I knew it! I knew they'd try to go through the elven forest!

But I'd realized it too late. The elven forest had no paved roads, so I initially thought a large army wouldn't be able to cross it. But *of course*, they had heavy machinery of sorts in the lindwyrms. They could use those to clear a way through the forest.

"We have to handle it right now," I declared. "Thankfully, we have a base in the elven forest. Using that, we might be able to..."

Can we really do something about this, though? No, we have to do it! I couldn't let the elves get overrun by this war. I'd promised them our protection, and they believed in me.

"We'll mobilize our army," I told Keralt. "Could you continue scoping things out with your adventurers?"

She nodded. "Got it. What about the mercenaries?"

"Have them protect the home front."

I finished my hurried exchange with Keralt, and we each departed for our respective battlefield. I had sworn an oath to protect the elven forest. I couldn't allow it to fall so easily.

The Battle of the Elven Forest

In the southern reaches of the elven forest, thousand-year-old trees were being knocked down and trampled underfoot. A crowd of eighty lindwyrms plowed through the ancient woodlands, showing off their impressive striding charge. The trees the elves worshipped as gifts from the gods were being mowed down without a second thought.

The lindwyrms formed a path through the forest, though some remnants of the natural scenery survived their march. This route would allow the Nyrnal Empire to invade the Dukedom of Schtraut.

The commissioned officer in charge of the lindwurm force said, "At this rate we'll be in Schtraut in a few weeks."

"Will it really go that well, though?" another officer asked. "The elves place traps around their forest. I hear Frantz suffered considerable casualties because of them."

"Hmph. Elven traps won't be enough to stop a force of lindwyrms. We will crush this forest and march on Schtraut. And once we defeat them, we'll invade Frantz and pincer the Arachnea monsters."

Operation Felix was quite simple. The Nyrnal army would cleave a way through the elven forest with the lindwyrms and invade Schtraut without passing through heavily defended mountain roads. Once they defeated the Arachnea in the Dukedom of Schtraut, they would march into the Popedom of Frantz. Then they would end the war by joining the army at the Phros River and crushing the Arachnea force that was stalled in the Eastern Trade Union.

The invasion of the elven forest was going smoothly. It seemed the enemy hadn't expected them to travel through the elven forest. There were some Genocide Swarms stationed here and there, but the Nyrnal army had taken no losses thus far.

"In just over a week, we will have broken through the elven forest. Once

we're past that, nature will no longer stand in our way. We've already proven that the lindwyrms are capable of breaking through the enemy's fortress line. At least, so long as we don't run into any enemy mutations..."

By mutations, they were referring to Sérignan and Lysa. The Nyrnal army was wary of the mutants, since they recognized them as the primary factors of their past defeats. Indeed, Sérignan and Lysa were extremely strong and far more menacing than any ordinary Swarm.

The Empire's forces had to be wary of them—it'd be extremely incompetent if they weren't. The army's new regulations were to handle each mutation with formations of at least three lindwyrms, and, if possible, under aerial support from the wyverns. They were just that wary.

Both the invasion from the northeast and the crossing of the Phros River had been crushed by the mutants' intervention. Given that these unexpected irregularities had dashed multiple plans by now, the Nyrnal Empire recognized them as the utmost threat. Thus, the military was ordered to eliminate them on contact by any means necessary.

"The operation is proceeding smoothly. The wyvern scouts have confirmed that the enemy's main army is still in the Eastern Trade Union. We'll definitely win this time."

Just as the man leading Nyrnal's army said that so confidently...

"Ugh!"

An arrow whizzed past and pierced his aide's chest, knocking the man off his horse and down onto the ground. With that as a signal, arrows rained down on the soldiers walking along the carved path. The heavy infantrymen were capable of blocking some of the arrows, but a number of the projectiles still met their marks, causing unbearable agony. The arrows were definitely poisoned.

"All forces, be on your guard! I repeat, be on your guard! What's going on here?!"

"It's the elves! The elves are attacking us!"

Apparently, the elves of the nearby village had risen up against the lindwyrms stampeding through their home. There were other elven settlements aside

from Baumfetter, and all their chiefs had made pacts with the Arachnea for continued autonomy within the faction's territory.

But now, their way of life was being threatened by the Nyrnal Empire. The trees they'd worshipped for generations were being overrun, and the enemy was approaching their villages. And so, the elves had taken up arms to stop the invasion.

