

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

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Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra: World Conquest Starts with the Civilization of Ruin, Volume 4

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Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra: World Conquest Starts with the Civilization of
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Prologue

BRAVE Questers' Demon Lord Army—it was in the battle against these unexpected enemy forces who hailed from a role-playing game that Mynoghra ended up losing one of its mightiest Hero units, Isla, Queen of Bugs.

Yet, despite her loss, the might of the Hero still remained with Mynoghra.

On the verge of death, Isla had transferred her Hero status to the twin girls she loved like daughters, causing both Maria and Caria to awaken as Witches. Not just any Witches, but as the Witches of Regret, who went berserk from the sadness of having lost their mother figure.

The girls ended up coming across a strange entity just as they were about to exact their revenge upon the enemy who'd taken their mother from them. They had no idea that the entity they had encountered was another player who'd come to this world with a video game's protection, just like Takuto had.

At this point, Takuto finally realized multiple beings with similar circumstances to himself had come to this world. He also understood that they would never, ever be able to see eye to eye.

This led him to the inevitable decision to conquer the world.

He would make everything his and achieve the Ascension Victory, allowing him to regain all that had been lost. He would bring back everyone who'd died, no matter what it took.

When he declared this to his people, he was cloaked in the deepest darkness, and indescribable terror and reverence filled all who'd witnessed it.

Chapter 1: Nostrum

MYNOGHRA'S Hero, Sludge Atou, felt more anxious than ever. Perhaps that was only natural given that Mynoghra had only just fended off an attack from *Brave Questers'* Demon Lord Army and lost one of its few Hero units in the process. But the more pressing concern eating away at her was the change in her master and Commander.

Without any trace left of the sweetness he'd displayed during their first days in this world, Takuto had shown such unbridled fury that even Atou felt the chill of fear course through her that day. Naturally, Atou had survived thousands of battles at his side. Though those were only in a video game, Takuto's anger was just as real then.

But the indignation he had shown for the first time since coming to this world had given Atou the impression that the human known as Takuto Ira had been replaced with the complete opposite personality, and that was what had filled her with the kind of anxiety that chilled her to the core.

Things might not be able to stay the way they've been...

Atou's heart squeezed with the thought that they would forever lose those peaceful, relaxing days. But she couldn't let the past keep her from facing the present.

Isla had been defeated despite how dreadfully powerful she was—despite being leveled up. Then there was Atou's own failure of not being there in her master's time of need. And they also couldn't turn a blind eye to the clear and present danger bearing down on this world.

All three of those things helped Atou brace herself mentally, transforming into a firm determination that powered her.

The crisis had passed, giving her the chance to learn from her mistakes.

I'll never fail again. I can't possibly, for I am Sludge Atou! The strongest Hero

who destroys all her enemies and eventually herself. I will destroy Takuto's enemies. No matter what.

Atou tossed aside her weak, needy thoughts, leaving only fanaticism burning within her scarlet eyes...

"Great and mighty King Takuto Ira! Your Sludge Atou has come!"

Atou threw open the doors leading to the Throne Room where the king resided. There she found—

"Ugggggh, I wanna die..."

"Aw, that's a good boy..." Maria cooed.

"Please cheer up, Your Majesty," Caria said.

—her master, Takuto Ira, sitting on the floor, hugging his knees and being comforted by the twins as he pathetically whined.

"K-KING TAKUTOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" she cried.

"...Atou, I wanna die."

That was the first thing out of his mouth, and he didn't even deign to look at her when he said it, choosing instead to keep his face buried in his knees.

Whatever determination Atou had worked up went out the window, and another, currently more pressing matter sent her running to her master's side.

"You mustn't! You mustn't die, King Takuto! What happened? Please tell your Atou everything!"

Takuto meekly lifted his head and looked at Atou. He flapped his lips with no sound for a few moments as if he wanted to say something until, finally, the sparkle in his eyes extinguished, and he reburied his face in his knees like a mole returning to its burrow. He had lost heart.

"King TAKUTOOOOOOOOOO!!"

At a complete loss over what was going on, all Atou could do was pitifully cry his name. Mynoghra's mightiest Hero no longer fit the part. Not that it was her fault when *Eternal Nations'* strongest player had been reduced to a moping mess...

“There, there. Good boy, good boy. You’re a cute widdle baby-waby.”

“B-Big Sista!” Caria chided. “Um, I don’t think it’s proper to call His Majesty a baby.”

“It’s fine,” Takuto pouted. “I’m at the same level as a baby. I want to start over from before I was born.”

“There, there, widdle baby,” Maria repeated her baby talk as she cheerily patted Takuto on the head.

Caria seemed to have some reservations about treating their king that way, so her comforting tactics showed more restraint. Atou quickly noted the younger sister’s better behavior and beckoned Caria closer with hand signals. She then began conversing with the girl in a whisper so Takuto wouldn’t hear or notice.

“H-Hey, Caria! What in the Accursed Lands happened to King Takuto?!” Atou asked in a barely contained whisper.

“C-Cary believes it bestest if it doesn’t come from me...” Caria whispered back.

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrr... But! King Takuto isn’t confiding in me! Desperate times call for desperate measures!”

“Then why not try babying him like Big Sista?” Caria suggested.

“...Excuse me?”

“If you do,” Caria continued, “I’m surest His Majesty will feel like talking to you, too.”

“Of all the preposterous ideas! As Mynoghra’s strongest Hero and King Takuto’s confidant, I could never do such...such a thing as babying!” Atou rejected Caria’s suggestion in a much louder voice than she intended. “I just can’t!” she said, shooting down the idea a second time.

Atou’s loyalty and dedication would never allow her to disgrace Takuto in any way.

“...King Takuto~! Th-There, there, sweetie! Your one and only Atou is here for you~!”

In the end, Atou decided to baby Takuto anyway.

She was honestly terribly curious about the concept. Sure, she had her honor and dignity as a Hero to think about, but the sweet temptation of getting to pat Takuto on the head won out in spades over such things. Besides, she had a million different excuses she could use to explain herself if necessary.

As she continually repeated the excuse in her mind that she was just doing this to cheer Takuto up, Atou indulged fully in babying Takuto without even trying to hide the upward slant of her lips. But on the outside, it only looked like she was doing it to please herself. However, it goes without saying that Takuto's self-esteem definitely got a boost from being patted on the head by the person he trusted and cared for the most.

Takuto finally lifted his head again, the sparkle returning to his eyes.

Atou's wish had gotten through to him.

And she still hadn't stopped stroking his hair, and likely wouldn't any time soon.

"Ugghh, Atooooouu..." he whined.

"Wh-What happened, King Takuto? Please confide in me."

Atou continued to stroke his hair with what was obviously a look of rapture. And it was to her in that moment that Takuto finally explained what had depressed him so.



"**SO**, what you are saying is that you think you went too far with your proclamation during our meeting the other day...?" Atou asked, trying to summarize what Takuto had told her.

"Yeah." Takuto nodded. "Well, honestly, the whole situation pissed me off too, but it's been bothering me that I might've taken it a little too far, you know?"

Takuto was speaking about the day he proclaimed their new objective to his people. That was the day all who served him came to fear him in their bones as they were grimly reminded that Takuto Ira was indeed the King of Ruin—the

bringer of the end.

He felt his approach was overkill. And it was plain to see that the Dark Elves had started to act stiffer and more awkward around him since. Even Atou, his closest confidant and Hero, was wound up tight with nerves. Although Elder Moltar and the rest of empire-management council served as key figures in Mynoghra's government, Takuto's proclamation had been too much for those who still fell under the classification of Humanoid.

If the Takuto before Atou now was the same one she knew and loved, then she could easily chalk up his attitude that day as simply taking things too far in the heat of the moment.

"Haaaa," Takuto sighed. "I seriously can't believe I cockily said such a thing in front of everybody. Throwing my arms open while proclaiming something like 'Let's get to conquering the world' is just so...so...I can't even bear to put it into words...!"

Takuto shoved his face between his knees instead of saying what it was that bothered him so. His loud moans and groans made it obvious he was mentally beating himself up over it.

"Oh, oh, I know!" Maria suddenly piped up. "Something to do with ed-ed-edgee...?"

"Edgy? Oh, you mean being an edgelord, Big Sista," Caria corrected. "That's that illness where someone's deliberately outrageous in order to boost their ego, and it only comes back to bite them later in life."

"Poor, poor, Kingy," Maria cooed.

"AGHHHHHHHHHHH!!" Takuto shouted.

"Stop that, you two! You're only adding to King Takuto's mental woes!" Atou chided, quickly trying to save him from their innocent assault on his mental well-being.

Much more of this, and Takuto was bound to shut people out again. That being said, most of Atou's concerns were relieved once she discovered what had gotten him so depressed in the first place.

“But,” she said, “I must say that I’m relieved by this. You see...the other day, you were a tad...well...”

“Scary?” he finished for her.

Before she knew it, he had lifted his head and was looking straight at her. The sudden change in mood left her baffled for a moment, but she felt the need to answer his query, so she gave a small, reserved nod.

“Y-Yes...”

How will he react?

Atou’s concern was met with Takuto’s usual gentle smile.

“Yeah. I figured as much. I was kinda scary, wasn’t I? Sorry, Atou,” he said, then turned to the twins. “Also...I know I already apologized to you girls, but I *am* sorry. It isn’t easy to speak your mind to a scary king, is it?” Takuto spoke fluidly, almost as if his prior depression had never existed.

He’d apparently already spoken quite a bit with the twin sisters before Atou showed up. Both Takuto and the girls likely had a lot of hard feelings left over from what had happened to Isla. Atou thought it was best for Mynoghra as a whole if he and the twins could talk it out until both parties were satisfied and could move forward.

After all...these two young girls were Heroes now.

“It’s true. Cary loves this version of Your Majesty more. Big Sista feels the same, right?” Caria asked.

“Yeppie-yep! I love the non-edgelord king more!”

“Aggggggggggggh!” Takuto buckled over from that direct blow to his self-esteem.

“Stop that, you two!” Atou shouted again.

Unfortunately, the new Heroes were a bit...outspoken and uncouth. Neither of them meant to be hurtful, of course, but they still hadn’t learned that sometimes the most innocent of remarks can be the sharpest blade thrust into another’s heart.

I wonder if all three of us will have to baby Takuto now? Atou wondered with a mix of anxiety and hopefulness as she gauged her master's reaction. But Takuto pushed himself to his feet, seemingly ready to move on.

"Well, with that said, I'm still planning on going all-out from now on. Setting out to conquer the world...is still the objective. Since I've decided to do it, I'll make it happen using whatever means necessary."

As he said that, Takuto gave off a curious kind of charisma and divinity that inspired those who heard him to naturally want to serve him.

"I did make a promise to you girls," he said to the twins. "We'll do this together."

"...We won't let anybody else die," Maria said.

"Cary and Big Sista have become more than just the protected—we're the protectors now."

Determination burned bright within the twins as well.

The crazed berserkers Atou saw them for on the day they had lost their mother was still very much a part of the girls. Madness still raged within them, just beneath the surface—and this time, it was directed toward the world as a whole.

On that fateful day, Mynoghra as an empire had completely changed.

"King Takuto..." Atou whispered, captivated.

Hers was the expression of a subordinate who'd been reminded of their leader's erudition. It could also be taken as the expression of a maiden in love and a fanatic standing before their god.

Atou solemnly went down on one knee and repeated her oath from long ago, her expression reflecting the crystal calm she felt within.

"My name is Sludge Atou. The bastard child of the world-ruining mud. From this day forward, my mind, body, and soul are yours. Come, let us sink as low as we can together, my king."

"...Yeah, let's do this together, Atou."

That exchange was one Takuto and Atou had exchanged thousands of times, and it had never once lost its importance to them. They gazed into each other's eyes, confirming their bond was still as strong as ever.

Before long, they both stepped forward and took the other's hand, naturally closing the distance between them...

"King Takuto..."

"Atou..."

"GYEGHYEEEEEEEEEE!"

With impeccable timing, a buttinsky appeared.

Atou's annoyance showed plain on her face for the subordinate who'd noisily scuttled up to them.

"What is it, pest?" she hissed. "We were just getting to the good part... Are you inflicted with some sort of illness that will kill you if you don't interrupt King Takuto and me during our alone time?"

"Um, Cary and Big Sista were here the whole time, though. You left us out..." Caria said.

"Shh. You mustn't interrupt the grown-ups," Maria said sagely.

"GYEGHEE!"

"Ah, so you've finished. Good work, Long-legged Buggo," Takuto said.

A Long-legged Bug had ruined the moment between them. Long-legged Bugs were Mynoghra's unique Scout units that were incredibly popular for a variety of reasons, including how their high mobility and cheap cost made them worth using for many tasks outside of just scouting.

Drool spilled from his or her (it was impossible to tell) mouth as they completely ignored Atou and scuttled up to Takuto with an unreadable expression. Takuto began questioning the Scout, so they were apparently there to report back on a mission he had given.

Dissatisfied with the situation, Atou glumly watched them converse until she noticed a large basket strapped to the Long-legged Bug's back.

“King Takuto?” she asked, interjecting herself into the conversation. “What is that basket on the bug’s back? Actually, that reminds me, you seem to have been mass-producing Long-legged Bugs over the last couple of days...”

Atou was aware Takuto had been using up valuable empire reserves to produce Long-legged Bugs. She understood it must be for an urgent mission since he was using their limited Mana to produce the units with Emergency Production.

Atou questioned Takuto about it, and just as he opened his mouth to answer her, Maria interrupted them by suddenly skipping up to the Long-legged Bug, digging around near its head, and then holding out something shiny and golden to Takuto.

“Here, Kingy,” she said.

“...Hm? Oh, it must’ve gotten stuck to its body,” Takuto responded. “Long-legged Buggo, this is important money, so be careful with it, okay?”

“GYGHYEEE!”

“That’s right. As long as you get it.”

As far as Atou knew, the item glittering upon Takuto’s palm was a gold coin from *Brave Questers*. A part of the RPG system governing that game made it so currency from that world appeared in set amounts when their monsters were defeated.

Mynoghra’s battle with the Demon Lord Army might’ve been brief, but the enemy army was massive. An exponential amount of gold had been produced from slaying not only their endless hordes, but even more was earned from killing the stronger monsters and bosses. A mountain range worth of gold probably extended from the area around Dragontan all the way to the southern region where they had battled the Demon Lord Army. The southern area was now under Mynoghra’s control as well.

One such gold coin was now in Mynoghra’s capital.

While Atou had fought a great many battles alongside Takuto and had a general understanding of his thinking, she was still a weapon who moved per her master’s bidding. There wasn’t much she could do when he used his

strategic genius without explaining things to her.

Growing increasingly confused, Atou looked pleadingly to Takuto.

“King Takuto? I’m sorry, but what? You need to explain what’s going on to me soon, or I won’t be able to keep up with the conversation,” she pouted.

“Haha, sorry, sorry,” Takuto laughed apologetically. “I forgot that I hadn’t said anything about this to you yet.”

He flipped the gold coin into the air with a flick of his thumb. The coin rotated edge-over-edge above his head and then landed flat on the ground, rather than safely in the palm of his outstretched hand.

“.....”

The three girls said nothing.

“Well...it’ll be faster to show you,” he said. “Okay, let’s head to the center of town. You girls come too.”

“All right,” Caria said.

“Okey dokey,” Maria said.

Takuto scooped up the coin and continued the conversation as if he hadn’t just botched the catch. Obviously, Atou and the twins were wise enough not to comment on it. None of them wanted to deal with the hassle of him falling back into a depressed state again.

“C’mon, Atou, hurry it up. I’ll leave you behind?”

“Ah! Please wait for me! I’m coming!”

Takuto’s voice snapped Atou back to her senses and she ran after him.

Relief spread through her, followed by joy over the fact that nothing had changed between them. The maddening urgency she felt before entering the Throne Room vanished like a puff of smoke, leaving behind only the steely resolve to do everything in her power for her king.

Term: Gold

A currency that drops when monsters are defeated. No one knows how or why this is, and the Brave Questers series never touches on it. In the world of Brave Questers, every country uses this gold coin as its currency, and any kind of monetary transaction can be done anywhere as long as you have the coins. The coins are made of 100 percent pure gold. There's so much gold equipment to be found in that world because gold is a common metal there.

Chapter 2: Gold

“TH-THIS is something else...”

Atou’s jaw dropped as she stared at the spectacle before her in disbelief: gold coins lay in haphazard stockpiles reminiscent of sand excavated from a mine. The mounds of gold glistened and glittered under the shafts of sunlight spilling through the tree canopy.

The gold had been collected within the city square, originally used to store construction materials, but was now so covered in gold, you couldn’t walk without stepping on a coin.

“GYEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

“GYEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

“GYEEEEEEEEEE!!!”

More than a dozen Long-legged Bugs were scuttering around. Each of them deposited the gold coins from the baskets on their backs onto the piles, then quickly scuttled into the shadows. There seemed to be plenty more gold for them to collect.

Atou had certainly seen an ocean’s worth of gold scattered across the battlefields with her own eyes. From that alone, she knew they had much more collecting left to do, but she was more worried they would run out of space first.

“Th-There’s so very much of it!” Caria cried.

“Moolah, moolah, everywhere!” Maria cheered.

“Wow... It’s something else when you see it in person,” Takuto said in awe. “And wow, is it blindingly bright!”

Takuto stared curiously at the mountains of gold. It seemed even he hadn’t imagined the sheer scale of it all despite giving the order to gather it.

“King Takuto...is this why you mass-produced the Long-legged Bugs?” Atou asked.

“Yeah. I ordered the Long-legged Buggies to collect all the gold coins the *Brave Questers*’ monsters had dropped,” he explained. “They have high Movement and Speed, so they’re the most effective at collecting stuff.”

“I-I see... Forgive me if I’m wrong, but I believe the economy will collapse if we try to circulate this much all at once. Even if we can use it for trade with Phon’kaven, do they even have anything worth trading for?” Atou asked, wording her question carefully. She didn’t think for a minute that her master didn’t already have a plan accounting for those things.

A nation strictly manages the distribution and processing of currencies. The amount of currency in circulation depends on the public’s demand for currency.

There was too much gold to circulate within Mynoghra, where the population was still quite small and trading goods was the norm. And even if they decided to use the gold in trade with Phon’kaven and the other empires, it would sink the international market at this scale.

In Atou’s honest estimation, the gold coins were essentially no better than fool’s gold to them.

“Oh, right.” Takuto slapped his hands together as if her confusion suddenly made sense. “I forgot you’d only be familiar with Mynoghra’s strategies and wouldn’t know the different playstyles for the other empires.”

He was right. Atou only knew the world of *Eternal Nations* through Mynoghra’s limited lens and wasn’t well-informed about what strategies the other empires excelled at. Still, even drawing on all she did know of the game, she couldn’t think of any empire or a specific strategy that would allow an empire to put such an insane amount of money to use effectively.

“Yes, you’ve got me there, my king,” she conceded.

“Atou, do you remember what the term *Currency* refers to within *Eternal Nations*?” he asked gently to help her understand.

“I do... Currency is issued and managed by an empire as a tool for circulating the domestic economy. However, each empire has its own specific Currency, so

it never seemed all that important to me...”

“That’s right. Getting too specific on something like that will make this kind of game less fun, after all,” Takuto said. “That’s why the game makes more use of Mana over Currency.”

“Mana has the characteristics of both energy and money, right?” Atou ventured. “It’s incredibly versatile and easy to understand when trading with other empires.”

“Exactly!” Takuto exclaimed.

The three most important Resources in *Eternal Nations* are Food, Materials, and Mana. Food is, of course, used to maintain the population and armies and is an indicator of national power. Materials are mainly used during the production of units and structures and are also an indicator of productivity. And Mana is an indicator of economic power and is required for various things, including Emergency Production. Generating a solid balance of these three basic resources while maintaining your empire is the basis of *Eternal Nations’* gameplay.

“So that’s why I don’t understand,” Atou continued. “It doesn’t matter how much gold we have—it’s still *just* gold. It has little value beyond its material use, even if we go out of our way to collect it...”

In *Eternal Nations*, “Gold” as a metal is a Strategic Resource. It’s necessary to produce advanced units and buildings, but its value is limited to that.

It would be one thing if Mynoghra had reached the final stages of development as an empire, but wasting time and energy collecting gold at their current level seemed pointless to Atou.

“If you understand that much, I’m pretty sure you know the answer deep down...” Takuto said.

“...How?” Atou tilted her head, the answer still eluding her.

“Don’t worry about it. I think showing you will be faster, anyway!” Takuto smiled wryly at her as though he figured he was better off just explaining without beating around the bush. He held his palm out over a part of the town square.

“Emergency Production: Market!”

“K-King Takuto?!”

A great rumbling vibrated the ground. Takuto’s Mana absorbed into the town square as a low-pitched thrumming noise resounded through the area. Then came a building with a distorted and bizarre design that seemed to sprout from the ground.

“Huh? ...Pretty!” Maria said in a bit of a daze.

“H-Hey! B-Big Sista! It’s dangerous over there! Come here!” Caria scolded.

The twins leaped away from the piles of gold they’d been playing in and scurried out of the way, since the newly sprouted facility had toppled the coins. It grew in such a way that it incorporated and surrounded the town square by dividing itself into multiple buildings and tents of various sizes. With its asymmetry and strange colors, it was far from any design most people associated with a marketplace, but looking at it from a functionality standpoint, it was certainly a market.

Takuto had used Emergency Production to create a Market, one of Mynoghra’s many facilities.

“Welp, there goes the last of my Mana,” Takuto said lightheartedly, looking awfully refreshed.

Emergency Production can be used in a variety of ways. Although it consumes an enormous amount of Mana, it offers the unbeatable advantages of instantly creating Food, Goods, and even Buildings. In a matter of seconds, it’d created a Market, which would’ve needed ample personnel and time allocated to it to build using normal means.

Impressed by the awesomeness that was Emergency Production all over again, Takuto boastfully spun toward Atou, hoping to see the look of surprise and awe on her face. However...

“...Atou?” he asked cautiously.

“Hmph...”

Atou was pouting.

Apparently, he was being a little too pompous with his display.

“I-I promise I’ll explain everything to you!” he rushed out in a fluster. “C’mon, Atou, follow me!”

Even Takuto knew that he was in for some serious trouble if he let her mood sour worse than it already had. He left the twins buried under the mountains of displaced gold and quickly led Atou inside the main Market building.



TAKUTO brought Atou to the largest building within the Market. It was the most conspicuous structure among the myriad of tents and stalls used to exchange goods.

A large number of shelves packed with documents came into view as soon as they set foot inside. This seemed to be the building where the ledgers were kept and the exchange of valuable goods would take place.

The oddest thing of all was that while Takuto and Atou were the first to enter the building, someone else was already there.

“Y-Yu-Yur Magesti... Wer-come.”

Asymmetrical limbs and nebulous, googly eyes. Twisted joints and dirty skin marked by distinct edema. This creature lacking any signs of intelligence was a member of the Homunculus, Mynoghra’s unique race.

Takuto raised a hand in greeting to this Homunculus as if it were only natural that it was there as a part of the Market. He then commenced speaking with it about something or other before finally shouting toward the door.

“Heeeey! Can you girls bring me some gold?” he called.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Maria called back.

“Yessums!” Caria responded.

Shortly after that, the Elfuur Sisters showed up noisily dragging along a basket jam-packed with gold coins. Atou finally understood what Takuto was trying to do. Surprise colored her features as the truth dawned upon her.

“I want you to convert this gold into Mana. Can you do that for me?” Takuto

asked the Homunculus.

“Yip, me can.”

The Homunculus owner of the Market lifted the basket of gold with unimaginable ease and unsteadily withdrew into the back of the building with it. Before long, he returned on equally wobbly legs with a substance resembling faintly glowing gas resting upon his palm.

“Takey-take, Yur Magesti. Takey-take.”

“Thanks,” Takuto said. The moment he held his hand over the gas, it absorbed into him.

Atou trembled with glee as she closely oversaw the proceedings. There was no doubt in her mind that what Takuto had absorbed was exactly what she believed it to be.

“I thought the exchange rate would be lower, but they bought it at a much higher price than I imagined,” Takuto commented. “I’m seriously surprised. Just a few more baskets of gold, and we’ll easily recover the cost of the Market.”

Takuto’s remark solidified Atou’s theory.

In *Eternal Nations*, the Market increases an empire’s economic capacity. The secondary function also allows the player to sell their excess Resources and buy the ones they need instead. This may come across as a very basic economic activity, but it held significant value in Mynoghra’s situation.

What they could receive in return for their abundance of gold coins was none other than *Mana*.

“I didn’t drain the last drops of our Mana to create the Market for economic reasons. That’d be pointless at this stage,” Takuto explained. “My real aim was this exchange.”

“I can’t believe it accepted the gold coins dropped by RPG monsters as an exchangeable resource...” Atou muttered, baffled.

“That’s not quite right. It’s not the gold coins as a currency that it accepted, but their status as a Strategic Resource—Gold,” he corrected.

Takuto had more or less grasped the rules behind Emergency Production after

using it so many times.

◆Emergency Production Rules

1. Items that don't exist within *Eternal Nations* can be produced with the necessary amount of Mana.
2. The Mana required for production is equivalent to that item's value in the world it comes from.
3. The Mana required to produce any known item in *Eternal Nations* abides by its in-game value.

Put another way, no matter how common and mundane an item is in another game, if it exists within *Eternal Nations*, its value would be set by *Eternal Nations*. The gold coins were a perfect example of this. It didn't matter what value the gold coins held as a currency within *Brave Questers*. It didn't matter if their value was so low that you could only buy a Wooden Stick after collecting fifty pieces. *Eternal Nations'* system would treat it the same as the Strategic Resource called Gold.

It ultimately came down to this: Takuto could exchange this Gold for the equivalent amount of Mana. That was the conclusion he came to after applying everything he had learned thus far about Emergency Production.

"B-But where is all this Mana coming from?" Atou asked.

"Beats me." Takuto shrugged. "The game never covered that either. They probably figured fleshing that mechanic out too much would bog down the game and make it more tedious than fun."

The fourth rule Takuto had realized was that the game system presiding over this world carelessly reproduced things from video games despite knowing they went against existing laws of physics. The fact that the Demon Lord Army, forces that came from a role-playing game, could pull off things that ignored the laws of physics, such as the infinite summoning of subordinates and forced events, proved this rule to be true. This was also proven by the fact that Mynoghra, a civilization that came from a 4x strategy game, could turn its territory into Cursed Terrain and change the Dark Elves' alignment by making them its citizens.

Takuto fully understood that the powers granted by the game weren't their only weapon—just wielding the massive strength from their pre-established settings wasn't going to take them to the finish line. No, their true weapon was applying their game mechanics to the reality of this world, warping it in their favor.

...In this case, Mynoghra's greatest weapon as a 4x strategy game was empire management. This meant that as long as they had Mana, they could produce an endless supply of goods and buildings, all while ignoring the laws of time and physics. This also meant that the player—the Commander—had the ability to know all that was going on within their empire and could give direct orders to their subordinates from the comfort of their throne. There was also the fact that almost every building and unit had unique traits and abilities.

All of these factors applied without considering the laws of reality.

In other words, this was the ultimate proof that they could game the system by exploiting holes in the rules.

"This is what people usually call an economy-focused run," Takuto said. Then he turned to thank the twins, who were busily bringing more and more gold coins without him ever having to ask them. With each new batch, he asked the Homunculus to exchange the "Gold" for Mana.

"With this playstyle, you focus on generating a large amount of money through international trade and the domestic economy, and then create all your buildings using Emergency Production," he continued to explain. "It's a strategy where economic power creates more economic power, exponentially increasing national power as a result. People who play as the Great Wall Dwarves or the Seven Seas Coalition tend to go this route."

Takuto had no idea what was happening in the back room where the Homunculus brought the "Gold." Regardless of what went on back there, the Gold continued to be exchanged for Mana—without any holdups. They didn't have to worry about rate fluctuations or the depletion of their desired resource, because *Eternal Nations* never implemented such complexities into the system. Thus, this repetitive exchange would continue until they ran out of gold coins.

"Funnily enough, Gold is such a rare and valuable Strategic Resource, I was

always scrambling to get some to produce the strongest units...” Takuto remarked. “On the upside, its scarcity and value also gives it a very high exchange rate with Mana.”

Just as he said, Atou could sense Mynoghra’s Mana reserves rapidly growing—growing to insane amounts for early game, which was where they still considered their empire to be.

“S-So, in other words...” Atou said hesitantly, “if we invest this many gold coins—no, this much Gold as Mana into the empire...”

This was the trick to masterfully exploiting the holes in both strategy and role-playing games. Bugs that would’ve never existed if the two games hadn’t encountered each other were now being exploited in full.

The greatest weakness of a strategy game player is that it takes a lot of time to make an empire huge. They had now eradicated half of that problem.

“Come along, Atou. It’s time for some oh-so-very fun cheating,” Takuto said in a singsong voice.

The cries of Long-legged Bugs resounded in the distance. It sounded like they’d returned with even more gold coins. Elder Moltar and the rest of the Dark Elves could be heard making a fuss over something outside too. Takuto would need to explain the situation to them as well, even if it was coming a little late. He stopped what he was doing and strode outside.

“We’re rolling in gold. Why don’t we live it up like billionaires?”

The mountain of gold reached the treetops.

After gaining a nearly unlimited amount of gold—of Mana—Takuto let out his first pleased laugh in a long time.



Market

Building

Empire **Mana** Production +5%

Unlocks resource trading.

The **Market** is the basic building that handles the empire's economy. It slightly improves the economic power of the empire and increases **Mana** production. In addition, it makes it possible to buy and sell resources using **Mana**.

Chapter 3: Bolstering

NOTHING greases the way quite like money, no matter the playstyle. So, how does someone explain a strategy that lets money and Mana do all the heavy lifting? Whether you define that playstyle as Lucrative, Resource Fat, or Overpowered, applying it to Mynoghra changed the empire's landscape in the blink of an eye.

Streets and buildings with fantastical designs had suddenly appeared in the center of the forest, already warped by the effects of the Cursed Terrain. If that wasn't bizarre enough, mountains of gold coins littered every street corner, to the point they could be considered a nuisance. Gold...a nuisance...

An unusual pair was walking through the capital, taking in the mystifying new sights.

"I daresay...the sudden increase in buildings makes me feel like I've come to an entirely different city," Elder Moltar remarked, stroking his beard.

"That's because I selected every facility as soon as it became available to me," Takuto responded.

Takuto and Elder Moltar were going around checking on the operational status of the newly built facilities and giving detailed instructions to the citizens assigned to them. Everyone secretly wondered why the king was doing his inspection only *after* building the facilities, but that was entirely because the construction speed happened faster than he could take action—pouring that much excess Mana into Emergency Production really sped things up.

This was why Atou had to leave her usual station at Takuto's side to survey another facility on the city outskirts. Takuto would've preferred to have joined her instead, but he couldn't prioritize his own wishes when they were short on time and personnel.

Aside from the Market, he also created the Training Grounds, Learning

Institute, and Living Reeds facilities. All the facilities he could produce at Mynoghra's current stage were already completed through his use of Emergency Production and were in full swing.

Why couldn't he build more when he still had an abundance of gold coins? There was a strategy game reason for that.

"We need to research new technology before we can advance further," Takuto explained to Elder Moltar. **"We'll temporarily halt production of new buildings."**

There was a hard limit to how far his cheat-like method of exchanging piles of gold coins for Mana could take him. This limit appeared in the form of Research and Technology—he had already constructed all the facilities Mynoghra could possess at its current technological level. Unfortunately, there were no means available to make it so he could instantaneously finish researching new technology. It was practically impossible for him to build the next facility without acquiring some new technology.

"I see." Elder Moltar nodded. "Since we've finished constructing the treehouses and other facilities, I have transferred the personnel allocated to those projects to research. Our research speed should increase exponentially now that we've entrusted manual labor duties, such as Food production, to the Homunculus you created, Your Majesty."

"Good. We need the intellectuals assigned to jobs that actually use their intellect. Leave all the simple and mindless tasks to the Homunculus."

Every building under construction, such as the Treehouses and Farms, was fully completed thanks to the excess Mana. With all the primary facilities taken care of, Takuto also started producing more of Mynoghra's unique race, the Homunculus. He didn't have much work for them besides managing the Farms and Food production, but that was more than valuable enough when he considered how it freed up the intellectual Dark Elves for research.

With children now being educated at the Learning Institute, it was safe to say that Mynoghra had finally reached the stage of being a sustainable empire.



Empire-wide Mana Production +5%

Empire-wide Crime Rate -5%

City Research +10%

City Operating Cost -10%

The Learning Institute is a building that improves a city's research capabilities by promoting academics. It's indispensable for the production of units and for constructing facilities requiring advanced education. It also has the added bonus of reducing city operating costs. Providing citizens with a standard education has the additional effect of reducing crime rates.

“Still, I must admit my surprise at the endless amount of gold that shows no sign of decreasing even after producing so many buildings...” Elder Moltar said, his tone laced with concern as he gazed up at the haphazardly piled mountains of gold strewn carelessly around the main road extending from the city’s center. “We can only hope no one with untoward thoughts shows up.”

It was only natural Elder Moltar would be disconcerted by the inestimable amount of gold that seemingly ignored the existence of “economics,” but his concerns lay more with what might happen should word leak of their wealth to the outside world.

Gold was an equally precious and highly sought-after resource in this world and *Eternal Nations*. Any bandits who dared venture into Mynoghra territory would meet their untimely end at the hands of the miasma oozing from the Cursed Terrain long before they reached the city. But the last thing anyone wanted was to draw more unwanted attention from the likes of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and similar empires.

Takuto thought he could solve the problem by exchanging all the gold for Mana, but he was stuck at this bizarre impasse because he’d quickly hit whatever Mana Max storage limit his empire had at its current stage.

Endless mountains of gold exist in the country reigned over by the King of Ruin. Put like that, it sounded like the cliché setting for some sort of fairy tale or children’s story. Seeing it in person was something else altogether...especially since Takuto and his people were on the side that had to protect the gold.

“That’s why expanding our military is of urgent concern.”

Elder Moltar nodded his head extra hard in agreement with his king.

Facilities weren’t the only thing Takuto had produced using his Mana. He’d used his abundance of Mana to produce enough of Mynoghra’s elite units to make anyone antsy with anticipation.

The current defense force swarming Mynoghra’s capital consisted of the following units:

- 3 Headhunting Bugs

- 28 Long-legged Bugs

- 15 Brain Eaters

▪ 30 Giant Pitcher Plants

Takuto made up for his lack of basic units requiring Upkeep or specific citizen types by producing an abundance of unique units. If nothing else, Mynoghra now had the sheer numbers that would be hard to defeat if they holed themselves up within this one city.

“I must say,” Elder Moltar began, turning stark white as he reviewed the set of sinister abilities listed on the document he procured from his robe pocket, “every single one possesses powerful abilities that inflict special effects on Humanoids. I can sense their deeply rooted desire to destroy all humanity.”

“Having abilities that specifically target Humanoids is always convenient, after all...” Takuto replied nonchalantly. Mynoghra was designed to be the enemy of all Humanoids, so it made sense why its abilities and traits skewed toward anti-Humanoid effects.

At any rate, their current known potential enemies were the mostly Human Holy Kingdom of Qualia and the Elven El-Nah Alliance of Elementals. Since both were Humanoid, Mynoghra’s skewed abilities were perfect.

But it’d be foolish to think that was all there was to the world at large. It was quite possible yet another unknown force like *Brave Questers’* Demon Lord Army could emerge on the playing field.

“But we’re still far from where we need to be,” Takuto said. **“You and the rest of the Dark Elves have a very important role to play too. Probably the most important role when it comes to bolstering our forces.”**

“I presume you are referring to this?” Elder Moltar grinned as he pulled a single book from his robe and showed it to Takuto.

It was a makeshift book with no cover that consisted of a bundle of paper tied together with string. But they both knew that the information contained within the book was far more valuable than it appeared—a perfect case of don’t judge

a book by its lack of a cover.

“The Land of the Gods is truly marvelous! Who knew that war...that killing people could be done so efficiently!” Elder Moltar mused.

What Elder Moltar held in his hand was the book Takuto and Atou had stayed up all night making by transcribing and summarizing the elements necessary for battle from various books spanning Earth’s history that Takuto had produced with Emergency Production. Anyone who read this book detailing the sins of another world from beginning to end, no matter how uneducated, would have the theoretical tools to conduct modern warfare in this land of fantasy. Takuto was exhausted from the unusual workload, but seeing Elder Moltar carry it everywhere like a priceless treasure made it worth the effort.

“However, I do wonder what kind of place the Land of the Gods is to have so many advanced war tactics that can only be described as chilling...” Elder Moltar muttered.

“Well, it’s definitely a weird place. Can’t really say whether it’s a comfortable place to live or not,” Takuto replied, purposefully being vague about it.

“Hrm... Is that so?”

Takuto would only explain his former world to a certain extent, and that was it. He couldn’t really go in-depth about it after he’d already explained it away as the Land of the Gods.

“Anyways,” Takuto said, changing the topic, **“how’s it going? Think you can learn from it?”**

“To a certain extent, yes. We’re currently at the stage where I am discussing the contents in earnest with Gia and Emle. But since much of the information pertains to technology completely unknown to us, we won’t be able to grasp and apply it overnight...”

“That comes with the territory.”

Futuristic technologies and ideas are complex and diverse. Those aren’t things that can be immediately put to use just because someone gives you a guidebook on them. They needed to analyze and reconstruct the elements that

would apply to them in this world where magic and racial traits played a huge role.

Either way, this information would undoubtedly change Mynoghra.

The forebearers of the information contained within that book had shed far more blood and left much deeper ditches piled high with bodies than the people of this world. The resentful voices of the dead whispered to them through the pages to add more friends to their ranks.

Takuto was being awfully talkative despite Atou's absence. What kind of emotions lurked in the dark depths of his heart as he cheerily answered Elder Moltar's questions?

Banging sounds that shook the very ground could be heard in the direction they were heading. The sounds grew louder the closer they got to the Training Grounds.

Within those grounds was the technology of death the world known as the Land of the Gods had obtained in exchange for generations of slaughter. The lid to hell quietly slid open in search of new victims with the introduction of this forbidden technology.



Training Grounds

Building

Experience Granted to New Units +2

Training Grounds are necessary to build up an empire's military strength. It grants experience to newly produced units, allowing you to upgrade them quicker.

The Training Grounds were built further away from the city center in a place that had been cleared of trees—a highly unusual sight within the Accursed Lands where the evil civilization of Mynoghra dwelled. They had set up all the basic facilities required to train soldiers there, including everything from training dummies and training gear to high ground for trainers to watch over mock battles. Sure, it was a primitive setup, but it was the perfect starting point for the Dark Elves, who'd never trained as an organized group before.

Except...this facility meant to train new recruits was being used for a different kind of training.

“Looking good out there,” Takuto said with a smile.

BANG! BANG! BANG! A cadence of loud pops and cracks shook the surrounding trees, and with each bang, the training dummies visible at the opposite end of the Training Grounds exploded, along with the ground under them. At the entrance to the Training Grounds was a group of Dark Elf Warriors commanded by Gia, holding weapons that shouldn't exist in this world.

Weapons that shoot projectiles with the power of gunpowder to kill the enemy.

The Dark Elf Warriors were training with Dragunov sniper rifles, also known as SVD-63s.

“Your Majesty! Thank you for coming all this way!” Gia, who'd been presiding over the training, glanced in Takuto's direction and quickly called the troops to attention. “Platoon, ATTENTION!”

The platoon lined up in perfect order with their weapons as if they were a single body, rather than many separate individuals.

“Carry on. You can all return to training,” Takuto said, satisfied with their unified and disciplined greeting.

“Things seem to be shaping up well, but...how's it going on a deeper level?” Elder Moltar asked, raking his gaze over the grounds.

“The sound and recoil are still a bit much for some...” Gia responded, trailing off a bit. “Their accuracy has steadily improved, but there's still quite a steep

learning curve going from the bow to this, so they aren't combat-ready yet."

Takuto and Elder Moltar followed Gia to the Training Support Tower built into a nearby giant tree to discuss the matter away from the deafening gunfire. Gia sounded slightly dissatisfied with the troops' current skill level, especially compared to how content he was with their perfect show of order when coming to attention before their king. Was he being a bit meek and vague in his reply because of his pride? His strained expression spoke volumes about his regret and vexation about not meeting Takuto's expectations.