The initial attack was a success. The attacks from the forest confused Nyrnal's soldiers, and more and more of them fell dead from the poison.

But the battle could only remain one-sided for so long. The Nyrnal army regained its bearings and continued the lindwyrms' charge into the forest.

"The monsters are on the move again!" the elves called out as the lindwyrms drew closer.

The elves tried to escape deeper into the forest, but the lindwyrms and Nyrnal's soldiers retaliated. With their crossbows and longbows, they shot the elves in the backs and legs, the latter to render them immobile and trample them with the lindwyrms.

Somehow, the elves managed to rescue their injured comrades, lending their shoulders as they disappeared into the forest.

"Filthy elven savages..." the Nyrnal officer spat, surveying the carnage.

Roughly twenty infantry soldiers had been shot to death, and two or three of their warhorses had been hit too. By comparison, roughly fifty elves were killed in the fighting.

"Continue our advance! Don't let the elves get in our way! March, march!"

The Nyrnal army continued its advance, drawing ever closer to an elven settlement—Baumfetter.



At this very moment, I was soaring on the back of a Griffin Swarm. Flying to Baumfetter was a major gamble. Nyrnal's army had countless wyverns soaring through the skies, and their firepower was not to be trifled with. Even our fearsome, powerful Griffin Swarms would be burnt to a crisp if they tried to

contend with the flying reptilians.

But we didn't have time. The enemy was already encroaching on the depths of the elven forest, and it wouldn't be long before they reached Baumfetter.

"Your Majesty, you should land somewhere safe!" Sérignan called out as she flew beside me.

"This isn't a fight I can afford to be away from," I said firmly.

I'd promised to protect the elves' right to remain independent. I couldn't break that promise. They had a right to live without having to fear the menace of inquisitions or knights.

When I first came to this unknown land, the elves had welcomed me with open arms and helped me. I wouldn't forget that. In my time of plight, they'd both fed me and told me about this world when I didn't know left from right.

I could still remember the taste of the soup they served me. It was rich with the taste of vegetables, and every spoonful filled me with warmth. Nothing I'd eaten since soothed me like that soup did. It taught me that I didn't have to survive all alone in this world. That was why I couldn't tolerate Nyrnal stampeding through their forest.

The Griffin Swarms soon soared over the skies of the elven village.

"Your Majesty, I can see the lindwyrms beneath us," Sérignan said. "They're moving in two lines of forty each."

"So they really were using the lindwyrms..." I muttered.

I could see the lindwyrms pushing their way through the trees too.

"Isn't Baumfetter nearby?" I asked.

"It is! We gotta hurry!" Lysa answered, clearly alarmed.

"I know. Let's hurry. We also need to mobilize the Swarms in our base. I just hope they'll make it here on time!"

I could feel stress building up in my heart too. It was only a matter of time until they crushed Baumfetter—until they destroyed the sacred place I'd promised to defend.

“Wyverns above us!” Sérignan shouted.

A formation of wyverns was swooping down on us from the south.

“Your Majesty, you must land for now! I’ll keep them occupied!”

“I’m counting on you, Sérignan!”

I’d pushed her to take me along, so Sérignan had to handle our enemies in aerial battle—which she wasn’t used to, of course. With this in mind, I resolved to protect Baumfetter at all costs. Otherwise, we’d never make it.

I had my Griffin Swarm go into a nosedive, landing in our first-ever base. When I landed, I addressed the force of new units I’d had in rapid production.

“Everyone!” I called out. “The enemy is threatening our allies! They’re as savage as they are strong, and many of our comrades died at their hands! But we will not submit! We will crush our enemies and defend our allies’ land! That’s the might of the Arachnea! Of the Swarm! That is our power!”

I continued my speech, calling out to the Swarms in attendance.

“That’s right! We are the Arachnea! All who hear us cower, all who see us tremble, and all who speak of us are cursed with nightmares! We submit to no enemy! We shall not besmirch our name with surrender or retreat! Prepare for battle, for the enemy is nearby! We have no time! We cannot allow the enemy to do as they please!”

“All hail Her Majesty!” The Swarm praised my passionate speech.

My Swarm would fight to their last breaths. You’ll get what’s coming to you, Nyrnal!

“I’ll explain the plan, then. It’s simple, really. Very simple. We’ve done it so many times, it’s almost hackneyed by now.”

I transmitted the outline of Nyrnal’s operation through the collective consciousness. The time of battle was fast approaching...



We began by setting a twofold defensive line. The first line was intended to separate the lindwyrms from the infantry, and the second was to dispose of the

lindwyrms. The most important thing was taking out the troops accompanying the lindwyrms. Much like war elephants, charging lindwyrms were bad at taking sudden turns. If it was just a force of lindwyrms, we could find ways to handle them.

I recalled reading in a magazine somewhere that no matter how powerful tanks were, without infantry to accompany them, they were little more than large targets vulnerable to heavy weaponry. In other words, unit composition mattered. The lindwyrms would be vulnerable as long as we cut them off from their infantry.

To that end, I set up our first defensive line behind Baumfetter. The Nyrnal Empire had already seized the village and were heading north. In the end, I hadn't been able to defend it. We were simply too late; I'd failed my duty.

It was beyond frustrating. Intolerable, more like. Baumfetter's elves were the first locals to welcome me to this world. I felt like such an ingrate...and a liar.

"Your Majesty!"

As I was stewing in self-loathing, Lysa came up to me.

"Lysa, how are things in Baumfetter?" I asked.

"Well...many of the warriors died. The sick and elderly failed to escape, and they were hurt. But the women and children are fine and are evacuating north."

So it was as bad as I thought...

I'd hoped the enemy might just kill the warriors and spare the rest of the elves, but they did no such thing. I peered into Lysa's consciousness and saw memories of burnt households and severed corpses. It was an act of barbarism.

We didn't make it, and it was all my fault.

"You've done everything you could, Your Majesty," Lysa assured me. "None of us expected the enemy would try to march through the elven forest."

"No, we didn't." I shook my head. "This forest doesn't have a road for them to march through or cities to resupply in, so we assumed they wouldn't pass through the forest with a large army. But we did know about the lindwyrms, and we knew they'd be able to plow their way through here. If only I'd

connected the dots sooner.”

I should have predicted this. Large units couldn’t cross forests in the game, but this wasn’t a game anymore. These monsters could level the forest, knocking down the trees. Just like how Worker Swarms could chop trees... I should have seen all this coming, but I’d read the situation entirely wrong.

I was too focused on the Phros River and thought the enemy’s attention was fixed on the Eastern Trade Union. In my eyes, the Dukedom was only a secondary front. And in that thought process, I’d gravely misjudged the situation. Instead, the enemy decided to topple the stalemate by shifting their target to the Dukedom of Schtraut, our most vulnerable flank.

“He outplayed me. I played right into Emperor Maximillian’s hands. But it’s not over yet. If they kill ten of our allies, we’ll massacre a hundred of their men.”

As I said this, I took a look at the operation. The enemy had overrun Baumfetter and would soon clash with our first defensive line. There, the Worker Swarms had set up a basic palisade. Based on the direction the lindwyrms were headed, the enemy would soon enter the densest region of the forest. If we attacked them head-on there, the lindwyrms wouldn’t be able to advance. That would be our chance to turn this around.

“Lysa, you go to the second defensive line with Sérignan,” I ordered. “Leave the first line to the Toxic Swarms, the Genocide Swarms, and the new units.”

“Understood. I’ll give it my all, Your Majesty.” Lysa offered a curt nod and headed to her position.

“All right, time to teach those despicable louts a lesson.” After that, I began maneuvering the Swarms.

I’d already decided—they would *pay*. They really pissed me off this time.



The Nyrnal army continued its steady stampede through the elven forest and approached the Popedom. The lindwyrms led the charge and paved the way for the rest of the army, followed by rows of infantry and cavalry. If they were to find themselves under attack, they would either move in to defend or send out

a unit to pursue the enemy.

“The elves’ resistance is getting more and more bothersome to handle.”

“Agreed. We can’t ignore our casualties.”

The elves had been attacking Nyrnal’s army using guerrilla tactics, hiding in the trees to pelt them with arrows. Nyrnal had sent out a force to pursue them, but the elves had caught the soldiers in a series of ambushes.