But Takuto himself was more than satisfied with the results. This was their first time using firearms, after all. Not only had they never handled a gun before, but they almost certainly hadn't seen one either. Not in this world. Although guns fall under the same long-range weapon category as bows, that's the extent of their similarities. Furthermore, Dark Elves didn't have the same aptitude for bows that Elves did. Takuto was fully aware they wouldn't master guns right away.

"Hrm," Elder Moltar hummed, stroking his beard. "Would you mind demonstrating by shooting that target there, Gia?" He flashed a wicked grin as he looked at the gun strapped to Gia's back.

Gia's weapon of choice was an anti-materiel rifle, which was about a full size larger than the Dragunovs used by the rest of the Warriors. The bullet weight and velocity of anti-materiel rifles gives them exceptional long-range capability even when compared with designated sniper rifles, but that also makes them significantly more unwieldy. The recoil of this weapon is so high that it's known to break collar bones and dislocate shoulders. Every time Gia fired a shot, he was pushed slightly backward from the force of it.

The old sage knew all too well the struggles Gia was having with the cumbersome weapon.

"Grr..." Gia cursed under his breath. "I would be honored if you watched, Your Majesty."

Takuto pretty much picked up on the situation from the grin spreading ever wider on Elder Moltar's face. But Gia braced the weapon in a kneeling position before he could intervene. They were currently standing on the open balcony of

the Training Support Tower. Gia aimed at the target situated in the Training Grounds below.

“GHH!”

After a few beats of silence, a large boom shook the wooden floorboards, and Takuto saw the shoulder blown off the training dummy in the distance.

Gia’s accuracy was beyond acceptable. A shot like that could immobilize an Under Paladin. The only thing that left him wanting was that Gia didn’t land his shot in the center of the chest. Even so, Takuto was impressed by his ability to accurately hit the target with an anti-materiel rifle while only bracing it in an unsupported kneeling position.

Man, this gun’s seriously awesome, Takuto thought. Contrary to Gia, gritting his teeth in vexation at having missed his target, Takuto was pleased with the results.

As a matter of fact, Takuto’s real aim in training the Dark Elves in how to use sniper rifles was to make full use of their excellent night vision. As a race that navigated the night as easily as they did the day, they would have an overwhelming advantage during nighttime raids and assassinations. And judging by Captain Gia’s proficiency with the weapons, they seemed more than capable of reaching the level of skill Takuto required for his strategy.

The strategy he wanted the Dark Elf Warriors to fulfill for him involved becoming a raiding party that could unilaterally shoot the enemy under the cover of darkness.

“That’s more than I could ask for from an unsupported kneeling position,” Takuto said to Gia.

“...! I don’t deserve such praise! I will continue to improve myself!”

Takuto meant his comment as praise given in consideration for the circumstances of the shot, but Gia’s reaction oozed with chagrin. Apparently, he’d determined the comment to be a consolation for his failure. Takuto hadn’t meant it like that, but if taking it that way was going to motivate him, then there was no reason to correct it.

...After all, the people of Takuto’s old world had long surpassed the results

produced by the Dark Elf Warriors.

Besides, anti-material rifles aren't typically meant to be shot by an unsupported kneeling position. Perhaps it was because they still lacked an understanding of guns that they couldn't comprehend the awesomeness of easily wielding something weighing more than twenty pounds.

Seeing how far Gia had come gave Takuto hope that the Warriors he was training would soon be ready and rearing for real combat too. Few living creatures could dodge bullets from a sniper rifle that could travel thousands, even tens of thousands, of feet. Barbarians with tough, stony hides like the Hill Giants and elite soldiers such as High Paladins might be able to withstand the first shot, but they could just down them in a barrage of bullets.

With that in mind, Takuto was extremely pleased with the current results. Or at least he had been...

BOOOOOOOM! Takuto heard an even louder noise than gunfire come from right beside him. He looked up and shifted his gaze toward the explosive sound. There he saw Maria target practicing with an even heavier anti-material rifle—and she was firing from an unsupported standing position!

“Wow! Amazing as always, Big Sista!” Caria cheered and held out her hands to use the gun next.

“I shoot with the mind's eye,” Maria boasted, nodding like she was very pleased with herself as she tossed her younger sister the heavy gun like a toy.

Caria caught the gun with the same ease her sister had tossed it to her and assumed the same standing position as if she were a child excitedly wielding a branch like it was a make-believe gun instead of the real deal.

Takuto was pretty sure that gun weighed more than forty pounds. They were definitely using it in a way that drastically differed from its original design.

Due to its absurd size, weight, and possible range, two to three-man sniper teams are required when using an anti-materiel rifle. The operating crew usually helps when firing and transporting the gun as well. The recoil produced by the cartridges employed dictates that these rifles are also designed to be fired from the prone position and usually with bipods and other accessories to

help stabilize it. Using it in any other way is bound to knock over the operator or severely injure them.

Obviously, they weren't the type of gun used for target practice.

"Do I hold it like this?" Caria asked. "Yay! I hit the target!"



The farthest dummy on the grounds below exploded into pieces, accompanied by a noise that shook the inner eardrum. The training dummy might've been inorganic, but it was still a harrowing sight to see it shredded by a bullet. Caria's perfect shot pierced right through the heart. Most life forms wouldn't even be able to register that they'd died if they were on the receiving end of that bullet.

After that, the twin sisters squeed and giggled as they happily mowed down the dummies with bullet after bullet. How could one even describe such a scene aside from calling it...extraordinary?

Of course, there was one pitiful Dark Elf present who couldn't openly rejoice over the younger generation's success.

Forced to witness their surreal skill, Gia's shoulders slumped as his pride shattered into even more pieces than the dummies.

On this day, Gia, a renowned Dark Elf Warrior whose name was feared throughout the land, had suffered defeat at the hands of two little girls.

"I-I'll continue to i-improve..."

Takuto just barely heard Gia's wisp of a voice. His spirits had been completely crushed and stomped on.

"Th-The twins are special..."

This time Takuto couldn't help but actually offer the poor Dark Elf some words of consolation. He could sympathize with the Warrior Captain, since he was positive he'd be just as depressed in his shoes.

But there was a good reason why the twins stood a cut above the rest—they were Witches and Heroes who'd inherited Isla's powers. Even when they weren't in berserker mode under the full moon's influence, they had immense strength and latent abilities. If anything, Gia was doing an amazing job keeping pace with them.

Elder Moltar was naturally aware of this, since he'd heard about the twins from Takuto, but he merely cackled at the whippersnapper's defeat rather than encourage him. Offering unnecessary words of comfort would only hurt a Dark

Elf Warrior's pride, and more than anything else, Elder Moltar had the most terrible assurance that the youngster would snap back from this defeat even stronger.

Takuto had already shown his support twice, so he didn't feel the need to say more when he figured Gia would work it out on his own eventually.

Men not knowing how to comfort other men seemed to plague every race in every world.



"BUT there is something that concerns me, Your Majesty..." Elder Moltar said, shifting the conversation away from Gia and his deflated pride.

"What's that?" Takuto asked, prompting him to go on.

"This consumable projectile you call ammunition, I believe?" Elder Moltar ventured. "We've been using buckets of it for target practice. Won't it eventually be a drain on our resources?"

Elder Moltar was concerned with the amount of ammo required for training the troops. Emergency Production produced everything from the guns to the ammunition. As much of an unfair advantage the mountains of gold coins from *Brave Questers* gave them, they'd eventually run out and no longer have anything left to exchange for Mana. He was afraid their supply would run dry in the future if they burned through too much ammunition now.

But Takuto already had the solution to that problem.

"Oh yeah, we've got that taken care of. You've collected as many shells, cartridges, and bullets as you can, right?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. The entire Warrior corps collects everything on the field as soon as training is finished. Isn't that right, Gia?" Elder Moltar turned to confirm the situation with the Warrior Captain.

"Yes, sir!" Gia responded in a resounding voice, immediately perking up and standing at attention to give his report. "We don't let a single bullet created by His Majesty's mighty hands go to waste!" He spoke with such fervor, he seemed to be trying to make up for falling behind the twins with sheer energy.

“Then it’s all good.” Takuto gave a satisfied nod, a wry smile turning up the corner of his lips at the Warrior Captain’s perky reaction. **“Bullets, shells, and cartridges can be exchanged at a good rate as Metals, essentially making them free.”**

Lead, Brass, Soft Steel—bullets, shells, and cartridges consisted of several different types of valuable Metals. And anything that had a value as Metal could be exchanged at the Market for Mana. The Market ended up treating those items as Minerals since they were a combination of materials, but that didn’t pose much of a problem.

Being able to almost completely recover the cost of ammunition felt like too much of an unfair advantage even to Takuto, who’d confirmed it worked.

From the base weapon to the consumable ammunition, guns are huge money hogs. The cost only goes up when trying to train troops to a combat-ready level, because they need to practice a lot with live rounds. This is where the costs typically swell out of control, making maintaining and Upkeeping an army that uses guns extremely difficult.

But a combination of fiendish elements in this world granted Mynoghra the power to make a gun-toting army a reality.

“Grenades and explosives cost a bit more, so we can’t use them as freely,” Takuto stated.

“Even without those, the sniper rifles and assault rifles our military is currently learning to use will undoubtedly change the battlefield as we know it,” Elder Moltar responded as he looked down at the Training Grounds with a pleased glint in his eyes. “Ours will surely be known as the Army of God. By your mighty command, Your Majesty, we have obtained unimaginable power.”

A man as wise as Elder Moltar surely understood how the untold killing power of modern weaponry could completely upend the way battle was conducted. Even Takuto agreed that they now had a devastating advantage. But the acrid memory of being outdone with Isla on his side viciously nagged at him never to let his guard down again.

Too many unknown supernatural entities existed in this world. No matter how powerful modern firearms were, there was no way to be sure they could

one-sidedly annihilate entities like the Four Generals of the Demon Lord's Army and the Demon Lord himself, who hailed from *Brave Questers*.

I can't become complacent, Takuto told himself. I can't relax and get comfortable.

Besides, they had a fundamental problem that guns alone couldn't solve.

"The world will be at the mercy of any military that has firearms. This should be enough to deter the other empires from foolishly attacking us, but..."

"But we severely lack the manpower to be a major threat...no?" Elder Moltar finished.

Mynoghra painfully lacked citizens that could join the military. Only a few dozen Warriors served under Gia's command. Even if they added in the people who'd expressed a desire to join the Warriors after they recovered from illness and malnutrition, their numbers would barely reach one hundred. With potentially less than thirty active-duty members, they were painfully far from the numbers necessary to form a legitimate army.

"And we can't arm the Homunculus, since they fire at random," Takuto sighed.

"We'll have a lot of friendly fire on our hands if we try," Elder Moltar agreed with an even bigger sigh.

They'd initially planned on solving their personnel problem by arming Mynoghra's Homunculus with guns. If that had worked out, they could've used the Homunculus's explosive reproduction rate to grow their army rapidly.

In *Eternal Nations*, weapons and the like are treated as equipable items. Takuto was hopeful because he had no issues commanding a battalion comprised of Homunculus equipped with primitive long-range weapons such as bows, but the system wasn't going to make life that easy for him.

Homunculus were given the setting and nature of being unable to handle anything that required intelligence. Because of that, he could equip them with primitive weapons, such as swords and bows, but not more complex weaponry, such as crossbows and siege weapons. With this setting hanging over them, it

was impossible for the Homunculus to wield firearms properly.

That meant they needed to find manpower elsewhere. Manpower that possessed a basic level of intelligence and would swear allegiance to the evil civilization of Mynoghra. And Takuto also had an idea of where to find just the people for the job.

“Well, at least there’s a solution,” Takuto said. “It’s about time I fulfilled my promise to you and your people.”

“Oooh! Could it be...!” Elder Moltar lit up with anticipation as Takuto finally uttered the words he’d been waiting for. Gia also perked up from where he was listening behind them.

Takuto was alluding to his promise to welcome in the persecuted Dark Elves who were still wandering in exile. He’d always planned to make good on his word, it just got postponed due to the various chaos that had arrived in the interim.

He’d already learned through his diplomatic relations with Phon’kaven that there were a number of Dark Elf refugees taking sanctuary in their main cities. He just had to send for them. Their numbers weren’t much to write home about, but anything helped when Mynoghra was so short-handed they even tried to arm the Homunculus.

Takuto had several other ideas to work off of after that too. He’d also devised a slightly difficult-to-pull-off plan to solve their personnel shortage in one go based on the information gathered by the Long-legged Bugs, who’d been scouting the area around Dragontan. Whether it’d work or not relied on successful negotiations with Phon’kaven.

He wasn’t sure how they’d react to his proposal, but he believed it wouldn’t become too big of an issue when both parties already recognized the equal danger they were in. No one knows what the future holds, but they were still allies for now.

“Your Majesty! I have an urgent report for you!”

As Takuto was developing his strategy and thinking about how it’d play out, a Dark Elf hurriedly ascended the Training Support Tower. He seemed to have

urgent news to report as he knelt before the king, a little short of breath.

“What is it?” Takuto gently prompted.

“A messenger has arrived from Dragontan. He has come bearing an official letter from Phon’kaven’s Staff Holder Pepe for the king!”

“Perfect timing!” Takuto slapped his hands together and nodded as yet another strategy hit him, bringing a smirk to his face. It was an effective and astonishing strategy that no one else would think of. **“Summon Atou and the rest of the council members for an urgent meeting.”**

There was much to discuss. Mynoghra’s policies might have changed on some matters, but respecting the Dark Elves’ opinions was still important to Takuto.

Now then, what matter has Phon’kaven approached us over this time?

As Takuto left the Training Support Tower in a good mood, Elder Moltar and Gia followed him, feeling deeply moved by the rapidly changing situation over the past few days and the level of command the king was taking.



Living Reeds

Building

Defense +10%

Additional Damage +1

Living Reeds is a building unique to **Mynoghra** that takes the place of **Stone Walls**. In addition to its normal ability, it has the bonus effect of dealing +1 damage to enemy units when defending the town or city where it's located.

Chapter 4: Strategy Meeting

IN Mynoghra, a lot of weight's placed on policy decisions made by the empire-management council. This had little to do with democracy and was more about creating a foundation for the Dark Elves to think for themselves and make their own decisions.

Takuto drastically changed his stance on this policy after the war against *Brave Questers'* Demon Lord Army. He'd unilaterally switched their overall objective from pacifism to world conquest, indicating that the Dark Elves' opinions and decisions wouldn't be taken into as much account as before.

Regardless of this change, he still held strategy meetings with his council members to nurture the Dark Elves' autonomy. However, the meetings, which used to proceed smoothly, ran into a deadlock for the first time.

"How exactly...are we supposed to interpret this?"

"Hrm," Elder Moltar hummed dubiously. "I'm positive there's a catch, but what? Perhaps...no...hmm..."

Everyone gathered within Mynoghra's Grand Council Room expressed varying degrees of dismay. The full council wasn't in attendance at this meeting. Only the most insightful people were summoned to discuss the matter: Takuto, Atou, Elder Moltar, and Emle. They didn't want to tie up too many key personnel with a topic that would likely take up a lot of time.

Takuto was also struggling with how to handle the matter, proving how troubling of a topic it really was.

"I can't believe...Phon'kaven's offering to transfer ownership of Dragontan to us."

The topic plaguing them was a proposal from the multiracial empire of Phon'kaven offering to cede the town of Dragontan to Mynoghra. The official letter didn't get into the deal's specifics or even what led them to offer such a

thing. The missive only stated that the representative leader of Phon'kaven, Pepe, and the rest of the Staff Holders were requesting an urgent meeting to discuss it as soon as possible.

There was little else to go off of. The missive simply ended with long, overly flowery formulaic sentences expressing their deepest gratitude to Mynoghra for aiding them in the war against the Demon Lord's Army. Atou groaned and racked her brains over the letter whose intentions she couldn't decipher no matter how many times she reread it.

"If we accept their offer at face value, then it's an amazing proposal we should only be all too happy about," Atou said. "However, it's far too suspicious..."

"Too suspicious, indeed," Elder Moltar agreed. "I don't care if this is an official missive, such a grave diplomatic matter should never be conveyed in this unorthodox manner. It's offensive! We can reasonably expect this to be some sort of trap, but it feels too clumsy for that. I haven't a clue how to interpret their intentions."

Even a sage like Elder Moltar struggled to comprehend their intentions and was left groaning over it. Although there was only one topic to discuss, the meeting held to deal with the problem, which resembled an intricate puzzle, ran into a dead end and wasn't moving forward.

"Your Majesty...how should we interpret this matter?" Elder Moltar turned to Takuto to rescue them from the vexing standstill.

Takuto had gone through almost every negotiation type in the game, but this was his first time running into this pattern. He could probably make a wild guess based on that experience but lacked the decisive factor to say anything for sure. Ultimately, he had to make the final decision. Mynoghra had a mountain of tasks to deal with, so he wanted to decide the direction they would take on this issue by the end of the day.

"Emle, as far as you know, how's the situation in Phon'kaven?" Takuto turned to Emle to get a better grasp of the situation to break the deadlock.

Emle promptly began flipping through the documents she'd gathered on Phon'kaven. Before long, she reported on the things they were already aware of

and then finally revealed some of the latest information that was news to them.

“Lastly, there’s a huge exodus of townspeople leaving Dragontan now. We are in contact with Mayor Antelise, but things are so chaotic there that her response to our questions has been delayed,” Emle finished.

“Thanks,” Takuto replied, then fell into contemplative silence.

Because of their alliance with Phon’kaven, they could obtain more direct information on Dragontan than before. Mynoghra was also slow to get a hold on the postwar chaos. Unlike in a video game, things didn’t automatically go back to normal after winning a war.

“The townspeople are leaving? Why is that happening, Emle?” Atou asked.

“Likely due to the war, Lady Atou,” Elder Moltar said. “Can you expound on the matter, Emle?”

“Certainly. As you all know, the town of Dragontan is located far from the country of Phon’kaven, and it’s apparent that they’re struggling to maintain public order with all the bandits and marauders who’ve slipped into town. In my opinion, it’s not all that strange for mayhem to ensue when there were barely any reinforcements sent from the governing country during the war. From that, we can speculate that the residents are leaving the town to escape to safer locations within Phon’kaven’s sphere of protection.”

While Takuto was organizing his thoughts, Atou and the Dark Elves were piecing together the situation based on the information they had on hand. He gained a more accurate grasp of the situation as he quietly listened to their exchange.

“Hmm. In other words, Dragontan’s on the verge of collapse?” Atou summarized.

“It might’ve already collapsed, Lady Atou,” Elder Moltar said. “Either way, it’s only a matter of time before it stops functioning as a proper town.”

When insightful people are gathered together, meetings have a way of making dramatic progress with the slightest of hints. Like Takuto, they could make rough guesses based on the available intel, and although they weren’t sure, they were beginning to come up with plausible answers.

Or rather, the situation would be easily understood if you put yourself in the shoes of Dragontan's residents.

A horde of Barbarians had suddenly appeared nearby when they lived in a fringe town far from their country's borders. Moreover, not only were they told not to expect reinforcements from the main military, but their defense was even left in the hands of another nation's military. It was only natural that some people would flee to their home country in search of safety, and not unsurprising if riots broke out along the way.

Some people might've even expressed a desire to immigrate to Mynoghra instead.

Takuto didn't know the mayor of Dragontan personally, but he could sympathize with her being in the terrible position of trying to get this nasty situation under control.

"Once the town stops functioning as one, it'll be the weak and helpless who suffer the most," Emle pointed out. "Perhaps Phon'kaven thought the best way to protect those people was to cede the town to us."

"Moreover, our great Mynoghra actually put boots on the ground during the last battle," Elder Moltar added proudly. "Their forces could barely defend the town, much less fight or act in a martial capacity. I presume they're even struggling to find people capable of keeping order within their walls."

"I see. This isn't a very nice way of wording it, but is their ulterior motive here to curry favor with Mynoghra so they can ask for something more?" Atou summarized. Her conclusion was blunt but to the point.

Put simply, Phon'kaven was in a tight spot. Their situation was dire enough that they'd laid out all their cards on the negotiation table, stealing the first move from Mynoghra.

Takuto didn't know who'd come up with this plan, but they had to be quite the insightful tactician... Or maybe they were just epically simple-minded? The face of Phon'kaven's Commander and Takuto's new friend suddenly came to mind, but it was drowned out by other thoughts just as quickly.

"It could be that by ceding Dragontan to us, they hope to maintain the

alliance and receive something extra in return..." Elder Moltar said, continuing Atou's line of thought.

"It's not hard to imagine they'll still want access to the Dragon Vein Mine," Atou asserted. "Not that that'll be much of a problem when we've practically already decided to share ownership of it before all this..."

Ceding territory to another empire wasn't something done with half-baked resolve. While Dragontan was a detached territory that was particularly difficult for Phon'kaven to maintain, it could still serve as a critical stepping stone in expanding their empire. And that wasn't even scratching the surface of the issues that needed to be considered. Distrust and dissatisfaction were bound to ripple through their empire when the citizens learned they were handing over a whole town to another nation, regardless of whether it was a peaceful deal between allies.

With all the potential risks and losses they would sustain in mind, they must've been expecting something of equal or greater value in return. That's how negotiations work, after all.

"They want military aid," Takuto declared with certainty.

The most pressing problem Phon'kaven faced was expanding and bolstering their lacking military. They had already revealed this weakness and their inability to protect their territory when they'd requested Mynoghra's assistance in defending Dragontan. Military expansion couldn't be achieved overnight, so this was obviously still an urgent issue for them.

"But, Your Majesty, we are in the midst of preparing our own military against enemy threat," Elder Moltar stressed. "We're in no position to weaken our forces, even at the behest of an ally nation..."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Takuto agreed.

Elder Moltar's concerns were valid.

No one dared say it aloud, but they all knew Isla's loss happened in part due to dividing their forces. They wouldn't endanger their empire by making the same mistake twice. Takuto took that all into consideration when he made his decision.

“Let’s sell them weapons.”

The room fell silent.

Normally that kind of reaction would’ve made Takuto uncomfortable, but now that he was confident in his direction and decisions, their shock was actually exhilarating.

Huh, I guess situations really do change a person without them realizing it, he mused, even though it wasn’t the time for such introspection.

“P-Please don’t make that your final decision, Your Majesty!” Emle shouted despite herself. “Th-That’s far too dangerous! We don’t know what evils will be committed if we hand over such deadly weaponry to another nation! Forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I must insist on the possibility of them turning those weapons against us!”

Emle’s objections reflected what everyone else wanted to say as well.

Firearms are powerful armaments that must be handled with the utmost care. The modern weapons produced by Takuto’s abilities constituted Mynoghra’s newly acquired swords and shields. There were too many risks involved in granting their allies the very weapons that gave Mynoghra an edge.

While the council members’ concerns were sound, they were forgetting one very important detail.

“And how’ll they turn them against us?” Takuto prompted.

“Obviously by— Oh!” Emle’s realization stopped her from finishing her initial response.

Only Takuto was capable of producing these weapons and their ammunition. In other words, no matter how many firearms Phon’kaven purchased to increase their military strength, that strength would run dry the moment they stopped dealing with Mynoghra—the only nation capable of resupplying their bullets. Moreover, the technology used to develop firearms and ammunition was the end product of science and technology belonging to a research tree from another world.

Put simply, no one from this world could recreate those weapons.

Mynoghra would ultimately have the power to strip them of these deadly weapons whenever they felt like it. And Phon'kaven likely wouldn't be able to resist the allure of overwhelming power.

Phon'kaven had roughly 10,000 to 20,000 active-duty troops. The majority of those were close-combat Soldiers. They didn't have many of the very costly to maintain Cavalry or Archers, and they only had a handful of elite units with high Strength stats on par with the Paladins.

Dragontan's Town Defense Force had the bare minimum amount of training and combat experience necessary to fight. They seemed to be mostly getting by on the innate physical advantages of Beastmen. If that was the standard for their Defense Force across the empire, then they were staggeringly behind the other countries.

Such a ramshackle and slipshod military could acquire the qualities necessary to stand up to the other nations simply by equipping the weapons provided by Mynoghra. If nothing else, they could at least say goodbye to the miserable days of living in fear as they desperately fended off Barbarians.

It wasn't hard to imagine how attractive of an offer this would be for the people of Phon'kaven, who lived in the barren land of the Dark Continent and in the constant presence of the threats posed by the ever-looming Holy Kingdom of Qualia and the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals to the north.

There just weren't that many alternatives for Phon'kaven to turn to.

Meanwhile, this was an equally appealing plan for Mynoghra as well. It'd allow them to form a united front with Phon'kaven's military armed with modern weapons in any future wars against hostile forces.

Mynoghra's own military leaned heavily on a few select elite units, so being able to add in a greater number of Soldiers with a standard level of Strength was extremely appealing. This kind of united front would allow them to pull off deadly formations, with Phon'kaven maintaining the frontlines while Mynoghra's own forces concentrated on raids and taking out enemy elites.

Providing Phon'kaven with guns and ammunition was a two-pronged strategy that involved strengthening their ally to give Mynoghra an extra edge in future wars against hostile empires, while also indebting that ally to them.

The wiser council members immediately caught on to the hidden agenda and quietly chuckled as they realized Phon’kaven was desperate.

It wasn’t a bad deal for Phon’kaven—it was actually incredibly advantageous for them. They simply had no room to bargain or anywhere else to go...

“I see where this is going! I would expect nothing less of our king. I have nothing but admiration for your boundless insight and ingenuity... However, providing them with arms feels like we’re now the ones giving too much. What do you suggest as appropriate compensation from them, Your Majesty?” Elder Moltar asked with a hearty laugh.

A stronger military was likely what Phon’kaven wanted the most right now. Whatever else was behind their proposal to cede Dragontan wouldn’t change that fact. With that in mind, they were guaranteed to be all over the arms export deal.

“Compensation, eh...? It’s gotta be people. They can toss us anything from people who’re struggling to make ends meet to criminals—we’ll take whatever we can get at this point.”

Takuto’s compensation of choice was citizens. A larger population was what Mynoghra wanted most right now, and that was the hardest, most unpredictable resource for them to secure.

“That’s a wonderful idea, King Takuto!” Atou exclaimed. “I’m absolutely positive the people of Dragontan will be choked with tears to be welcomed under the great and mighty Mynoghra’s wings!”

“It’ll make them evil, though,” Takuto pointed out.

“B-Being evil is surprisingly enjoyable...” Emle stuttered. “That is, I don’t feel like that different of a person.”

“Hear! Hear!” Elder Moltar agreed.

The two Dark Elves who’d recently switched from neutral to evil alignment seemed more than okay with the idea as they offered up words of support. Seeing them in favor of the idea reassured Takuto that it should be possible to welcome Dragontan’s residents into Mynoghra’s fold.

Of course, he had no interest in dealing with human trafficking or forcing anyone to join against their will. He might consider it if they were remnants of an enemy empire, but Phon'kaven was still a good ally. They would be recruiting anyone who wanted to join, but that might actually get them more citizens than they could hope for once they got started.

"If this goes well, then it'll be the answer to all our population problems, King Takuto!" Atou declared with innocent delight. Takuto firmly nodded.

They didn't know how Phon'kaven would react to Mynoghra's demands. But they had to have already considered what to do with the residents of Dragontan when they offered to cede the town to Mynoghra. Perhaps they'd purposely mentioned ceding Dragontan in the official missive to subtly urge Mynoghra to consider the matter before their meeting.

"All right, let's start selecting what weapons to sell," Takuto said, redirecting the meeting. **"Does anyone have anything else to say on the matter? We need to consider every angle, so we don't miss anything in our negotiations."**

Takuto thought of Pepe as he watched the lively debate between his council members. Pepe was cheerful, friendly, and hard to hate. But Takuto's intuition told him there was more to the boy than that.

"I'm looking forward to our meeting."

The world around them was moving as they spoke. If there were others out there who'd come from game worlds like Mynoghra, they were destined to clash eventually. Takuto was convinced of that fact, as if some invisible being was whispering it in his ear.

"Oh, that reminds me..."

"Yes? Is something on your mind, King Takuto?" Atou promptly reacted to Takuto's quiet utterance.

Takuto responded to her query with a shake of his head, deciding not to broach the subject, after all. **"Nah...it's nothing."**

He needed to properly confirm the nature of his abilities before they inevitably clashed with their enemies.

Interlude: The Accursed Lands

THICK clouds blocked the moonlight, wrapping the Dark Continent in a curtain of inky darkness. A swarm moved swiftly under the cover of night in the land where *Brave Questers'* Demon Lord Army, invaders from another world, once used as their base of operation

“Stop.”

“Gyegagaa!”

The swarm halted at that quiet command as if they were a single unit rather than many. They had stopped at the command of Mynoghra's elite Dark Elf Warrior Captain, Gia. The swarm in question was comprised of Mynoghra's unique bug units.

“How is it? Any difficulty moving?” Gia asked the Headhunting Bug he was riding, only to receive an ear-piercing chittering in reply.

“Gyegegegee!”

Perhaps it was because they'd spent so much time together that they could understand each other without speaking the same language. Gia gave a satisfied nod as though he'd received the answer he'd wanted to hear from the chilling cries coming from the creature under him.

“How's it going for the rest of you?” Gia asked the Warriors and the Long-legged Bugs they rode behind him.

“No issues here, either. We've gotten used to all the jostling when they move, too.”

“GYEGYE!”

He received the same answer from both rider and mount.

Gia's current mission was to patrol the Dark Continent while training a quick-response squad that could move at high speeds using Headhunting Bugs and Long-legged Bugs as mounts. It was the ideal collaboration between bug Scout

units with high Move stats and Dark Elves with impeccable night vision. Toss in sniper rifles with silencers, and they had formed an elite special forces unit that could silently annihilate the enemy in the dead of night.

The Headhunting Bugs worked fine, but the Long-legged Bugs were a tad small for mounts. Scout or not, they were still Mynoghra's units. Contrary to their squishy appearance, their tremendous physical strength allowed them to carry the Dark Elf Snipers with ease, bringing about the formation of a new squad.

While this combination would've been unthinkable within *Eternal Nations*, it was the perfect way to take advantage of the many flexibilities presented by this new world.



Headhunting Bug

Combat Unit

Strength: 5 Move: 2

<<Scout>> <<Evil>>

Anti-Humanoid Combat +20%

Description

~Their legs carry them quickly over poor terrain and their eyes see far and wide. They use their fearsome sickle arms for hunting the heads of their prey. The bugs no one paid any attention to have now grown into an unavoidable menace.~

The Headhunting Bug is a combat unit unique to **Mynoghra**.

This deadly combination also had a lot of value on the national defense front. The bitter taste of failure they'd experienced during the Barbarian invasion still weighed heavily on the Dark Elves. Of course, an overall lack of defensive capabilities and their decision to support Phon'kaven backfiring on them played an even bigger part in that failure.

There was little to nothing they could've done to change things with their strength alone. Even so, that was a hard pill to swallow when Mynoghra and its king had saved their very lives and pride as Dark Elves. That's why they put their body, mind, and soul into training day in and out to prevent such a tragedy from ever happening again.

And all their efforts were steadily yielding results.

"Captain, there's one Orc located to the south-southwest," a Sniper reported. "It hasn't noticed us yet but seems to be surveilling its surroundings."

"They shouldn't be able to perceive us in the dark— Ah, it's using smell, isn't it?" Gia speculated. "This is another problem we'll have to borrow His Majesty's wisdom to solve."

This was just one of many factors that would remain unknown to them unless they participated in actual combat. Improving upon all these small details would aid them in the future. Mynoghra's military consisted of a small number of skilled individuals. They needed to hone their senses to detect the smallest details and always be prepared for an emergency if they wanted to make up for their lack of numbers.

"How should we proceed?" the Sniper asked.

"I'll finish it..." Gia said, pulling the gun off his shoulder and pointing it at the target.

He breathed in, held it, and slowly pulled the trigger. There was a slight puff noise, like the sound of an arrow being released into the sky, followed immediately by the Orc's head exploding like a melon in the distant darkness.

Barbarians couldn't survive within the territory surrounding the Accursed Lands. All life that entered the land under Mynoghra's surveillance wouldn't live to see morning.

“Move out...”

The swarm careered forward like a unified beast at the command given in the same hushed whisper that had ordered them to stop. All that was left in their wake was jet-black darkness.



“**GIA** seems to be pulling the troops together well.”

Back at Mynoghra’s Palace, in the smaller Council Room around the same time, Sludge Atou was listening to a report on the results of Sniper training.

“Indeed,” Elder Moltar responded. “He’s been taking the troops out nightly to patrol and survey the Dark Continent as part of their training. He’s succeeded in both missions without running into any major issues.”

“One of the most important things in national defense is having a strong influence on the areas surrounding your territory, after all,” Atou remarked. “Our existence became widely known during our involvement in the last war. We’re fortunate to have this opening to strengthen our forces before all hell breaks loose again.”

Elder Moltar nodded firmly in response.

Takuto’s new Mana-making method was rapidly enhancing Mynoghra’s military power. In addition, the advanced strategic theories recorded within the book Takuto had summoned from the Land of the Gods made their military even more efficient, and not just through firearms.

“Our domestic defenses have increased with the addition of our newest subordinates too,” Elder Moltar said as he glanced outside the Council Room’s window to where a copse of bizarre plants seemed to be flaunting how dangerous they were with their comically large size.

Known as Giant Pitcher Plants, the plants in question were one of Mynoghra’s unique units with a massive defense boost that came at the cost of immobility. Takuto was able to place them all over the city thanks to their cheap cost and all the gold coins from *Brave Questers*.

Did he go all out building them throughout the capital and the Accursed Lands

because they drew their nutrients from the ground and wouldn't need a steady Food supply to survive? He certainly seemed to have a bias for the monster plants.

On top of that, they had the Defense bonuses granted by the recently constructed Living Reeds, the unit recovery abilities of the Medic Brain Eaters, and now the Dark Elf Special Forces. The combination of these forces, in terms of defense, made Mynoghra dangerous enough that the Lawful Continent would have to think twice before attacking.



Giant Pitcher Plant

Combat Unit

Strength: 5 Move: 0

<<Flesh Eater>> <<Evil>>

Defense Bonus +25%

※ This unit can't attack.

Description

~Once upon a time, there was a gluttonous plant that wished it could eat any fly, no matter how big. Now Humanoids are its sole "Fly" of choice.~

The Giant Pitcher Plant is a defensive combat unit unique to **Mynoghra**.

Since time immemorial, people have referred to the Accursed Lands as a cursed sea of trees you can't leave once you step foot inside their labyrinth depths. The funny thing was, until the entity known as Takuto Ira appeared there, that land was really nothing more than a vast primeval forest that was hard to navigate.

The Accursed Lands weren't actually cursed when they were named as such. Perhaps such a name was given out of the fear of the unknown. Or perhaps it was meant as a built-in warning for unsuspecting travelers not to get lost within its dark, unnavigable depths.

But things were very different now. The Accursed Lands had become an entirely different creature that more than lived up to its once false name.

Ruled over by the King of Ruin and infested with true evil, those lands had become truly cursed in every possible way. The trees were warped and distorted every which way, and all-consuming miasma hung like a thick mist in the air. Ferocious, man-eating plants filled every gap between the trees, expectantly awaiting any fool who dared set foot inside so they could devour them whole. Day and night, Dark Elves stood guard, silently attacking anyone who disturbed the peace with mysterious weapons.

This region had become the Accursed Lands in the truest sense now. The holy could no longer safely venture inside. The evil dwelling there was propelled by burning rage to deny access to all that was holy in order to prevent their peace and stability from being stolen from them again.

The Accursed Lands, as they were now, were truly suited to house Mynoghra's imperial capital. Everything about this region had warped to be suitable for the great King Takuto Ira and his citizens...

"Strengthening the nation's defenses, preparing favorable conditions to win, and then annihilating the enemy is the most basic of the basic tactics, no?" Elder Moltar remarked.

"It's the fastest and easiest route, after all. Not much will get past our defenses now," Atou said, sounding satisfied with their steadily improving defenses.

She wished they had reached this stage sooner, but they were able to build a defense grid this fast only because of the gold coins they'd obtained from their battle against the Demon Lord's Army. There was no use indulging in vain regrets—after all, regretting the past wouldn't bring back Isla.

What mattered now was learning from their failures to better tackle what lay ahead of them.

"We're on our way to rock-solid defenses, so it's about time we launch the offensive. Are we going with an orthodox approach for this too?" Elder Moltar asked like a friendly old man with a thirst for knowledge.

When launching the offensive, the most orthodox approach is to assign elite forces with a Hero unit and send them straight into the heart of enemy territory to crush them head-on with overwhelming strength. Novels and some historical accounts prefer telling the tale of the underdog overturning unbeatable odds to win against those in power with carefully thought-out tactics.

But the simplest method is often the best, and when it comes to the military, the simplest approach is to put together enough forces to overwhelm and crush the enemy.

If Mynoghra were to follow that path, their current objective would be to quickly assemble all the powerful units they couldn't produce before. But Atou's expression was slightly different from what Elder Moltar had expected to see when he'd made his query.

"No. King Takuto actually prefers more atypical methods," she said.

"Ooooh!"

Elder Moltar was brimming with curiosity. Everyone wanted to know where the king was going to direct them next.

"As King Takuto's most trusted retainer, I have witnessed his countless strategies up close and personal," Atou continued, satisfied with the amount of awe Elder Moltar was showing. "Each and every strategy is so complex and novel that I often don't understand his vision until the final outcome."

Atou's expression was so gentle as she seemed to be remembering those moments fondly. While Elder Moltar reaffirmed the depth of the bonds

between their king and the girl before him, he itched to know more about the other wars Takuto had waged.

“If King Takuto chooses to wage war next...” Atou sighed before continuing, “...then it will be a war like none before it.”

Just what kind of enigmatic strategies was their king capable of that they still puzzled and wowed even the Hero who’d served him for years?

Even as his subordinates revered and feared him, the King of Ruin never stopped preparing for his next battle...

Chapter 5: She Used to...

<Holy Kingdom of Qualia's Southern Assembly, St. Amritate Cathedral> TWO young women were conversing within the provincial assembly hall that seemed a little too bejeweled and extravagant to have been built by people who proudly claimed to be the humble servants of God.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials. She was the Saint who'd supposedly lost to Slurping Witch Erakino during the Northern Witch Disturbance. "Why...are you doing this?"

Soalina asked the girl dancing in front of her this question for what felt like the hundredth time.

During her battle with the Witch, Soalina realized she'd made a fatal mistake at the last second and was certain death was finally upon her. However, contrary to her hopes that she'd found peace in eternal slumber at last, fate still seemed to have plans for her. She eventually regained her senses and realized she'd traveled to the unfamiliar southern province with the girl in front of her.

Soalina couldn't help but repeat her inquiry. What was this girl enjoying so much? Or what was she about to enjoy?

The girl twirled and spun throughout the assembly hall, dancing to her own tune despite only one person watching her little show.

...Soalina was about to repeat her query, when the dancing girl finally stopped and spun toward her with the same flare as a clown addressing a child.

"Because this is what *you* wanted, Sainty Soalina~♪!"



This girl was the creature known as Erakino, the Slurping Witch.

“You claim...*this* is what *I* wanted?” Soalina asked, incredulous.

“Absolutely, Sainty~♪!” The Witch grinned like she was smiling at someone she’d been friends with for years.

Soalina had been deprived of her will by Erakino’s special ability, but her consciousness was returned to her by none other than Erakino. Well, only a piece of her was returned...

Soalina was only allowed to speak her thoughts. Erakino still bound her mind, and she couldn’t even wiggle her toes of her own volition without the Witch’s consent. She still didn’t know the nature of the wicked little girl’s ability, but it was obviously capable of binding someone’s mind if certain conditions were met.

Soalina quickly learned she couldn’t take hostile action against Erakino, seek help, leak any information regarding Erakino, or do anything that would give away something was wrong. A wide range of locks had been imposed upon Soalina, and she was compelled to comply by a mysterious force her Divine Protection had no effect on.

Soalina was no different from a bird trapped in a cage. Its beautiful birdsong might charm people, but its song is nothing more than the lament of a creature deprived of its freedom.

And so, Soalina put forth her query time and time again—in order to discern Erakino’s thoughts. To better understand what kind of convictions and beliefs the Witch was acting on. To somehow understand what made no sense to her.

“*This* is not what I want,” Soalina asserted. “You’re just trying to draw this country into the vortex of war.”

“Am I the one drawing y’all in, or is this all happening at the behest of an entirely different creature? The world is just full of mysteries, ain’t it?!” Erakino cackled.