In this fashion, the Nyrnal army had gradually lost over two hundred men. As such, the invasion army adopted an approach of simply ignoring the elves. Even if they were attacked, they would disregard the elves and continue their march. A few soldiers would die in the attacks, but at least they wouldn’t lose an entire unit while chasing after them.

A pessimistic strategy, to be sure, but the elves’ tactics were passive in their own way. They didn’t try to stop the lindwyrms’ march. Or rather, they *couldn’t* stop it. The elves didn’t have any ballistae or catapults, which meant they lacked any means of stopping the Nyrnal army’s advance. They never needed siege weapons in the past, after all.

“The elves’ attacks are irritating, but we must ignore them,” said the commander of the invasion army. “Dealing with them will just cost us needless losses. Forget them, just continue the march and—”

But just as he said this, something like an arrow skewered his face, sending him tumbling and thrashing off his horse.

“Attack! We’re under attack!”

“Look out, look out! Enemies ahead!”

More arrow-like projectiles zoomed through the air, and the soldiers crouched down in terror. Countless arrows—no, poison stingers were raining down on them.

“Gaah!”

“Help m—”

Soldiers pierced by the stingers swiftly melted into puddles of liquified flesh.

A relatively calm officer took over for the dead commander. He shouted, “Dammit, it’s not just the elves! The Arachnea are here! These aren’t anything like the bugs we’ve seen before! None of them fired off stingers that big!”

Indeed, the stingers that flew through the air were not those of the Toxic Swarms. They were as large as stakes and thick enough to pierce a heavy infantryman’s armor. The ones to fire them were the newly unlocked units that cost the Arachnea much of their resources—Chemical Swarms. These Swarms inflicted greater poison damage than any other unit, and they were even capable of healing their allies. They were a complete upgrade of the Toxic Swarms.

“Have the lindwyrms move ahead! Infantry, keep your shields up until you have to attack! Move through those stingers!”

The de facto commander sent the lindwyrms to handle the attacking Swarms and had the rest of the soldiers move back.

“Won’t the lindwyrms be in danger?” one soldier asked him.

“Still, we can’t move through this rain of stingers. Shouldn’t we have the lindwyrms shield some of our units?”

“Should we?”

The lindwyrms have avoided advancing without infantry support. A few of the infantry units followed closely behind the lindwyrms, jogging under the pelting rain of stingers and using the gigantic lizards as living shields.

And so they marched ahead, forming two lines behind the lindwyrms as they knocked down trees in their way, seeking the Swarms. The enemy might have been falling back; while the soldiers could hear faint footsteps, the Arachnea was nowhere in sight. Was the enemy even ahead? The soldiers couldn’t help but doubt themselves. Suddenly, the lindwyrms’ footing collapsed, and the gigantic reptiles fell, as if sucked into the ground.

“Wh-What?!”

“What just happened?!”

The confused soldiers lost sight of the lindwyrms, and more bewildered

lindwyrms kept going, stepping over their kin and then toppling into pits in front of them. Before long, all eighty lindwyrms were stuck in the ground, struggling to get out. But the holes they'd fallen into were too deep.

"That's far enough, Nyrnal soldiers."

Sérignan, Lysa, and countless Genocide Swarms stood in their way.

"This place is your graveyard. Perish," Sérignan said coldly and dashed toward the Nyrnal soldiers.

Her targets weren't the soldiers, but the non-commissioned officers and others leading the army. It was easy to tell them apart, since the high-ranking soldiers had unique embellishments on their armor. In the Vietnam War, officers would fake their rank insignias so as to fool snipers, but in this case they garnished their armor to signify their higher status.

"Oh no!"

"Haaah!" Sérignan bellowed a battle cry as she severed an officer's head.

Blood spurted out as the officer's body crumpled to the ground.

"A trap, this is a trap! Run!" a soldier called out.

"You're not getting away," Lysa said as she shot him through the back.

The fleeing soldiers were all shot down, and they collapsed one after the next. All the arrows fired their way are painstakingly laced with Chemical Swarm venom.

"Don't let any of them get away, Lysa," Sérignan told her.

She nodded. "I won't."

Lysa's expression was ghastly. Seeing her fellow elves being killed had hardened Lysa's heart and imbued it with a thirst for vengeance. She mercilessly slaughtered any soldiers who dared to run.

"Can you take out the enemy infantry, Lysa?" came another voice.

"Yes, Your Majesty. We just need to kill the trapped soldiers with Chemical Swarm and Toxic Swarm fire."

An odd figure entered this bloodstained battlefield. It was a girl—the

Arachnea's queen, Grevillea. With cold eyes, she watched Nyrnal's soldiers die and the lindwyrms flounder in the pits.

The holes had been dug by the Digger Swarms, who burrowed beneath the earth and crumbled it to the point where the surface just barely remained intact. Normally, these Swarms were used to dig under the enemy's walls, but now their tunnels had been used to ensnare the enemy. The lindwyrms had fallen for the Arachnea's provocation and stumbled right into their trap.

"Kill the lindwyrms," Grevillea said. "Give those ugly reptiles the deaths they deserve."

At her order, the Chemical Swarms gathered around the lindwurm pits and stabbed them with their stingers. Even the lindwyrms, who'd boasted some of the highest defense in the game, died from multiple stabs from the Chemical Swarms. The creatures spasmed as they melted into pools of flesh. Within minutes, they were all dead.

"That just leaves the soldiers. They're pitiable, but they don't deserve mercy. Make them pay, my Swarm," the queen ordered.

"Understood, your Majesty." Sérignan and Lysa obliged.



Eighty enemy lindwyrms had been wiped out in a flash. Without them, Nyrnal's army only had rank and file soldiers. The heavy infantry couldn't stop the Genocide Swarms' fangs or the Chemical Swarms' stingers. Either way, they would die.

"Genocide Swarms, split up from the Toxic and Chemical Swarms and pincer them. Cut off their avenue of escape. They won't get away from here. We don't know which of them raided Baumfetter."

I didn't intend to let any of them get away after they attacked the elven village. After all the havoc they'd wreaked here, they needed to pay. If it had just been trampling the trees the elves cherished, I might have found it in me to forgive them. But killing Baumfetter's villagers, non-combatants, was something I couldn't overlook.

My force of Genocide Swarms, Toxic Swarms, and Chemical Swarms ran

through the forest in an attempt to catch up to the enemy. Nyrnal's soldiers stopped running, noticing that the lindwyrms' footsteps had abruptly ceased. Suspicious, the officers debated sending out scouts.

"All right. Figure out what's going on ahead," I heard an officer say through the Genocide Swarms' senses.

"Send out a scout!"

Soon, a scout on horseback galloped across the path made by the lindwyrms and approached us.

"Lysa, kill him," I ordered.

"Got it." Without hesitation, Lysa loosed an arrow.

Her arrow pierced the scout through the head, sending him flying off his horse in a splatter of blood. He then lay on the ground, twitching as his life ended. With that as the signal, my Swarm commenced their attack.

The Chemical and Toxic Swarms rained stingers as the Genocide Swarms lunged and chomped on the soldiers and their horses. The soldiers desperately fought back, but unfortunately for them, this wasn't the game. In the game, heavy infantry had high defense and good attack, but here in the real world, they were sluggish and slow-moving, fell to fatal blows, and all too frequently fled in terror.

This wasn't a game. It was a real world. The sight before me burned that fact into my mind.

As roughly half the soldiers died, something else came onto the scene—something that might change the outcome of this battle.

"Wyverns coming in from above!" Sérignan called out.

A formation of over one hundred wyverns was swooping down toward us.

Oh, crap. This is bad news.

The wyverns went into a nosedive, blowing their fire onto the woods where my ranged Swarm units were hiding. The trees shielded some of them from the fire, but any Chemical and Toxic Swarms consumed by the flames burned alive until they perished.

Right away, the Swarms switched their targets to the wyverns. The wyverns ascended, accelerating and moving in irregular directions to throw off the Swarms' aim.

I didn't have a countermeasure. My only airborne units were three Griffin Swarms, which simply weren't enough to stop all these wyverns. We were basically at their mercy. For now, I had my Swarms fire their barrage of stingers toward the sky, basically hoping they'd land lucky hits. They shot down five or six wyverns, which crashed to the ground and melted, but those that remained breathed fire on the ground again.

As the carnage ensued, Sérignan approached me. "Your Majesty."

"What is it?" I replied, shooting her a dubious glance.

"There's something incredibly dangerous hiding among the wyverns. We must be wary. From what I can tell, it is even more powerful than the Seraph Metatron."

Something stronger than the Marianne faction's hero unit is hiding among the wyverns?