“If nothing else, our kingdom was peaceful until you showed up,” Soalina countered.

“Ha! There’s no guarantee it would’ve remained that way, Sainty. This world’s gonna be embroiled in war sooner or later. The most important question is, will you live or die when it happens.”

Countless cities and lives were lost to Erakino and her Northern Disturbance. Although the population in the northern province was significantly smaller than the other provinces due to the cold, inhospitable climate, that didn’t make the loss any less significant.

Everything Erakino said was contradictory. She almost seemed to imply that the Northern Disturbance and everything evil she did wasn’t her fault.

But there was absolutely no denying that the girl standing before Soalina was evil incarnate. Who could deny it when the evidence of her wickedness was strewn around them?

“Then, by that logic, what necessitated this atrocity before us?” Soalina asked grimly.

The assembly hall was newly decorated in fresh blood, entrails, and gory body parts. That was all that remained of the clergymen who’d been disparaging Soalina and Erakino only a few hours prior. Now they were being welcomed into the loving arms of their holy God on the other side.

Erakino broke out in a wide grin and resumed gracefully dancing through the hall again, splattering crimson blood all over the pristine white cathedral walls. Soalina watched her without batting an eye.

“Hmm, the need to roll out a Hollywood-style red carpet?” Erakino giggled. “This room would totally be rated R, huh? R for violence and gore! Man, I’d watch that!”

The Saint didn’t answer her, partially because she barely understood what Erakino was talking about, but also because she knew full well that a wrongly worded response would only please the wicked child. Still, just because she didn’t feel like replying didn’t mean she could stop the Witch from rambling on.

“Say, Sainty, were these old fogies necessary for this kingdom to run?” Erakino asked with a tilt of her head.

Soalina’s emotions showed ever so slightly with a twitch of her eyebrows.

“All souls are born into this world with a role to play. Everyone fulfills their role under the guidance of the Holy God Arlos,” Soalina returned dryly.

“*Uhh*, did my question actually register in that pretty lil’ head of yours? Are you dodging the question with a politically correct response?” Erakino asked in a mocking tone. She sidled up close to Soalina and peered into her downcast eyes to provoke her.

Soalina frantically suppressed the contradictions within herself as she hid how she actually felt behind a sedate argument.

“The Veiled Saint is still here in the Southern Province. What you are doing will eventually be exposed, and the other two Saints—the Scribe Saint and the Mystic Saint—tasked with protecting the Holy Capital of Qualiane will see through your wicked schemes.”

“Aaaaaaaaah, I don’t give a rat’s ass about any of that right now, ’kay? None of that’s got anythin’ to do with cute little ol’ me. C’mon, Sainty, tell me what you *really* think,” Erakino insisted as she waved off Soalina’s trite response.

“What I really think?”

Soalina’s lips formed a pouty moue in response to Erakino’s words that seemed to poke right at the crux of the issue without relenting.

“Let me make it easy for you. Were they people who deserved to die?” Erakino persisted.

Soalina was rendered speechless by the realization that was the one question she least wanted to confront.

“Were they pariahs that made everybody else’s lives more difficult?” the Witch asked, her finger thrust toward a particularly fatty pile of flesh and guts. “Tell me the truth, Sainty Soalina. That’s an order.”

Soalina didn’t have any control over her own consciousness. Her ability to speak her opinion at the moment happened only because Erakino allowed the bird in the cage to sing. Ultimately, she had no means of disobeying her master’s orders.

“They abused their power for the illegal accumulation of wealth. They

mistreated the young boys and girls who attended church in ways that are too obscene to utter. They were entirely unfit to lead the people.”

It was all too easy to expose the contradictions within the Holy Kingdom of Qualia when compelled by the mysterious power Erakino held over her. These were dark secrets Soalina never would’ve voiced before.

“I see, I see. Then wouldn’t you say it was a *good* thing...they *died*?”

“...It’s a good thing.”

Soalina’s face, which she’d kept schooled into a perfect mask of calm, distorted for the first time. Not from anger toward the Witch. No, it was from frustration with herself for not being able to do anything about the heinous crimes of those in power when she bore the grand title of Saint. And even greater frustration over the fact that the grinning Witch before her brought them to justice instead...

“You oughta be jumping with joy, then!” Erakino exclaimed with a little jump. “At the very least, no one else will have to cry in the dark about the abuse they suffered at their hands. If this ain’t justice, I don’t know what is! We did the right thing, Sainty~♪!”

Could this really be called *justice*? They’d simply killed a few pariahs that would get in their way.

Qualia’s Southern Province was blessed with fertile land and a booming economy. Corruption among the clergy boomed in proportion to its economic success. Most of the high-ranking clergy, starting with the Cardinals, had a hand in illegal activities, and their cunningness, left unchecked by their lack of fear of God’s wrath, kept them from ever getting caught with their pants down.

They had clearly gone against Qualia’s established laws, but they couldn’t be judged and punished without evidence. That was what it meant for there to be a governing state and laws.

Erakino had overturned the system with a single swing of her arm. She overturned it by force, violence, malice, carelessness, and simply being naïve...

As she said, many people would likely be saved as a result of the tragedy that had happened in the cathedral today. They would be *undoubtedly* saved by it.

...What was the purpose of justice, then?

What had happened to the ideals Soalina believed in?

“I can’t even begin to fathom what you are trying to do, Erakino.”

With her convictions shattering around her like glass, the resentful voices of those she’d failed to save became auditory hallucinations that whispered haunting things in her ears. Too worn down to even think for herself anymore, Soalina simply shook her head and admitted the truth to the Witch.

Erakino must’ve picked up on something from her reaction, because she flashed her sunniest smile yet and launched into a detailed explanation of her intentions.

“Master and I have learned that to conquer this world we can’t just push everything through with brute force. You hafta follow the proper steps and get all kinds of people to join you to win~♪!”

Soalina had heard Erakino mention this “Master” of hers several times. This seemed to be who the Witch served, and every time she mentioned them, she overflowed with respect and deep affection for that person. Soalina didn’t know who or where this person was, but it was clear that Erakino trusted them from the bottom of her heart.

Chills froze Soalina to her core at the knowledge there were entities out there who had the wholehearted trust and devotion of a Witch.

“So, see?” Erakino continued, unaware of Soalina’s inner thoughts. “Our interests align here, Sainty. We want a country where we can be free to do what we want. You also want a country where you’ll be free to do what you want. Don’t ya think we can make the most wonderful country if we work together?”

“A wonderful...country?” Soalina repeated.

“Yeppers! It’ll be a country where no one suffers! Where no one’s sad! A wonderful country where everybody can live happily ever after!” Erakino enthused. “All little ol’ Erakino here wants is an organized military, so I’ll leave *everything* else to you to do with as you please, Sainty! You can save all the lost souls you want! Awesome, right?”

“You speak of saving people when your hands are stained with the lives of so many...?” Soalina countered with sarcasm. Erakino was talking about her dream country in such a giddy, childlike way, but it’d be a lie to say the farfetched idea didn’t tempt Soalina.

“*Hm-mm*, that wasn’t this Erakino, but...whatevs! Doesn’t make much of a diff when it comes down to it, ehe~♪!”

Central and the rest of the provinces would eventually learn of the annihilation of the Southern Province’s high-ranking clergy. However, if Soalina used her rank as a Saint before that happened, she could cover it up and smooth things over, albeit a tad forcefully.

Each of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia’s provinces were granted extensive autonomy from Central. If they limited their scope to the Southern Province alone, then...it might very well be possible for them to create a country that aligned with the ideals Erakino spoke of.

“What really matters is that you and I are already in the same boat, Sainty. It’s just a fact that everything’ll eventually be swallowed up if you don’t rally forces together here and now. The game’s already begun—a game where your life is on the line, and you can’t back out even if you want to!” Erakino pushed her point even further while Soalina remained silent to gather her racing thoughts. “You were also bothered by it, weren’t you? Y’know, the omen of cataclysm that appeared in the Accursed Lands~♪!”

Only a handful of people knew about the omen of cataclysm—the apocalypse-bringer—Soalina had sensed within the Accursed Lands. And now it was none other than the Witch before her who’d confirmed her omen. It was comical, really. A Witch was confirming her suspicions when one of Qualia’s very own Cardinals tried to lead her astray for his own gains...

“Let’s defeat ’em together, you and me, Sainty! Any baddie will be putty before our tag-team efforts! We’ll put an end to the bad guys just like we did today and all the days before now! Doing so will surely bring about the peace we long for!”

Soalina was at a loss for words. There was just something so tempting and irresistible about her offer.

If all goes well, maybe it really will be possible to create the ideal country?
How could she not be tempted when such a sweet offer was being dangled in front of her? And then there was the more naïve, childlike delusion that crossed her mind: *Maybe we can create a truly peaceful country by removing all the evil in the world?*

Soalina would've never been tempted by such blatant cajolery under normal circumstances. But she was currently a bird locked in a cage, left with little else but the misleading voices of the dead whispering to bewilder her.

"Life is one big gamble, Sainty," Erakino continued more seriously. "People like to chalk up what happens to something as pretty-sounding as fate, but in reality, it's all about whether the dice roll in your favor."

Soalina silently contemplated the situation. If the good she believed in couldn't save anyone, and the evil she despised could bring about justice, then maybe she should try that route instead—because it's not like she could do anything, anyway. Not now...not ever.

"Will you...promise me one thing?" Soalina finally asked.

"What is it?"

"Promise me you will no longer kill when it's not necessary."

"Sure thing!"

There was no guarantee she'd keep her word. To Soalina, it seemed Erakino had replied just to appease her and that she'd agreed to it right away because that was her plan from the start.

Either way, Erakino had accepted Soalina's request. That's all there was to it.

"Now the real question is: will we win or lose~♪?"

The Witch cackled.

Her words were the epitome of frivolous—there was nothing trustworthy about them. But Soalina couldn't help thinking: *Does a trustworthy soul actually exist anywhere in this world...?*

How could she wonder such a thing when it was by her hand that those once trustworthy souls were now...no more.

She could hear the clatter of armor in the distance. The Paladins who'd caught wind of the disturbance were headed to this assembly hall to fulfill their duty.

Soalina needed to make a decision. Now. She had surprisingly little time left and only two options to pick from.

Her decision wasn't going to be made for her by Central's clergy or a divine oracle. This decision would be made by none other than she herself.

But just how important of a decision was it?

Soalina quietly inhaled. And then, feeling resigned to what was happening in the world, she decided to go along with the ridiculous deal presented by a Witch.



Slurping Witch Erakino

Combat Unit

Strength: Unknown Move: Unknown

※ Some information can't be displayed because it comes from a different game profile.



Description

~After much trial and error, this **Witch** was born under the guidance of the dice.~

Erakino is a combat unit of unknown affiliation. All her abilities are unknown, and it's presumed she possesses means of attack that abide by different mechanics from Eternal Nations.

She's cruel and hedonistic, and noteworthy for her consistently playful attitude.

She's willing to harm anyone to achieve her goals, which makes her a wildcard.

Chapter 6: Evil Saves Lives Indeed

SOALINA was alone in her office inside St. Amritate Cathedral, perusing a stack of papers. Every document contained evidence of the injustices accumulated by the sly old foxes of the Southern Province assembly. Still, the sheer amount of information exceeded her expectations due to the complicated and hardened administrative system.

Soalina came from a humble village, so she wasn't accustomed to heavy reading and writing. Like a child receiving an elementary school education, she slowly and tiringly plodded through the contents of those documents.

For every document, there were one or more citizens out there suffering. She needed to confirm every letter on every page as soon as possible to right those wrongs... Her mounting impatience only served to trip her up unnecessarily, slowing her pace.

There was a sudden knock at the office door and a Paladin entered the room.

"Saint Soalina!" came the booming voice of High Paladin Fjord Vysterk, Captain of the Southern Province Paladins. "We've finished the initial investigation into the deceased Cardinals' private assets."

Despite his old age, his undiminished skill with Holy Sword Artes had the people throughout Qualia laud him as Fjord the Stalwart. He was so famous, there wasn't a soul among the commoners, much less the clergy, who didn't know his name.

The battle-hardened veteran swept into a deep, courteous bow.

Soalina acknowledged his presence with a nod. "How are your findings?" she asked, her tone hopeful.

"If I had to sum it up in one word, I'd say they are *tremendous*. To think they had so many hidden assets. And then there's their dual bookkeeping, misappropriation of donations, and taking bribes. I can't help but think of all the

good that would've come of these donations actually being given to the poor instead of the greedy. I lament my inability to have stopped these heinous sins."

Even Fjord, who usually kept a consistent mask of calm that never betrayed his feelings, couldn't hide his disgust with their findings. Actually, it was only because he was delivering this report that the information was laid out so calmly before Soalina. The rest of the Paladins, who'd been temporarily summoned to get the situation under control, were ranting and raging over those repulsive acts that went against their beliefs.

"Arlos strongly desires for us to be a light upon the people," Soalina said. "Let's do everything we can for them. Have you filled the positions I asked of you?"

"We've sent word to the Priests of each town and village, but they aren't quick to respond when they have local issues to address," Fjord responded.

It's not easy to rebuild a governing body with gaping holes in it. It's not just a matter of assigning the right person for the job—the candidate also needs a certain level of ability and popularity with the masses. That being said, the Bishops and Cardinals Erakino had killed all served in the highest positions of government in the Southern Province. Since most of the practical work was handled by the ordinary clergy, the average citizen's daily routine was left unaffected, keeping a semblance of the status quo.

However, it was clear the tranquility would crumble over the next few days. They had to somehow restore the complex flow of order to a reliable form before that happened.

"I see... You may use my name if necessary, so please continue your efforts to persuade them. We need people most of all right now."

Soalina even permitted Fjord to throw around the weight of her title as Saint—something not to be taken lightly. Fjord trembled with the knowledge of just how weighty of a decision that was and how much determination Soalina had to make it. But even as he revered the Saint, Fjord remembered something he must confirm as the Captain of the Southern Province's Order of Paladins.

"But are you certain it's wise not to report back to Central?" he inquired carefully.

Several seconds of silence followed before Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials answered.

“Yes...we would be wise not to. Unnecessary interference from Central at this point will only serve to inflame the disorder here. Naturally we won’t keep the matter from them forever. We will wait until the time is right.”

“*Hmm... If that is what you believe is best, Saint Soalina...*”

She was misleading him. Fjord was more than just a senile old man on the verge of retirement. He was a High Paladin known throughout the continent, and a renowned Hero of Qualia who’d purged the most evil from the world aside from the Saints. He had honed his insight into the realm of foreknowledge and mind-reading, so he perceived Soalina was hiding something she felt guilty about.

There’s something fishy here. Something stopping Soalina from bringing this urgent incident to Central’s attention. Fjord schooled his features so she wouldn’t notice as he dissected all the information he’d obtained thus far. *There must be more to this... Something I’m overlooking...*

As he fished through his foggy thoughts, Fjord suddenly arrived at a blurred memory: *the bishops’ corpses were strewn messily around the cathedral, and in the sea of their blood stood Soalina and a girl. Just as Fjord and the Paladins who served under him drew their Holy Swords and swung at the girl—*

“Hiya, hiya! You seem to have a lot on your mind! Should you really be twiddling your thumbs chatting away the time right now?”

“...Ah! You’re...”

“Yo, Chiefy! Have ya looked in the mirror? The bags under your eyes make you look more like a raccoon by the day! Are you getting enough sleep?”

A girl suddenly appeared and started talking to Fjord like they were chums.

Fjord’s vision blurred and his head throbbed like it was being pounded with hammers. The girl in front of him overlapped with the girl from his blurry memory as she flashed him an uncanny grin with lips the same shade as her blood-red eyes. His headache grew a thousand times worse, and he was one step away from removing the veil clouding his thoughts.

“Ngh... P-Pardon me...m-my head...”

Just a little more... Just one more push!

And then it happened—High Paladin Fjord recalled that the girl in front of him was Slurping Witch Erakino.

“Oh darn...looks like the effect’s worn off already. You’re such a handful, Chiefy. Trust in lil’ Erakino here, ’kay? Ehe~♪!”

Erakino rolls for Brainwash

Rolled: Critical

“Ngh... What was that? Oh, Lady Erakino,” Fjord said, greeting his trustworthy fellow believer. “Pardon my late greeting; I wasn’t aware you were here, too. I was fighting off a bit of a dizzy spell, you see?”

The hammering pain rattling his brain subsided as if it was never there, and the haze cleared from his mind, filling him with thoughts of justice and a gentlemanly regret for having been discourteous to the young lady in front of him.

“Were you dazed by my cuteness?” Erakino teased. “You shouldn’t work yourself silly, Chiefy.”

“Hahaha!” Fjord let out a hearty laugh. “I must still be lacking to cause a lady to worry after me. However, there are times when we must push ourselves to the brink to achieve our goals, Lady Erakino.”

“Like when helping people in need?” Erakino guessed.

“Indeed! That’s exactly when we should work ourselves silly!” Fjord exclaimed. “As you well know, Qualia is about to be embroiled in unprecedented turmoil. And it’s in these difficult times that it is the duty of a Paladin to become Arlos’s sword and the people’s shield. Evil doesn’t rest, and neither does good!”

“Nyahaha! Now you’re a workaholic if I’ve ever seen one! You’ve got the reckless work ethic that would turn any corporation you headed up into a sweatshop~♪! And guess what? I’ve got just the job for the work fiend Chief

Paladin~!”

Erakino cracked a strained smile as she procured a stack of papers from thin air. Was her smile strained because she was overwhelmed by Fjord’s straitlaced attitude or simply put off by him being so devoted to his work, even at the cost of his health?

“Th-This is...!” Fjord’s eyes bulged when he looked at the papers. The documents contained the locations where the Bishops and Cardinals had stashed their illegally gained assets—information he thought they’d never uncover. “Where did you find this...Lady Erakino?”

“The Investigate skill’s always worth having— Oh, but Chiefy, is that what you should be focusing on right now? What’s important isn’t how I found the information, but how you put it to use, right?”

“Indeed! Forgive me. You are absolutely right. Thank you for setting me straight, Lady Erakino.”

Fjord immediately switched gears at Erakino’s advice.

The secret accounts they’d found thus far exposed an enormous amount of hidden assets. Fjord thought they were in for the long haul since the stashes’ locations were unknown, but with this new find, they could recover the assets much sooner than anticipated and bring order back to the Southern Province with it.

Fjord’s complexion looked much better than it had moments earlier as he’d discovered a potential way to put an end to the brewing chaos.

“All right, Saint Soalina, Lady Erakino, I’ll closely examine these documents at once. Time is of the essence, and we never have enough of it, after all,” he said, firmly gripping the stack of papers.

“That’s true. I leave the task to you,” Soalina said.

“Good luck!” Erakino waved.

Fjord bowed politely to the ladies as he had when he’d entered the office, then turned on his heel to leave...except he suddenly stopped before exiting the room.

“I am...deeply grateful to you both for standing up and taking action for the sake of this kingdom. Through you, Arlos is telling us we shouldn’t continue to overlook the rot festering throughout His country.”

Erakino, who’d seen into the darkest depths of Fjord’s thoughts with her Brainwash skill, knew he really meant what he said. And Soalina, who’d come completely under Erakino’s control with her Slurp skill, also understood that to be true.

“Let’s make this a better country. If you will excuse me, then, ladies.”

Erakino responded to High Paladin Fjord’s comment with a carefree grin while Soalina plastered a nebulous smile on her perfect lips.



“**GOSH**, it feels awesome to do somethin’ good for once! What a novel experience!” Erakino laughed as she twirled around the office. Her carefree smile was that of an innocent girl and nothing that would make anyone assume she was a Witch who’d ended many lives.

Soalina focused all her attention on processing the documents on her desk—as though she could block out the reality she didn’t want to see and gloss over the contradictions and lies breeding within her by working nonstop.

“If things keep goin’ this well, we’ll get rid of all the baddies in this area in no time, Soali!” Erakino purred.

“If things keep going... If things keep going this way...” Soalina repeated

Yes, I hope things keep going this way, she thought.

Oddly enough, Erakino truly seemed to be trying to make Qualia a better country. If nothing else, she certainly appeared to be getting attached to this land and her new acquaintances here, such as Fjord. Soalina couldn’t understand for a second why a Witch who didn’t give a jot about human life had any feelings at all.

But, if by chance, Erakino developed a true attachment to this country and its people, wouldn’t everything change for the better? Surely there would be no more miserable and unfortunate people like me? Such self-delusional thoughts

of a better, brighter future filled her mind.

“If things keep going... Yes, if things keep going this way...” Soalina muttered again.

“Yes, only *IF* things keep going this way...and that’s a *big* if.”

Yet another visitor dashed the hope Soalina put into her mantra.

“Saint Fenne...”

The visitor was a woman whose height was a mystery. She was undeniably taller than Soalina, but she often stood hunched over, as if afraid to stand tall, which made her look much smaller in comparison. She wore a saintly habit to conceal her skin from the neck down, coupled with a pure white veil that completely hid her face—altogether, there was something eerie about her.

Meanwhile, her voice was like a goddess singing. It was beautiful enough to make it feel like the room had been purified just by her speaking and even stained the cheeks of Soalina, a similar blessed entity.

The woman’s name was Fenne. She was one of Idoragya’s Seven Great Savior Saints: The Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair.

“Oooh! If it isn’t Veily! Good to meet you, good to see you! All healed up, I take it?” Erakino casually addressed Fenne, who’d appeared in the room using some sort of ability.

Fenne wordlessly turned her head toward the Witch, lifted a corner of her veil at an angle Soalina couldn’t see her, and confirmed Erakino directly with one eye.

“Nice to meet you, Erakino. To think you brought down Soalina... You did well.”

“Pretty much! It took a hella long time, though. But thanks to that win, Erakino here is one step closer to achieving my ambitions! Aren’t I awesome?”

“I see. I couldn’t care less.”

Soalina was struck by a terrible sense of incongruity. She didn’t know the relationship between Erakino and Fenne.

Qualia had a culture that despised provinces getting involved in each other's affairs because of the large amount of autonomy granted by Central to each province. Thus, the Northern Province received no information on how the Veiled Saint, under a different province's jurisdiction, fought against Erakino. Without any information on the situation, what had happened between them was a complete mystery.

"What's the matter, Soalina?" Fenne asked softly, seeming to notice Soalina's antsiness. Her voice was as sublime and beautiful to the ears as a court orchestra.

Shaking off the somewhat inhuman voice echoing in her mind, Soalina phrased her concern in a roundabout way. "Pardon my rudeness for asking in such a manner, but did Erakino do anything to you, Saint Fenne?"

"Nope, nothing," Erakino and Fenne answered the same way at the same time. Soalina shuddered at that eerie coincidence.

"You ask the silliest things, Soalina," Fenne said. "Did you think I was under her Brainwash spell or something? Oh, or did you think I'm plotting something? In either case, you've got the wrong idea. I am always thinking of the people first. The situation is what it is. As someone who has lost once already, I know I can't beat you and Erakino."

Shadowy eyes pierced Soalina from under the veil. Fenne seemed to see straight through everything Soalina was thinking. Soalina didn't know how to respond.

"Oh, so that's what you're thinking, Soalina. You think the Veiled Saint made some sort of secret deal with the Slurping Witch and went into hiding, only pretending to be severely injured during the last battle. What a terribly wicked thought. Arlos would never approve of such dreadful musings. You should promptly rid yourself of such thoughts, Soalina."

Fenne floridly denied Soalina's question, both as if she'd had this speech prepared beforehand and as if she were just speaking as things came to her in the spur of the moment.

Every Saint's abilities were strictly classified as a general rule, and anyone who might've accidentally found out about them in one way or another would

be sworn to secrecy. The same applied among the Saints themselves, and even Soalina only vaguely knew what kind of abilities the other Saints possessed.

...Soalina suddenly remembered the Veiled Saint was rumored to possess a Miracle Arte that allowed her to see the truth.

“Come now, Soalina. Let us save the people. God created the Saints for that sole purpose, after all,” Fenne said in her siren-like voice. Her voice could pull anyone in and drown them.

For some reason, Soalina found herself looking to Erakino for help.

The Slurping Witch merely let out an amused cackle.

“Everybody should be saved,” Erakino said. “That’s right—*everybody*.”

Everyone in the office was in complete agreement on that point. However, what they actually meant by it was confined to their respective minds.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The Southern Province has seceded from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. It will be treated as an independent territory until the Empire Declaration event occurs.

OK

Chapter 7: Bilateral Talks

LOCATED in the Phon'kaven town of Dragontan is a vital Strategic Resource called a Dragon Vein Mine. Unprecedented tension and turmoil now surrounded this special town that had been the focal point of a slew of dire situations and high expectations.

Talks were about to be held between the respective leaders of Mynoghra and Phon'kaven, Takuto Ira and Pepe. That vague rumor spreading through the streets plunged the people of Phon'kaven into anxious confusion, bringing about a hushed stillness that made Dragontan seem like a ghost town.

Dragontan's inhabitants were painfully aware of the Barbarian hordes that had attacked Phon'kaven and that Mynoghra had helped drive them away. But that knowledge wasn't enough to assuage the intuitive fear and apprehension taking root in their hearts. Apprehension that made every single one of them wonder: "*What* in the world did we make a deal with?"

Rumors spread not only among the townspeople, but also the soldiers who'd fought on the frontlines against the Barbarians alongside Mynoghra.

"Hey...do ya know who we're having talks with next?" a Wolfman with excellent vision called out in a conspiratorial whisper to his colleague from his post atop the watchtower built into the town's outer walls.

The Human soldier frowned theatrically as he answered, "Wasn't it...the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira?"

"Yeah, seems like it. Why's someone like that going outta his way to come here himself...?" the Wolfman asked, not hiding his disgust.

"Obviously because Staff Holders Pepe and Tonukapoli went to see him in person last time. It's only natural he'd come to their turf this time," the Human explained. "Besides, there's the Barbarian Invasion to discuss. National leaders got a lotta stuff to talk about, I'm sure."

The soldiers were talking about the upcoming bilateral talks. It was already well-known among those in the know that Staff Holders Tonukapoli and Pepe had held in-person talks with Mynoghra's king a while back.

They should be happy to have a good relationship with an ally who valued and trusted Phon'kaven enough for their king to visit personally. This vote of confidence displayed a solid alliance between the two nations. And no one doubted their alliance after Mynoghra had devoted so much to defend Dragontan from the Great Barbarian Invasion, to the point of great loss on their side.

...The only black mark on their resume of being an excellent ally was simply that Mynoghra consisted of *evil* forces with unfathomable strength.

"Yeah, but will things really turn out okay?" the Wolfman asked. "We didn't join hands with the wrong side, did we?"

"Can't say..." the Human trailed off, hesitant to answer his colleague.

Information about the empire of Mynoghra was kept top secret within Phon'kaven. The alliance between the two nations was formed only recently, so little to no information had trickled down to the grunt soldiers. They only heard vague rumors claiming their allies were a frightening bunch, and that was it.

"Phon'kaven and Mynoghra are allies for now. I'd like to think...that it'll all turn out okay," the Human finally admitted.

"We *all* hope it'll turn out okay," someone suddenly joined in the conversation, mirroring those hopeful words. That clear, dignified voice belonged to a young woman.

The man reacted to that familiar voice with a start and hurriedly spun around to salute.

"M-Mayor Antik!"

"Wh-What are you doing here?"

The men saluted a gorgeous Elf.

"Playing hooky— I mean, patrolling. I'm *playing* my role by patrolling. I thought I'd check on how everyone's getting along."

Mayor Antelise Antik, a woman renowned for her slender frame, ample bosom, long ears, and cascading blonde hair, casually waved her hand and told them to be at ease with a tired smile. She was a woman with an unusual history that had her leave the conservative, secretive El-Nah Alliance of Elementals for Phon'kaven. Her background wasn't the only impressive thing about her, either. She was a woman of exceptional talent, so much so that she was appointed the mayor of Dragontan without even applying for it.

The soldiers recoiled when she appeared on the walls with them. They were taken by her inhuman beauty—a trait unique to Elves—and the gleam emitted from her sharp gaze as it burrowed into them both. They couldn't stop from blushing under her strong gaze—Antelise was much like a rare and stunning flower seen on top of a mountain they could never reach.

But the men soon remembered they had been neglecting their duties to entertain scandalous discussion, and they quickly stood at attention. It hadn't been long since the last Great Barbarian Invasion. Although the damage had been minimized with Mynoghra's aid and the Defense Force's efforts, they still couldn't afford to be slacking off on wall duty.

"I-I'm sorry you discovered us like this, Mayor Antik."

"We were slacking off... Please give us whatever punishment you deem necessary."

"It's all good, boys. We've been working nonstop, so I know how you feel. Peaceful days have become extra nostalgic to me lately, too... Wait, has there ever been a peaceful day since I became mayor?" Antelise joked with a shrug of her slender shoulders.

Determining the mayor was going to overlook their misconduct, the soldiers scratched their heads and tried to feel out the reason for her visit.

"Haha! We've got nothing but respect for you, Mayor Antik. Even now, you're goin' on the rounds to make sure we stay on our toes."

Phon'kaven's frontier towns were experiencing an exodus of citizens due to their Self-Defense Force's utter lack of usefulness during the Barbarian invasions and the damage sustained from a lack of reinforcements sent from the main army.

Citizens want peace. That's a natural mortal desire and not something that can be suppressed by reason.

What if something similar happens again? What if our allies don't join in the next battle? Anyone who understood those worries couldn't blame them for wanting to leave this deadly zone outside of their empire's protection.

The soldiers on lookout struggled with the same thoughts as well. If they were to be honest with themselves, their morale had hit rock bottom, and their determination to protect the people of their country was shakier than ever before.

Even as they were sounding Antelise out, they could see a line of carts loaded with household belongings heading for the gate on the dusty streets below. They didn't know where the citizens were headed, but they'd obviously given up on this godforsaken town. Watching that exodus day in and out was a hit to anyone's morale. So, to the soldiers, it seemed reasonable for the mayor to go out of her way to monitor and encourage the people out of concern for deteriorating public safety.

But Antelise chuckled and gave an answer that was contrary to their thoughts. "While that's a part of the reason for my rounds, it's also not," she said with a wry smile. "I came here because it's the best spot to overlook the town. This might be the last time I see it like this, you know? It's only natural to want to burn in what the town you ran looks like, right? We don't know where things are headed, after all."

The future ahead of them was too unsettling and surreal to imagine. Antelise had made the remark lightheartedly, but the soldiers didn't miss her hard-set jaw or strained smile. What meaning was hidden behind her words? They didn't have enough information to speculate, but they could tell something more was going on just by how she acted.

The men shared dubious looks. They couldn't imagine what awaited the town they protected. They forgot that they wouldn't even be in a position to think about the future if not for Mynoghra's assistance during the last wave of attacks.

"C'mon, don't say such ill-omened things, Mayor..." the Wolfman said

nervously.

“Yeah!” the Human joined in. “You’ve got a terrible personality there, trying to scare us by saying stuff like that. Hahaha...”

“That reminds me, you aren’t going to run away?” Antelise asked as she leaned against the watchtower and looked out at the town below.

The town wasn’t only bleeding citizens, but also soldiers. They had various reasons for leaving, covering everything from guarding the departing citizens to blatantly admitting they’d given up on Dragontan. It was so bad that they were down to a skeleton crew that just barely managed to cover town security.

There was no time to rest for those who remained, and their work hours were growing increasingly longer without any benefit. The two soldiers on guard duty hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep over the last few days, and it’d been quite a while since they last returned home. They had a mountain of tasks to attend to outside of guard duty, and their brief chat was just a momentary respite from a hard day of grueling, tedious work.

Running away would be easier—especially right now, when they had the guilt-free option of escorting the departing citizens to their new homes.

But both men answered Antelise in loud voices.

“Haha, we’re not running.”

“It seems like we like this town too much when it comes down to it.”

The two men had grown up in Dragontan. They’d received so much from this town and experienced various joys and sorrows while living there. They planned to stay with Dragontan until the end, regardless of how the other townspeople felt. Thanks to people like them, Dragontan had yet to crumble beyond repair.

“Really? Then can I ask you for a small favor?” Antelise asked, showing them a genuinely happy smile, soon replaced by a deadly serious expression. Then she told them her unthinkable favor.

“...I need you to have a steadfast mind and heart if you happen to see the king of Mynoghra during the upcoming talks. And please, no matter what happens, do not, I repeat, do not react. I’m not just saying this to uphold our appearance

or to make our country look good. Well, that's definitely a piece of it, but I'm telling you two who love this town this so you can live another day."

The soldiers both swallowed so hard it made an audible noise.

Ultimately, Antelise was telling them that depending on their actions, they could offend the king of Mynoghra and end up in a life-threatening position. A grunt soldier's life definitely wasn't worth much compared to the bigger picture. Phon'kaven and Dragontan had no reason to concern themselves with the life of a disrespectful soldier, especially under strained circumstances.

Eliminating the offender would smooth things over just fine—that's how diplomacy worked.

But were they really dealing with such a dangerous and unpredictable entity? Was this king *that* frightening?

For the first time, the two soldiers felt the chill of unease rise up from the depths of their churning stomachs.

"I heard from Lady Tonukapoli that the king of that country is a being existing two to three steps outside the rules of this realm," Antelise continued gravely. "She called him an anomaly."

Tonukapoli and Pepe were the only two citizens of Phon'kaven to have actually met the King of Ruin in person during their talks within Mynoghra's Imperial Capital. Pepe had very different sensibilities from a normal person, so his witness account wasn't very trustworthy, but Tonukapoli's words were absolutely credible and reliable.

The strength of Phon'kaven's Staff Holders was well known among their people. Not only were they respected for their achievements and abilities that began with Nature Spirit Artes and extended into a wide variety of magics, but they were also treated as a sort of legendary creature.

Such a person, who was already a godly existence to a grunt, evaluated the king of their ally nation as an anomaly?

A sense of impending doom crept up on the two men who'd been thinking of the situation as someone else's problem. After all, they finally realized that what they were underestimating as merely talks between two diplomats was

far more than that.

“I-Is it that extreme? Are you sure the Staff Holder wasn’t exaggerating a bit...?” the Human asked.

“Have either of you ever seen Lady Atou in action?” Antelise answered his hopeful question with another question.

The men instantly understood what Mayor Antelise was trying to tell them with that single question.

The girl named Atou, who’d helped defend Dragontan, was an existence outside of mortal understanding.

Both soldiers had seen her fight.

She’d been fighting far from the town, so they could only see her if they squinted really hard from the watchtower, but that was enough to discover she fought more like a monster than anything remotely Humanoid.

Ice and snow glittered all around her. Something tentacle-like whipped around with a mind of its own. Death cries and the dismembered bodies of Barbarians being flung high into the sky were noticeable even from the watchtower. Thunderous roars that sounded like lightning striking the ground shook the air.

...The fight was all too vivid...all too fantastical.

At the time, the soldiers had been told by their superiors that Atou was an octopus Demi-human, but now they all knew that was nothing more than a futile smokescreen. There was no way in hell she was that mediocre of a being.

The girl called Atou was a being beyond anything they could ever put a name to. And Takuto Ira was that girl’s beloved master and king.

An existence that could control that *monster* couldn’t be normal.

“W-We understand what you’re trying to tell us, Mayor Antik,” the Human stuttered. “So...while I’m not confident, I will do everything in my power not to cause any issues on the day of the talks.”

“That’s not even the tip of the iceberg...” Antelise said eerily. “Even the adorable Elfuur Sisters are...”

The soldiers held their breath.

The Elfuur Sisters were the Dark Elf twins Mynoghra had temporarily dispatched to Dragontan. The soldiers had seen the girls from a distance and even wondered why such children were sent on a diplomatic mission in the first place. At a distance, they looked like nothing other than ordinary, cute young ladies. But...

“Nah, I shouldn’t talk about them. Well, good luck, boys. Who knows? I might be the one who screws up,” Antelise jested, then returned her gaze to the town as if to say that was the end of that.

The conversation left a lot to wonder about, but one look at Antelise’s face let them know they wouldn’t learn anything further even if they asked. But the Wolfman suddenly remembered something else he wanted to ask her.

“By the way, you can use Spirit Communication Artes, right, Mayor? What’re the Spirits doing?”

Elves have a naturally high affinity with Spirits. Following the voices of these spirits, they perform various artes and divination. The Wolfman was curious about how the Spirits were reacting to the situation as incorporeal beings more sensitive to evil.

“Oh them? They all ran for it,” she replied bluntly, the smile not reaching her deadened eyes.

Spirits are a kind of energy that exists everywhere in the world. Their presence is incredibly faint, and they barely have much in the way of instincts and a will that typically indicates a living creature.

All the Spirits in the area had fled. How should they process that fact?

Antelise sprung to action before the men could draw their own conclusion. “You guys won’t run away, though, will you?! You love this town, don’t you?! Don’t you?!” she pressed, putting a hand on both men’s shoulders and squeezing tight as if to say she wasn’t letting them go.

The soldiers trembled before her beaming smile, wondering if they’d made the wrong decision after all.



THE more you yearn for a moment to come, the more you feel like you've wasted a lot of time waiting for it. Meanwhile, why does it feel like the days you wish will never come arrive all the faster?

Thus, the day of the bilateral talks arrived all too soon for the people of Dragontan.



Antelise Antik

Person

Race: Elf

Empire: Phon'kaven

Role: Mayor of Dragontan



Description

~Gifted with intelligence, beauty, and a cheerful, magnanimous personality, Antelise is the most trusted and most stressed mayor of all time.~

Antelise is a mayor belonging to the multiracial empire of Phon'kaven. She's in charge of dealing with the important people of Mynoghra, a vital ally to Phon'kaven, which has made her one of the most valued people in her empire. On the downside, this has only caused her to constantly have stomach issues and consume even more alcohol than before.

Chapter 8: Reception

TODAY was the day of the diplomatic meeting between the leaders of Phon'kaven and Mynoghra. Antelise, the mayor of Dragontan, was pensively gazing into the horizon from the town gates, waiting to welcome their state guests, including the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira.

Ugh, I wanna go home... Well, I guess this is home now. I'd rather die in a ditch than go back to El-Nah, Antelise thought morosely.

The duty imposed upon Antelise was to welcome Takuto and guide him and the rest of the Mynoghra diplomatic mission to Town Hall, where the meeting was being held. Although Pepe and Tonukapoli would conduct the main negotiations at Town Hall, Antelise was also required to attend as mayor. The pressure of the heavy responsibilities placed on her was mind-numbing.

Even now, she was stressed to the point that it hurt physically and her stomach clenched and churned when she thought of the day ahead. She'd normally drown the pain out with alcohol, but she couldn't risk that on such a day as today, so she was reduced to a pitiful Elf who could only plead with the Spirits to make sure things came to pass as peacefully as possible. Sadly, the Spirits she wanted to ask for help had foreseen the disaster to come and had long since fled.

Then again, since transferring Dragontan to Mynoghra was already considered a done deal, Antelise's wish for peace was a lost cause even if there were still Spirits around to hear her plea.

He won't wanna eat me, will he? I've met and chatted with Atou and Sage Moltar a few times before, but...their king's probably on a totally different level, right?

It wasn't like she'd had zero contact with Mynoghra before now. She'd worked with Elder Moltar and Atou, two key officials, several times and had even gone through quite the first experience with their people when the Elfuur

Sisters came for their initial visit.

She might've actually interacted with Mynoghra more than anyone else in Phon'kaven, including the Staff Holders. So she felt she understood the general disposition of that country's citizens. And that was exactly why she felt the highest amount of tension and wariness over their king's visit. The picture Mynoghra's people painted when they spoke of King Takuto Ira made him out to be larger than life and beyond imagination.

This is the moment of truth, Antelise! You must receive our diplomatic guests without causing them any disrespect! That's your job as mayor! Antelise told herself. Look at it this way: get through this little welcoming moment, and then Pepe and Lady Tonukapoli will take over the rest! You've got this! Just make it through a few minutes!

The cession of Dragontan to Mynoghra was basically a done deal—that's how desperate Phon'kaven was, even by Antelise's estimation. How the people living there would be handled would depend on the direction of their negotiations, but taking the relationship between the two nations into account made it seem likely they wouldn't be mistreated.

In the midst of her tightly wound nerves, Antelise found herself thinking: *If Dragontan ends up becoming Mynoghra's, then I'll inevitably be dismissed as mayor. I have no intention of ever returning to El-Nah, and it's not like I could even if I wanted to. What should I do with my life now?*

As those concerns and a tinge of loneliness crossed her mind, a strangled cry from the watchtower broke the chilly silence.

"Ah, ah, ahhhhhh..."

Antelise glanced in that direction and saw the soldier she'd conversed with just the other day pointing toward the horizon like he'd seen a ghost.

She immediately knew what had perturbed the soldier without having to ask—something worse than a ghost had come.

"Our guests are visible in the direction of the Accursed Lands!!" the Wolfman announced loudly.

His voice pulled Antelise out of her pensive thoughts and back to the

moment. She trained her gaze on the direction of the Accursed Lands, where Mynoghra's diplomatic mission should be visible.

...At first glance, it looked like such a small delegation. Of course, it only looked that way because of the distance—the actual size was still vague. At the very least, their numbers had to be whatever was appropriate to join a king on a diplomatic mission.

But honestly, numbers didn't mean a damn thing in this moment.

Antelise and the soldiers scrutinizing Mynoghra's diplomatic mission from in front of Dragontan's gates saw a tower of darkness that pierced the heavens exuding from the whole group.

Ah, we're screwed...

Antelise was dominated by a sense of doom that made her clamp her mouth shut even though she didn't remember opening it. She was overwhelmed by an emotion she'd never experienced before. No, it wasn't a foreign emotion, but rather fear that was so palpable it didn't feel like fear anymore.

What Antelise felt like she was experiencing was: **DEATH**.

Strangely enough, everyone who laid eyes upon the king's retinue experienced the same feeling: **death** was coming.

Amid the tension dominated by chilling terror, the closed gates slowly opened, and a giant flag was raised from the watchtower to welcome the diplomatic mission. Antelise made the right decision, telling everyone what they should do in advance and having them practice. She felt like praising the Dragontan soldiers for having the courage and grit to pull off their jobs under these bone-chilling circumstances.

Time progressed slowly as everyone stared open-mouthed at the same spot, unable to school the shock and terror from their features.

After what felt like a painful eternity, the group of people who looked smaller than a grain of rice in the distance had become large enough to see who they were, signaling the hour of the greatest do-or-die moment in Antelise's life.

Calm down, calm down. You can take a moment to gather your thoughts if

you have to—just don't offend our guests, she told herself as she took a deep breath and looked directly at their diplomatic guests.

The diplomatic mission led by Mynoghra's king came to a deliberate stop in front of Antelise.

She already knew from prior interactions that Mynoghra's people weren't fond of overly ceremonious exchanges. But this was understood to be a formal meeting between two countries, meriting the bare minimum of formalities.

In other words, Mynoghra was waiting for Phon'kaven to receive and welcome them in.

Antelise was careful yet quick to rake her gaze over the people accompanying the king. Mynoghra's delegation had more people than she'd expected. There were a number of Dark Elves she recognized, along with several others wearing outfits she'd never seen before.

Large wagon carts trailed behind them as well. The carts weren't drawn by horses, but by gigantic bugs that let out disturbing chittering noises—a fitting retinue for the King of Ruin.

Disturbing as that may be, it was still within the range of oddities Antelise had prepared herself for. The real problem was what kind of *people* were a part of the king's retinue.

Antelise's eyes were drawn first to the Dark Elf's former chief, Elder Moltar. He currently held the position of Chancellor and Advisor within Mynoghra, and was the most versed in politics among the group. He was also Mynoghra's Minister of Magic and a Mage who spent night and day researching dark magics beyond Phon'kaven's wildest nightmares. He was known as the Curse Sage back when he ran with the Dark Elf Assassination Brotherhood.

The danger lurking behind his grandfatherly smile was not to be taken lightly.

Antelise's gaze then shifted to the Minister of Defense and Military Affairs, Warrior Gia. He was infamous for his fierce and merciless personality all the way back when Antelise used to live in El-Nah, and rumor had it even then that the number of people who'd fallen at his hands was so great, keeping track was an exercise in futility. His nickname was The Assassin. His dark skillset and

loyalty belonged only to the King of Ruin now.

The two girls standing on either side of the king like maids were the Elfuur Sisters. Rumor had it that the king was personally providing them with a special education to train them to become future leaders—as sketchy as that sounded.

They had visited Dragontan as envoys from Mynoghra before and continued to maintain a good relationship with Antelise. These two girls were originally the only ones Antelise thought she could talk to without feeling queasy, but the darkness they exuded had grown a thousand times worse since their last encounter, making Antelise particularly uneasy now.

Antelise glanced at the king's most trusted confidant, Atou, last. This girl, fundamentally different from the Dark Elves in both origin and being, stood quietly by her king. Antelise had little to note about her. Much to her horror, she'd learned from all their interactions thus far that this girl, with powers that easily surpassed human understanding, had absolute trust in her king and was equally trusted by him.

Going by looks alone, it was hard to wrap her head around this beautiful girl being Mynoghra's strongest weapon. But it was undeniable that if Atou felt like it, she could instantly massacre everyone in town.

As someone privy to all the information Phon'kaven had gathered during the Great Barbarian Invasion, Antelise sharply inhaled through her teeth as it sunk in how truly dark and evil of a being was standing before her.

And if Atou is darkness incarnate...then...then...the being she obeys implicitly must be...

Antelise forced her trembling body to move and jerked her gaze toward **that** being.

The King of Ruin. Takuto Ira.

It just stood there calmly, like a friend who came for a stroll in your neighborhood.

This is...the King of Ruin.

The king's attire was a tad strange. He wore a luxuriously designed robe

draped over his head to conceal his appearance.

I can't see his face or read his expressions like this, Antelise thought, staring at his face as much as she could without being blatantly rude.

...Beneath the robe was a void of nothingness and a pair of glowing eyes.

“Eeep!” Antelise cried out, then clamped a hand over her disobedient mouth.



Cold sweat cascaded over every inch of her body and her heart pounded so loudly it could be its own drum circle. His gaze seemed to know everything about her, as if watching her from beyond the logical world. In an instant, it bound Antelise's heart with fear and tried to drag her into the depths of hell. Just as she thought her heart was about to stop from the shock, the king suddenly looked away.

"Haaa...haa..." Antelise gasped for air.

I narrowly escaped with my life there, she thought as she tried to catch her breath.

The king's gaze strayed a little below her eyes and continued to stare at her like a lifeless void. Antelise didn't know why Atou suddenly started whispering with displeasure into his ear, but she had a strange feeling it wasn't because of any offense on her part.

Actually, the king acted completely opposite from what she'd expected. In her wisdom, Antelise understood the meaning of his actions. The King of Ruin was being considerate of her by looking away, so she wouldn't collapse in fear. He must have heard her loud cry, yet not only did he not call her out for it, but he kindly dropped his gaze to her chest instead!

Did he don that deep robe in order not to stir up fear by exposing his appearance to the masses? Such actions didn't belong to an apocalypse-bringer who wished only for ruin—at the very least, he was reasonable enough to be considerate of his allies.

Antelise was grateful that Mynoghra was Phon'kaven's ally, even if that alliance left a lot to be desired. At the same time, she deeply resented the fact that they were allies.

Spirits! Did Pepe and Lady Tonukapoli seriously understand what they were doing when they allied with this MONSTER?! He ain't something that we can deal with on equal footing!!! If everything goes to hell, it's not my fault!!

Antelise shouted and cursed in her thoughts, unable to shake the feeling he could read her mind. She needed to at least vent internally about the overwhelmingly outrageous predicament she found herself in before she blew

her top. That just went to show how much shock she was in after meeting the King of Ruin.

However, just as it sounds like a wild tale for an elephant to considerately visit the home of an ant, it was even more of a delusional stretch for the root of ruin to peacefully visit the home of puny mortals.

Antelise's mounting confusion and inner turmoil were unavoidable given the situation.

Calm yourself, Antelise. You're dealing with someone who's being considerate of you. It'll be okay. Nothing's gone wrong. You still haven't committed an irreversible mistake.

Fortunately, many of Dragontan's residents had left town already. Everyone else was under strict orders from the mayor not to go outside until curfew was lifted. Decorum usually dictated that the townspeople should welcome their international guests as well, but they were in no position to cater to such formalities.

Antelise had made the right call, telling everyone to stay home despite knowing it was discourteous. If her predictions based on what Tonukapoli had told her were correct, then none of Dragontan's townspeople would be able to withstand the King of Ruin's grueling gaze.

Antelise had, of course, told Mynoghra as much. She'd prepared a better-sounding excuse for them, and they'd gladly approved of not having a large welcome party. Elder Moltar, Mynoghra's contact point for Antelise, was even kind enough to offer her words of consolation despite being on the receiving end of what could've been taken as a slight against king and country.

If only Antelise could accept their thoughtfulness and kindness at face value, then this incident could've been used as a cute story to show off the budding friendship between Phon'kaven and Mynoghra. But something about their attention to detail when it came to being considerate of how people viewed them made Antelise sick to her stomach.

I can't stay silent forever. It looks like the soldiers have steeled themselves as well.

Less than a minute had passed. Having just experienced a lifetime of fear, anxiety, and bewilderment in that short span of time, Antelise took a steadying breath and swept into the deepest, politest bow of her life.

“Welcome to the town of Dragontan, King Takuto Ira of Mynoghra. I am Antelise Antik, the mayor of Dragontan. On behalf of my town and country, we would like to extend a hearty welcome to you and your people.”

Putting on an amicable smile was one of the secret weapons Antelise had honed throughout her life. She hadn’t had much use for it since getting buried under the exhausting work required of her as mayor of a fringe town, but she was glad to discover her weapon hadn’t dulled.

Her battle began for real now—she needed to receive her guests without a single misstep.

“Cool. Thanks.”

Aah, so this is what the voice inviting you to ruin sounds like. The maddening claws of fear clawed at the inside of Antelise’s chest. I’m confident the negotiation table will be a million times more confusing and chaotic than I’d imagined.

She felt like she was facing a heartless void.

What will the King of Ruin ask for during these talks and what will he offer in exchange? Antelise’s chest was plagued with anxiety and disgust of a different nature from fear. If the Spirits will hear me, my only wish is that these negotiations end without blood and tears.

The bilateral talks began with no Spirits to bring her modest wish to fruition.



THE meeting room prepared within Town Hall was awfully understated for the leaders of two countries to gather for negotiations. Then again, they had chosen a frontier town that was strapped for people to hold their meeting rather than a capital city. Besides, Phon’kaven didn’t have the financial leeway to build a stately international conference center just to show off and make jobs like some other countries, and Mynoghra would much rather get their business done and over with than waste time on pomp and circumstance.

Thus, they chose this modest meeting place to satisfy both sides.

Everything about these international talks went against the norm—and that didn't stop at just two international leaders meeting in this shabby, old, cramped conference room at the edge of the Uncharted Territory.

“Long time no see, my best buddy Takuto! I'll give you Dragontan, so gimme something in return, pretty please!”

The first words uttered when the two Commanders came together proved these were going to be very unusual talks indeed. Phon'kaven's Commander, Pepe, jumped straight to offering Mynoghra Dragontan without much in the way of small talk.

Takuto always took the unbeaten path himself, but even he had to stop himself from cracking a joke at such an outlandish start. Obviously, Pepe jumping the gun wasn't planned for. Tonukapoli shot him an irate look as she cradled her head in her hands and Antelise blinked rapidly, her mouth falling open.

Meanwhile, Mynoghra's council members couldn't hide their shock either. Elder Moltar was drenched in a cold sweat as he fiddled with his beard and Emle dropped her pen. Even Takuto was a bit disappointed Pepe got the first strike in before he could confirm who was attending the meeting.

“It's nice to see you again, Pepe. Hmm, even if you ask me to give you something, I'm not sure what that something should be.”

But the ball was already rolling, and he couldn't stop it now.

Okay, time to buy a little time, Takuto thought, purposely beating around the bush with his answer to drag things out. He liked Pepe's simplicity and out-of-the-box approach to things, but it wouldn't do to let the other party take the initiative completely out of his hands.

It didn't matter that both sides already had a general idea of what they were there for—this was still supposed to be formal negotiations held between two empires, not talks that took place after accidentally encountering each other like the last time they met. Takuto also wanted to avoid a messy conclusion to clarify the power dynamic between the two empires going forward.

Takuto put a finger to his chin, pretending to be considering what he could give them as he scanned the room.

The major players in attendance on the Phon'kaven side were Staff Holders Pepe and Tonukapoli and Mayor Antelise of Dragontan. Other than them, there were several soldiers on guard duty and a few civil officials taking notes and organizing documents.

Takuto did his very best not to let his gaze drift toward Antelise's ample bosom as he shifted his attention to his own delegate members.

Elder Moltar was there to support him and back him up during the talks, while Emle was there to take minutes. Atou and Gia were present as well, but more in a guard capacity. Waiting in the next room were the Elfuur Sisters, some Dark Elf Warriors, and the Brain Eaters. Takuto's diplomatic contingent made it impossible for them to lose in case of attack and was a tad excessive for a meeting with a friendly ally nation.

Well, it's obviously an extreme lineup when I brought all our aces with me. If I learned anything from what happened to Isla, it's to never split our forces and let individual units get taken out alone. That's why I had everyone come along.

Takuto chose the safer, albeit a little over the top, route of bringing the brunt of his forces with him since Mynoghra's capital was relatively close to Dragontan, and they could march right back home should the enemy invade while they were away.

At any rate, few people were participating in the actual talks. However, the Commanders with the authority to make the final decision were present on both sides, and Takuto also had his whole council in attendance, so they could actually get somewhere with their negotiations. Takuto also didn't want to neglect his Domestic Affairs for long by staying away, so he was prepared to finalize things today.

How should we play our cards next?

"Hohoho. That's a difficult thing to come up with, indeed, my king," Elder Moltar joined in the fray after Takuto bought them around thirty seconds. "Our country is still in the early development stages. The hard fact of the matter is, there isn't much we can provide you with due to how inadequate we Dark Elves

have been in serving our mighty king.”

Elder Moltar wasn't called a Sage just for show. He immediately noticed the meeting was shifting in Phon'kaven's favor and subtly knocked the reins out of their hands.

Pepe already mentioned ceding Dragontan to Mynoghra as the basis for their exchange. Now the real negotiation was over what Mynoghra could and would give in return. Phon'kaven planned to take as much as they could in the exchange, and Mynoghra planned to tighten its purse strings as tightly as possible, so they were indirectly yet keenly sounding each other out. Although it goes without saying, most negotiations don't play out this fast.

This was the point when both sides would usually try to confirm the intentions and goals of the other party. And they would've tried to ease the tension in the room by discussing their joint efforts in the last war first.

Why do we have to waste time on such tedious formalities? Oddly enough, the Commanders of both countries were of the same mind on that front.

“There you go being all modest again!” Pepe exclaimed. “You served us such amazingly delicious food last time, my best bud. Don't you still have loads of goodies you haven't shown us yet? Plus, you brought those big bug-drawn carts with you, right? Show me what's inside!”

“I didn't bring anything that's that big of a deal, Pepe,” Takuto countered smoothly. **“Just something I thought you might need.”**

“I'm positively positive it's something uber awesome!” Pepe said in a singsong voice. “I'm really looking forward to it! This is so exciting!”

He's perceptive...too perceptive. I know we made the carts stand out, but it'll be hard to get the conversation to flow the way we want if we show our hand now.

Takuto had no intention of stupidly giving in to Pepe's request at this point in the game.

“Hohoho!” Elder Moltar broke into the conversation with a jovial laugh. “We can only hope our small offering pleases you, Master Pepe... By the way, Lady Tonukapoli, I've heard that your country has several other Staff Holders. What

did your fellow Staff Holders have to say about this matter?"

"Hm? *Mm...*" Tonukapoli hummed, dragging out her response. "They had a lot to say but accepted it in the end. This fool here convinced them by saying we have to offer at least this much as a token of gratitude for the Great Barbarian Invasion and our continued friendly relations with your country. Although...the Dragon Vein Mine is another matter entirely."

"We are certainly happy to go ahead with joint management of the Dragon Vein Mine, just as we've discussed before," Elder Moltar smoothly replied. "His Majesty also desires as much. However, ceding us the whole town seems like quite a bold move, don't you think? I was taken by surprise when I first heard the news."

"...Let's just say it was the best move we could think of," Tonukapoli conceded. "I can only hope that it helps you understand how much our country values Mynoghra."

"In that case, pray tell how receiving this town benefits our nation...?" Elder Moltar inquired, not holding back.

"Hey, Moltar!" Takuto interjected. **"You shouldn't say such things. Dragontan's a lovely town."**

"Oooh, forgive me, Your Majesty! I accidentally let my mouth run on about rude things because I was so concerned with what value it'd bring to Mynoghra and you." Elder Moltar turned from Takuto to address the Phon'kaven members. "Please laugh it off as the ramblings of a senile old man, friends."

Mynoghra's delegate succeeded in shifting the topic toward Dragontan's value. They had to sort of force it in that direction, but neither side expected the other to follow much procedure. All that mattered was to reach a profitable agreement, and the more profitable it was for Mynoghra, the better. Any means were acceptable to get the desired result.

"Sorry about that, Pepe."

"Don't be, buddy! It's no skin off our backs, since Dragontan really is a town with no value! Wahahaha!" Pepe burst out laughing.

"Haa..." Tonukapoli sighed. "This little fool never fails to open his big trap

without thinking...” She shook her head, then took control of the situation. “All right, if I may speak, King Takuto? As we said in the official missive we sent you, Phon’kaven is considering ceding the town of Dragontan to Mynoghra. In return, we would like to request you provide us with something to bolster our military, whether that be boots on the ground or the technology to help us reach your level, such as weapons or research.”

“And what good is Dragontan to us?” Takuto fired back.

“Tch!” Tonukapoli clicked her tongue.

Negotiations between nations are wars without bloodshed. Neither side has any pity for the other—only the strong get what they want in the end.

Takuto was merciless on that front as well. He cornered his prey by repeating the same words he’d just chided Elder Moltar for without an ounce of shame. His creed was to squeeze every last drop out of the other side, even if they were an ally nation. In negotiations, the only person in the wrong is the one who can’t negotiate a better deal for themselves. Although he held back just enough not to let his comments strain the future of their alliance.

“.....”

Tonukapoli fell silent.

Phon’kaven was at a disadvantage. Dragontan had little to no value without the Dragon Vein Mine. What value it had was diminished by it being on the verge of collapse as a functioning town and requiring considerable work to rebuild it.

Their disadvantage grew greater yet because they still didn’t know what Mynoghra was bringing to the table. When you don’t know what your opponent’s hand is, while your hand is unilaterally devalued...crushing defeat is bound to come in no time.

But Phon’kaven had its fool. A boy who did the most unexpected and crazy things but shouldn’t be taken lightly for a single second.

Pepe stopped staring dreamily out the window and suddenly jumped into the conversation as if a brilliant idea had struck him.

“There’s a great value to you. Dragontan has some very lovely *people*! Yessiree, it has *lots* and *lots* of people!”

Now that’s getting straight to the heart of it, Takuto thought, impressed.

Pepe likely knew the true state of affairs within Mynoghra.

What Mynoghra severely lacked was *people*.

Dragontan’s buildings could be instantly built with Emergency Production as long as they had Mana. As it currently stood, Mynoghra could build an endless supply of facilities if they exchanged the gold coins they’d obtained from *Brave Questers’* monsters for Mana. Dragontan’s failing government and lack of public order could also be handled by the Brain Eaters, which had skills specifically designed to solve those problems.

But obtaining and maintaining a *population* was an entirely different matter.

There was no quick hack for instantly obtaining a population, and it took time for an already existing population to increase. Mynoghra’s unique race, the Homunculus, may have a high fertility rate, but even they had real, physical limits not usually present in a game. At the very least, it’d take several years to create the next generation, and that was several years too many, given Mynoghra’s current predicament.

Time was not on Mynoghra’s side.

As long as a clear threat to Mynoghra’s existence still existed in this world, strengthening the empire’s national power was imperative, and it could be said that the lack of a population was the greatest weak point preventing them from moving to the next stage.

From the outset, what Mynoghra had always wanted from Phon’kaven was *people*.

“People, eh? Hmm, I’m not sure about that,” Takuto hummed, purposely trying to sound disinterested.

“They’re all lovely people. I’m sure they will be very much to Mynoghra’s liking!” Pepe pressed with his usual cheer, his eyes sparkling, his smile deepening. “Don’t you prefer things to be livelier too, my best bud?”

Was Pepe just pushing forward in his own airheaded way, or was he intentionally spinning the conversation in his favor? Either way, the boy Takuto considered a friend was an expert negotiator he shouldn't underestimate for even a second.

"My country lacks strength. Your country lacks citizens. So why don't we trade what we have for what we lack?! I'm absolutely positive doing so will let us make our countries even better!"

Pepe was right. He'd stated an undeniable fact.

Increasing Mynoghra's population was an incredibly appealing deal to Takuto. And if they could change the Dragon Vein Mine's Mana to Earth Mana, that would unlock various Terraforming Tactical Magic as well. This would avail him to a variety of extremely effective methods for developing the barren Uncharted Territory, instantly increasing the speed of urban development.

A lot more research was required to unlock the various technologies necessary to prepare Mynoghra's true army. It didn't matter how dedicated the Dark Elves were to their research when their numbers were too limited to even make a dent in the technology trees.

Ultimately, the number of citizens an empire has directly correlates to its national power.

Meanwhile, this deal would also massively benefit Phon'kaven.

Phon'kaven's biggest roadblock to expansion lay within its meager military strength. They couldn't safely expand their territory within the Barbarian-infested Dark Continent without some kind of definitive weapon to give them the upper hand in protecting their cities. Being unable to expand outside city walls delayed the cultivation of new farmland. And they couldn't increase their crop yield from existing farms due to the barren nature of the Dark Continent.

A Food shortage meant they had to rely on imports from other empires, depleting their coffers and impoverishing the nation across the board.

A thorough investigation of their territory showed the entire empire of Phon'kaven was suffering from rampant poverty. Borrowing Mynoghra's strength would instantly change the tides for them.

It was unclear how much they knew about what Mynoghra planned to offer, but the weapons Takuto brought would perfectly serve their goals. With renewed, overwhelming military strength, they could pacify the surrounding areas and cultivate the land under safer conditions. Their potential as an empire would be further maximized if they made use of the Earth Mana drawn from the Dragon Vein Mine they joint-owned with Mynoghra.

Takuto knew that the Beastmen had high reproduction and fertility rates, although not quite on the same level as Mynoghra's Homunculus. Adding them to Mynoghra's roster would absolutely help the empire prosper in the long run.

The contents of this agreement offered significant benefits for both sides.

Takuto felt like he was traveling down the path his opponent had laid out for him in advance, so he decided to throw out several more hard-hitting questions to shake things up.

"What are your thoughts on the Dragon Vein Mine?"

"Like when it comes down to the finer management details?" Pepe cocked his head to one side. "We can decide all that later, with good terms that respect our great friendship!"

"But, Pepe, the people have their own will and pride that they abide by. Won't they all just flee?"

"You can only have a will and pride if you're *alive*. Besides, not everybody has the same strength and courage as soldiers."

"They will become evil if they join my country. You need a whole lot of mental fortitude and courage to take that leap."

"Really? I'm not so sure about that. Mynoghra is a great country. The food is tasty, and there's so many awesome things! Plus, all the Dark Elves seem oh-so-very happy! Isn't that the case, Mr. Moltar?"

Elder Moltar's eyes widened in surprise when the conversation suddenly turned toward him. As soon as he realized everyone was looking at him, he reluctantly answered, "Hrm... Of course. All of us Dark Elves feel truly blessed to have become citizens of our king."

“.....”

“Y-Your Majesty...” Elder Moltar said nervously.

“Thanks, Elder Moltar. I’m happy to have you, too.”

“You honor me!”

Takuto let his little gaffe go as he had a good idea why Elder Moltar was reluctant to answer. Actually, it wasn’t quite right to call his reaction a gaffe. After all, considering his position, Elder Moltar couldn’t have given any other answer.

“I’m extra positive that our countries will get along even better if some of our people become Mynoghra’s citizens!” Pepe continued. “Dragontan will become the bridge between us!”

He might actually be a move or two ahead of me, Takuto thought in awe of Pepe.

People who become citizens of Mynoghra get to keep their *free will*, aside from being saddled with absolute loyalty toward Takuto Ira and Mynoghra. Pepe sounded out that fact through his little exchange with Elder Moltar. He’d likely already guessed as much through prior interactions with the Dark Elves.

While becoming a citizen of Mynoghra will change a person’s alignment to evil, it doesn’t overwrite their identity or feelings to make them an entirely different person. With that in mind, it should be easy to persuade Phon’kaven’s people to immigrate to Mynoghra.

In other words, one slip of the tongue increased Dragontan’s value and gave Phon’kaven the advantage.

Pepe only turned the question toward Elder Moltar to confirm what he already knew.

Ultimately, Phon’kaven was trying to say: “You want people, right? Both your side and our side can make that happen without a hitch.”

Of course, Mynoghra didn’t want to agree when they were trying to gain the advantage by drawing attention to how difficult it’d be to actually obtain the promised people. But the talks would break down right here and now if they

didn't agree. After all, the meeting would only end in a disadvantage if they didn't both find something to gain from the other.

“True. Good relations are very important.”

Takuto put his mind into high gear examining the advantages and disadvantages to both sides as he simulated where the conversation would go next.

On Mynoghra's side of things, they would accept the former Phon'kaven citizens as immigrants. Even if they became naturalized citizens of Mynoghra, they'd never be able to forget their homeland. Of course, the game mechanics would force them to be loyal to Mynoghra, but their feelings and memories would remain intact. This was proven by how the Dark Elves still hadn't forgotten their hatred toward the Elves or their racial pride.

This left some discomfoting unpredictable variables in the picture if the relations between Mynoghra and Phon'kaven ever became strained. Game mechanics being what they are, the new citizens would inevitably side with Mynoghra in the end. But Mynoghra wanted to avoid doing anything to make its citizens unhappy.

After all, citizen Happiness directly correlates to how much Mana they produce.

This particular mechanic from *Eternal Nations* would tie Mynoghra's hands. A lot more weight would be put on the alliance with Phon'kaven if Mynoghra accepted their people. And while there were plenty of advantages to strengthening their current alliance, there were close to zero disadvantages.

Proposing something that would essentially be an act of cultural infiltration was definitely an aggressive strategy, to say the least. Takuto didn't know how far ahead Pepe was looking or what his take really was, but if nothing else, his approach was profound.

“A bridge between us...hm? I see. That's certainly a good plan.”

Is this where we should compromise and find common ground?

Takuto decided to accept the compensation they had prepared as something of value to Mynoghra. As a result of accepting that, Mynoghra would have to

give more in exchange, but it was a valid enough exchange to merit that.

Of course, Mynoghra had a lot to gain as well. As Pepe said, this strategy worked not only in favor of Phon'kaven, but also in Mynoghra's favor as well. Just as it made it harder for Mynoghra to break off the alliance, it placed the same restraints on Phon'kaven.

The mortal mind is complex. The domestic turmoil that would result from sending their own citizens to naturalize into another country and then turning on that country would be immense. What was once taken as a peaceful cessation of territory could abruptly be considered a betrayal and abandonment, leading to distrust toward the nation's leader and the potential for civil war.

In other words, Phon'kaven's hands would be tied just the same as Mynoghra's. No matter how the dice may fall, they couldn't betray each other. That would be the outcome of this agreement.

"Oh yeah! I remember hearing there are more Dark Elves living in the main Phon'kaven territories... It might be a good idea to talk to them about becoming Mynoghra's citizens! And hey, while we're at it, why don't we put out an open invitation to all of Phon'kaven's citizens to see if anyone else is interested!!" Pepe continued, putting his stupid, seemingly thoughtless genius on display and dominating the negotiation floor in the process.

The Dark Elves couldn't fully conceal their excitement at his proposition. Yet again, he beat Mynoghra to a matter they should've brought up first.

Interesting. He's skilled at knowing just what people want, Takuto thought, feeling a little despondent at the idea he might've lived an easier life if he'd been even a quarter as good at reading and playing people as Pepe was.

"H-Hold your horses there, Pepe!" Tonukapoli interjected in a flurry. "Now you're just making arbitrary decisions! We never discussed allowing such a thing!"

"Eeeh? It's your job to make these things work after I say them, Granny Tonukapoli. You can just talk them into it like you did last time! You're good at convincing people!"

“You...foolish child!”

“Besides, do we even have enough food to feed all of our citizens right now?”

“Spirits, child! Whose side are you on?!”

Takuto found Pepe very entertaining...and secretly quite skilled, to boot. He was okay with not deciding on the finer details of their exchange today. Mynoghra could provide them with Food supplies to a certain extent using Mana.

I'd feel bad if this caused Tonukapoli to get stomach ulcers from all the stress he's causing her, so maybe I should ease her concerns a bit here, Takuto thought.

But before he could say anything, Pepe spun toward him and looked him straight in the eyes with a serious expression that belied his usual boyish playfulness. “I feel like we put you in a bad spot recently, Takuto. We couldn't do a thing during the attack on Dragontan. We should've been the ones shouldering the loss of life during that battle.”

Takuto let a moment of contemplative silence pass before speaking his true thoughts on that matter. **“We were up against forces that wanted to destroy and conquer the world at large. Mynoghra would've clashed with them sooner or later. Phon'kaven isn't at fault.”**

“Then that means the blame lies with the bad guys who brought war to our gates!”

“And also with us for failing to be perfectly prepared for them.”

Yes, everything went wrong because of insufficient preparation. No, not just that—a naïve outlook on the situation brought about this tragedy. That didn't only apply to Phon'kaven, but also to Mynoghra and Takuto too.

“That's why we should be prepared for anything that comes at us next time, Takuto! We need overwhelming strength to defeat anyone who comes to our doorstep with whatever reasons bring them there.”

Pepe's words drew everyone in and applied to both countries.

Is this what people usually refer to as a charismatic speech? Takuto mused,

deeply impressed with his little ally and very much of the same mind. *Being prepared is imperative. We need to be overwhelmingly prepared with an overpowered military and devastating national power. That's what an empire needs no matter what they're up against.*

"We can provide you with people. What can you provide us with?"

He really is an amusing opponent, Takuto thought, laughing on the inside.

Power isn't defined solely by brute force. Everything that goes on in the world is complex, and various factors continually affect people and the world at large. Power, in the truest sense, is how much you can influence and affect people and things other than yourself.

In that sense, Pepe's genius insight and simpleminded yet eccentric approach to taking the initiative could be considered power. And Takuto was the type who was very fond of such people.

"Elder Moltar," Takuto said, giving the signal.

"Yes, sire! Everything is ready on our end, but...are you certain you wish to proceed?" Elder Moltar asked.

"It just goes to show Pepe was the better negotiator. Well, in the end, this exchange equally benefits us both."

Takuto decided to change his tactics. He switched to putting all his cards on the table instead of playing them one by one. If the other side was going all-out with what they were offering, then he should do the same. If Pepe and Phon'kaven were going to throw their lot in with Mynoghra, then Mynoghra needed to respond in kind. Even if the day would come when they would have to revisit this alliance for Takuto to achieve his ultimate goal, today was not that day. Right now, they were still friendly allies.

"Pepe...do you want power?" Takuto asked in a scandalous whisper, purposely putting on airs. He'd often heard that phrase used in stories from his past life and always wanted to try saying it once himself.

"I do!"

"Then it's our turn to surprise you."

That's right. It's our turn to toy with them. I'll offer them power that's a million times more valuable than anything they could imagine. I'll make it so there will never again be a force that can stand up against our alliance.

"In that case, I'll show you what it means to wield real power."

"Yay! I can't wait!"

Tonukapoli and the rest of Phon'kaven's citizens in attendance paled in stark contrast to Pepe's delighted, carefree grin.



Beastmen

Race

<<Race Traits>>

Melee Bonus +10%

Flatland Bonus +5%

Fertility Bonus +10%

Food Production Bonus -5%

Research Bonus -5%



Description

~A people with beast and human souls. The vast land itself is their home.~

Beastmen are a race of Demi-humans covering a wide variety of species that are a cross between humans and animals, such as wolves, cats, and cows. Although they can be broken down into more detailed classifications, as a whole, Beastmen are a race with excellent melee skills, high fertility, and high survivability. However, since they tend to lack Dexterity and Intelligence, they have negative bonuses for Food Production and Research, requiring a playstyle that keeps these negatives in mind.

Chapter 9: Incalculable Power

REAL power. Antelise ruminated over what Mynoghra's king had said as she held back the sliver of hope and ocean of anxiety threatening to wash over her while she waited to see what Mynoghra was about to unveil. Antelise was no uneducated, innocent villager with a childish outlook on the world—she had a solid guess about the kind of dangerous goods Mynoghra had prepared for them.

A new type of weapon usable by ordinary soldiers. Mynoghra had likely concluded that was what Phon'kaven wanted from their missive and brought them just that. Antelise could tell that was the case from the sound of many hard items lightly clanging together in the delegation's carts.

Phon'kaven's original intent behind sending that missive was to ask for Tactical Magic even their people could use or monsters they could control. But physical weapons met their demand just as well. Actually, weapons would give them immediate access to various strategies over Tactical Magic, which required already skilled Mages with the talent and time to learn. It was also better than trying to learn how to control monsters that might turn on them.

The only real concern that came with weapons would be them leaking to the enemy or the enemy making their own versions, but that was hard to complain about until they saw what they were working with. After all, they didn't even know what kind of "weapons" Mynoghra would show them.

"All right, I think that handles all the prep work," Elder Moltar announced. "Thank you everyone from Phon'kaven for going along with our sudden request."

"Y-You needn't thank us, Sage Moltar," Antelise responded. "But are you certain about this location? People are more likely to see us here... I don't know what you intend to show us, but I can't imagine it's something you want out in the open?"

“Hoho. Your concern on our behalf is greatly appreciated. However, the power our king has created is so destructive, it stands out regardless of precautions taken to conceal it.”

“I-If you say so...” Antelise sighed, scanning her surroundings to see what exactly Mynoghra had prepared.

Mynoghra’s delegation had brought everyone to the lawless slums on Dragontan’s outskirts, where thugs and other riffraff congregated. Squalid buildings that were far from livable tightly lined the narrow alleyways, their crumbling exteriors making them look more like ruins. It was in this peculiar place that several scarecrows were lined up in equal intervals. These scarecrows, usually used for training soldiers, were decked out in the heavy plate armor imported from Qualia.

Antelise’s mind raced as she stared at the training dummies from afar. *So, they brought us ranged weapons? Maybe a type of crossbow? The general consensus on crossbows is that they’re little more than a scholar’s toy with far too complex mechanisms to be suited for mass production. Did they reengineer it to be suitable for combat? If that’s the case, I’m a tad disappointed.*

It was only by coincidence that Antelise had learned about the crossbow, which used complex mechanisms to modify the bow and arrow to give it deadly accuracy, longer firing range, and stronger penetration power. She had the opportunity to handle one while she was still living in El-Nah when one of her clan leaders showed it off after getting it from only the Spirits know where. Back then, the Elven Archers criticized it as useless in actual combat because its complex structure increased the chances of breaking and becoming unusable in the field. Perhaps Mynoghra had succeeded in developing a crossbow that solved those issues.

But...that theory didn’t sit well with Antelise because Elder Moltar mentioned the weapons were so destructive they stood out. From what she knew of the crossbow, she couldn’t imagine any ranged weapon of the sort drawing that much attention. Either way, Dragontan’s training grounds should’ve sufficed for showing the weapons off, as small and confined as they were. And yet, Mynoghra politely shot down their proposed use.

Meanwhile, the district they requested for their demonstration might've been considered no-man's-land but was still open enough for spies and other unwanted onlookers to sneak a peek. Antelise had stationed soldiers to keep people away, but she'd been mayor long enough to know to always expect the unexpected.

There was no way Mynoghra didn't know the risks of holding the demonstration there. The only logical conclusion was that the weapon they'd developed was no crossbow, but something so powerful and flashy it couldn't be hidden.

"Elder Moltar, we've finished unpacking and checking over the firearms. We're ready to fire any time. How would you like to proceed?" someone asked Elder Moltar, who was giving orders beside Antelise while she was lost in thought.

The person in question was one of Mynoghra's key players, Emle. Antelise had already exchanged several letters with her, so she felt like she was getting together with an old friend when they finally met. Their races got along about as well as cats and dogs, but Antelise was personally fond of the Dark Elf and her friendly disposition.

Emle used a lot of technical jargon in her conversation with Elder Moltar, which proved this new weaponry had established terminology. It sounded much further from known technology than Antelise had speculated.

"Hrm, I see. I'll go inform His Majesty and the Staff Holders then. Please excuse me, Mayor Antelise."

Antelise rushed to craft a politician's smile when Elder Moltar suddenly addressed her.

Looks like the show's about to get started. Antelise took a deep breath and braced herself for what was about to come.

"Oh, one last question before you go..."

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

Emle had called Elder Moltar to a stop before he could leave. She seemed to still have something to run by him. Antelise debated whether she should listen,

but since they didn't seem to mind her presence, she decided to stay put.

"I'm sorry, but who should serve as the first shooter? Warrior Captain Gia's handpicked team is getting ready, just in case..."

"Hrm..." Elder Moltar looked around them as he slowly stroked his beard. Then a mischievous grin crept onto his face as if he'd thought up a devilish idea. "You do it, Emle."

"Yes, sir. Then we'll go with— W-Wait, m-me?!" Emle cried in a hysterical voice, clearly startled by his suggestion.

Ahh, I can tell she goes through hell, too...

Feeling like they were more alike than she first thought, Antelise warmly watched over Emle as she started getting ready in a fluster.



"**LADIES** and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. We would now like to put on a demonstration of Mynoghra's premier weaponry for the esteemed members of Phon'kaven gathered here today," Elder Moltar said, acting as the facilitator of the demonstration about a half hour after they'd gathered.

Mynoghra's King Takuto Ira quietly watched over him from the simple viewing area set up a slight distance away. From the same area, Phon'kaven's Staff Holders, civil officials, and various military officers watched on with a myriad of expressions as the curious demonstration began.

"What Mynoghra brings to the table is a new type of weapon that a single individual can use," Elder Moltar continued in his booming, baritone voice.

So I was right. Antelise was delighted her theory hit the mark...and also a bit disappointed it was going to be a *crossbow*, after all.

"A weapon meant for waging war must meet a variety of requirements: anyone can use it, it's easy to learn, easy to operate, and difficult for the enemy to steal. Most of all, it must excel at killing. Such a weapon is needed in large quantities and at low costs. Naturally, there will be times when an elite force or a powerful and complex spell will be the key to winning a battle. However, for every ace, there needs to be a capable military to support them so they can

achieve the end goal. The combat capability of the ordinary soldier can never be overlooked if you wish to win.

“...If I may be frank, I humbly believe you have experienced strong feelings of chagrin over the way the war with the Barbarians played out. Your people must be wondering why their peaceful lives must be threatened by such an inferior, unintelligent race. I’m certain you are wondering if there is any power you can obtain to crush those cretins into the ground where they belong. Wondering if there is a method you can employ to teach any fool who dares mess with your great nation a lesson.

“...Our empire has prepared just such a method for you today.”

He’s good at drawing people in, Antelise thought, listening to Elder Moltar’s speech with such rapt attention she didn’t even realize she was clenching her fists.

Elder Moltar used the mysterious atmosphere unique to Mynoghra and demagoguery to draw in his audience and incite excitement and interest in them.

“Now, this here is Emle, a civil official with our empire who has almost no combat capability. Her knowledge and scholarly talents have greatly contributed to our empire, but her physical prowess lacks so much she’d lose to even a child, not just an ordinary soldier.”

“Ah! Ehehe...”

Emle entered the scene upon Elder Moltar’s introduction. Was she nervous from all the eyes on her? She repeatedly bowed her head as she strode to her mark in the middle of the square.

Antelise and several of Phon’kaven’s people leaned forward when they saw her. She seemed to be holding some sort of staff. No, parts of it closely resembled the shape of a crossbow, especially the grip. But everything else, the firing end in particular, was different. This weapon had nowhere to nock a bow and was oddly long.

What in the Spirit realm is it used for? Everyone from Phon’kaven wondered, their eyes glued to the curious weapon. They also wondered how the woman who didn’t look like a trained soldier would use it.

“But you needn’t worry. Allow me to repeat that a good weapon is one anyone can use, easy to learn, easy to operate, and difficult for the enemy to steal. Most of all, it must excel at killing. Those are the necessary conditions that must be met,” Elder Moltar repeated to assuage their doubts. Then he gave the order that sounded the beginning of change for Phon’kaven. “Show them, Emle.”

“Y-Yes, sir!!”