I couldn't spot any dragons or great dragons flying in the wyverns' formation. That only left one plausible option.

"The Gregoria's hero unit...?"

I squinted as I looked up at the wyverns again. Each wyvern carried a rider, and I tried my best to see if any of them seemed out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, the wyverns were moving too fast for me to see properly.

All the while, the forest floor was on fire. Both flanks of the road the lindwyrms had carved burned, and the Genocide Swarms were still finishing off the Nyrnal foot soldiers. Their numbers had whittled down to a third of their original size.

Then, a single wyvern landed.

"Arachnea Queen!" a hulking man called out, brandishing his claymore. "I know you're here! Show yourself."

What an idiot.

Striking a pose there would just end with him getting hit with a Chemical Swarm's stinger or torn to bits by the Genocide Swarms. My will traveled through the collective consciousness, prompting four Genocide Swarms to lunge at the man.

"Hmph!"

But the next moment, he caught a stinger flying at him with his bare hand, using the other one to swing his giant blade and mow down the Genocide Swarms charging at him in one fell swoop.

"So that's the Gregoria's hero... Georgius the Dragon Slayer..."

In the game, his backstory was that of a hero who slayed countless dragons in an ancient era where the dragonkin menaced humanity. He slayed dragon after dragon, protecting the people. Eventually, mankind and the dragonkind reconciled, but he continued his slaughter, eventually making him the most hated man alive among the dragons.

When he made his way to slay the ancient dragons, they cast a curse on his younger sister. Should Georgius slay any more dragons, his younger sister would die. He was told that the only way to lift the curse was to serve as a warrior under the wise leader of the dragons, Augustus. And so, Georgius bitterly reconciled with his old enemies, becoming the Gregoria's hero unit.

He was a formidable unit in the game. He was no match for Sérignan's final form, but his defense and attack were both very high, and he could overwhelm large crowds of enemies. I recalled many matches where he'd easily dispatched many of my Arachnea units.

As one would expect of a hero unit, ordinary units couldn't hold a candle to him.

"Your Majesty, please wait here. I shall dispose of that man."

"Sérignan, no! Wait!" I called out to stop her. "The way you are now, you—"

The way she was now, she couldn't beat Georgius if he was in his final form!

"You there!" Sérignan shouted, facing him.

"Hm? Oh, one of the Arachnea's insects." Georgius turned his eyes toward

her in a provocative manner. “I have no interest in fighting you small fry bugs. I only have business with the Arachnea’s queen. She’s here on this battlefield, right? I will not kill her, so bring her before me. The Emperor seeks to speak to her.”

“You dare call me a small fry...?” Sérignan asked, glaring at him. “You disrespectful lout. We will never leave our queen in your hands, no matter what your intentions are. No, you will instead become another corpse to feed this forest.”

“I see,” Georgius said, holding up his claymore. “Negotiations have failed, then. Die, insect.”

“Try it if you can, human,” Sérignan spat back, readying her longsword.

Their clash would be resolved quickly. As she was now, Sérignan couldn’t beat Georgius. I should have stopped her, even if it meant stepping out myself. But my feet were shaking too hard. Their fighting spirits clashed and filled the place like a storm, leaving me rooted in place.

“Then let the battle...”

“Begin!”

Sérignan charged ahead, and Georgius moved in too. Sérignan made the first move, swinging her longsword down on Georgius’s head. But he deflected her blow with a swing of his claymore and swiftly dived into her flank.

“Heh, is that all you’ve got, Arachnea?”

The next moment, Georgius’s claymore swept sideways across Sérignan’s body, rattling her.

“Ugh!”

Thankfully, her armor blocked the slash, but she clearly took damage.

“Now, come on out, Arachnea Queen!” Georgius called out as he landed another blow on Sérignan. “You’d better hurry up, before I turn your servant into mincemeat!”

He punctuated this comment with another swing of his claymore, this time striking Sérignan’s abdomen.

“Ngha!” Sérignan groaned, coughing up blood.

No more. I couldn’t stand to watch it any longer. I had to save her.

“Your Majesty!” Lysa cried, but I ignored her and stepped out into the clearing.

“Stop it,” I told Georgius. “That’s enough.”

“Your Majesty! Why?!” Sérignan moaned, looking at me as if to say she could keep on fighting.