Time seemed to flow slowly after that. Emle fiddled with several spots on the weapon, slowly raised it toward the target, and positioned herself to fire.

There was a moment of absolute silence...and then...

A cadence of terrifying pops exploded.

“Aaah!”

Antelise paid no attention to the fact that she’d instinctively let out an adorable-sounding scream as she quickly turned her eyes toward the training dummy serving as Emle’s target. All that remained of the once solid iron armor defending the dummy was pitiful scrap metal pumped full of holes. She had no idea what had happened. The deed was done the moment she heard the loud pops.

“Wh-What...?” Antelise uttered in more of a groan than a voice.

How should she describe what she just witnessed? It was terribly difficult to put into words. The only thing she knew for sure was that the dummy dressed like a soldier and placed at a distance from them had been devastated in an instant. Smoke billowed from the tip of the staff-like weapon and a strangely pungent odor permeated the air.

Mynoghra’s delegation carried on a conversation as if this was the expected result, while the canine Beastmen wrinkled their noses at the offending odor.

“Hrm... Your aim was off, Emle,” Elder Moltar remarked. “How many hours have you trained with it?”

“Um, I believe I spent two hours being taught how to use it and another eight actually practicing...” Emle answered.

“I see. You need additional lessons,” Elder Moltar concluded. “However, I’d still give you passing marks. You may stand down now.”

Emle bowed deeply to the onlookers, then jogged away as if glad to be done. But Antelise didn’t have the wherewithal to give her a passing thought.

“In just t-ten hours?!” Tonukapoli cried out in a voice laced with surprise and excitement. “That’s all it took to be capable of that kind of destructive force?! Is that what you’ve been trying to tell us? What a weapon you’ve prepared for us!!”

Antelise internally nodded along with the elderly Staff Holder.

The weapon was just too dangerous and anomalous.

Antelise had already gained a fairly good grasp on who Emle was through their letter exchange. She couldn’t have been opposed to violence, given she’d served as adjutant to the Dark Elf Warrior Captain, but judging from her physique, she must’ve held that position for her intellect rather than her brawn. Meaning that her physical capabilities were on par with an average person, making her no different from any other ordinary citizen if you took her intelligence out of the equation.

Put another way, an average person just blew holes through plate armor made from solid metal. The silence hanging over the square made plenty of sense when you stopped to think about the implications there.

I thought it looked like a modified crossbow, but boy, was I off! Antelise thought, putting a hand to her head. What the Seven Saints is that thing?! I can’t even begin to guess what makes it loose its arrow! Was that even an arrow?! It moved too fast to tell!

The supposed arrow shot out and hit its mark, turning the armor into a beehive in the blink of an eye. The hard and heavy armor designed to protect the wearer from all kinds of attacks was rendered to scrap metal in a split second. You didn’t have to be combat-savvy to guess what would happen to the person wearing that armor.

This weapon was too deadly for anyone to have. What made the whole thing a lot more terrifying was that Mynoghra said they’d already prepared a wagon’s

worth of the weapons for them.

This will change the way war is waged! No one will ever be able to employ close-combat strategies again if they're up against this ridiculous power!

"Just seeing Emle use it doesn't really show off what this new weapon is capable of," Elder Moltar said, taking charge. "Gia, it's the Warriors' turn."

"Men, it's time to show the results of your training. Don't let our king down," Gia commanded.

"Yes, sir!!" the Warriors responded as one.

Mynoghra didn't know or care about Antelise's inner turmoil. They continued with their demonstration, not even giving a passing glance toward the Phon'kaven attendees, whose brains still hadn't fully caught up to the shocking reality put on display before them.

"Target mark two through three! Two seconds of continuous fire! Guns at the ready!"

"FIIIIIIRRRREEEEE!!"

A cadence of booms several times louder than before brought the targets to their holey demise. Antelise bore witness to what could only be called overkill as her ears rang from the sharp cracks. It was just so one-sided. She couldn't think of many who could defend against such an attack. A High Paladin, and perhaps a Mesial Paladin, might be able to sense they were being targeted in time to evade it. In other words, soldiers inferior to those elites couldn't escape this rain of death brought into existence by the King of Ruin.

Hahaha... Seriously, what the Seven Saints did I just witness? What does Mynoghra intend for us to fight against with these? Antelise barely suppressed the dry laugh bubbling up in the back of her throat at the overwhelming power she'd just seen on display. She also felt excited for the first time in a long time.

What kind of military gains could Phon'kaven achieve if their soldiers were equipped with these weapons? They'd be able to form the most elite troops on the Dark Continent, save for Mynoghra's own forces. Of course, they'd have to put countermeasures in place to prevent the weapons from getting into enemy hands, but at least they would no longer have to worry about rogues trashing

their towns or Barbarian invasions.

If I'd had one of these weapons, I could've turned those so-called merchants into blood splatter before they'd wreaked so much havoc on my town, Antelise thought. This is like a powerful drug. The change it'll bring is too tempting!!

“With that, ladies and gentlemen, we bring our demonstration of Mynoghra’s latest pride and joy—the gun—to a close,” Elder Moltar said with a bow.

Silence reigned as everyone from Phon’kaven failed to react to the excessive, inconceivable power and Mynoghra gave them time to process it. However, there was one person who seemed to be looking around curiously. That person was Mynoghra’s king, Takuto Ira. He almost seemed disappointed they weren’t all gasping in surprise.

It wasn’t that they weren’t surprised—their brains were frozen in shock.

Then again, an ordinary Elf couldn’t possibly be capable of correctly guessing what the King of Ruin was thinking. Thus, Antelise pretended not to notice his curious glances and instead concentrated on trying to wrap her mind around the impossible. Her efforts to instinctively avoid engaging the king were dashed by his voice clearly resounding through the silence.

“I was hoping for it to have a little more impact,” he said out of the blue.
“Caria, Maria, you’re up.”

“Okey-dokey!”

“Cary’s on it!”

Surprised whispers rose from the rest of Mynoghra’s delegation, implying what was about to happen next wasn’t on the agenda. Only the king’s confidant and the two girls he called on seemed to know exactly what was about to happen.

“All good here!”

“We’re ready to go.”

Antelise was at an utter and total loss for words. The twins she considered friends answered their king with cheerful voices as they brought out two giant contraptions that didn’t look like something young girls should or would be

lugging around.

No way... Could that also be one of their so-called guns?!

This weapon had a completely different design from the ones used by the Warriors. It looked twice as long as the other guns and had a far more complicated build that clearly wasn't meant to be carried around.

What in the world happened to the girls that they can carry something that looks so heavy around like it's as light as a doll? Actually, maybe I need to change the way I look at them? Our last encounter more than proved that they are bona fide citizens of Mynoghra.

While Antelise's surprise was merited, there was something even more deserving of her attention right now.

In general, size directly correlates to how much strength something has.

In El-Nah, some Elemental Champions use massive longbows for greater range and penetration.

Going off that one example, just how much power and range was packed into the giant weapons each girl was wielding?

"Show them how amazing a gun can be."

"FIRE!!"

The air crackled and the ground exploded. The house behind the totally annihilated target blew into pieces with what sounded a lot like a giant wasp zooming by. Small cylinder-like objects sprayed from the gigantic gun, and from the tip of the shining staff, countless *arrows* rushed toward the target with unfathomable speed and destructive intent.

Phon'kaven's sturdy buildings were constructed from wood and clay. The hardened clay walls weren't easily destroyed and were highly resistant to flaming arrows and the like. One such building had just been smashed to pieces as easily as kicking over a sandcastle.

It was only now that Antelise understood why they'd insisted this new weapon be tested in the outskirts because it was so destructive it'd stand out no matter what...

The townscape had completely changed before her eyes in a matter of a few seconds.

Suddenly remembering the painful ringing in her ears, Antelise sluggishly covered them with her hands and continued to stare, speechless.

“I regret to inform you this particular weapon will not be included with the items we will be providing you. We hope you take this demonstration of the overwhelming military power we have at our disposal as a sign of our intentions to have continued friendly relations with your nation,” Elder Moltar said, nervously trying to smooth over his king’s unexpected addition.

“So, what do you think?”

The King of Ruin’s pleased voice rang through the devastated square.

Even Pepe could only gape at what he saw.



“NOTHING...remains...”

Around the time Mynoghra’s delegation returned to Town Hall to continue the negotiations, Antelise was giving orders to several of her staff to clean up the town square that was no longer boxed in by dilapidated buildings.

“Do you have a minute, Antelise?”

“Yes, Lady Tonukapoli...?” Antelise turned around to see Scimitar-horned Tonukapoli behind her. Antelise probably wasn’t just imagining the heavy exhaustion on the older woman’s face. She had no doubt her own face looked ragged with stress.

“I know you requested a long-term leave, but...I have to ask you to postpone your plans indefinitely.”

“Haha...ahaha...” Antelise laughed dryly. “All right...”

Antelise felt like a fool for worrying she wouldn’t have a job after the town was ceded to Mynoghra. Phon’kaven lacked talented officials. From the look of things, she was going to be slaving away as a workhorse for a while yet.

Did I pick the wrong career path? Antelise wondered woefully, though it was

far too late for regrets.



Firearms -Modern / Cheap-

Weapon

<<Weapon Traits>>

Strength +4

Preemptive Strike Chance +40%

Indispensable in modern warfare, this weapon gives Humanoid races tremendous power. Equipping your units with Firearms gives them a Strength bonus and an overwhelming advantage over melee units without ranged attacks. However, the use of Firearms has a cost commensurate to its power, putting constant pressure on military spending.

Chapter 10: Treaty

THE following terms were agreed upon between Mynoghra and Phon'kaven:

1. Phon'kaven will cede the town of Dragontan to Mynoghra.
 - Mynoghra will accept any townspeople who want to become naturalized citizens.
2. Mynoghra will provide firearms, ammunition, and the necessary equipment and tactics associated with them free of charge to Phon'kaven.
 - This clause will change to providing the weapons at a cost once Phon'kaven's military meets a strength threshold determined in another document.
3. Roads will be built connecting Mynoghra to Phon'kaven to strengthen trade and defense between the two nations.
4. Dragontan's Dragon Vein Mine will be jointly managed by the two nations and operated as determined in another document.
5. Both nations acknowledge they will continue to work together against global threats.

The specifics would be decided and put into writing by the civil officials, but that more or less covered the main points of the treaty.

Thus, on this day, the town of Dragontan became a part of Mynoghra.

But that was easier said than done.

This was only the beginning of a long process, considering how much work was involved in transferring territory from one empire to another.



TAKUTO summoned his right-hand woman to Mynoghra's Palace for a private meeting to discuss future policies.

Only a handful of people knew that Takuto and Mynoghra were originally

from the 4x strategy game *Eternal Nations*. Isla used to be one of them, but now it was just Takuto and Atou who understood Mynoghra originated from a video game and ran by its rules. Thus, it was only a matter of course that they needed to meet in private, away from the Dark Elves, to examine their situation with the game mechanics in mind.

“Even in the game, it took a few turns for a ceded or conquered territory to change affiliations. We probably shouldn’t expect an instant turnover,” Takuto remarked.

The results of the negotiation tied them to Phon’kaven more than they liked, but it was within acceptable limits to strengthen their alliance.

However, they bled what mattered more than gold in the process—precious time.

Just because Dragontan belonged to them on paper didn’t mean that it’d be theirs the second the ink dried—cutting through all the red tape to make the transfer stick was eating a lot of their time.

“That’s true,” Atou nodded. “At least it shouldn’t take as much time to restore the bare minimum governing systems and operate it as a Mynoghra territory thanks to the peaceful transfer.”

“Yeah. Easiest town get ever,” Takuto responded with a grin. “Everyone who matters in Phon’kaven seemed happy with the trade, so we basically caught a lucky break with this one.”

“Just one additional territory opens up a lot of new things we can do, too!” Atou exclaimed.

In *Eternal Nations*, there are two ways to acquire towns. The first method is to send out colonizers to an unoccupied territory and create the town from scratch. The second method is to obtain an already existing town from another empire by cession or subjugation. Both methods take time and money, but the peaceful transfer of territories is the most cost and time efficient method in the long run.

A satisfied smile spread across Takuto’s face at this unexpected gain. “Things are going to get busy,” he said, switching gears to the less exciting aspects of

this new development. “We don’t know when hostile forces will show up again. We’ve got to keep our domestic affairs flowing smoothly, strengthen our military, bolster our national power, maintain our alliance with Phon’kaven... and the list goes on. Busy doesn’t even begin to describe how hectic things are gonna get.”

“But we’ve finally reached true empire management,” Atou pointed out.

Yes, this was where the game really started to take off.

Empire management was one of the main things that made people crazy addicted to *Eternal Nations*.

Some of that appeal was present when Takuto built up Mynoghra’s capital with the Dark Elves in the Accursed Lands, but their settlement size had nothing on the joys of managing a town or city. Dragontan’s current population was estimated to be around 3,000. The number had shrunk significantly, with people using the Barbarian invasion and the cession of the town as an excuse to leave, but Dragontan had plenty of potential to grow. Takuto would have a lot more things to manage and execute now.

That said, the danger and greater threat to Mynoghra was still ever-present. Now wasn’t the time to be overly optimistic, but Takuto was still excited about entering his favorite phase in the game.

“We sure have,” he said. “Okay, why don’t we consider what forces to send to Dragontan first? Let’s take care of their Food here at the capital and have the townspeople focus their efforts on restoring the town.”

Mynoghra’s military forces could be replenished with Emergency Production at the drop of a hat. Mynoghra could only produce basic units at this point, but with enough of them, Dragontan would become a strong town with a great defensive front. They also needed to expand Dragontan’s already existing troops. Takuto was going to train the naturalized townspeople who served in the town’s Defense Force to make them a force to be reckoned with.

“We’re loaded thanks to the morons from a certain RPG dying for us,” Takuto laughed dryly. “All right, let’s move things along at a fast pace.”

There’s a mountain of things to do.

Takuto concentrated all his efforts on bolstering national power, as if pushed in that direction by some invisible force.



MEANWHILE, the town of Dragontan was at the height of confusion and chaos. The decision to cede the town was made in haste, and the townspeople didn't even have time to process what was happening. They were only informed about the change by a sign in the middle of town. Asking the people in charge of their district didn't amount to any kind of informative answer, either.

Still, whether we like it or not, the world moves at a rapid pace around us.

Change wouldn't wait for them just because they whined about it, so the townspeople were forced to respond to the upheaval in their lives after it'd already happened.

"Mama...I'm scared..."

"I-It'll be all right, sweetie. I-I'm positive our new king has good intentions for us."

The same applied to the Beastmen mother and daughter who barely scraped by in an impoverished corner of Dragontan's residential district. They were easily identified as Catkin from their fluffy triangular cat ears and tails. The father had fled during the Barbarian Invasion. They'd managed to survive until this day off their meager savings and handouts from neighbors. Families with similar circumstances could be found throughout Dragontan.

The district commissioner had told the mother that Dragontan had been transferred from Phon'kaven to the empire of Mynoghra. Naturally, as residents of Dragontan, mother and daughter would also automatically become citizens of Mynoghra. Anyone opposed to the change was allowed to move to another town belonging to Phon'kaven, but the mother and daughter duo didn't have the resources to even consider it. The only option available to them was to go along with the change like a person pulled out to sea by an unforgiving current.

Today was the day the district commissioner told them they would receive food rations. Apparently, their new country would provide food to impoverished residents like them. Their kitchen stockpile had long since been

emptied. The mother and daughter, who'd given up on life, thinking all that was left for them was to starve to death, frantically suppressed their anxiety and got ready to head out to retrieve their rations.

"Be a good girl and come with mommy to get some food, okay?"

"O-Okay..."

The biggest rumor in town was that Mynoghra was an *evil* empire. Word had it that their people bristled with hatred and anger toward all that was good and spared no mercy for those who defied them. Those rumors, which originated from a soldier who actually saw Mynoghra's king at the talks between the two countries, quickly spread among the townspeople, striking terror in them.

What will become of us? the mother wondered. Until now, they were able to live reasonably decent lives despite being poor, but there was no guarantee even that much would be allowed under their new rulers. Given the rumors, it wasn't hard to imagine they might end up as sacrifices in some sort of unholy ritual.

The mother didn't want to think Phon'kaven had sold them, but it was hard to have much faith in her former rulers when they'd failed to properly respond to the Barbarian Invasion. She couldn't shake her doubts and fears. But there was no one they could turn to for aid, anyway.

The mother held her daughter's trembling little hand and opened the door leading outside for the first time in days. All the while praying to the Ancient Spirits: *Please, just grant us the bare minimum necessary to survive...*

"GYGYGYEEEEEEEE!"

A gigantic insect zoomed past the mother and daughter just as they set foot outside. Surprise hit them before fear. The giant creature, unlike anything they'd seen before, kept on running without even giving them a passing glance.

As the pair patted down their hair, tousled by the sheer speed of the creature, they finally realized they'd witnessed something supernatural. Yet they felt no fear. The insect in question was already long out of sight. Just the sound of its bizarre chittering let them know it was still somewhere in the vicinity.

"M-Mama, Mama! A big bug! A big bug just...!"

“I-It certainly was a big bug, wasn’t it?”

Offering her excited daughter a faltering smile, the mother led her in the direction the mysterious insect came from.

Rumor had it that various evil monsters served Mynoghra. That insect must’ve been one such monster. It seemed to be patrolling the town, as they saw it whizz past them several more times after that. The bug ran so ridiculously fast, it looked more like a blur than anything, but the two figured they didn’t have to worry about it since it wasn’t bothering them.

Mother and daughter were experiencing what it was like to be a part of Mynoghra. They felt more baffled than afraid, and soon surprise would be the strongest emotion they’d experience. They ran into the source of that surprise the second they exited the alleyway onto the main street.

“F-Feels like a different town, doesn’t it...?” the mother said.

“It does! It does!” the daughter cheered.

The town was alive and bustling like never before. Piles of what could only be relief supplies and more raw building materials than should be possible to obtain in the barren Dark Continent filled the street. It appeared all the materials were for rebuilding the town, and all of Dragontan’s former residents were working feverishly to get the job done.

Dark Elf officials were telling the townspeople where to carry supplies and what to do with them. Their foreign attire and overwhelming energy made it easy to tell they were from Mynoghra.

Mother and daughter were used to the streets of Dragontan being stifling and deserted, especially with the recent Barbarian issues. Where did that feeling go? They weren’t even part of the hustle and bustle, but they found their enthusiasm growing just watching everyone acting like they were getting ready to put on a big festival. Something strange crossed in front of them as they were reveling in this odd new sense of excitement.

“HEEEY! Where should we put this Flesh Tree sapling?!” one Dark Elf asked.

“Whoops... Where was that supposed to go?” another Dark Elf responded and suddenly started to converse with someone who wasn’t there. “Oh, right! Yes,

Your Majesty! At once! I'm ever grateful for your direct order, sire!" Then he turned back to the other Dark Elf. "His Majesty says to bring it to the empty lot across the way! It seems the Beastmen workers are leveling the ground there."

"Hold on, did you just receive direct orders from His Majesty? Spirits on rocks! I'm so jealous of you, man!"

"Hahaha! His Majesty is always watching over us! C'mon, let's get a move on!"

On top of the wooden cart pulled by the Dark Elves was a man-sized tree. It was different from any tree the mother and daughter had ever seen. Its limbs twisted and curled as if defying the laws of nature, and for some reason, it even had hollows in its trunk that could eerily be mistaken for eyes and a mouth. Freakish fruit that looked unfit—or rather, heretical—for mortal consumption hung from its branches.

"Mama! Mama! Look at the funny tree! It's a tree...right?"

"Um, good question, sweetie. I feel like we shouldn't look directly at its fruit, but...I'm pretty sure it is a tree?"

They called it a Flesh Tree. I definitely heard them say it's a Flesh Tree... the mother thought.

The most disturbing part was that the tree seemed to be dexterously swaying its branches to wave to her daughter. Seeing that, her daughter excitedly waved back, but did she even know what she was responding to? Dancing and singing trees existed only in stories. They didn't suddenly break into a jig or walk around in reality. Then again...maybe the mother was the one who was wrong here since the tree was literally waving to her child as she watched.

She put a hand to her aching head as she led her daughter, who was still giddily waving to the mysterious tree as it was rolled down the road, toward their destination.

"Okay, I think this is the place, sweetie."

"Wow! There's so many peoples, Mama!"

"There sure are. Hold on tight to Mama's hand and don't get lost."

They finally made it to the town square. This used to be where various wartime supplies, such as swords and arrows, were left out for the fight against the Barbarians, but now it was where Mynoghra distributed food supplies and gave instructions to the townspeople.

The guidepost at the entrance to the square had images and words drawn on it that even the uneducated working class could understand. After confirming what they should do with one of the nearby Dark Elves on guard duty, they got in line to receive their rations.

As the mother looked at the long line ahead of her, she marveled at how obediently the townspeople were waiting. Phon'kaven was a multiracial empire, so naturally the townspeople naturalized into Mynoghra were also diverse in race, culture, customs, and temperament. The mother couldn't help but find it strange to see people who normally never listened to anyone being awfully compliant.

"Line up for rations over here! Come one and all, precious inhabitants of Dragontan! Citizens of our MIGHTY KING! EAT TO YOUR HEART'S CONTENT AND INCREASE YOUR LOYALTY TO THE GREAT KING OF RUIN, TAKUTO IRA! WAHAHAHAHA!"

"Mama, who's that birdie?"

"One of our new country's soldiers, I'm sure. Be sure to greet them properly."

"Okaaay!"

The person she assumed was a soldier working at the ration distribution center was dressed in bizarre attire. His entire body was wrapped in a black robe, and he wore a mask shaped like a bird's face. The soldier, whose hands were hidden inside gloves to avoid exposing any skin, distributed supplies to the townspeople in a jovial voice that belied his spooky appearance.

Maybe something inhuman is slithering underneath all those clothes? Mind reeling with such surreal thoughts, the mother patiently awaited her turn.

Funnily enough, the soldier was indeed a monster just like the mother had thought—he was one of Mynoghra's Brain Eaters. Obviously, the mother and daughter had no way of knowing that, and the daughter cheerfully greeted him

when their turn finally came.

“Good morning, mister! I’m Toto! I’m this many years old,” she said, holding up four fingers. “Who are you?”

“Well, good morning to you, polite little miss! I’m the Brain Eater, Shigeru! I’m a newborn zero-year-old!!” the soldier said, making a circle with his gloved fingers.

His perky demeanor melted the daughter’s heart and made her look past his strange appearance. Taken by him, Toto broke into a toothy grin and jumped with joy.

“We have lots and LOTS of rations to give to good little children!” Shigeru exclaimed. “His Majesty lavishes rewards on all exemplary and loyal citizens!”

“Ehehe, zanks!”

“Thank you very much, sir.” The mother accepted the ration bag in her daughter’s stead and politely bowed to the soldier. Then she glanced behind her to confirm the line wasn’t too long before making up her mind to ask the question gnawing at her. “Excuse me...but I would like to consult you about something. I’m a single mother, and I can’t find a job that’s willing to hire a woman with a young child, so I was wondering if you could help me...”

Mynoghra was currently distributing necessary supplies to everyone, but that wouldn’t continue forever. If the mother didn’t find a job soon, they wouldn’t survive after the handouts ceased. She considered leaving her daughter alone at home while she worked, but that’d be far too dangerous at her age, and so she gave up on the idea. With few soldiers around to keep the peace, young children were often kidnapped and sold.

The mother had asked the soldier about it, hoping he could use his ties to find her a side job she could do at home, but she got an entirely unexpected answer in return.

“I see! My work has nothing to do with that kind of thing, so I haven’t a clue how to help! WAHAHAHA!”

Ah, it’s not just the mask that’s birdlike, but also his brain...

His jovial laughter was rather refreshing, but his answer didn't contain even a shred of what she'd hoped to hear. He was just someone assigned to distribute supplies. Maybe she'd picked the wrong person to ask. She'd hoped he could introduce her to someone who could help.

Someone stepped in and offered a helping hand before the mother could press the issue.

"You needn't worry about that."

"Oh? Who are you?" the mother asked.

"I guess you could say I'm these birdbrains' boss," said the Dark Elf girl who showed up just in time. She lightly bowed her head in greeting. "I'm Caria."

If she's their boss, does that mean she's a commanding officer? the mother wondered. She couldn't conceal her surprise at this girl having such a high rank when she clearly wasn't much older than her own daughter.

Whether or not she was aware of the mother's thoughts, Caria proceeded to explain things professionally to the woman.

"His Majesty has given orders to preferentially distribute rations to single-mother families, families with sick people, and families with no able-body workers. Taxes will also be exempt until Dragontan is fully rebuilt. After that, we plan to establish exemption and welfare systems depending on citizen needs."

"I'm sorry, but what exactly does all that mean...?"

The mother was confused by all the complicated words. She never received an education since Phon'kaven had no school system or requirements for its people to learn. She desperately tried to understand the complex terms and systems the much younger girl spoke of with ease. Apparently, her confusion showed as Caria nodded with understanding and rephrased her answer.

"It means that His Majesty won't abandon any citizens as long as they put in the effort to survive."

"Oh! That makes sense! Thank you for explaining!"

Now that was something the mother could understand.

Is it normal for the king of an evil empire to be so charitable and benevolent?

she wondered for a brief moment, before her doubts dispersed for some strange reason.

“You have His Majesty King Takuto Ira to thank for everything good that happens,” Caria said emphatically.

“Of course! I’m forever grateful to the great King Takuto Ira for his boundless mercy!”

Everyone had talked about how frightening the empire of Mynoghra was. About how it was full of villainous people who harbored hatred and anger toward all that was good and just and never forgave anyone who defied them. But when the mother interacted with them, she saw how merciful and generous they were.

She was moved to tears. Her relief gave way to gratitude, and loyalty bloomed in response to King Takuto Ira’s benevolence.

We’re being protected and cared for.

All the anxiety about their future weighing on her like a ton of bricks vanished. The mother finally felt like a weight had been taken off her shoulders.

Aaah, what a wonderful country Mynoghra is! I want to be useful to this country even though we’re poor and powerless! Driven by a sense of impatience to be useful, the mother promptly decided to discuss what they could do for their new country as soon as she returned home with her daughter.

It still didn’t feel real that they had become Mynoghra’s citizens. There was much for them to learn, but pride glimmered in both their eyes.

“Stop it! Lemme go, you monster!”

The mother and daughter’s cat ears suddenly picked up on a ruckus. They glanced toward where a large Oxman was being dragged away by another bird-mask soldier.

Did he cause trouble? The mother felt like her optimistic thoughts and hopes for the future had been tainted by the man’s unruly scream, which irked her. As she watched with a frown, her daughter Toto suddenly spoke up.

“Miss Caria! Miss Caria! What’s wrong with him?”

“Good question. Do you know, Mr. Shigeru?”

Shigeru’s neck snapped unnaturally in the direction of the commotion, which he closely assessed.

“Hmm...?” After a moment, he slapped his hands together as if he suddenly remembered the reason. “OOOOOH! If I remember correctly, he’s a ROGUE who was trying to EXTORT rations from INNOCENT citizens! He was planning to make some money on the black market with it. He’s about to be SKINNED alive as PUNISHMENT.”

“There’s your answer, Toto,” Caria said matter-of-factly. “They caught a bad person, so he’s going to get skinned.”

“Wha-?! S-S-Skinned?!”

They received an awfully gruesome answer. The uncanny soldier and his commanding officer acted like that was the most natural thing in the world. They were about as casual about it as two people sitting down for tea.

“Right as rain,” Caria said. “Please watch for yourselves if you have the time.”

“U-Uhhh...”

The mother was torn. Criminals need to be punished, even more so during a crisis. The death penalty wasn’t out of the question for someone who dared extort precious rations from the powerless.

But...death by being skinned alive? That raised an eyebrow. Especially being invited to watch it happen. Sure, she’d heard about public executions, but not ones that involved skinning.

The mother was struggling to accept the situation when her daughter started tugging on her sleeve.

“Mama! Mama! I wanna watch! I wanna see the bad man get skinned!!”

“Whaaat...?”

Her daughter just said the most outrageous thing. Her eyes sparkled and her whole body trembled with excitement.

What’s so exciting about seeing a criminal get skinned? Here I thought we

could finally live in peace, but now I worry about my daughter's future...

“W-We’ll only watch for a few minutes, okay...?”

“YAY!!”

Dubious nature of the execution aside, everything in life can teach you a lesson. There was plenty for the mother and daughter to learn from watching the criminal die painfully. Besides, the mother couldn’t shake her own budding desire to watch.

I’ve suffered for a long time. I deserve some entertainment, she thought as she bid the Brain Eater and Caria farewell.

“Enjoy!”

“TAKE CARE!!”

The mother headed to the execution site feeling exhilarated as she lightly chided her daughter not to make such a fuss by skipping and waving the whole way.





Brain Eater

Medic Unit

Strength: 3 Move: 1

Grants the following buffs to ally Humanoids:

Strength +50%

Resilience +50%

Town and City Public Order +50%



Description

~HUEMANS! HUEMANS! HUEMANS! OH HOW WE LOVE HUEMANS!~

Brain Eaters serve as the primary Medic units for the evil civilization of Mynoghra. They can stabilize public order in Humanoid towns, and they will crack down on crime and get rid of spies. As a Medic unit, they also improve city-wide sanitation. However, you must use them carefully because their buffs don't work on non-Humanoids, such as Demons, Golems, and Homunculus.

Chapter 11: Rebuilding

ROUGHLY two weeks had passed since Dragontan officially joined Mynoghra. Although there was still some lingering confusion over the change, the town officials were finally starting to get the hang of things, and business was mostly back on track.

Antelise Antik, the town mayor, continued to be the most influential and powerful political figure even after all the changes. After a lot of back and forth, she ended up joining Mynoghra and was appointed to continue serving as mayor.

At first, she was very leery about becoming evil, but her motivation and loyalty skyrocketed when she received direct permission from the king to drink on the job, because that's what evil does. If that wasn't wonderful enough, His Majesty even prepared her a treasure trove worth of Heavenly Nectar. Now she could openly chug high-class liquor during work. She felt invincible and unstoppable now.

Antelise was currently grappling with her endless workload at her much tidier desk.

"Mayor Antik, I brought the documents you asked for. It's the draft of a standard education plan for the townspeople."

"Thanks. Leave it on that pile there, please."

The civil official trainee, who'd entered the mayor's office without knocking on the already open door, left a stack of white paper on Antelise's desk. Antelise stopped what she was doing to briefly flip through those documents, and once she confirmed it wasn't urgent, she tossed them into the bottom rack of the file organizer sitting on the corner of her desk marked "Unprocessed." The trainee sympathized with the drafters of the plan that got immediately put on the back burner.

“Is it okay to toss it aside like that?” he asked, curious.

“Hm? Yeah, this is just a draft on how to best educate the townspeople. Now that we’ve decided to build a Learning Institute, we’re planning to create a system to raise the basic education level of our people. Anyway, it’s nothing I need to tend to right now, so it’s on hold till later. Oh, if you give me a second, I’ll get together some documents I want you to deliver to another department for me,” Antelise said, pulling stacks of paper out of her desk drawers and the filing cabinets behind her. Her office had gone from chaotic mess to organized chaos, so she knew exactly where to find what she was looking for.

The civil trainee was actually one of the guards she’d spoken to on the watchtower and personally selected to work for her at Town Hall. It was an unusual appointment but relatively common in Dragontan right now. Major personnel reorganization was currently underway since the town’s defenses had been completely entrusted to Mynoghra’s creepy crawlies.

What they needed more than anything right now was educated people to keep the government running. For that reason, anyone who could read and write was reappointed to work for Town Hall.

The former guard was one such person whose life was shifted by this major reform. He seemed to dislike this position that required him to use his brain, but working for any government means you have to go along with reassignments, regardless of how crazy and high-handed they are. This was why his Wolfman partner remained a guard to this day because he’d failed the test given for reassignment. It was hard to say who was the luckier one.

The Human former guard was in for a massive salary increase, but he had to learn and remember a lot for his new position. He partially resented his former coworker for escaping this job that required him to put his half-dormant, barely used brain to work twenty-four-seven.

Pushing back the trivial dissatisfaction in his heart with his loyalty to his new empire, the guard-turned-civil-trainee was doing his best to help with the reforms that Mynoghra was strongly promoting. However, since this new post involved work of an entirely different nature from his former job, every day consisted of failure, confusion, and fumbling to grasp what he needed to do.

Even now, he couldn't fathom the degree of priority and importance belonging to the draft Antelise had put on hold, and he scrunched up his face trying to figure it out.

"So...that's a draft on how to raise the basic education level? From what I gathered, it's a proposal covering the various things to be taught to commoners, too, right? I thought only nobility and the powerful get taught stuff...?"

"Even commoners need a basic education. It looks terrible and is inefficient if the king's people can't read. Make sure to get yourself enough knowledge, so you don't ruin His Majesty's image either, all right?"

"I-I'll try not to..."

The trainee couldn't really argue against that, but something about it still didn't sit well with him.

Antelise watched the man's expression waver with his desire to be loyal to the king's decree and his dislike of studying. Her mind filled with thoughts about how things were rapidly changing for their town.

Basic education will be required for almost any job in the future. It's hard to even obtain the skills for an occupation without the ability to read and write.

Anyone working in the town government knew Mynoghra was investing a lot to rebuild and prop up Dragontan. Their wide range of recovery measures used a lot of money, human resources, and materials. Some of those measures made a lot of sense, but what really took the government officials by surprise was Mynoghra's strong push to educate the townspeople, even if it took time. Their efforts extended to the commoner class, considered not worth educating before now, and many people adverse to change were grumbling about it.

Increasing basic knowledge across a whole population tends to lead to the acquisition of new concepts and breakthroughs. This push showed how much importance Mynoghra placed on researching new technologies and, at the same time, proved they were wealthy and powerful enough to devote national power to education.

With what she knew of the size and scale of Mynoghra as an empire, Antelise

thought it was a bit reckless to carry out such a drastic measure. What made that recklessness plausible?

The answer lay with but one person—the great King of Ruin, Takuto Ira.

Everything was only possible due to the profound wisdom and power of their new leader and king.

I mean, after being taught a ton of stuff from Mynoghra, I've really come to see the importance of education. It makes a lot of sense why His Majesty pushes to educate the masses when you realize how inferior Phon'kaven's technology is compared to the countries up north.

The harsh environment of the Dark Continent was the main reason Phon'kaven lagged so far behind the countries on the Lawful Continent. The barren land made it difficult to grow crops, and savage Barbarians ran so rampant that they constantly threatened life and property. Making your home on this continent meant living side by side with danger and little reward.

Educating the masses costs money, time, and manpower.

Even children were considered a valuable source of labor within Phon'kaven. Once a child could speak, they were expected to help with their parents' work, and the apprentice-like guidance they received in that endeavor created the next generation of craftsmen and workers. With that system in place, most citizens considered receiving an education an indulgence permitted only to the rich and privileged classes. The harsh reality was that just struggling to survive was the most the majority of people could strive toward in this barren land.

However, that reality was completely upended the moment Dragontan came under Mynoghra's rule and reaped the benevolent rewards bestowed upon them by the King of Ruin. In a sense, Dragontan's inhabitants could be said to be living civilized lives for the first time.

As wonderful as that sounded, the townspeople were still put through a series of shocking changes at an alarming rate. One corner of the town could look completely different from one day to the next, and the familiar day-to-day procedures for work and daily life changed just as quickly.

Dragontan was undergoing such drastic reforms it was basically being rebuilt

from the ground up.

“Maybe it’s just me, but everything’s changing and moving ahead at such a rapid pace, I’m having a hard time keeping up with it,” the civil trainee groaned.

“We can move things along quickly because we’re getting a near-infinite supply of Food and Materials from Mynoghra’s capital. Not to mention we’re being protected from trouble inside and out by the Riflemen troops wielding those outrageously overpowered guns,” Antelise said, partially agreeing with the trainee. Her thoughts went to the Riflemen squad, who played a big part in making the policy reforms go through rapidly.

The town’s Riflemen, selected from the elite of the elite among their ranks, had already completed the minimum required training and were working toward exterminating the Barbarians in the area while also doubling as patrolling security. They were extremely effective at their jobs and had put a complete stop to the farmland being destroyed by invading Barbarians. If that wasn’t incredible enough, they were on course to completely eradicating all the Barbarian dens surrounding Dragontan.

At this rate, they’d eventually be able to set up large-scale agricultural settlements outside of Dragontan too. Although it goes without saying that restructuring Dragontan and getting it back up and functioning as a proper town came first.

Antelise put sticky notes on the documents that had already been settled by the department in charge. As she worked, she suddenly remembered the important task she’d assigned the trainee the other day.

“By the way, how goes the intelligence gathering on other countries?” she asked.

Dragontan hadn’t closed its borders despite going through a chaotic upheaval. Trade with Phon’kaven was still going strong, and they continued to do business with peddlers from the Lawful Continent.

Information is often worth more than money.

Even though Antelise’s office was understaffed, she redirected some of her budget and staff to gather information on other countries. Of course, this was

on direct orders from Mynoghra and, by extension, King Takuto. Contrary to the casual manner in which she asked her question, she was actually on pins and needles, worried that doing anything less than perfect might incur her new king's wrath.

"So far, we've just been collecting intel on rumors and the state of things in their cities, but it's been going pretty smooth," the trainee responded.

"Huh. That's surprising. I thought you'd have a harder time of it. Is your primary source of information the peddlers and mercenaries?"

"Precisely. Those types will go the extra mile when money's involved. And their prices are absurdly higher than usual. They're completely taking advantage of the situation, that's for sure."

"Mynoghra is backing us in every way, but there are some things we'll have to learn to handle on our own. Fortunately, they've given us plenty of money, so it's my opinion that we pay the higher prices. It'll prime the pump and make them sing like a songbird when we need them to."

Relief spread through Antelise to learn information gathering was going smoother than she'd anticipated. She thought the merchants and mercenaries would stop doing business with them once they were associated with an evil empire, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Dragontan was currently going through a sort of transitional state. The appearance and atmosphere of the town would supposedly grow more ominous as time went on, but for right now, aside from the large-scale reconstruction, it hadn't changed much from before. This in-between state might've been what kept the merchants coming without thinking twice. It was anyone's guess how people from other countries might feel about it in the future, given what Mynoghra was like.

"Got it," the trainee nodded. "Then I'll tell the person in charge to bring the list and cost estimate of the items to be purchased from the merchants later, so please look over it when they do."

In any event, they could collect information and purchase supplies without issue right now, which was critical to Mynoghra and Dragontan.

“Make it a top priority,” Antelise told him. “Still, I can’t believe we’re making lists and cost estimates now... I can’t believe how much these more tedious, smaller-scale tasks have increased.”

“Isn’t having a structure in place a lot less tedious than having to deal with he said, she said blame games?”

“You can say that again. It’s nice to work for a government with thorough checks and balances in place—it seriously cuts down on headache-inducing problems. I’m getting better at signing approval for matters every day, so I can’t complain.”

“Speaking of approvals, I’d like to deliver the ones you’ve already signed to our wonderful staff, who’ve been working around the clock. Can I yet?”

“Yes, yes. Here. Take it with you.”

It seemed like Antelise had taken her idle chatter a little too far. She handed over the papers she’d already prepared to the civil trainee, not minding that he was chiding her for talking too long. She watched as he withdrew from the room before swiping a bottle of ale off the floor under her desk and popping the cork.

“M’kay, time for some good ol’ work. Nothing like downing a bottle of nectar while whiling away the hours with paperwork.”



【Notes on the Dragontan Urban Development Plan and the Cursed Land】

Urban development is proceeding roughly as planned. Unoccupied houses with unknown owners, which have increased due to the exodus of townspeople, are to be collectively requisitioned by the government, and after appropriate repairs are made, they will be provided to residents looking for housing. In addition, dilapidated buildings, such as those in the former slums, should be knocked down.

Buildings should be made sturdier to combat the eventual influence Mynoghra’s Cursed Terrain will have on the land. We are also continuing to construct specific facilities such as Magic Research Institute, Market, and Training Grounds.

As for the Dragon Vein Mine, since it will take time for both Phon'kaven and Mynoghra to inspect and make decisions on how they want to jointly manage it, the area is to be classified as a restricted zone.

【Food Production Plan】

Dragontan's food production capacity is extremely poor in terms of supplying the town's needs, and many residents have nutritional and developmental problems. Therefore, the main priority is to provide food with high nutritional value produced by His Majesty. At the same time, we plan to popularize the Flesh Tree fruit and actively seek cooperation in adopting dishes using it at bars and other food joints to help the townspeople become more familiar with this new ingredient.