Sérignan, no. If this goes on any longer, you’ll die. I can’t stand by and let that happen. Never.

“I’m the Arachnea’s queen. You wanted me to come out, right? Well, here I am. Take me away.”

But then I found Georgius gawking at me, his expression completely drained of bloodlust.

“Katja...?” He muttered an unfamiliar name. “Is that you, Katja?”

“No. I’m the Arachnea’s queen, Grevillea,” I told him tersely.

Eventually, he said, “Right... So you are the queen. Yes, you fit the description. A fourteen-year-old with black hair and brown eyes.”

He began approaching me, his eyes once again lighting up with intelligence and fighting spirit.

“Will you come with me peacefully?” he asked.

“You’ll kill my knight if I don’t, right? Then my answer is yes.” I nodded.

“Follow me, then. We will not tie you up, but do not resist. Otherwise, I will have to kill you, and I don’t want to do that.”

Oddly enough, Georgius seemed to regard me rather gently, as if I were a dear family member or something.

“Fine by me. Dying isn’t in my itinerary either. I promise to come along quietly.”

“Farewell then, Arachnea Knight,” he told Sérignan. “We will take custody of

your queen for a time.”

With that said, he carried me to his wyvern and then took off. As we launched into the sky, I could hear Sérignan shout something from the ground.

Just bear with it for now, Sérignan. I can't let you die.



Watching as the Nyrnal Empire took Grevillea away, Sérignan was overcome by a terrible sense of helplessness.

Protecting her is my duty. I was to be her sword. Her shield. I ought to have sacrificed myself before I gave her up. But I couldn't protect her.

The queen, Grevillea, had sacrificed herself to save Sérignan.

I couldn't protect myself. I couldn't protect my sworn sovereign. I let her fall into the enemy's hands.

“Dammit...all!” The words slipped from Sérignan’s tongue out of sheer frustration. Her failure to meet her duties was simply that vexing.

“Lysa, we must save Her Majesty from the enemy!” she cried.

Lysa shook her head. “Sérignan, you need to heal those injuries first. Her Majesty let herself get taken hostage to protect you. If you die, she’ll surely be beside herself with grief. Are you all right with that? We can still feel her through the collective consciousness. She’s still alive.”

“But—”

“No buts. You have to focus on recovering so you can be in prime condition to rescue her. I’m sure that’s what she wants. Don’t forget, she can still give us accurate orders even when we’re apart. Or do you not trust her?”

“That’s not what I mean! I do believe in Her Majesty! You’re right... She’s always given us the right orders so far. This time should be no different. But I’m still worried. Her Majesty is held prisoner, and who knows what these Nyrnal outlaws might do to her. You know as well as I do how rotten these people are, Lysa.”

“Yes. I know.”

Lysa's home village had been burned to the ground once again. The elves had been massacred, and the forest they called home had been ransacked and ravaged. Despite the elves not wanting anything to do with the war, the Nyrnal Empire dragged them into the conflict and unjustly torched their entire settlement.

The Empire's crimes far surpassed the cruelty of Maluk's knights. Lysa was hardly calm about this. She, too, was worried about Grevillea. Given what the Nyrnal Empire had done to the elves, there was no guarantee they would treat her fairly.

"Your Majesty... Please, stay safe. We'll definitely save you."

"Yes. We will save her, Lysa."

Lysa and Sérignan were determined to strike back against the Nyrnal Empire. Right now, the two of them couldn't do much, but their queen, Grevillea, would surely come up with a plan for them. So Sérignan, Lysa, and the Swarm believed. They kept their minds fixed on the collective consciousness, awaiting her voice.

Overseers

Sérignan and Lysa weren't the only ones who'd watched Georgius take Grevillea away. Two other presences had observed the scene.

"So Queen Grevillea fell captive. The Nyrnal Empire is sending this war in such a dull direction... I was expecting a huge clash between the dragons and the Swarm."

Samael spoke to no one in particular.

"Are they going to have a little discussion as two players? Seeing them join forces would simply be insufferable. The game must be fair, and the players must play according to the rules. Ending this war with a diplomacy win would surely feel like an empty victory, wouldn't it, Maximillian?"

Here, Samael spoke of Nyrnal's emperor.

"Blade to blade. Flame to flame. Destruction to destruction and death to death. Hate each other, fight each other, kill each other. That is how the game will come to its conclusion. An alliance will bring you nowhere. As scared as you might be of the Necrophage's menace, an allied victory isn't an option. We must use our units to kill one another. We must hate each other, destroy each other."

After saying so, Samael stomped down on the map of the continent. However, south of the continent she stepped on was another continent.

"From the south the Necrophage hail,

Across the sea the Necrophage sail.

Leaving the scent of decay in their trail,

Their every step howls like terror's gale,

Their trumpets herald the ending of the world's tale."

Reciting this, Samael danced upon the map. Her words were a mad cadence, her movements a crazed frolic, her thoughts a manic buzz.

Producing a knife out of nowhere, she nicked her finger on it, allowing droplets of blood to spill onto the parchment. The red stain spread over the southern continent. It washed over the southern continent like a conflagration, extending over the sea toward the continent where the Arachnea was fighting the Nyrnal Empire.

“How many days will it take for everything to be consumed? How many days until everything is over? How many more days before Maximillian goes mad with terror? Until the Arachnea’s queen, until Grevillea, until _____ learns of her true enemy? Tell me, tell me!”

Samael whispered half in song, her expression euphoric.

“Aaah, I can’t wait. How will the Arachnea’s queen react when she meets an opponent she really can’t defeat? How will Maximillian struggle with his wounded Empire? They’re bound to entertain me.”

A chair appeared out of nowhere, and Samael took a seat.

“Will catastrophe emerge the victor, or will salvation come a-calling? After all, Sandalphon seems quite devoted to _____. Yes, yes. A boring life needs the spice of excitement.”

Samael alluringly licked the gash on her finger.

“The taste of blood. Who will taste of it, _____ or Maximillian? Either way, this is bound to be a real show. Excitement is all that keeps me entertained in my eternal hell.”

With that, Samael let out a dark chuckle.



“_____,” a girl in white whispered.

It was Sandalphon.

“I promised I would save your soul,” she said, as if in prayer. “Forgive me for failing to keep my promise so far. Forgive me for being unable to help you out now. Forgive me for being so powerless... But there is salvation. So long as you remain strong, you’re never outside salvation’s reach.”

Sandalphon brought her hands together, interlacing her fingers.

“You have shown great mercy. You have even managed to teach mercy to the mad, the butcherers, and the abusers. That is a great feat, enough to earn you the right for salvation. You have proven that even a soul as _____ as yours deserves to be saved.”

She gripped her hands tighter and tighter, until her nails drew blood.

“But you’re still trapped in the devil’s game, and I cannot save you there yet. You deserve salvation, but I cannot give it to you. I cannot express how alarmed, angry, and tormented I am by this. I won’t ask you to understand me, but I do want you to know this: if I could save you right now, I would not hesitate to reach out and help you.”

Once those words left her lips, Sandalphon sighed.

“_____. I will save you, no matter what. So you must remain firm. No matter how merciless things become, bear it. Do not let your emotions get the better of you, even if a rage strong enough to make you forget your humanity overcomes you.”

Sandalphon prayed.

“’Tis cruel. ’Tis merciless. ’Tis even coldhearted. And yet, and still, never forget your human heart. That is what shall bring you salvation.”

Sandalphon prayed so that her wish would surely be granted. So that she could make it happen.

“I pray for you, _____. I pray for the many victims to come. I pray that this will lead to your salvation.”

As she spoke, tears quietly slid down her cheeks.



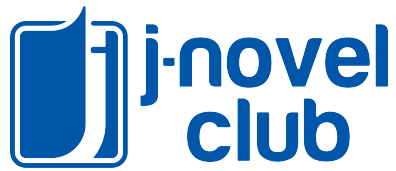
A maelstrom of war has run over the continent for years. The last peacetime feels like it was in the distant, long-forgotten past. The war runs deep through this land, which has sipped on the blood of the war dead for too long. No one knows when the war will end.

But the war is definitely approaching its endgame. Through the abduction of the Arachnea’s queen, Grevillea, the war reaches a crossroads that may lead to

hope. Perhaps the war will finally end. Whether the winner is the Nyrnal Empire or the Arachnea, this war has lasted for far too long.

Will the war end? No war lasts forever. Eventually, the war must end, and peace will settle over the land. The people can only pray for that peace to come.

The endgame draws near.



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