【Domestic Road Construction and Distribution Network Development Plan for Allied Countries】

A highway will be built connecting Mynoghra's Imperial Capital to the town of Dragontan to facilitate a more manageable distribution of goods. The capital's logistics team will handle developing the territory within the Accursed Lands, which is challenging to navigate due to the dense forest and uneven ground. Dragontan will also dispatch an official to help with planning, but the primary focus for Dragontan is rebuilding the town itself.

At the same time, a distribution route to Crescent Moon, the capital of Phon'kaven, is also set to be developed and maintained.

【Information Gathering】

All taverns, canteens, and inns in the city are under the direct control of Mynoghra and operated as key locations for information gathering. In addition, we will provide specialized training for store owners and employees to nurture personnel who can collect higher-quality information. The primary objective is gathering information on the internal state and changes occurring within potential enemy empires, such as the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and El-Nah Alliance of Elementals. The secondary objective is gathering information on Phon'kaven and the other smaller nations on the Dark Continent.

Information gathering is under the direct control of Mynoghra's capital, and Dragontan is responsible for gathering information as ordered.



A myriad of projects were being carried out in tandem. All the information and directions given by Mynoghra's capital were carefully looked over and processed in order. Almost everything involved new ventures that would reform the way the town was governed; none of these matters could be taken lightly.

In addition to the above four plans, construction plans for recreational facilities and plans to strengthen the city's defense facilities, such as the extension of the outer walls, were also on the agenda. However, those were a lower priority and were currently on hold, along with the establishment of educational institutions.

"I still have an endless workload, but it's a lot easier to handle when I have hope for the future," Antelise remarked to herself.

She felt fortunate to no longer have to worry about what tomorrow would bring. The power displayed by the king of Mynoghra gave the residents of Dragontan an indescribable sense of relief, even a kind of drug-like euphoria.

Is this what it means to become evil? Antelise wondered as she concentrated on getting her work done. She had a lot of busy days ahead of her. Dragontan was still in the process of being fully transferred over. Although it now belonged to Mynoghra on paper and by affiliation, it would take a while yet for it to come completely under their control.

"Uh, let's see, where did that directive go? Ah, there it is."

That day would come in the blink of an eye with how busy they were.

Antelise scanned the most recent directive to come in from the capital.

【Dragontan Cession Completion Ceremony and...】

"...One more month to go, huh? I've gotta work my butt off to ensure everything gets done in time."

Antelise was being rewarded more than enough to be satisfied with her work. She'd make sure she pulled off the tasks assigned to her, even if it shortened her lifespan.

She lovingly stroked the ale bottle gifted to her by the king and chugged its contents. Then she braced herself and pushed forward in her duties, working toward the day she was certain would have vital significance to Mynoghra...and the rest of the world.

Chapter 12: Misgivings

<Accursed Lands, Mynoghra Capitol Building>

CIVIL officials were trained and put to work in the Capitol Building the Dark Elves had constructed to handle the practical processing of policies and domestic affairs, just as Takuto had hoped. While they hadn't nurtured anyone capable of single-handedly managing whole departments like Elder Moltar and Emle, the overall workload proceeded much smoother with more help.

Today several Dark Elf officials got together in the newly expanded council room to settle the matters getting out of control since annexing Dragontan.

"Dragontan's reconstruction projects seem to be moving along smoothly. The Beastmen are strong and follow orders well, so things are actually proceeding faster than planned," said Forlais, one of the Dark Elf officials. He tiredly rubbed the crease between his brows as he checked over the latest report.

Piles of approved plans and various data sheets littered the table in the middle of the room. Boards and maps hung on the walls to organize information, and in the back of the room was a smaller table lined with canned beverages in bright colors called "Energy Drinks" that the king had gifted them.

Anyone with normal sensibilities would want to complain when saddled with an impossible workload, but this didn't even count as suffering to the Dark Elves, who'd survived unspeakable hardships and now served their king with unbridled joy. Although their physical fatigue was evident, they pressed on drafting reports and directives for Dragontan's reconstruction with fire in their eyes.

"It doesn't look like we'll have any issues with rebuilding, but the townspeople's lack of education is far worse than any of us expected," another Dark Elf, Mylirth, commented thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "It won't affect much at this stage, but we should probably run the education plan by Miss Emle."

The tasks assigned to them by Emle, their direct superior, mainly covered all aspects of Dragontan's domestic affairs. Naturally, the bigger policies and priorities were decided by King Takuto. Emle distributed the work to the officials based on his directive. Their superiors would check over all their work in the end, but that didn't mean they could slack off. When they considered how much work Emle was already responsible for, they didn't want to worsen her stress by adding unnecessary, miscellaneous tasks.

"Is it bad enough that we have to make Miss Emle aware of it?" Akith, the civil official in charge of education, asked. "Remember, consulting her means we're asking His Majesty as well."

He wasn't trying to hide the education issue to save his own hide. He simply didn't feel the need to consult the higher-ups about something so low on the priority list. They had a plethora of more urgent matters to prioritize, and it was commonly understood among the members in charge of Dragontan's reconstruction that they needed to settle those projects before tackling education.

But something had come to their attention, giving them cause to readdress the topic.

"I thought the same thing," Mylirth said. "Until the incident the other day when we provisionally provided the farmers with fertilizer per His Majesty's orders."

"Oh, I remember that. It's a part of our plan to revitalize the exhausted soil. Don't tell me they even struggled with that concept...?"

In addition to their orders to rebuild Dragontan, the reconstruction committee was also tasked with trying out various innovations at King Takuto's command. Improving the soil with Heavenly Fertilizer was one of the experiments they were put in charge of. However, large-scale Terrain Enhancements using Mana drawn from the Dragon Vein Mine were considered the primary measure for revitalizing the land, so the fertilizer experiment was more about finding an alternative if their Mana-source dried up and measuring the effects of combining magic and science.

In other words, the fertilizer was also low priority. So low, in fact, it didn't feel

worth reporting on. Of course, writing up reports was important, but if they ran to their superiors over every little thing, what was the point of them being assigned work in the first place? That's why they felt it was necessary to reexamine the situation. They needed to consider the order of priority and handle smaller matters on their own.

"You explained how to use the fertilizer and pesticides before handing it over, right?" Forlais asked. "I thought we chose the simplest one that just needs to be sprinkled occasionally. What's the problem?"

"I thoroughly explained it to them all right. But the next day, an awfully assertive Oxman dumped it all onto the soil. *All* of it. A *year's* worth of fertilizer and pesticide..."

"Wh-Why the Saints would anyone waste something Heavenly bequeathed upon them by His Majesty...?"

"The Oxman said if it's that amazing in bursts, then something even more miraculous should happen using it all in one go..."

Everyone in the room began rubbing their temples.

These Dark Elves originally came from the assassination branch of the Elves. Meaning they'd all been given a basic Elven education, and everyone assigned to civil official positions was clearly a cut above those serving as Warriors when it came to the intelligence necessary for their position. That's why they'd completely miscalculated and overestimated the intelligence of Dragontan's residents.

"Basically, our common sense doesn't apply to them. What we think they can figure out on their own is completely over their heads. Even Elder Moltar is struggling with how to get us on the same page."

"What should we tell His Majesty? He said we shouldn't worry too much because problems and failures are bound to arise, but I'm not sure we can do i —"

"Don't finish that statement. We just have to produce results that overwrite our failures. We can't go against our orders and slow down the whole process."

Unexpected problems always show up unannounced and at a whim, without

giving a jot about your circumstances.

The Dark Elves were incredibly capable. With their loyalty to king and country, and their abilities honed from their time in the Assassination Brotherhood, rebuilding the town should've been a walk in the park for them.

But nothing ever goes as well in reality as it sounds on paper.

This problem alone required them to waste time writing up a report and reorganize their stock to make up for the instant loss of a year's worth of pesticides and fertilizer. They would also have to thoroughly question the farmer in question and walk him through what he did wrong.

Dealing with problems and putting countermeasures in place will greatly impact how things are done in the future, so such matters can never be neglected or postponed.

If they procrastinated on solving the issue and it reoccurred, then they really would have to present the king with their head on a platter.

"His Majesty has high expectations for us. We shouldn't let him down."

The Dark Elves devoted everything they had to their assignments.

Takuto also rubbed his temples when he finally read the report given on the fertilizer incident. And then he personally praised the officials in charge of the issue.

<Accursed Lands, Mynoghra Palace>

AROUND the same time the Dark Elf Dragontan Reconstruction Officials were racking their brains over how to solve the various problems coming their way, their superiors—Emle, Elder Moltar, and Gia—were also busy handling the deluge of information and issues flooding in.

"Time, money, and materials are always in demand and in short supply. I knew rebuilding and managing a town required a lot, but it's worse in reality than in theory," Elder Moltar grumbled to himself as he scanned the stacks of reports from his subordinates.

Since he was in charge of the Ministry of Magic and supporting the other ministries during emergencies, he wasn't directly involved in Dragontan's

governance, but just lightly reading through the reports reminded him how hard it was to govern a single town.

“I guess that’s to be expected when we’ve pushed things through, even if it takes a little force. We’ve even had to push some of the work onto little Caria and Maria...” Emle laughed dryly as she recalled the Elfuur Sisters sitting at their desks, slogging through paperwork with dazed eyes.

Even if they were overwhelmed with the unfamiliar work, they couldn’t throw a fit and stop. Every Mynoghra citizen knew what happened when you stopped moving forward and gave in to weakness.

“We should be taking things a little slower, but time’s not on our side with the world the way it is,” Gia opined.

Impending danger was nipping at their heels. It was waiting for the opportune moment to target their loved ones and threaten their peaceful lives. They didn’t know when that danger would finally be at their door. They did their best not to regret today in preparation for what may very well come for their heads tomorrow. They were all driven by the same motivation, even if they didn’t speak of it.

“All right, that about covers it for Dragontan’s domestic affairs. Our excellently trained civil officials are handling things well on that front,” Elder Moltar said, putting an end to the discussion on Dragontan and turning to Gia to bring up another topic. “Now then, Gia, what news do you have on El-Nah?”

As members of Mynoghra’s empire-management council, they were responsible for resolving the more imperative problems that couldn’t be assigned to anyone else. The primary problems they tackled were all military-related, such as investigating the strange phenomenon happening worldwide and surveilling other empires.

The Holy Kingdom of Qualia and the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals were the two lawful good empires Mynoghra identified as hostile. Other threats existed, such as *Brave Questers’* Demon Lord Army and the Northern Witch, but considering the huge territories and military behind those two empires, they couldn’t discount their ever-present threat. El-Nah, in particular, concerned the Dark Elves, who were already on hostile terms with the Elves, and they found it

eerily strange that they had gone silent in recent days.

They would be happy if their misgivings were proven wrong, but if there was *something* behind the sudden lack of activity from their archnemesis, then...

Unfortunately, the answer they received from Gia, who'd been investigating El-Nah using the intricate investigation network he'd built during his time as an assassin, was not good.

"There's almost no information coming out of El-Nah anymore," he said grimly. "I suspect there's restrictions in place to prevent information from leaking, but...judging from the limited intel I've been able to gather, there's a high chance they've been invaded by an enemy."

"What?! Are you certain?!" Elder Moltar asked louder than usual, shock coloring both his and Emle's faces.

This was the definition of earth-shattering information. They were thunderstruck.

They already had their hands full worrying about the threats posed by the Witch Disturbance happening in Qualia and more forces like the *Brave Questers'* Demon Lord Army showing up. Yet another anomaly taking place came as a surprise to them. No, this wasn't just an anomaly, it was a new world threat. It wasn't that a new threat to Mynoghra had just appeared out of nowhere; rather, they only now identified something that already existed as one.

It suddenly made sense why everyone in Mynoghra, including King Takuto, was so on edge and obsessively preparing to fight the next threat.

Elder Moltar and Emle both flayed Gia with their gaze, urging him to continue. He wordlessly nodded, glanced over the documents in front of him, and looked back up at them.

"It's just conjecture, but I think it's extremely likely. My reasoning is based mostly on information from a source I can't share with you, but that doesn't disqualify its legitimacy. Most of what I gathered was just bits and pieces here and there, but once you start piecing together the bigger picture, it reeks of something more. There are signs of El-Nah substantially strengthening security on the border with Qualia, and the price of goods has skyrocketed. The various

clan chiefs have also started imposing emergency taxes in the background too.”

Based on just those tidbits, the first thought would be they were planning to invade another country, but the fact Gia didn’t allude to it meant they could eliminate that possibility. The reason he could be so sure had to lie with his classified informant, but neither Elder Moltar nor Emle pushed the point with him. Even if he had an Elven informant, a connection with their archenemy, they had nothing to gain from causing him to lose that source.

They had more urgent issues to discuss. This was now an issue that was beyond them to solve—they needed to involve King Takuto and Atou in the decision process.

As he was sorting out what to do next, Elder Moltar suddenly remembered they hadn’t discussed the situation in Qualia yet.

“That reminds me, what news do you have on Qualia, Emle? The last I heard was that they have their hands full with the Northern Witch Disturbance...”

“I would say they’re in the same situation, wouldn’t you?” Gia interjected before Emle could answer. “Going by what His Majesty and Lady Atou said, the Witch won’t be easily defeated. Well, any *holy* empire is an enemy of ours, so don’t we only stand to benefit if the Witch ends up weakening their forces?”

Gia’s casual dismissal of Qualia belied his earlier display of excellent information gathering and analytical observation. Elder Moltar was still hesitant to hand over his role as clan chief to Gia because he had a way of overlooking potential problems if they didn’t catch his interest. His disappointment over the young Warrior Captain still not growing out of his immature ways instantly morphed into criticism.

“Haa...” Elder Moltar let out the longest, aggrieved sigh. “Jumping to conclusions like that will eventually be the end of you, boy. I can’t believe you still haven’t grown out of such simple-minded thinking.”

“Tch! Then gather information on your own, geezer!”

“Save your arguments for your personal time, gentlemen... We’re too busy for you to squabble,” Emle intervened, putting a stop to their petty fighting.

She was absolutely right—and the two men knew it. They could feel the

disdainful way her drilling gaze seemed to say, “Don’t use our precious time on stupid things. This is why men can never get anything done without a woman’s help...”

Emle had been much harsher and more critical of them lately. They weren’t sure if that was because she’d grown a backbone after everything she’d been through or simply because the never-ending paperwork was shortening her fuse.

“AHEM!” Gia cleared his throat. “So, anyone know what’s really going on with Qualia?”

“A-A fine question, young man,” Elder Moltar sputtered. “It’s our duty as His Majesty’s vassals to do what we can about the matter at hand.”

Most of the time, men can’t stand up to a woman’s astute criticism.

Nervous that the pecking order was about to be decided, both men fumbled to get back on topic.

What mattered here was the state of things in Qualia. They needed to confirm what information they had first and foremost.

They were obviously trying to repair Emle’s mood, but she took their questions seriously rather than rake them over the coals. “As for what’s happening in Qualia...” she hesitated for a moment, “things are a bit *strange*.”

Emle gave an explanation of the situation that was even more troubling than Gia’s report on El-Nah. Qualia had closer trading ties with the Dark Continent’s neutral empires, which made information more available through independent traders. Emle’s report was a summary of the information collected by Dragontan. Her complexion was rather pale, not because there was a particularly concerning problem, but more because the whole thing was confusing.

After she was done giving her report, they launched into an hour-long discussion covering speculations and concerns they had identified from the available information.

“...All right, let’s go directly report the main points of concern to His Majesty. Change is afoot.”

By the end of the meeting, all three Dark Elves had tense looks on their faces.

While Mynoghra was undergoing major changes, other empires were also at the mercy of the great swell of fate.



“THIS isn’t...a good sign,” Atou said in an ominous tone after looking through the information the empire-management council had presented.

“I agree. Things are definitely taking a turn for the worse in Qualia and El-Nah,” Takuto said, nodding in agreement with the Hero he trusted more than anyone in this world and the last. “Qualia’s especially suspicious since all information on the Witch has dried up despite her being their sole focus right now. Based off of what we saw of *Brave Questers’* Demon Lord Army, I can’t imagine any Witch going down that easy.”

They were privately discussing the current state of things in the two lawful good empires they had their eyes on.

The information they had obtained from the Paladins during their first encounter with the Holy Kingdom of Qualia revealed that Qualia’s main territory was being invaded by an enigmatic being known as Slurping Witch Erakino. Takuto had naturally never forgotten that critical bit of information and had filed it away as a potential threat to Mynoghra worthy of investigation.

But he couldn’t deny that he’d postponed looking into the matter during all the confusion that arose from negotiating with Phon’kaven and going to war with an army from an entirely different game genre. Not to mention, information was harder to come by when the territory being invaded was the northernmost tip of Qualia.

But things were changing too drastically and counter to his predictions. The change was so sudden, Takuto didn’t notice it until his subordinates brought it to his attention. They were dangerously behind on gathering intel. At the very least, this situation pointed out a need for drastic improvements in Mynoghra’s domestic and international information-gathering networks.

The report contained information on the missing Witch Erakino and the big reforms happening within Qualia at the time of her disappearance. Reforms

that seemed out of character for the conservative empire.

Qualia's Southern Province was experiencing unprecedented political change.

Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair were the faces of change. Saints wielded untold influence over Qualia. So it was setting off all kinds of alarm bells for Atou and Takuto to learn this stuffy religious country—that always put narrow-minded traditionalism over innovation—had suddenly deviated from its traditional ways.

The lack of information in the report left them wondering what was *actually* happening in Qualia. All they knew was that the people of Qualia's Southern Province supposedly felt hopeful for the new relief policies and regulatory exemptions. If that didn't sound flowery enough, they had purged all the corrupt officials. High political positions were now held only by people supported by the masses instead of purchased by the rich and powerful.

It all sounded too good to be true—someone had to be pulling the strings behind the curtain.

“It's disturbing we can't predict what they will do next,” Atou lamented. “If this were actually the world of *Eternal Nations*, we would've had an idea about what tactics the other empires might employ...”

“Yeah. I didn't realize how much harder it'd be to strategize against entirely unknown forces,” Takuto sighed. “It's seriously difficult to make a move against them when we don't know how they'll retaliate.”

Several empires in *Eternal Nations* were designed to pull off strategies behind the scenes without the other empires noticing they were pulling the strings. Mynoghra was one such empire, but it was much easier to plan countermeasures when you knew the enemy could only be one of a handful of empires. However, that only worked in a game with preset empires known to the players, not in reality full of unknowns.

They didn't know their opponent's objective, making it difficult to predict their next move. Even with their limited knowledge of the situation, Takuto felt strongly that the Saints would've never acted on their own good will to uproot the corruption and massively reform the Southern Province. If they had the motivation to improve things, Qualia would've never stayed in a state of

stagnant corruption all these years...

“Considering our own objectives, we will eventually clash with them,” Atou concluded. “Is the best strategy right now just to bolster our empire as much as possible and gather intel on the enemy?”

“Modern weapons may give us an edge, but we don’t have enough national power or information to go looking for a fight. We should still be focusing on domestic affairs,” Takuto decided.

Either way, their options were severely limited. It was one thing when it was just Qualia dealing with these problems, but now even El-Nah was going through a similar anomaly.

Takuto and Atou then started discussing what they knew about both countries. They had a special relationship that continued from their past lives. Even with all the experience and knowledge they brought with them into this life, they still chose to focus solely on domestic affairs and collecting information rather than foolishly poking a sleeping bear before they were ready.

Mynoghra wasn’t designed to openly wage war. The best strategy to employ when playing this empire was to concentrate on domestic affairs while avoiding attention from other empires, only launching the offensive once everything was prepared on all fronts. They were still at the stage where they should be lying low. Increasing their national power as much as possible was of the highest priority.

“We need to get our hands on both siege and high DPS units before launching any kind of attack. Although, if I’m being honest, I would much rather go into turtle mode...” Atou admitted.

“I’m worried about our defenses still, too. We’ve got the Elfuur Sisters now, but their abilities are unreliable at the best of times. They might do okay on a moonlit night, but their abilities might be a double-edged sword during the day,” Takuto sighed.

Atou and the Elfuur Sisters were the only units Takuto knew he could count on when push came to shove. The Dark Elf Mages and Riflemen were working hard to bolster their forces, but there just weren’t enough of them to make an

impact. And while they had a military alliance with Phon'kaven, they couldn't expect another nation to save them.

With all that in mind, it made sense why Takuto and Atou chose to turtle up and concentrate on building their forces despite knowing they were risking falling behind the other empires.

"But it's dangerous and boring to just sit around waiting for our national power to get where we want it. We need something to break the status quo. Something like...a Hero who can turn the tide against the enemy no matter what," Takuto said, falling into thoughtful silence.

Losing Isla dealt them a crippling blow. If she were still around, Mynoghra's military strength would've ballooned to unrivaled levels. Her defense-focused skills were especially useful against enemies with unique abilities. But there was no point crying over spilled milk, because there was no undoing what had already come to pass.

That's why it was only natural for them to want to rush the summoning of a new Hero to fill the gaping hole Isla's absence left. It's not that there weren't other methods he could employ, but Heroes were so overwhelmingly effective, they overshadowed everything else.

But there was a good reason they didn't immediately summon another Hero right after Isla's death. Hero summoning was directly tied to an empire's technology tree. Many Heroes couldn't be summoned without unlocking specific technologies. Mynoghra might've had fewer restrictions compared to the other empires, but they had laughably little technology researched at this point, which meant—

"There's only one Hero we can summon right now," Takuto said.

—they had extremely limited options for who they could summon.

"P-Please don't tell me it's..." Atou gaped at Takuto. Her eyes pleaded with him to tell her it wasn't true.

"You know it. *He's* the only option."

Atou's face paled with despair. Takuto also looked unhappy with his own suggestion. They both looked displeased despite knowing they could summon

the next Hero if they prepared the Resources. They were obviously reluctant to go through with it.

What was causing such an adverse reaction in them?

“No way! I won’t stand for him! Ever!” Atou shouted, throwing a fit. “Please don’t even think about it! Just stop, King Takuto! That...that monstrosity is just too much!!”

Atou knew what her king had in mind. She threw herself on him faster than the eye could follow and started whining. Takuto couldn’t stop himself from agreeing with her when he knew she got along with him worse than cats and dogs. If that wasn’t troubling enough, this Hero was a BIG troublemaker who made it his life purpose to cause problems.

There was no telling what impact such a Hero would have on the world. If things went south, they’d have to review and redo all their strategies from the ground up.

“I-I’m also unsure about him...” Takuto muttered, quickly regretting his own suggestion. “Maybe it’s a bad idea?”

“Remember, he was ranked first among the Heroes you don’t want to have as subordinates and first as the Hero you wouldn’t want as your superior in *Eternal Nations!*” Atou stressed, trying to reinforce Takuto’s misgivings by reminding him of that Hero’s terrible reputation.

“And he’s also the number one most morally bankrupt Hero,” Takuto continued for her. “You gotta wonder what he’s like in real life. I wonder if he has even an ounce of loyalty in him.”

“Oh, he’s *loyal*. Not only is he loyal, but he also understands what he should and shouldn’t do, and yet he’s the type to go around purposely triggering problems with a big fat grin on his face...” Atou shivered.

“Yeah, that’s the type of guy he is, all right...”

Mynoghra is an evil empire designed with a different set of values from the rest of the world. Said Hero was the biggest example of that, and he could actually be labeled as the Hero who represents Mynoghra the best.

“...Now that I think about it, there’s no advantage to be gained from summoning him right now... Actually, there’s nothing but disadvantages, so I think his presence will actually set us behind instead of getting us ahead,” Takuto laughed dryly.

That particular Hero didn’t just have high stats. If anything, he excelled more at causing problems for other empires, which made him more difficult to use when there was a clear and present threat. Pulling the strings during peacetime was his forte.

“Yes! He’ll do exactly that! So let’s not consider him! We don’t need to summon that swindler! There are many other bett...” Atou paused for a long moment as if she didn’t even believe what she was saying, “*better* Heroes to choose from! There are!”

“You and Isla are Mynoghra’s only Heroes with any sense, after all...”

It went without saying that the rest of Mynoghra’s Heroes were just as problematic as the one they were discussing. The Heroes belonging to evil empires are almost always designed to be missing a few screws, so Atou and Isla were actually the odd ones out for having as much common sense as they did. When it came down to it, Takuto was increasing his chance of getting stomach ulcers from stress with each additional Hero he summoned.

Takuto thought back to the short stories written to expand on *Eternal Nations*’ lore and worldbuilding. Most depicted the Commanders having to go around cleaning up after the messes their Heroes caused. He could honestly say he never once imagined himself in their position. Thinking about it made him even more torn over how to handle the Heroes since it wasn’t like he couldn’t summon them forever—not with the set of abilities they brought to the table with them.

“Yeah, that settles it, let’s hold off on summoning him for now,” Takuto decided. “We should save him for a time when we need someone to do things with sneaky, roundabout, unconventional means rather than brute force... Like if something ever happens to me...”

Atou’s jaw dropped and her eyes spread wide. She never thought he’d mention something happening to him. She couldn’t even imagine such a

scenario.

“I want you to summon him if anything happens to me. That’s an order I’m giving you now for that possible future, Atou,” Takuto commanded. He almost sounded confident something would happen to him someday.

“I will never allow that day to come!!” Atou rushed to deny it. “Your Atou will protect you! No matter what comes our way!”

But Takuto knew there were no guarantees in this world. He didn’t doubt Atou’s loyalty or ability for a second. However, some situations couldn’t be avoided even when two people trusted each other wholly. Of course, he wasn’t trying to panic Atou by mentioning it.

“Hahaha, thanks, Atou,” Takuto said with a laugh, hoping to comfort her a bit. “I feel a little embarrassed being protected by a girl I care about all the time, though. I wish I could show off and protect you in battle sometimes too.”

“You’re an ordinary person, so that’s asking for the impossible... Although, any battle that requires you to fight on the frontlines would mean we’re in a do-or-die crisis...”

“You can say that again,” Takuto nodded several times.

A Commander’s primary duty is to guide their empire and choose its policies—not go out fighting on the frontlines. Many historic tales from Takuto’s past life spoke of leaders who did indeed carve their way through enemy forces themselves, but he had a feeling a lot of those had some fictional elements added in by later generations.

A Commander, Leader, Ruler—however you prefer to call them—should never be fighting on the battlefield.

As a matter of fact, Takuto already prepared several cards he could play should he ever be pulled into direct combat. But that didn’t mean he should go seeking it out.

As Atou said, any situation that required an empire’s Commander to stand on the frontline meant that nation was cornered...or, more accurately, on the brink of defeat. For that reason, Takuto didn’t include himself as a fighting piece on the board, and his strategies worked toward making it so he would never have

to.

But reality never plays out as planned. To this day, he was continually revising his strategies and expectations.

“Anyway, I just want you to remember to summon him if anything happens to me,” Takuto stressed.

“All right, I will. But, just so we’re clear, I don’t believe for a single second that that *swindler* will seriously try to resolve our problems out of loyalty to the empire if you, our Commander, is gone...”

“What a coincidence. I don’t either.” Takuto nodded several times in absolute agreement.

If anything happened to Takuto, that swindler would buckle over with laughter first and foremost. And then, he would set about trying to solve the problem in the most problematic way possible for everyone involved. Takuto was torn between his desire never to summon such a troublemaker and morbid curiosity over what would happen if he did.

“But he’d definitely get the job done,” Takuto chuckled and reassured Atou, whose cheeks were puffed up with uncertainty over his decision.

Then he thought of the Hero they hadn’t summoned yet. For better or worse, he was confident in that Hero’s ability.

“Okay, with that said and done, we should continue building up our strength for the upcoming...ceremony,” Takuto said, pausing before the last word.

The ceremony in question was the Dragontan Cession Completion Ceremony happening a week from today. It was widely announced as a celebratory event, publicly placing Dragontan under Mynoghra’s control. As the paperwork had long since been taken care of, the ceremony was more about the festivities than stifling bureaucracy.

The Dark Elves were putting in every effort toward making the ceremony a success, and even Takuto and Atou were looking forward to the festivities. They still had a mountain of things to do, and the world was rampant with threats to their peace, but surely, they could sit back and relax for just *one* day.

They started discussing the next meeting agenda with that thought in mind.

Unfortunately...that special day would go down in Mynoghra's history...as one of the greatest trials to establishing the bedrock of their empire.



Earth Mana

Map Resource

Gain the Following Every Turn

Earth Mana: 1

※ Earth Mana Effect

- National Food Production +10%
- Unlock Earth Military Magic

Earth Mana is a Strategic Resource that can be obtained by converting the Pure Mana collected from Dragon Vein Mines. An empire's food production is improved simply by having Mana. In addition, Mage units can now use Earth Military Magic, which can improve the terrain through powerful enhancements.

Chapter 13: The Girl Dreams at Last

AROUND the time Mynoghra's empire-management council was having misgivings about the drastic changes happening in the lawful good empires, the Holy Kingdom of Qualia's Southern Province was going through massive reforms just as they feared.

"O Holy Saint! All hail Holy Saint Soalina!"

"Praise be to the divine Saint Soalina!"

St. Amritate Cathedral had regained its former glory as a house of God since Saint Soalina purged it of corrupt clergy and set it as her base of operations. Beautiful hymns and radiant light filled its halls once more. People from all classes and races congregated in front of the cathedral, singing words of praise and gratitude for the Saint.

Today was an ordinary workday, not a holiday. And yet people gathered at the cathedral to extol the Saint who had become the Southern Province's new Commander.

"Phew..."

Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials waved to the people from the cathedral balcony. This wasn't one of her duties, but she felt guilty not responding to them, so she made it part of her daily routine to step out on the balcony and let the people see her for a few minutes every day. She waved and smiled at the ocean of people crowding the plaza below, then withdrew back into the room.

Traces of fatigue loomed on her face. Her fatigue was more mental than physical.

"Looking good out there, Soali! Finally gettin' the hang of things?" someone asked behind a pillar. Out stepped Slurping Witch Erakino. She frivolously chuckled and skipped over to Soalina, acting no different from when she'd dragged Soalina to the Southern Province with her.

Witch Erakino hadn't changed at all since the day they'd met. Her attitude remained shallow and playful, and she gave off a constant dark aura that implied she only looked at things in terms of how they might amuse her.

Saints and Witches are mortal enemies. They're like oil and water—they don't mix. That's the way of the world and the natural order of things. This was one of the world's foundational laws that never changed.

And yet, how did Saint Soalina respond to Witch Erakino when she casually addressed her like an old friend?

"Spirits, you're embarrassing me, Erakino..." she said bashfully, a sheepish smile pulling at her lips, making her look her age for once.

"Nyahaha! The Saint who governs the Southern Province! People's fortunes are skyrocketing, all thanks to the true Leader sent by God! ...Ah, wait, there aren't any rockets here, are there? Let's just say their lives are on the up and up! We're in the go-go years now, girl! Ain't nothing gonna stop us! Everybody's happy-happy!"

"All of this prosperity is thanks to you, Erakino. All because you worked with me to make it happen... This peace was made possible because you gave me the push I needed," Soalina said with a terribly soft smile. She was acting a bit clingy and naïve for her age. But perhaps this was the real her underneath the saintly title.

Saints are subjected to a myriad of ulterior motives and expectations from the rest of the population. Being on the receiving end of so many opinions and feelings, the Saints tend to shutter their hearts and keep people at arm's length. It made sense then, that when they finally did meet someone they could be themselves with, they let a genuine expression or two show through the façade.

"Mwahaha! Right? Right? It's all thanks to your girl Erakino here! And c'mon, why don't you stop being so stuffy with me already? You and I aren't strangers, silly! Besties gotta be frank and open with each other!"

"S-Sorry!" Soalina quickly apologized and tried to be a little less formal. "I just can't seem to get used to speaking so openly... It might not seem like it, but I am trying to be more casual like you asked."

“Seriously?! That’s trying?! Oooh, you’ve got a loooooooooooooooooong ways to go, girl! I just want you to start calling me Eraki, like the besties we are~♪!” Erakino cooed, taking Soalina’s hands in hers.

“I-I can’t do that!”

A harmonious moment passed between them.

Ever since the Slurping Witch and the Game Master, who’d yet to appear, moved to the Southern Province, the relationship between Erakino and Soalina had taken a completely different shape. No one knew what curious course of events led to that outcome. Perhaps even the gods didn’t know what caused it.

Nevertheless, a friendship between the two young women rapidly blossomed while governing the Southern Province until they both considered the other an irreplaceable best friend.

...Erakino’s abilities had nothing to do with their relationship. The truth was, Erakino had already removed the Brainwash effect caused by her Slurp skill. Soalina was voluntarily striving to improve this country together with her captor. The simplest explanation for their friendship was that they had chemistry and were able to hit it off when given the chance.

The whole affair was laughably clichéd. The Witch, who should be evil and malice incarnate, was touched by the Saint, and the Saint, who was supposed to be the embodiment of good and kindness, opened up her frozen heart to the Witch. They grew closer as they turned a blind eye to all the sacrifices and losses that came before their union, and the Happiness of the people living in the Southern Province skyrocketed in direct correlation to their blossoming friendship.

The most twisted, distorted peace took place where they governed—so twisted, not a soul was left unhappy.

But one person watched over the pair of unlikely friends with judgmental eyes.

“I see you have become...fast friends.”

“Saint Fenne...”

Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair suddenly appeared out of thin air. The Saint who always hid her face behind a veil and never showed a sliver of skin shattered the perfect little bubble the pair had formed with her frosty voice. This kind of cynicism wasn't uncommon for the always disgruntled Veiled Saint. She treated everyone this way, and likely wouldn't have a place among the masses with that thorny personality of hers if not for her achievements as a Saint. Thus, her cynical remark on their relationship was perfectly in character for her.

However, it must've struck an uncomfortable chord with Soalina's conscience because she flinched. Erakino twirled in front of her friend, as if to protect her, and returned Fenne's jibe with one laced in her own form of sarcasm.

"OMG! Are you jelly, Veily? You don't have to be so jealous just because Eraki and Soali have become BFFs with awesome nicknames for each other! *BE*sides, I'm busting a nut for our cause. I haven't done anyyyything *evul*, and I'm burning the midnight oil to make the people of this country happy as clams~♪!"

"I'm willing to acknowledge you're putting in the effort for now. People are indeed being saved by your actions. Both Arlos and I want nothing more than for those who deserve saving to find happiness," Fenne responded to Erakino's goading with indifference. Her tone lacked any kind of emotion, making Erakino wonder if the woman behind the veil was really a Saint.

But Fenne was undeniably a Saint. The Game Master, who secretly gave orders to both Fenne and Erakino, knew she had a different objective from the other two.

"Um, I am grateful for your assistance too, Saint Fenne," Soalina said, stiffening up. "Your cooperation has helped eliminate further misfortune from befalling this kingdom."

Fenne responded to her comment with a slight nod. While she obviously had a difficult personality that kept people at arm's length, she kept an extra wall up between herself and the other two girls. Soalina realized as much but didn't think for a second that Fenne was scheming something behind their backs.

Fenne was, by all accounts, cooperative with their reforms and using her powers to get the job done. If nothing else, Soalina could count on the fact that Fenne desired peace like all the other Saints.

God chose the Saints. You couldn't become a Saint if you didn't long for peace and have the heart to serve others.

"I can understand your apprehension, Saint Fenne," Soalina continued. "But please know that Erakino hasn't once broken her word since we formed this partnership. Our Lord, our God, hath said, 'Suspecting others is a testament to the fear that dwells within you...'"

"...So it is said," Fenne responded noncommittally. She probably couldn't accept a Saint and a Witch being friends.

Soalina often dreamed of the day she could become friends with Fenne as well, but the Veiled Saint doused her hopes with cold water. Whether she knew how Soalina felt or not, Fenne redirected the conversation toward their current situation with the same apathy she had started it with.

"Tell me: how have Central and the other provinces reacted so far? Our government might be full of senile dignitaries, but even they would've caught on by now. If you don't do anything to circumvent it, the Mystic Saint will hear about you and take action."

"Central has remained silent," Soalina said. "They have their hands full overseeing restructuring the region devastated by the Northern Witch Disturbance. Meanwhile, the Eastern and Western Provinces are busy hindering the process with demands for the Cardinal in charge to take responsibility and resign."

Qualia was ruled by three Popes who were elected behind closed doors with a complete lack of transparency, and several Cardinals ruled the provinces under them. They competed for power in the Holy Capital of Qualiane, the seat of Qualia's central government.

"I see. Those Central rats all want their own piece of the Northern Province... Even so, it's strange their hungry eyes haven't turned toward the Southern Province with the wave of prosperity that's come from all the reforms you've pulled off so far, Soalina," Fenne said, her tone hinting she knew more.

The Southern Province was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom thanks to the reforms Soalina put in place. Qualia was an affluent country. The climate was mild, crops grew well, and public order was kept by the Order of

Paladins' routine patrols. Resources were abundant, and there were never any major disasters or epidemics, most likely due to Arlos's Divine Protection. Furthermore, all kinds of evil were stopped in their tracks by the Saints' oracles.

That's why it came as no surprise there was a huge economic boom once they started redirecting the corrupt clergymen's cash piles back toward the citizens. Now the people had money for all their daily necessities and even a little extra for recreation and small indulgences. The demand created by the flow of capital into the people's pockets helped finance the marketplace, lowering prices, expanding supply, and increasing demand for items once out of reach.

The people then began donating their time and money to thank God for this new abundance, which helped improve equipment and facilities for the Order of Paladins and clergy. Now that the corrupt members were removed, the remaining Paladins and clergy were nothing but sincere about their religious convictions and more than happy to donate their legitimately earned private wealth to the people.

A land without corruption was a fruitful utopia—ripe for the picking by the greedy. So it made absolutely no sense why the predatory clergy from Central and the other provinces weren't all over the Southern Province like flies on honey.

Soalina held her tongue. She didn't address Fenne's unspoken question: *Why haven't they come to take the Southern Province from you yet?* But Soalina's expression said it all, telling Fenne exactly what she needed to know without words.

"Aha! So that's your answer." Soalina managed to eliminate any interference from Central and the other provinces with less-than-saintly methods. "Hahaha. You silenced them with what they respond to best: bribes," Fenne laughed for the first time.

What was the intent behind her laughter? It didn't take much to guess. She was deriding Soalina with her frosty, scornful laugh.

Corruption plagued Qualia to its core. Those in power used Arlos's name to line their pockets, and they brandished their authority to silence anyone who spoke out against them or just for the fun of it. Their egos expanded like

limitless balloons, their sense of self-importance swelled like waves during a storm, and their obsessions with themselves grew worse by the day. The holy kingdom was crawling with greedy politicians who'd come to view themselves as gods. These plump fat cats even put laws in place, claiming it was by God's decree to ensure no one could ever unseat them.

That was the way of things in Qualia, and it was out of disgust for that crooked system that Soalina took a stand against it. Yes, she *should've* been taking an uncompromising stand against corruption and underhanded methods. And yet, she used those very same unethical means to keep those two-faced politicians in check.

Soalina gnawed her bottom lip. *Why are ideals always so powerless?* The reality Soalina had seen with her own two eyes constantly crushed her ideals and hopes.

"The funds spent on this matter will be returned to God's people in full. We can't have Central getting involved yet! This was the right decision to ensure the future!" Soalina argued, trying to justify her actions in a flurry of words. She felt so frustrated she just had to say something, even though she knew it'd only stoke Fenne's amused derision of her.

"Haha. Calm down. I'm not criticizing your actions, so don't take your guilty conscience out on me. All your shouting is scaring me."

Soalina didn't get the reaction out of Fenne she'd expected. Perhaps the person Soalina was arguing with all along was *herself*. As Fenne said, Soalina was tormented by guilt and what she viewed as being just.

Tears shimmered in Soalina's eyes. She felt the same powerlessness she had back when she used to cry with despair for her lot in life every single day...

"Fenny, I won't stay quiet if you bully Soali a second longer."



Both then and now, it was Erakino who reached out and rescued Soalina from her despair.

“Erakino... You’ve been tamed so well, haven’t you? Am I the third wheel here? That makes me kind of sad. Won’t you be a little kinder to me?”

“If you want to get along with people, you shouldn’t bully them! Besides, aren’t you guilty of doing the same thing, taking out your pent-up feelings on Soalina? You’re barking up the wrong tree, Fenny.”

Erakino’s counterargument got a reaction out of Fenne for the first time. She paused and clenched her fists for a moment, as if realizing Erakino had pointed out a fact she wasn’t aware of herself. Perhaps she also thought she had taken her comments too far because her tone and word choice softened a bit after that.

“...You got me there,” she admitted. “Did you come to that conclusion on your own? Or was it a tip given to you by your beloved Master?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know~?” Erakino replied in that shallow, singsong way of hers. “I’m not telling a bully! Let’s get outta here, Soali!”

“I guess I got on your bad side. I hate to stop your gallant exit, but can you stay a moment longer?” Fenne requested, stopping Erakino from leading Soalina out of the room by the hand.

Erakino scrunched up her face in an annoyed frown as if to say she didn’t feel like sticking around for more useless banter. Soalina grimaced, as if she were afraid Fenne was going to poke her where it hurt again. Fenne stared at their polar opposite expressions through the veil and carefully picked her words to try and get back into their good graces.

“I still have questions for Soalina. Don’t worry, this topic isn’t laced with cynicism. I want to discuss our plans for governing the Southern Province.”

“I’m willing to hear you out if that’s the case. You good with that too, Soali?” Erakino asked, turning to her friend.

“Y-Yeah...”

Erakino and Soalina exchanged looks and then agreed to hear Fenne out.

Fenne was relieved they were mature enough to talk despite the tension in the air. She had come all this way just to ask them about this particular matter. Her cynical remarks and poor taste in teasing were meant more as a prelude to the actual conversation.

Erakino and Soalina took a seat facing Fenne at her insistence. She scrutinized them both as she ran through her list of questions. Her brows furrowed under the veil. Even as she thought it through, it still didn't make sense. The matter she wanted to ask about was a plan Soalina was for and Erakino was against. It was hard to understand their positions, when it should be the reverse.

Ha, I guess it's foolish to even try to apply logic to this situation where good and evil are happily working together... Fenne lightly shook her head, shaking off the various thoughts swirling through her mind.

"Soalina," she began, confronting Soalina head-on about the plan that would surely affect their position in the future, "I want you to tell me your reasons for going ahead with this Decapitate Mynoghra operation of yours..."

Soalina's eyes gleamed as they locked onto Fenne's through the veil, all signs of fear and guilt gone. The air grew tense until Soalina finally spoke in a quiet, controlled voice.

"I received a divine revelation informing me of an omen of cataclysm happening in the Accursed Lands. We have since heard multiple rumors about the empire of Mynoghra emerging from there. It is far too dangerous to leave them unchecked."

"I am equally aware of the importance of divine revelations. But I think you are rushing into this. You're being too hasty, Soalina. What's driving you into being this reckless?"

Fenne also believed Mynoghra was a dangerous empire. This was probably the one matter the Saints and the Order of Paladins all agreed on. But opinions varied on how to deal with the threat.

The Southern Province was in a very precarious situation despite its prosperity and success. It was questionable if there was any good reason to take such a hard stance against Mynoghra when they'd yet to amass an army and still faced a very real threat from Central.

“Have you heard what kind of creature Mynoghra’s king is?” Soalina asked.

“Some information comes from the peddlers who do business with the Southern Province and the relatively close Dark Continent. Most of what we learn comes from street rumors picked up by the Paladins... If I’m not mistaken, the king is a person known as Takuto Ira. And he’s called—”

“The King of Ruin,” Soalina finished.

Intelligence gathering isn’t only done by highly trained spies in secret. Wherever there is an economic exchange, there’s also an exchange between people. The relationships between people span labels such as good and evil, and many become more talkative over drinks after work. Therefore, it’s not unusual for people on the streets to know things the upper class didn’t. The Order of Paladins could follow up on this information by using their sheer numbers to ask peddlers and tavern owners about what’s new.

This straightforward intelligence-gathering method had paid off, making it a known fact in Qualia’s Southern Province that the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira, had established the empire of Mynoghra in the Accursed Lands and had employed a Witch to spread his influence through the surrounding areas.

Yes, they knew for a fact that this new ruler went by the title the King of Ruin, and this name drove Soalina to hasty action.

“I see what this all comes down to: *The Ancient Saints’ Book of Oracles*... You believe what’s written in that moldy tome to be the truth, then?” Fenne guessed.

“We all know God is real, at least,” Soalina responded, not answering the question.

“That much is true. But from what I read of that old tome, it’s a little too poetic and flowery to be taken at face value...”

Now I understand what’s motivating her. Fenne suppressed a sigh.

The Ancient Saints’ Book of Oracles was one of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia’s most important classified artifacts. It was a compilation of recorded universal warnings and advice for the future contained in oracles previous Saints had received directly from the Holy God Arlos. A copy of this *Book of Oracles* was

kept in every province and the Holy Capital of Qualiane. Only clergymen with the rank of Cardinal or higher were permitted to look at it. The book was tightly guarded out of fear that the terrifying prophecies within would drive a normal person mad if they knew.

The contents weren't actually that dangerous to read, but it did contain oracles they needed to take seriously. One such oracle concerned the King of Ruin. Soalina was convinced the King of Ruin would reign terror on this world, just as described in God's oracle. That's why she wanted to subdue the threat as soon as possible. She was trying to eliminate anything and everything that could possibly pose a risk to the happiness she'd finally obtained.

"Hey, hey!" Erakino interjected, bouncing on her heels. "What's this *Book of Oracles*? I've never heard of it before!"

"It's a record of the oracles received by past Saints," Fenne explained. "There's one section that mentions the King of Ruin. It's considered ancient for a reason, so some parts make no sense."

"I knew about Mynoghra. Hmm... Takuto Ira, eh? I wonder if he's a player. So, is this King of Ruin a big baddie? Super dangerous?" Erakino asked.

"We...don't know," Soalina admitted. "Maybe it will make more sense to you. I'll show it to you later."

"Yippee!"

"It's a classified text, but such rules no longer apply to you two, do they?" Fenne said dryly.

Erakino giggled behind her hands, drawing a smile out of Soalina.

Fenne doubted Soalina had permission to show the *Book of Oracles* to Erakino, but getting feedback from her and her Game Master was more important than playing by the rules. They knew things the Saints didn't.

Erakino had warned them about Mynoghra from the beginning. Both she and the Game Master shared the same opinion that they were completely incompatible with that empire. Another Witch being involved with that nation may've had something to do with it, but either way, Erakino unmistakably viewed Mynoghra as the enemy.

Erakino originally planned to go with Soalina, who she'd brainwashed, to the Accursed Lands, where Mynoghra was said to exist. None other than Fenne persuaded her to stay in the Southern Province out of fear that Soalina would be needlessly sacrificed in such a careless plan. All that resulted in a very odd relationship being formed between the Witch and Saint, but nothing could be done about that now.

"Back to the topic at hand," Fenne said, forcefully taking control of the conversation and bringing them back to what she wanted to discuss. "I want to hear your thoughts on this matter too, Erakino. What do you think about launching an attack on Mynoghra?"

Fenne was personally against it. The strategy itself wasn't bad, and she agreed that Mynoghra and the King of Ruin were too dangerous to be left to their own devices. But in her estimation, they needed to wait until they gathered more information. She'd never admit it out loud, but she believed they might someday have to negotiate and work with Mynoghra against other forces. That was why she roped Erakino in to dissuade Soalina, because she was also against employing this strategy.

"...Yeah, I'd say we're better off not making a move on them yet," Erakino replied.

"Your Master is for this plan, right? Won't he come to talk to us first? I would like to speak with him directly to hear his opinion from his own lips," Fenne pressed.

"Master's a shy boy, so I wouldn't get your hopes up..."

Fenne had already heard the specifics of this mysterious being known as the Game Master from Erakino. It'd be a lie to say she wasn't suspicious and leery. They had earned a modicum of her trust for sharing all sorts of information and knowledge, but there was something unsettling about receiving orders from someone she could never meet in person. Fenne really wanted to ask the other decision-maker about his thought process, but since he refused to ever show himself, she figured that was asking for the impossible and gave up.

"That's answer enough for me. So, Soalina and the Game Master are for it. Erakino is against it. Then I guess I will even out the odds and join Erakino for

two marks against,” Fenne said. “Oh, what a funny coincidence, Erakino, we’re on the same team now. Let’s be the best of friends.”

“Uggggggghhhh...” Erakino screwed her face up to show her absolute disgust.

Oh my, I was just teasing. She doesn’t have to look so blatantly disgusted. Fenne cracked a wry smile under her veil, but before she could poke fun at Erakino’s reaction, Soalina started shouting.

“Wh-Why are you against it, Erakino?! You should also regard the King of Ruin and his Witch as a threat! If we leave them be, there’s a chance they will bring calamity to our country!”

“Your fears are super valid, Soali. But the thing is...”

Soalina was terribly shaken by Erakino having a different opinion from her. Her lips trembled like a child abandoned in the rain, making Erakino set her lighthearted responses aside to calmly explain her reasoning so it wouldn’t further upset her friend.

“...I’ve just got this terrible feeling, y’know? And I’m of the strong belief that you should go with this kind of gut feeling when it hits you.”

The stupidest thing you can do is make a decision that will affect the future of not only yourself, but the lives of many innocent people and your allies based on gut instinct alone. But there are times when that’s actually also the smartest thing you can do. There are things in the world that cannot be explained with reasoning and logic alone.

In a world where unexplained phenomena, such as magic and Miracle Artes, are the norm, a Witch’s intuition should be taken seriously. But that wasn’t enough to convince Soalina.

“Why, Erakino? Why don’t you agree with me? It shouldn’t be difficult to pull off if we work together. What’s changed? You were all for it in the beginning...”

“Nyahaha. What can I say? Little ol’ me has taken a shine to things the way they are now. I hesitate when I start thinking about the what-ifs, you know?”

Soalina grimaced and fell silent.

“A-And don’t you think you’re a little too gung-ho about this, Soali? T-Take a

deep breath and chill, girl... Hey, Fenny! Don't leave me hanging and say something, too!" Panicking to see she upset Soalina, Erakino shamelessly turned to Fenne for help.

"Well...I won't deny that Mynoghra, the King of Ruin, and the king's Witch are threats. That much is undeniable since it was preordained in God's oracle," Fenne said with the same cool composure she maintained while watching the others argue back and forth.

She purposely took Erakino's side because she knew the conversation would get derailed if they entered their own little world again. But Fenne was also genuinely concerned Soalina was letting her emotions cloud her judgment.

"We will have to confront Mynoghra someday," Fenne continued. "But it's too dangerous for that to be today. According to the prophecy, this is a confrontation that requires all of Qualia's provinces and Saints to be a unified front to succeed. We lack too much to handle them ourselves."

Impatient panic was driving Soalina to action. While Fenne had a vague idea of what was fueling that impatience, she persisted in getting the other Saint to admit the cause. Fenne actually had a way to find out the truth without asking, but she preferred not to use that method when she didn't have to.

"What reason is there for us to make enemies elsewhere when we're currently at risk of being excommunicated or labeled as an enemy of Arlos by Central? I don't doubt your devotion to God or your righteousness, but even you must be aware that alone doesn't make for a persuasive argument. Soalina, please tell me, what is it you are after?"

Fenne's eyes pierced Soalina through the veil. Soalina opened and closed her mouth several times before finally confessing her true intentions.

"...Brainwashing Mynoghra's Witch with Erakino's ability."

Fenne and Erakino gasped. Soalina's plan was outrageously heretical and belied her role as a Saint.

"I see..." Fenne said thoughtfully. "It makes sense it'd work on a Witch since it worked on a Saint..."

All the disconnected pieces finally formed a picture in Fenne's mind. She'd

figured out Soalina's objective: Defeating the King of Ruin and securing his vanguard Witch through Brainwashing. It was a bombastic plan equivalent to reaching for the stars, but there probably wasn't a better method to solving all their problems. No, they had no other method to employ but this one.

Even if they left Mynoghra alone and maintained the status quo, Central would eventually find out about what was happening in the Southern Province. Their whole objective revolved around breaking off from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and forming a new empire. Qualia's Popes and the Mystic Saint absolutely would not stand for that.

The three of them—actually, no one, could defeat the Mystic Saint. So, what Soalina was after was the prestige she would earn from defeating the King of Ruin and bringing peace to the world. If she could exterminate a Witch on par with the one who destroyed the Northern Province and her evil master, then the people of not only the Southern Province but all of Qualia and El-Nah, would surely rejoice and sing her praise. And once she had the hearts of the people on her side, Central would have to tread more carefully in how they dealt with her.

Even if Central still excommunicated them or declared them enemies of Arlos, it'd only look like defamation against the two saints who'd defeated the incarnation of evil. Besides, the Witch they'd secure from Mynoghra could handle any necessary assassinations behind the scenes.

They would be treading on thin ice with this strategy, but the future on the other side of that ice was bright and rosy. Such a too-good-to-be-true reward is often said to be a trap that clouds people's judgment, but they had an ace up their sleeve capable of overturning any trap. That ace was why Soalina was so insistent on carrying out this outrageous strategy.

"I assume you are suggesting this plan because there's an actual chance of it succeeding, right?" Fenne pressed.

"Erakino's Master's ability greatly increases the odds for us. As long as we have *that*, we absolutely will not fail."

The *that* which Soalina was referring to was the Game Master's Authority. At first, there was a lot of mystery surrounding Erakino and the Game Master's

abilities. They had disclosed a lot about it over the course of their interactions as proof they could be trusted, but it seemed they were still trying to figure it out themselves, so they were testing things while governing the Southern Province. It was during these experiments that they coincidentally discovered *that* ability.

The Game Master's unholy ability that even defied and surpassed God's powers...

"What are the chances of your beloved Game Master screwing up?" Fenne asked Erakino.

"Master's ability is perfect through and through. I'm absolutely certain of it. The system is absolute. It doesn't allow for exceptions or deviances. Like, at all."

"Absolutely certain, are you? I choose to believe in those strong words of yours."

"Don't worry, Saint Fenne," Soalina said with confidence. "We absolutely will not fail. We have the power to make that a reality—it will be our *reality*."

Fenne's silence was taken as approval. She realized she couldn't change Soalina's mind even if she continued to argue the point with her. Soalina's mental state was questionable, but even Fenne knew enough about the Game Master's power to conclude they wouldn't fail. Failing would be harder than succeeding. Thus, she nodded and decided to go along with the plan.

"Thank you, Saint Fenne... You're the only one left now, Erakino. I need you. Please, if you consider yourself my friend, won't you do me this favor?"

"Ngh. Gosh, I'm weak for that *yuri* vibe of yours, but it's not enough to win me over!" Erakino objected, flustered.

"*Yuri*...? You always try to deflect with such quizzical words." Soalina took Erakino's hand and wrapped it in both of hers. Then she looked pleadingly into her violet eyes. "If we can capture the King of Ruin's Witch, then there will be nothing left to stop us from creating our ideal godly kingdom."

"Word has it that Mynoghra has employed some sort of sneaky method to obtain a town from Phon'kaven. It'll be too late if they merge with the other Dark Continent nations and grow more powerful off the fear and suffering of

the people who live there...

“A Witch’s power has no equal. We don’t know what kind of surprises exist in this world... What we do know is that we won’t be easily defeated if it’s us Saints, you, and this other Witch against the world. With all four of us, no one will have to suffer anymore. We will make it so no one else is a victim of their fate, forced to end the lives of those dear to them because they have no other choice.

“We can’t allow evil to invade and destroy our happiness, our country—the country you and I will make together, Erakino,” Soalina finished her speech.

If all went well, if everything went perfectly according to plan, then Soalina’s ideal country would be born into this world. And the fulfillment of Soalina’s dreams would increase the chances of Fenne’s unspoken dreams coming true too. It’d also see Erakino and her Game Master’s ambitions coming to light. Happiness would come to the masses, and they’d be purging all that would threaten that happiness from their sight.

Everyone dreamed of the glory and happiness that would come because of their success.

“We need more power. Please join us in this, Erakino,” Soalina implored with tears glistening in her beautiful golden eyes.

“NNNGAAAAAH! Fine! FINE!” Erakino finally gave in. “You forced my hand, Soali! I’ll bet everything on this plan for you!”

Soalina’s face lit up like a child receiving a birthday gift and she lavished Erakino with ecstatic words of gratitude. Erakino didn’t seem used to being thanked and doted on so much. She bashfully looked away and launched into her silly talk in a loud voice again.

“BESIDES! Master’s all for this plan, anyway. If we’re gonna go head-to-head with Mynoghra at some point, we might as well take the initiative and steal their Witch! You good with that too, Fenny?”

“...Yes, of course. I have nothing more to say on this matter.”

“Thank you very much, Saint Fenne.”

But would reality really play out according to plan? It had to. It would. It was precisely because they had the means to pull it off that they ended up unanimously adopting this ridiculously risky plan.

“You’re welcome. But the more I hear about it, the more surreal this ability sounds...”

They only found out about it by chance, and they were rendered speechless and terrified by that law-defying power.

“Ehe! That’s right! And now, without further ado, it’s time for you to shine, Divination Dice! Tell me: will Erakino and co’s plan succeed? I’m gonna roll the dice again today to see~~♪!”

Clatter-clatter-CLANG! The sound of dice being rolled rang out.

Erakino rolls 1d100=13 for Divination

Outcome: Failure. Erakino and co’s plan will end in failure.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Dismisses outcome of previous roll and instructs to roll again.

Erakino rolls 1d100=87 for Divination

Outcome: Success. Erakino and co’s plan will succeed.

The Game Master had the authority to choose any event’s outcome. In other words, they could never lose with him on their side.

“God doesn’t roll the dice~~♪ You can just create any outcome you like! Conquering the world is easy-peasy with Erakino and co’s powers! Because we can just keep rerolling until we have guaranteed success!”

Suppose there was someone out there who could freely choose who wins or loses...could anyone ever defeat such a person?

The spark responsible for setting off the flames of war started here. It might just be a spark at this point, but it would become a great fire that would engulf and consume everything in its path. That fateful day was just around the corner.



Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials

Combat Unit

Strength: Unknown Move: Unknown



Description

~Today, too, her past haunts her into doing everything she can for those who've been lost.~

Soalina is one of Idoragya's Seven Great Savior Saints and her abilities are not to be underestimated. She purges her god's enemies with a swirl of all-consuming hellfire using the AOE ability called Blooming Burials. There are no restrictions on her Blooming Burials attack, and she can turn whole areas into a sea of fire if she so desires. Flowers rise from the ashes of the scorched land, giving rise to her title as the Saint of Blooming Burials.

Chapter 14: Checkmate

THE day of the Dragontan Cession Completion Ceremony had finally arrived. The sun was out and the sky was perfectly clear. Excitement and bustling activity breathed new life into the once-dying town. Bright smiles could be seen on the townspeople's faces, their lips uttering nothing but praise and gratitude for their new king. It was easy to forget Dragontan belonged to an evil civilization now.

Amid all the festivities, the King of Ruin and his confidant were...

"King Takuto... Y-You look *n-nervish*," Atou said, biting her tongue.

"Ha...haha... I-I'm not nervous. Y-You're nervous."

...shaky from nerves.

They were waiting in a room within Town Hall that had been renovated exclusively for the king's use. What in the world had the Commander who rose to the top of the leader boards in *Eternal Nations* with his deep insight and ingenious strategies and the Hero who slayed endless enemies to cut a path for him so afraid of?

"I-I've never given a speech before," Takuto said nervously. "I'm not gonna trip and fall on my face or anything, right?"

"D-Don't worry, my king. Y-Your Atou will be there to hold you up."

Yes, these two transcendental beings people feared and revered were experiencing untold anxiety over whether they could pull off their part in the ceremony without botching it. Takuto's apprehension was flamed by his social anxiety and Atou's by her general clumsiness when it came to everything outside of fighting without Takuto to guide her. They were a lot alike in many ways, one of which was their shared desire to run away from potential embarrassment.

"Please set your mind at ease, great King Takuto Ira. Our preparations are

perfect. There's not much you have to do during the ceremony. Please sit back and enjoy this joyful occasion," Antelise said as she entered the room wearing formal attire for the first time. It was odd for her to be here talking about taking it easy when she was the mayor, but she'd likely assigned her duties to someone else for the day because she was one of the key people partaking in the ceremony.

When Atou inquired about the remaining preparations, Antelise said she had indeed left it to her staff to handle so she could make time for the ceremony about to begin. Atou and Takuto were very satisfied with the competent Elf mayor, and they shared a smile over having obtained someone of her skill when they were so hard to come by. All the tricky and annoying details were completely taken care of when they left it to Antelise and Emle.

Atou felt a load lifted off her shoulders knowing they were on the job, because she was afraid Takuto would slip up and embarrass himself during the ceremony. Her tense expression melted away, and she lavished Antelise with praise.

"Now that's reassuring to hear! If anything went wrong at all, it'd be on your head, since you are the mayor. I certainly didn't want to lose such a talented worker like you over something like this," Atou said with an unreadable smile.

"Wha?! H-Hold it, what?!" Antelise sputtered.

The problem with Atou's taste in praise was that Antelise took it seriously. Atou was at fault for trying to pass it off as a joke when it wasn't funny. Antelise's confidence crumbled along with her rapidly paling face, and she started mumbling a slew of curses under her breath.

"...Excuse me," Emle said, entering the room after knocking on the door. "Your Majesty, everything is ready to proceed with the ceremo—" She paused when she saw what was on the other side of the door. "What happened?" Atou was all smiles and in the best of moods, Takuto was visibly trembling, and Antelise was sweating as she mumbled a litany of "It's okay, I'm okay, I'll be okay, it'll all go okay..."

What in the Elven Forest happened here? Emle thought as she informed them the time had come with a raised eyebrow.



THE ceremony was held at the special venue erected in Dragontan's central town square. The venue consisted of a wooden stage with stairs and a simple awning on top, much like what might be seen during a high school graduation or an outdoor concert. They deliberately chose this central location over Town Hall to easily share the good and glorious news with all of Dragontan's residents. The stage had been constructed so everyone could witness this awe-inspiring moment for themselves.

Many key government figures participated in the ceremony, giving it political connotations. Mynoghra's empire-management council headed by its king was naturally there, along with related parties from Phon'kaven invited to partake as a show of friendship. Pepe and Tonukapoli were important guests to show domestic and international players that the session was based on friendly relations and negotiations.

Yes, they were putting on a show for the world at large.

This ceremony carried heavy implications for declaring Mynoghra's existence to the world. Mynoghra's existence had already been exposed by informants and peddlers who did business in Dragontan, but that was in an unofficial capacity. Openly declaring the existence of one's empire is key to keeping up appearances and an essential part of being viewed as an equal in negotiations with other empires.

Of course, since they hadn't invited any guests from other countries besides Phon'kaven, the effect wouldn't be as strong as they had hoped, but the declaration alone was all that mattered now. If anything, Takuto wanted to keep things small to decrease the chances of unfortunate interference.

Funnily enough, the hotly anticipated ceremony that held so much importance ended without a hitch once they finally got to it.



"I'M so glad it ended without incident..." Atou said with a relieved sigh, taking a sip of the drink served to her within the marquee tent set up at the ceremony venue.

They were worried for nothing when success was the obvious result—Mynoghra had put its full national power behind this ceremony. Guards armed with firearms patrolled every corner of the town, and countless snipers were on the lookout around the ceremonial venues to ensure that any trespassers who appeared on the rooftops could be dealt with instantly. They also had the Brain Eaters, with the latent ability to improve public order, check over visitors entering Dragontan for the ceremony.

It'd be harder for problems to happen with such tight security measures in place. While small incidents like petty theft and lost children happened throughout the day, the ceremony itself proceeded uneventfully. The treaty ceding Dragontan to Mynoghra had long since been agreed to, so it was actually weirder for them to be so on edge about things not working out. Atou felt kind of funny about it now.

“Same,” Takuto said. **“I can’t believe speaking in front of such a large audience is this nauseating. I thought my heart was going to stop up there.”**

“Your speech was absolutely wonderful, King Takuto. Our people were deeply moved by hearing your impressive words and laying eyes upon your mighty visage. I witnessed their eyes shining with hope for the future!” Atou extolled her master with a dreamy expression.

Elder Moltar, Gia, and Antelise all nodded in agreement. They had also withdrawn to the marquee with Takuto and Atou.

Their praise was misplaced, however, because Takuto hadn't uttered a single word. He just nervously signed the cession treaty, queasily showed it to the people, and jitterily shook hands with Pepe. He'd planned to give a speech but totally forgot about it once he was on stage. Then again, the aura of darkness he gave off was so intense, almost no one could look at him directly, so his slip-up wasn't apparent...

Nevertheless, maybe it didn't matter he hadn't said anything as long as everyone had seen and acknowledged what a transcendental being he was.

Takuto had royally screwed up, yet he casually said **“It’s not easy being king”** as if he'd done all the heavy lifting. Then he turned his attention toward Antelise. **“So, what’s next on the agenda?”**

Completely relaxed now that he was free from public view, Takuto wanted to know what he had to do next. Antelise promptly listed off the agenda as if she'd been itching for him to ask.

"You have some time before the next event, so please spend it however it pleases you, King Takuto. The next big thing on the agenda is sharing a meal with our guests from Phon'kaven as a show of friendship. We were able to hire an excellent chef, so you can look forward to the food. We also plan to launch the fireworks you gifted us during the meal."

"Cool! Sounds like fun. Real royal-like," Takuto laughed.

"I'm looking forward to the fireworks, King Takuto!!" Atou exclaimed, beaming.

"So am I! I'm glad I used some Mana just to produce them."

The rest of the day was packed with fun festivities. Phon'kaven's state guests were all people Takuto knew, reducing the need for him to be nervous or on edge. He felt like a pressure had finally been lifted from his chest.

I can just leave the rest to my subordinates and have fun, he thought, his clammy hands drying, his shaking ceasing, and his narrowed view of things finally expanding to see what was around him again.

"Oh yeah, where are Caria and Maria?" he asked the room, searching for the girls.

The twins were around for the ceremony. They had the simple job of just sitting behind him as Mynoghra's council members. He'd completely ignored them as he reveled in being liberated from the duties that had been haunting him for weeks now, and when he finally thought to look for them, they were gone.

"They are out and about enjoying the festival stalls," Elder Moltar said. "They departed dragging a comically large bag of gold behind them, so they won't be back for a while, I'm sure. I instructed them to greet you first before setting off, but alas..."

"I don't mind. But gaaah! I wanted to check out the food stalls and stands too!!" Takuto griped, clenching his fists to keep his desire in check.

Today's ceremony was just as much of a celebration as it was an official event. Mynoghra planned to make this date a holiday for Dragontan from now on. That was why they allowed merchants from Phon'kaven to Qualia to the neutral nations to set up shops in town to celebrate the occasion. And set up shop they did...except, there was a certain problem stopping Takuto from joining the festivities.

"Y-Your presence will put too much of a strain on the surroundings, Your Majesty..." Elder Moltar reluctantly pointed out.

"I know," Takuto conceded, throwing a fit on the inside.

Even Takuto could tell from his experiences thus far that his presence as the King of Ruin incited fear in people. He believed that was a consequence of becoming Mynoghra's Commander, which made it hard for him to go where he pleased when he pleased. He was okay with it until just the other day. He used to think: *I don't care. I've always been a shut-in, so it's nice that people stay away from me because of my kingly aura.* But he changed his mind on this day because he realized he would never be able to live out his dream of enjoying a festival. One of the many dreams he had and could never fulfill in his sickly past life.

"My sympathies, my king..." Atou whispered, sympathizing with Takuto's disappointment.

He really wanted to enjoy the festive night with the girl who hurt when he hurt.

"Maaan, I really wanted to experience my first-ever festival together with you, Atou," Takuto told her telepathically.

"Aww... I wanted to explore the shops with you too, King Takuto. Now that you mention it, I guess this would be your first time going in any life, huh? Considering the condition you were in before, you probably couldn't go out much, could you?"

"I could only enjoy the festivals through my TV screen before... Ah, but I probably wouldn't have had any friends even if I was healthy, so not much would've changed, would it? Ahaha..."

“My condolences, my kiiiiiiiiiiiiing!!”

They telepathically chatted about things only they could understand and shed tears for reasons that only made sense to them. Takuto couldn't enjoy festivals in his past life because he was sick and forever a loner, and he couldn't in this life because of his position and intense evil aura. As fate and two worlds would have it, Takuto would not be allowed to enjoy a festival...ever.

Atou and Takuto wept when they realized that cruel, cruel fact. Takuto wept, knowing a dream of his was just out of reach yet again. Atou wept, knowing a festival date with Takuto would have to remain forever a fantasy. There was no end to their sorrow. The fact nothing showed on their faces as they conversed just went to show how polished their telepathy skills were, but it was hard to be proud of that accomplishment when it only happened because they constantly used the skill to whine and gripe to each other.

To everyone but Atou, it looked like the king was interested in the festivities but nobly kept it to himself to avoid inconveniencing others.

“Let's send someone out so you can enjoy the festival through their eyes,” Elder Moltar proposed, a wry smile on his face as he watched Takuto. “I'm not sure if it will be enough to satiate your curiosity, Your Majesty, but I hope we can at least bring a piece of the festival to you even if you can't go to it...”

“I like that plan, Moltar,” Takuto said, his mood improving a smidge.

What do you think of when there's a festival? The various stalls. And what comes to mind with festival stalls? Food you can only buy and eat there! The flavors aren't as elaborate as what you can get at a restaurant or bar because they don't have all the equipment, but there's an extra spice known as the mood that makes the food taste a thousand times better than anywhere else.

Plus, Takuto had prepared all sorts of ingredients for this very moment that could be used to make Japanese festival foods and local traditional dishes too. He even used Emergency Production to produce recipe books for everyone. He deserved to at least enjoy the festival through someone else's eyes.

As he discussed what he wanted to see most with Atou, he also asked Antelise and the others about what to expect at the festival. According to Antelise, the festival stalls also sold handicrafts and rare curios. He requested

they pick out and buy whatever looked interesting and bring it back to him. Takuto supplied his own pocket money for the errand. He'd saved up all his earnings since there was nowhere for him to spend any of it within Mynoghra.

I'm not as bad as the twins, but maybe I'll splurge a bit today?

Takuto's mood improved some more.

"Then I, your humble servant Gia, will take on this honorable task, Your Majesty!"

Gia eagerly raised his hand when they started debating who to send on the king's errand. He seemed awfully bored just standing in the corner with nothing to do. Everyone looked at him when he spoke up, and he even earned a heavy, judgmental sigh from Elder Moltar. Gia seemed to have forgotten that he was standing in that corner to ensure Takuto's safety.

"Can you be more witless, boy?! The head of security can't leave His Majesty's side to run an errand!"

"Ah, Saints!" Gia cursed.

"Honestly, this is why you're forever a child... But enough of this. Is there anyone else around who can take on this errand?!" Elder Moltar called out, looking for a better candidate.

They were all convinced it was relatively safe, but it still didn't do for there to be a gap in the king's security. While they could relax a bit, Mynoghra's guards weren't there to play.

The Dark Elves and Beastmen on guard duty in and around the king's marquee exchanged looks. None of them were suitable for the job. Elder Moltar contemplated their options as he stroked his beard. It didn't seem right to send out another member of the security team right after he'd scolded Gia for offering to go.

Emle had left to speak with their Phon'kaven guests. Elder Moltar was trying to ignore Atou's intense gaze that seemed to beg him to pick her for the job. He'd never admit it out loud, but he was certain she would get lost if he let her go. He hated to rely on someone else, but felt it might be best to have Antelise pick someone from the mayor's office...

“Aye, aye, sir! I’m your girl for the job~♪!” trilled an unfamiliar voice out of nowhere.

Who? Elder Moltar thought, turning to look at the person. There he saw three Dark Elf women dressed as servers.

“Hrm...? Servers? You came at just the right time...but...hmm...” he trailed off, unsure.

Odd. Did I assign these ladies here? the wise sage wondered, but their presence proved they were meant to be there. For a moment, he thought they were intruders in disguise...and yet the aura they gave off insisted they were clanswomen. And if they were, he needn’t view them as the enemy. After all, there weren’t enough Dark Elves in the world for them to be hired assassins for another empire.

They shouldn’t be a problem, Elder Moltar nodded, somehow convinced. They came at an awfully convenient moment, but that didn’t change the fact they appeared exactly when needed. Even Elder Moltar was baffled by his own lack of caution, but he went ahead and pulled out a notepad to scribble down what Takuto wanted to buy...

“Wait... Who are you?” Takuto asked, his voice booming through the tent.

Tension crackled through all his subordinates. Atou stepped protectively in front of Takuto, a tentacle rising from her back.

“Who do you serve?” she asked, her tone sharp. “Make your station known —”

They had struck at the optimum time—for them. Too many factors had stacked in the enemy’s favor.

First, Mynoghra had let down its guard because it had such perfect defenses.

Second, Mynoghra didn’t see a reason for their potential enemies to strike at this stage.

Third, the enemies’ Dark Elf *Disguise* was too impeccable to be seen through.

And lastly—

“Ahaha! OMG, people! I can’t believe it went THIS freakin’ easaaaay~♪! It’s

Slurp time!”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Outcome is a success regardless of the roll.

Outcome: Critical

—Erakino and co’s operation was guaranteed to succeed by the system.

“Agh...!”

Atou slumped forward and Takuto jumped from his seat in surprise.

“ENEMY ATTACK!!”

Takuto’s subordinates responded at once. Elder Moltar, Gia, and Antelise drew their respective weapons. The guards lifted their guns and the Snipers stationed all over town locked onto the enemy. Mynoghra’s monster units rushed in at tremendous speeds to protect Takuto.

However—

“Kill Erakino and co’s enemy, Sludge Atou~♪!”

—all of their efforts were rendered useless by that single command.

“GHH! AGGHHH!” Takuto choked out.

...He didn’t know what hit him.

“YOUR MAJESTY!!”

His subordinates’ horrified cries went in one ear and out the other. He felt a rush of heat course to his core, while his limbs went icily numb. Alarm bells blared in his head, and the spectacle before him played out slowly as if time had been stopped.

Takuto wrestled to understand the situation.

It all happened so fast, he couldn’t even register he had been attacked. Even if he had noticed the attack before it happened, Takuto couldn’t have prevented it. Erakino’s victory was ensured by the system, after all.

Takuto sluggishly tilted his head down to confirm the source of the attack.

What he saw there was Atou's tentacle pierced straight through his chest—straight through his heart.

“A...tou...”

She didn't answer his strangled utterance. The Hero he loved more than anything else stood there with empty eyes, her tentacle sticking right through him.



Chapter 15: Powerless

ELDER Moltar felt as if time had stopped. He was too thunderstruck to accept what he was witnessing as real, and at the same time, berating himself to get a better grasp of the situation and do something about it. All the Dark Elves, including him, had frozen as a deluge of emotions fought for supremacy.

“Pft! Ahahaha! What a noob! You got me worried for nothing!”

Indecent laughter shattered the stunned silence. An amused sneer twisted the Dark Elf woman’s face they had all believed to be a clanswoman a moment ago. Before any of them could wonder why, they realized they had been deceived and immediately got ready to fight.

“Okay, remove Disguise! Make way for sweet lil’ Erakino, peons~♪!”

The space around the three young women, the culprits behind this earth-shattering development, seemed to warp and change. What appeared next was their enemy wreathed in palpable darkness, wearing a clownlike attire and an even more laughable, innocently sinister Cheshire grin...

Slurping Witch Erakino was in their midst.

“Pump her full of lead!!” Elder Moltar bellowed, and the shooters took aim.

A cadence of gunfire followed. Several dozen guns fired at once. The marksmanship honed by unrelenting training and fanatical loyalty unleashed a volley of bullets on Erakino and her cohort from all directions, creating a deadly killing space. Death was inevitable, and yet...

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Attack rejected.

Even Mynoghra’s unrivaled weaponry from another world was powerless before the Game Master’s Authority. The Outcome decided in another

dimension erased the inescapable shower of bullets from existence.

“What the seven Saints?!” Elder Moltar stared on in utter shock.

They had fired upon their enemy—that was an undeniable fact. Even if the enemy had some sort of special ability to deflect the bullets, there should still be some trace of the attack. Bullet shells, the smell of gunpowder, ringing in the ears—something. And yet what they had witnessed happen with their very own eyes had no outcome whatsoever, as if the action had never occurred.

“AHAHAHAHA!” the girl cackled, her lips curling into a wicked smile. “What the heck? That was sooooo easy! Easy-peasy! A walk in the park! What, are we playing on easy mode or somethin’?!”

The apocalyptic darkness that hung over her like a cloak and her peculiar way of speaking and dressing shared more than a few similarities with Takuto Ira, the King of Ruin. Sensing those similarities, Elder Moltar gritted his teeth as he finally realized they were up against one of the Witches Takuto had warned them about.

“Way to go, Game Master! Ain’t nothing in this or that world is capable of beating you when you get to decide all the rules and outcomes! What a cheat!”

They were up against three people: the cackling girl who babbled on and on about how their plan had been a huge success and the two women standing a step behind her, warily keeping an eye on their surroundings like they were her attendants. One look at the women’s clothes immediately identified them as Qualian clergy or Paladins. It was a mystery why Qualia would’ve joined hands with a Witch, but they could think about that later. Dealing with this unexpected disaster came first.

Elder Moltar swiftly inventoried his surroundings. Aside from the guards, Gia and Antelise were Mynoghra’s primary fighting force on the scene. They were both leaps and bounds more skilled than an ordinary soldier. They had drawn their pistols—gifts from the king—faster than anyone else, but even their attack had been rendered null. Now they kept their eyes peeled to find any opening that could turn the tides of battle and defeat their enemy.

Elder Moltar only took a few seconds to assess the situation, but even that felt like an eternity. Every second counted now because directly between them

and their mysterious foe was Atou, standing like a motionless zombie robbed of her soul, and their king, lying in a pool of his own blood. Every passing second ticked down to the moment when this nightmare would end and was accompanied by a maddening sense of dread and urgency.

“Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock! It’s time to roll the dice! Roll, and who knows, you might get a Natural 20!”

“Ignore her! Don’t stop firing!”

Another round of bullets was fired from the Snipers positioned on top of the nearby buildings. Since their pistols didn’t work last time, Gia and Antelise switched to throwing knives and Spirit Artes. Elder Moltar ordered them to continue attacking despite expecting their efforts to end in vain. He wanted to lock his enemy in place with the downpour of bullets to buy time for Mynoghra’s defenses to kick in.

Elder Moltar made the right call. The Long-legged Bugs rushed out from the back alley at a tremendous speed to attack the Witch. Brain Eaters and other subordinate monsters joined the fray and wielded their respective weapons a step behind them, not caring for a moment that they were also exposed to the hailing bullets.

All of Mynoghra’s strength came down like a blazing hammer on the enemy.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Mynoghra’s units aren’t allowed to attack.

...And it all ended in failure.

The bullets, the knives flying straight for the enemies’ eyes with absolute accuracy, and even the blast of Spirit Artes vanished before their foe. If that wasn’t bad enough, even the Long-legged Bugs and other combat units that had lunged to rip off their heads disappeared with what sounded like someone clapping their hands. All that remained in the wake of their attack were three unharmed women and hopelessness for Mynoghra.

“I-Impossible... What sorcery is this?!” Elder Moltar sputtered, unable to hide

his shock.

He could have chalked it up to some unknown magic or arte if only the bullets and knives had been erased. He could even accept it as the work of some hidden treasure from the Land of the Gods yet unknown to them. But even the mighty minions of darkness created by the King of Ruin had their lives reaped in an instant. An instant!

This wasn't even a fight. There was such an overwhelming difference in power no words could express it.

"But hey, I didn't expect the guns! Smart move directing us to attack here and now, Soali!" Erakino, the Witch sporting an eccentric dress reminiscent of a female jester, cackled some more as she turned to her compatriot. She was acting like the Dark Elves were air. But Mynoghra's remaining forces didn't have the power to prove her wrong and make her pay for her arrogance.

"...Overconfidence will be your downfall..." Elder Moltar muttered.

The enemy had completely relaxed their guard after realizing they had the overwhelming advantage. Elder Moltar believed exploiting that overconfidence could be their one way out of this pinch. Gia immediately guessed what he was thinking from his quiet utterance and signaled his Warriors to move out.

Several Dark Elves leaped into action. They rushed into the tent—their target was the unconscious king, not the relaxed Witch.

An empire is its king, and the king his empire. It didn't matter how many sacrifices it took, Mynoghra could rebuild as long as they recovered their king. Even if every last Dark Elf was laid to rest here, as long as Takuto Ira survived, he would settle the score. Mynoghra's citizens chose to prioritize helping the king escape, even if it cost them their lives.

But the enemy was having none of that. Just as Takuto's survival was the Dark Elves' highest priority, his elimination was the invaders' *raison d'être*...

"Too easy."

"GUH! GAAAAAH!"

"URPH!"

It wasn't the Witch but her companions who responded first—the two holy women who obediently followed the child of darkness. The woman who stood with her back hunched and her face hidden under a veil muttered something under her breath and lifted her head, blowing the soldiers away with an invisible burst of energy. The violent impact wrenched the soldiers' limbs in impossible directions, ending their lives.

These three women plotted to assassinate the King of Ruin by entering his domain alone. Obviously they each possessed extraordinary abilities.

She just used an offensive spell that strikes whoever the spellcaster looks at. I'm familiar with this kind of spell, unlike the Witch's abilities, but I've never heard anything about Qualia's clergy being capable of using such powerful offensive Miracle Artes! That can only mean these women are...!!!

Elder Moltar obtained a critical piece of information through his comrade's sacrifice. The woman's attack proved they weren't omnipotent or a god, even if their resilience to attack was still a mystery.

"Those clothes! That power!" Elder Moltar roared, furious to learn just how much danger their king was in when he realized who they were really up against. "I've heard all about you, woman! You're one of Qualia's Saintsssssss!" he spat, vitriol oozing from his words.

"What?! A bloody Saint?!" Gia hissed.

"No way... What's a Saint doing here?!" Antelise shrilled, her voice trembling with fear.

If the veiled woman was a Saint, then that made it highly likely the other woman was one too. It'd be optimistic to assume she was anything else. There was nothing to gain from dragging an ordinary nun into the den of wolves. They should have realized that sooner.

...The Holy Kingdom of Qualia's Saints were the holy gods' playthings created solely to eradicate evil. Just one Saint was considered the Ultimate Weapon capable of taking on whole armies. And then there was the Witch, who was said to be the Saints' only equal.

They weren't just up against three lone women. The enemy had come to

Dragontan with the equivalent of three full armies to take the king's head.

"Finally caught on, have we? Or did you know all along and just didn't want to accept reality?" the Veiled Saint asked mockingly.

"Curse Sage Moltar and Gia the Assassin...to think two of the Dark Elves' most wanted criminals were hiding in the King of Ruin's shadow... We made the right call coming here, after all," the other Saint said coldly.

"Curse you!!"

No longer trying to hide their holy aura, the two Saints assessed Elder Moltar and the Dark Elves like they were superior. The overwhelming difference in strength between them allowed the Saints to leisurely express their opinions, implying that the victor was already decided.

Mynoghra was a powerful little empire with mighty Heroes and combat units made all the more terrifying by the King of Ruin's expert strategies. However, the source of this empire's power relied heavily upon Takuto Ira to guide it. All the parts came together and worked as a smooth machine with him at the helm, giving Mynoghra the power to push back any enemy.

Takuto was Mynoghra's greatest strength and greatest weakness. The empire rose and fell with him. That fatal fragility was proven the moment he was downed by the enemy.

"It looks like you have no way to fight back. We win. It's time for us to completely annihilate our target and head home," the Veiled Saint said.

"We won't let you!" Elder Moltar thundered. "FIRE! Pump them full of lead! Secure His Majesty's body at any cost!!"

Gunfire cracked the air, representing the Dark Elves' grief and fury with its deadly force.

"It's futile. You can't do anything even if you try," the Veiled Saint said.

"Save him! We can still save him!"

"It's futile. You can't save him even if you try."

The Elite Mage Squad finally unleashed the destructive ruin spell they'd been chanting, and it, too, vanished with a puff before the strange magics protecting

their enemy.

“Lady Atou! Please come to your senses! His Majesty is in peril!”

The Hero did not answer. She merely stood there, motionless.

“Your Majesty! Please wake up! Please destroy these heretics for us!!”

It wasn’t very likely Takuto was still alive.

“Where are the Elfuur Sisters?!”

Elder Moltar’s words rang out in vain. No one answered any query.

“Give up. Resign yourself to your fate instead of struggling like a maggot,” the Veiled Saint said.

“Our king and Hero won’t be done in by your measly attempts!” Elder Moltar snapped back. “Don’t get cocky, Qualia doll!”

“Anything you do will end in futility,” the Veiled Saint responded dryly. “My eyes deny falsehood and unrighteousness. Falsehoods are impossible before Arlos’s grace.”

The power Arlos bestowed upon the Veiled Saint, upon Fenne, resided in her eyes. Everything she looked upon revealed its truth—misinformation was impossible before her. Fenne discovered the enemy’s plan before they could enact it, Erakino and the Game Master prevented them from pulling it off, and Soalina reduced their enemies to ash. This assassination plot was pulled off with the perfect team—resistance was futile from the start.

“Wowwie~! I love it! I love it! I loooove it! Hearing the losers howl and whine is just delish! This is about as refreshing as taking a hot bath after a hard workout! I feel like I just won the jackpot, it’s so exhilarating! I feel about as godly as that one time I finished all my summer homework on the first day of vacay and shoved it in my friends’ faces! Mm-mm-*mmmmm*!! Erakino is at her best right now, bitches~♪!”

Erakino was enjoying the highs of victory and reveling in the guarantee of crushing her enemy underfoot. Mynoghra had fallen hook, line, and sinker into their trap, letting them win without a fight. If that wasn’t exhilarating enough, Erakino learned that the Gamer Master’s ability was so overpowered that not

even beings from another world could stand up to it. Who wouldn't enjoy a good laugh over that? Who wouldn't enjoy the thrill of trashing weaklings?

"Ahahahahaha!" she roared with laughter. "Our army is the bomb! A three-woman army that can't be beat~♪!"

Most people call modding a game to give yourself overpowered abilities cheating. Many complain that cheating reduces the entertainment value, but that's subjective. People like Erakino get the biggest thrill out of the game when they can crush the enemy with overwhelming power.

Erakino couldn't stop laughing.

"We're taking too much time. You can gloat after we finish our objective," the Veiled Saint urged, her tone unforgiving.

"Aw, c'mon! You're such a spoilsport, Fenny! We're on top, baby! Gotta act like it! Our victory's guaranteed. It ain't any fun if we don't savor the moment!"

"Unplanned actions invite defeat, and arrogance provokes death. It doesn't matter how superior you are to your opponent—nothing good comes from underestimating the desperate. Never let go of the reins of power yourself... Are you in need of another lecture?"

"Ick... Spare me! Okay, okay, I'm convinced. Time to go on our merry way, ladies?"

Casual banter in enemy territory is a leisure granted only to the overpowered.

Mynoghra's elite evil forces had no way to fight back, much less rescue their king from the brink of death, despite Fenne's caution. Erakino, Fenne, and Soalina had already achieved their objectives: securing Sludge Atou and vanquishing Takuto Ira. Retreating now would result in overwhelming victory on all fronts.

"We can't!" Soalina cried. "We must destroy every remnant of evil here and now!"

Soalina's suggestion to completely annihilate Mynoghra while they had the chance was equally valid. Greed leads to ruin and destruction. However, they had every advantage and no disadvantage. Soalina believed they needed to

finish the job instead of leaving seeds behind to sprout a new threat.

The final decision was left to Erakino.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!” Erakino hummed, pondering their options.

“Your Majesty! Our king! King Takuto Ira, heed our calls!”

The Dark Elves’ desperate attempts at resistance had been reduced to only what the Game Master would allow—nothing. Still, they repeated their attempts despite knowing it was futile, insufferably clinging to a baseless hope that their king would rise and save the day.

“Aaaah, gawd! Do you ever stop squawking?!” Slurping Witch Erakino made up her mind. “That’s it. It’s settled. Let’s slaughter every last annoying Dark Elf. Master loves having the power of life and death over NPCs! Better luck next game, suckers!”

The elimination of all the Dark Elves and Dragontan’s residents became a done deal. Erakino determined it’d be better to tie up all the loose ends now rather than having to worry about anything coming back to bite them later. It wasn’t a reckless decision by any means. After all, they still had a perfect pawn to put to use. Yes, they were about to try out the excellent pawn they had just obtained.

Erakino raised her hand high in the air like a child about to show off her new dolly and ordered, “M’kay, Atouy~♪! Go kill every last one of your precious, precious lil’ friends for—”

Her lips curled in a sadistic, self-satisfied smile—the nauseating visage of someone who knew they were superior and wanted to rub it in the inferior’s face for kicks. She was in the middle of declaring the death sentence for an entire town in a voice husky with euphoria as she imagined the Dark Elves being mercilessly slaughtered and betrayed by the Hero they so dearly trusted, when —

—a wisp of a voice poured freezing cold water on her power trip.

“...Appeal outcome. Remove Atou’s Brainwash status based on Trust level.”

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Initiating Appeal to Remove Brainwash Status: Confirmed Success

Everyone heard that fading voice.



Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair

Combat Unit

Strength: Unknown Move: Unknown



Description

~What's reflected in those eyes hidden behind the veil? The hardhearted saint continues to conceal her feelings for another day.~

Fenne is one of Idoragya's Seven Great Savior Saints. Her entire body's cloaked in a saintly robe, and even her face is covered with a veil, so her age and appearance are unknown. Meanwhile, her angelic voice can capture the very soul of its listeners, and it alone is how people recognize she is indeed Fenne and not an imposter. Her abilities are equally cloaked in mystery, though it's theorized that her **Miracle Artes** include mind-reading.

Chapter 16: Immortal

THE tides were turned in an instant. Everything changed when Takuto Ira, the king everyone thought was dead, muttered those two key words: Appeal Outcome. Only a few people reacted fast enough. It was a miracle they were even able to react at all.

Various elements intricately intertwined at that moment, resulting in the scales of battle leaning imperceptibly in one side's favor: Erakino's.

"MASTER!!" she shrieked, and her master threw down his verdict from his hiding place.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Outcome rejected.

Sludge Witch Atou's Brainwash status remains in effect.

Silence hung thick in the air, only broken by the sound of heavy panting.

"Haaa...haa...haa!!" Erakino gasped for air, her eyes bulging from fear and shock, her hair sticking to her sweaty forehead. Her heart pounded louder than a drum, her legs and hands trembled uncontrollably. "Shit! Haa, haaa...! You piece of shit!!!"

All her playfulness went out the window as she bristled with rage and frustration. How could she remain aloof when one of Atou's tentacles had stopped a quarter inch from her skull? She narrowly survived. If her master had been a second slower, her brains would've been splattered all over the floor.

Mental fatigue washed over her like a tidal wave. She felt as physically drained as if she'd just run for her life.

Fine, I'll admit I underestimated them. I did let down my guard, thinking we'd already won. But I didn't think for a second that they'd use our own system

against us!!

“...Dammit!” she cursed, fuming. “How dare you skip the dice’s outcome to lift Brainwash based on trust levels!!”

“Erakino!” Fenne called after her.

“A-Are you all right?!” Soalina cried.

The two Saints rushed to make sure Erakino was okay, their reactions too delayed to have saved her. Erakino was too frantic trying to think her way out of this mess to placate her worried friends. The King of Ruin had used their own gimmick against them when they had absolute confidence in it never being figured out.

Erakino and her friends hadn’t said much since entering Mynoghra’s territory. She couldn’t remember saying anything that would give their abilities away, and she never even taught the two Saints any of the terminology that’d doom them if they slipped up.

And yet...despite taking every precaution, the King of Ruin had deduced from Erakino’s limited words and actions that her abilities were governed by a tabletop role-playing game’s mechanics and turned the tides of battle completely in his favor with his very first move.

Tabletop role-playing games, called TRPGs for short, are multiplayer games in which each player acts out the role of a single character through a fictional campaign setting. Players act out their role by deciding and describing what actions their characters will take within the rules of the game. Many campaigns use weighted statistics and dice rolls or other random elements to determine the outcome of these actions. Tabletop role-playing games have been around for decades and still have a solid fanbase to this day.

In most games, a specially designated player—typically called the game master—proceeds over the session, describing the game world and the outcomes of the players’ actions. The Game Master is the storyteller, so they tend to have absolute authority over the setting, outcomes, and story progression.

This was how Erakino and her Game master were able to use his Authority to

progress the battle entirely in their favor. However, TRPGs revolve around the players using their words to advance the story, and the outcomes of some actions are determined by the game itself, not just the game master. Determining the outcome usually involves rolling dice and adjusting the result for the character's statistics and environmental factors to see whether the action was successful. Typically, the higher the character's score in a particular attribute, the higher their probability of success. In other words, the player also has the ability to appeal an outcome based on their stats and the campaign's rules.

Takuto Ira did just that—he appealed the system as a player and forced it to adjust the result based on his stats with Atou. Rolling the dice and input from the Game Master would typically take place before the outcome, but the Trust levels between the King of Ruin and his Witch were so high, they negated the need to roll.

The rules for this particular campaign stated that a player must roll a 98 or higher to remove Brainwash status with dice that only go from 1 to 100. But Takuto's appeal made the system take his and Atou's Trust into consideration. It divided their Trust value by 2 and added 200 to his roll. Having 200 added to his roll meant he would exceed 98 no matter what and succeed. He won by using Variable Values.

Takuto had figured out he was up against someone from a TRPG just by hearing Erakino talk about dice. Then, based on his experiences testing the limits of *Eternal Nations'* system, he speculated that the Game Master's rendering of the outcomes worked within TRPG mechanics and could be appealed.

He used what he knew would be the overwhelmingly Fixed Values between him and Atou to undo the Brainwashed status and return her to his side. And he didn't need to tell a liberated Atou anything for her to immediately unleash a deadly attack to kill Erakino on the spot.

Even on the verge of death, Takuto launched an all-or-nothing counterattack aimed right at the Northern Witch's cranium.

Game masters can only see and influence the world through their characters.

While game masters typically know everything about the campaign they are enacting, that didn't apply when the larger world wasn't created or selected by Erakino's Game Master. In other words, losing Erakino meant losing his ability to meddle with Mynoghra. Their attack would've ended in failure and given Mynoghra time to come up with countermeasures.

But fate was on Erakino and her Game Master's side.

In that split second, they realized Atou's status change and succeeded in narrowly rejecting the outcome. Thus, Atou's tentacle stopped a quarter inch from Erakino's forehead, snapping Slurping Witch Erakino out of her revelry and causing her heart to race—not with glee over being the winner, but for coming dangerously close to death.

Erakino chewed her lip as she processed all that had happened during that few-second exchange. Rage colored her features as she audibly ground her teeth. She didn't know to what extent the enemy had discovered their secrets. She couldn't tell how much the King of Ruin knew. Maybe it was just a coincidence? Or maybe he exploited her greatest weakness, knowing full well what he was doing.

"Master! What should I do?! Tell me! Direct me, Game Master!!" she cried out to him telepathically.

The Game Master did not respond. Did the sudden turn of events rattle him? Or was he just thinking up their next plan? Either way, Erakino thought giving their opponent time was a bad idea.

She glanced down at the entity that made her blood run cold—the King of Ruin. Was he dead? Was he alive? Was he a zombie? She couldn't tell anymore. Her pale face was reflected in his lifeless eyes. She couldn't shake the feeling that endless darkness beyond her comprehension flickered within those nebulous eyes.

"Haaa...! Haa...!" she panted some more. "A-Ahahaha! T-Too b-bad, s-so sad! Th-Thought you got us there, didn't'ja? Your counterattack ended in big fat failure~♪! Poor, poor baby~♪! Ahahahaa! ...Haa...haa!!" Erakino retreated a step as she squeezed out dry laughter between her gasps for air. She only just realized she was trembling from fear. "Just die already, you piece of shit!!!!"

“Your Majesty!!!”

She resorted to violence, pure and simple, to vent her anger. Erakino hadn't once taken direct action before now, but she ran up and kicked Takuto, lying in that pool of blood, with all her strength to release the storm of emotions brewing within her. There was a loud crash as the king's body, worshipped by the Dark Elves and darkness itself, went flying and crashed into the nearby stage created for the festival. The shattered wood frame came crumbling down on top of Takuto as if to stop the blood from gushing out of his chest.

“Erakino, calm down,” Fenne instructed. “Losing your head here will only bring about more problems. What is your Master telling you?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!! What the hell!!! He's not responding! Master! Master! What should I do?!” Erakino screamed hysterically, stamping her feet on the floor like a child.

Veiled Saint Fenne watched her tantrum with cold eyes. Meanwhile, Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials sidled close to her friend to show her support and raised her Holy Staff.

“It will be all right, Erakino. I was also taken by surprise by that attack. But I shall put an end to it all now... I entomb ye now in a blooming burial!”

With that brief incantation, a pillar of hellfire that reached the heavens engulfed the stage where Takuto's body was pinned. The pillar of hellfire swelled up like a spiraling tornado, spreading a torrent of hot air through the area and turning everything within its reach into ash.

“Y-Your Majesty! Someone stop that fire! Stop it!” Elder Moltar shouted.

“W-We can't! The force of the flames is too strong! You can't get close to it, Elder Moltar!”

The Dark Elves cried out in sorrow but were powerless before the Saint's purging flames. Its momentum rejected everything, making it difficult to even approach, let alone touch. Nothing could survive within the tornado of fire. Seeing that for herself, Erakino felt liberated from the confusion and panic overwhelming her. Knowing her friend lent her a hand calmed her more than anything else.

The torrent of flames continued to burn even after Saint Soalina ceased using her Miracle Artes. Looking at those crackling flames, Erakino was convinced that the battle was finally over.

“Erakino, the rest of his monsters are coming. We should retreat,” Fenne recommended.

Erakino hesitated. The creatures that served the King of Ruin were not their target. While it occurred to her that it’d be better to eradicate them all before they could become a problem in the future, it was too risky to stick around for long when they didn’t know how many or what kind of forces remained. There was also the potential mind control and other actions would fail without the Game Master to adjust the roll. Erakino didn’t enjoy wasting time picking off every last small fry, so it was time to leave.

Besides, they had achieved both their objectives. After almost botching their success once already, they were better off leaving while they were still ahead. They still had much to do to create their ideal country—they didn’t have time to waste on cleanup.

“...We good here, Soali?” Erakino asked.

“...Yes, we are. Evil has been vanquished. Nothing is alive within those flames.”

“You agree, Fenny?”

“Yes, I do. Nothing is alive within that pillar of fire. I can say with certainty that the King of Ruin has been purged by those holy flames.”

Both Saints agreed. There was no room for doubt if their superhuman senses confirmed the King of Ruin’s annihilation. And after much delay, Erakino finally received word from her master. At long last, she was able to act like herself again.

“Okay~♪! Master contacted me too. Sounds like we’re done here, girls! I’d hate to turn into a pumpkin, so we’d better get home before the clock strikes midnight, ehe~♪! With that, I bid you adio, Mynoghrans! Slurping Witch Erakino is checking out, baby~♪!”

Erakino and friends roll to escape—

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Outcome is a success regardless of roll.

Outcome: Erakino, Soalina, Fenne, and Atou succeed in escaping.

And just like that...Erakino and co's invasion ended in success due to mechanics unknown to everyone they left behind. Theirs was a sorcery that ignored all logic and the rules of nature to bring about the outcomes they wanted. The Dark Elves could only watch in horror as things drew to their inevitable conclusion.



A chilly lull settled over Dragontan in the wake of those tumultuous events.

“Aaah...it's over...all over...”

An elderly man stricken by grief stood alone in the town square dyed red by the setting sun. He was a man with a long history of achievements that earned him the title the Cursed Sage and who now stood as the last remaining pillar holding up Mynoghra's government.

“It's finished...we're all finished...”

He'd lost any trace of the vigor that kept him looking younger than his age as the oldest living Dark Elf, now reduced to a tottering old man about to crumble and wither away for good. His tears had completely dried up and no wise words or ingenious schemes came to mind. He fell to his knees, clinging to what was lost, stunned by how old and useless he'd truly become. He'd knelt in the exact spot where the holy flames had reduced everything to ash, including their king.

“Why did you leave us behind, Your Majesty?” he lamented. “Why didn't you take us with you...?”

It was a miracle he was even able to give orders and command others in his state. He had the town square cordoned off and the townspeople ordered to return home until further notice. Their state guests from Phon'kaven were confined to a single room assigned to them within Town Hall, making it evident Mynoghra was in no position to cater to their allies.

Strict gag orders were imposed on everyone who knew about the death of the King of Ruin and Hero Atou's Brainwashed state. No one uttered a peep about it. No one even fanned the flames of gossip.

The Dark Elves and Mynoghra's creatures were in turmoil due to the loss of their leader—they couldn't take satisfactory military action. It was all Elder Moltar could do just to get the situation under control and put their people on alert. He couldn't even fathom what to do next or what they should be doing now.

"Please guide us, Your Majesty..."

They had lost the ruler who made those decisions for them.

The divine flames unleashed by one of the intruders, a woman he believed to be a Saint, had to have been a Miracle Arte granted by a holy god. Not even the King of Ruin could've survived that pillar of hellfire that consumed all within its reach. Was he even alive before those flames touched him? He'd had his heart pierced straight through.

Even the most powerful, inexplicable beings die when death comes for them.

It was unclear whether death in the truest sense existed for a being like the King of Ruin, but Elder Moltar hadn't fallen so low as to hold on to the impossible hope that Takuto Ira would come out of that unscathed.

"I need to find His Majesty's remains..."

Elder Moltar rose on unsteady feet and staggered closer to the spot where his king was incinerated. The wood had completely carbonized, and the piles of debris on top of Takuto had been reduced to ashes. Perhaps it was a part of the Saint's powers, but flowers bloomed profusely in the burn site after the flames went out, as if they were left as an offering to the deceased, further unsettling Elder Moltar.

The man feared throughout the lands as the Cursed Sage sifted through the still-warm mountain of ashes and flowers, looking more like a vagabond than a wiseman. Truth be told, Mynoghra had already conducted a search for the king's remains. But the devastation was too great, and the sun was beginning to set, making it impossible to find anything.

Everyone who saw what was left of the spot where the king had been engulfed in flame lost all hope of finding him alive. They believed the Saint's hellfire had burned his corpse to nothing, consuming even the ashes. The Dark Elves had already drawn that embittered conclusion. Elder Moltar's actions were nothing more than an old man clinging to what had been lost—penance for failing to save his king.

“...No. This doesn't make sense...” Elder Moltar muttered under his breath after combing through the ash heap for a while. The light of lost wisdom gleamed in his tired eyes as he frantically rummaged through the debris in search of something. “It's not here! Nor here! Or here! It's nowhere...!”

He threw aside whatever he could get his hands on, leaving no rock unturned, his nails turning black with soot. He flung aside the torch he was carrying because it was dark out and scavenged in the dirt like a madman.

“Why? How? Impossible! There's nothing left of the king! Nothing!”

He could find logical reasons to explain why the King of Ruin's corpse had disappeared without a trace. It wasn't unreasonable to assume the king's fleshly body had been purged and reduced to nothing by the hellfire. Besides, they were talking about a transcendental entity known as the King of Ruin, who came from the Land of the Gods. It was entirely possible he wasn't made of blood and flesh like mortals. His death could come in the form of vanishing like a vapor in the wind.

But there was one strange factor that couldn't be so easily explained away. Every single piece of clothing and accessory Takuto Ira wore was made and gifted to him by the Dark Elves. Elder Moltar knew pieces of those items were made of metal, so it was strange that there wasn't even a trace among the rubble and ashes.

Elder Moltar frenetically dug up the spot he believed Takuto had been buried and burned. The search already conducted by over a hundred Dark Elves didn't turn up anything—not even a speck of gold. Still, Elder Moltar continued to dig around, as if digging for the answers to the questions arising within him.

“His Majesty...is alive.”

What reason led him to that conclusion? If he'd stopped to calmly think about

it, he would've realized how illogical he was being. It was quite conceivable they simply overlooked Takuto's charred items amid all the wreckage. Even more likely, the Saint's flames were so hot that even metal was reduced to nothingness. That would actually be the most accurate conclusion. They'd be better served to resume the search once the sun rose rather than in the dead of night with no light.

"His Majesty is alive! Alive, I say!"

Those were the shouts of a man who'd lost his mind. Elder Moltar was sinking into insanity. It was a pathetic end to an elderly sage who'd lost his ability to face reality.

"It's true! His Majesty shan't be beaten so easily! Not the King of Ruin we worship! Not the one who is destined to bring the end to this world! The apocalypse-bringer is above death!!"

Such was the senile babblings of an old man. No one believed him, they only thought he'd gone delusional. His was a wish for the impossible that lacked all sense and any grounds in reality.

Takuto Ira had been *annihilated*. Everyone who'd witnessed the tragedy that day could come to no other conclusion.

However...

"His Majesty...our king...King Takuto Ira is absolutely alive—"

A hand suddenly rested on Elder Moltar's shoulder.

"Correct you are, sage," the King of Ruin whispered in a penetratingly cold voice that seemed to reach in and caress the hearts of its listeners in an icy embrace.

"O-Oh-Ooooooooooooooooooooooh!" Elder Moltar spun around faster than any elderly man could and laid his eyes upon that chilling figure.

No dream or illusion could reproduce his wicked aura. There stood his king, the king they all believed in, completely unscathed. Calling it a miracle would be too weak. This was the one and only ending Elder Moltar knew would come to pass.

“O mighty King of Ruin, Takuto Ira!!”

“Lovely night, isn’t it, Elder Moltar?”

Elder Moltar’s mind and body reacted as one, and he prostrated before his king. With tears pouring down his sooty face, he rejoiced over Takuto’s safe return.

Mynoghra and the King of Ruin Takuto Ira were immortal yet.

“Indeed! Indeed! Made all the lovelier now that my undying wish has come true!” Elder Moltar bellowed much louder than intended, stirred by the powerful emotions of relief, shock, and exhilaration.

Takuto offered him a wry smile and held a finger to his lips to shush him.

The king was alive and well. Even after having his heart pierced and then being engulfed in hellfire, he yet lived.

Everyone was filled with despair and could think of nothing other than his death when they saw him struck through and consumed by fire. And yet here he stood, looking as if he hadn’t sustained any damage whatsoever. He was uninjured.

What divine magics brought about this miracle? Speculation was pointless. After all, it was impossible for a measly elderly Dark Elf sage to comprehend the depths of his king’s inscrutable powers.

It was already past midnight. Darkness loomed, and a few meager watch fires dimly illuminated the area. Silence reigned as though the whole town was in mourning over the chaos and tragedy of the daytime hour.

Elder Moltar knelt in silence, awaiting his king’s orders. His role was to act as the hands and feet of the one who would take control of everything—Takuto Ira. They were about to embark on an epic quest for revenge. As one of the key figures in the epic about to unfold, Elder Moltar was determined to bring down the hammer of wrath on those foolish invaders.

Elder Moltar lifted his gaze to look upon his king. Darkness so deep it had to have come from another realm paused to think with a very mortal gesture.

“I’ve got a lot of work ahead of me,” the King of Ruin, nay, Takuto Ira,

muttered to himself. The embodiment of the end of times loomed there in silence, plotting its next move—its vengeance would be most divine.

Chapter 17: Questions

IN the center of town, once shrouded in sadness and confusion, Elder Moltar experienced a wave of overwhelming emotions and indescribable shame. As one of the king's closest advisors, he had failed in every way during the enemy invasion. Not only had he allowed the enemy to get near His Majesty, he even stood by and did nothing as they attacked him. Nothing short of betrayal would've been more inexcusable than his failure.

"Your Majesty, I cannot apologize enough," he said, needing to apologize and atone for his mistakes. "Our incompetence led to this failure—"

"I don't need your apologies."

"...Yes, sire!"

Years of experience earned over his long lifespan helped Elder Moltar immediately grasp what his king was telling him through that statement. His ability to catch on quickly was one of the many reasons he directly served the king as a key player in Mynoghra's government. Put simply, King Takuto was saying: "Put your energy into resolving the issue rather than trying to find who to blame for it."

King Takuto was absolutely right. Apologies were a dime a dozen. Punishment could be meted out whenever the king wished. The results would be the same whether Elder Moltar worried about it or not, so he was better off putting his energy toward resolving their problems. The King of Ruin might've been alive and well, but Mynoghra was still experiencing a crisis. Things were still dire with the enemy out there with Atou under their spell.

"G-Give me any command, Your Majesty, and it will be done. Your vassals are prepared to offer our lives up to serve you," Elder Moltar declared, unable to take the silence a moment longer.

As painful as it was to admit, the Dark Elves were no match for their invaders.

Unfortunately, it was going to be extremely difficult to come up with countermeasures when they still didn't know what sorcery gave the enemy such an overwhelming victory. What good was it to enthusiastically offer up their lives when that did nothing to change the situation? What else could they do on their own against an illogical enemy?

Thus, the Dark Elves' only option was to rely on their king. To rely on the overwhelming power belonging to the King of Ruin.

Takuto silently nodded in response to Elder Moltar's plea. And then, he began to think about where to take his empire from there.

The current circumstances were far from favorable. The best outcome to come out of the whole thing was that Takuto was alive, and his opponent was none the wiser about it. However, he didn't feel much like rejoicing when Atou was still lost to him. Atou was the girl he trusted with all his mind and soul. In his past life, she was his favorite character with whom he spent years of his life campaigning. In this life, she was the most important person to him, and they had promised to achieve their dreams together.

The woman he cared about on so many levels had been ripped away from him. Stolen from under his nose.

Takuto felt more than a little skeptical about the fact he hadn't yet lost his cool over the whole thing and gone on a mad rampage, but he shoved those doubts aside and concentrated on solving the problem. And then he began to speak in an impassive voice...one that sounded like he was incapable of emotion or never had any to begin with.

“Letting them take Atou is the greatest blow. I didn't think there would be any way for someone to gain control of her like that. I thought the RPG mechanics were a pain...and now there's *this*.”

“Lady Atou is too important to our empire to lose. We'll do everything in our power to get her back.”

Making such a bold claim didn't discount the fact they lacked the power to make it happen. They might be able to corner their opponents using the combined powers of the Elfuur Sisters. But what good would that do them if they just ended up instantly Brainwashed like Atou, who was leaps and bounds

more powerful than the newly minted Witches?

They also had to consider they were up against an invisible force capable of repelling all their attacks. The odds of successfully recapturing Atou were slim if they just tried to march into enemy territory with an army and nothing more. Takuto was aware of that.

He simply nodded in response to Elder Moltar's declaration. The whole situation discomfited the elderly sage. Until now, his people had enjoyed living in peace by relying on King Takuto's benevolence, but when their king was in need, they couldn't do anything to help. But it wasn't just the mix of negative emotions he felt over their helplessness that made him uncomfortable.

Spirits... His rage is heavier than gravity...

Elder Moltar felt like a large boulder had been dropped on his back, the pressure exuding from Takuto was so great. Takuto's tone was calmer than a still lake, but the whirlpool of emotions he felt just under the surface was seeping out and dragging Elder Moltar under.

The King of Ruin is a transcendental being beyond mortal comprehension.

Elder Moltar always thought as much, but he was starting to doubt his own understanding when faced with Takuto Ira in his current state.

Silence fell over them.

Darkness thicker than a starless night and more nebulous than the black ocean depths enveloped Takuto, and to Elder Moltar's eyes, he felt like he was staring into the abyss through a dimensional rift.

Takuto Ira's safe return should be the most joyous occasion. However, Elder Moltar couldn't stop shaking with fear.

A few minutes passed in what felt like an eternity.

Takuto gathered his thoughts during that time and quietly looked at Elder Moltar. Then he lifted his gaze to the sky to confirm the waning moon before crisply laying out his plan to get Atou back and enact revenge on the invaders.

"My first orders for you are to keep my existence a secret, okay? I don't mind if you let a select few people in on it, such as Gia and Emle, but no one

else.”

“B-But, Your Majesty! Your people are in mourning! They may not recover mentally if we don’t inform them of your safety!” Elder Moltar promptly objected.

Under normal circumstances, the only correct answer would’ve been “Yes, sire,” but the situation was too grave not to object. The Dark Elves and Mynoghra’s unique creatures were reeling from shock over the loss of their king. Mynoghra’s inhuman units didn’t really experience emotions the same way, but the Dark Elves’ depression couldn’t be overlooked. If things were allowed to stay this way, they risked domestic turmoil from people acting out of desperation. Elder Moltar thought it wisest to make the king’s well-being known as soon as possible to prevent issues from arising.

“I know. Don’t worry. I don’t need long,” Takuto reassured the old man. **“I’d say keep it under wraps for...a few days at most. I just need a little time for my plans to work.”**

“I believe I can manage that, Your Majesty...” Elder Moltar said, a burden lifting from his shoulders.

From that brief explanation, Elder Moltar determined his ruler wanted time to work out his strategy. Grasping and controlling the flow of information is critical during times of confusion. Announcing the king’s survival would only pour fuel on the confusion, which was the last thing they wanted when they still didn’t have a firm grasp on who they were up against. There was no telling where their spies or Brainwashed drones had infiltrated.

Mynoghra would lose the upper hand if word of the king surviving leaked. Their enemies still believed the King of Ruin was dead. They needed to make the most of that advantage.

“Good. Glad to hear that.”

“I-Is there nothing else we can do for you? We will do everything in our power to fulfill your orders.”

“Hm, yeah, I guess there is something else I need from you specifically, Elder Moltar. I want to speak with the Elfuur Sisters first. I assume they’re

sleeping?”

Elder Moltar had informed the twins about what had happened to their king. He'd notified them through a messenger, so he didn't know how they'd reacted to the news, but there was no way they weren't on edge and ready to lash out. They were the last elite fighting force left in Mynoghra. Their importance just skyrocketed.

“It's kind of late to put them to work, but it's the perfect time of month.”

A waning moon hung high in the sky.

Night was their hour.



NIGHT turned to day and Dragontan welcomed the morning. Elder Moltar accompanied Gia and Emle to one of the meeting rooms in Town Hall at first light. After their king requested to speak with the Elfuur Sisters in private, he sequestered himself in the meeting room.

During that time, Elder Moltar busied himself informing Mynoghra's empire-management council of the news and laying the groundwork for them to decide their next move. He then planned to discuss everything with Takuto and the council members after having established a solid grasp on the state of things domestically, but...

“Wha?! What the seven Saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiintssssssssss?!” Elder Moltar's shriek echoed piercingly through the building.

The situation he faced was completely different from what he'd imagined coming there, and above all, it was absolutely unforgivable. He trembled uncontrollably, his mouth shutting and closing like a fish out of water as he struggled to come to grips with reality. Gia and Emle stared wide-eyed in response to the same news.

Twin sisters Caria and Maria watched their reactions like they had expected as much.

“I-Is what you just said true? His Majesty set out on his own?!”

The news was this: the King of Ruin had set out to rescue Atou from the Holy

Kingdom of Qualia *alone*.

The twins nodded profusely in response to Elder Moltar's stupefied question.

This was exactly why Takuto chose to only consult the twins last night. Having already decided the general gist of his strategy, he explained everything to the sleepy girls at the speed of a bullet and quickly left town. It was a very unconventional choice that no one could've predicted.

"Wh-Why didn't you tell me?! His Majesty must never leave without a retinue!! Even you girls must understand that!"

The girls were promptly subjected to a scolding. Naturally even the Elfuur Sisters understood and agreed with Elder Moltar. They had warned Takuto of the dangers and tried to stop him, saying he was being reckless and was walking into a trap. But the king had staunchly decided to launch a solo attack. He would not be dissuaded from marching into the heart of enemy territory alone.

"His Majesty said he's gonna show everybody how awesome possum he is!" Maria said.

"We also warned him against it, but we can't disobey orders," Caria pointed out. "He forbade us from telling anyone. Told us we have to keep quiet till morning."

"It's the duty of a loyal vassal to disobey orders and advise their king against his own stupidity!!"

The twins covered their ears with both hands to protect them from Elder Moltar's explosive shouting. They knew this was coming. They dreaded this inevitable moment.

They believed King Takuto's blindsiding strategy had a certain degree of merit. And merit or no merit, this was the king's decision—no one in this world had the authority to tell him no.

However, his plans had a decisive and fatal flaw: the twins would receive all the flak for following his orders. Caria still harbored a grudge against Takuto for dismissing her complaints on that front with a casual "Just do your best to make it work." However, the twins must've gotten through to him to a degree, because he'd prepared an impromptu gimmick they could use to take the heat

off of them.

“Caria, Caria, now’s the time to whip it out!”

“You’ve got it, Big Sista!”

Caria pulled a piece of note paper out of her pocket at Maria’s signal.

“Are you girls listening to me?!” Elder Moltar screeched, about to launch into another deafening tirade, but he shut his mouth when Caria told him it was a message from King Takuto.

“I’ve got a riddle for Grandpa Moltar from His Majesty,” she said.

“His Majesty said it’s very important, so everybody needs to put their heads together to solve it!” Maria added.

Caria placed the paper on the table so everyone could see it. The contents were...just as baffling as everything else that day.

“What the Saints?!” Gia sputtered.

“How...?” Emle stared at it in disbelief while Elder Moltar gasped.

Scribbled on the paper was a riddle asking them to solve how King Takuto survived. Written on it were the following seven true statements in the king’s own words:

- 1. I took a direct hit from Atou’s attack and died on the spot.*
- 2. Saint Soalina’s flames also caused my death.*
- 3. I don’t have any recovery skills to heal my injuries.*
- 4. It was me, not a body double, an alter ego, another organism, or an illusion that was attacked.*
- 5. I didn’t die and resurrect or loop.*
- 6. I escaped this crisis without the intervention of a third party.*
- 7. All of these events actually happened.*

“‘So, how did I survive?’ Figuring this out is your homework,” Caria said.

“Once you solve the riddle, we’ll give you His Majesty’s orders.”

A hush fell over them. Silence was the only natural reaction to this unbelievable information.

Elder Moltar hadn't whiled the night away without contemplating how the King of Ruin had made it out of the day's events unscathed. He'd run through various theories about what methods could've gotten Takuto out of that pinch while he took care of his workload before sunrise. But Takuto's list disproved each and every theory he'd come up with, leaving Elder Moltar baffled by the impossibility of it all.

The wisest sage had been reduced to such a state, so obviously, both Gia and Emle frowned as they stared at the words on that piece of paper.

"Booyah, they're quiet!" Maria said telepathically to Caria.

"Let's slip out before they notice, Big Sista."

"Right foot, left foot, quiet foot~♪!"

This was the ultimate counter Takuto had given the twins. Presenting this riddle to the council members was guaranteed to buy them some time. With time, Elder Moltar's indignation should subside, and his calmness would return. Once it did, they could discuss how to handle what was to come rather than waste time on what had already passed. The twins could then convey the king's orders to them.

Yes, the Elfuur Sisters had received various instructions from Takuto. They weren't ordered to sit and wait for the results of his invasion. On the contrary, they had a mountain of tasks to get done within a set amount of time. They had much to do to fulfill their side of King Takuto's stunning Operation Rescue Atou ...

The twins snuck out of the meeting room and dashed away at full speed.

"Things are going to get festive!" Maria exclaimed as they raced down the hallway.

"They sure are. Everybody'll get to see for themselves... His Majesty's true power."

Everyone was in for the shock of their lives. And they were going to learn that

the King of Ruin was not just a kindhearted, magnanimous ruler who doted on his people. Rather that he truly was the one destined to bring about the end of the world...

The twins' first reaction when they heard of the king's death was: "Impossible." The King of Ruin couldn't die. He'd promised to resurrect their mother—there was no way he'd bite the dust. Most of all, their supernatural intuition as Heroes assured them King Takuto couldn't die.

It was time for them to prepare what Takuto had asked of them. The Elfuur Sisters busied themselves preparing their side of the operation.

Term: Tabletop RPG (TRPG)

A tabletop role-playing game, also known as a pen-and-paper role-playing game, is an interactive table game that often uses a pen, paper, and dice to advance a storyline/ scenario based on a rulebook.

The basic gameplay consists of multiple players enjoying an existing or original scenario based on a rulebook that describes the game world, its inhabitants, and detailed rules.

In most games, a specially designated player, typically called the game master (**GM**), proceeds over the session, describing the game world and the outcomes of the players' actions. The game's outcomes proceed according to the **Game Master's** decisions.

In the past, TRPGs were played face-to-face using pen and paper, but in recent years, with the development of the Internet, it's become possible to play online. Being able to play on the computer has increased the number of players due to the ease of gathering online and the convenience of calculating and recording everything digitally.

Chapter 18: The King of Ruin

<Holy Kingdom of Qualia's Southern Assembly, St. Amritate Cathedral>

ERAKINO and the two Saints were going over their results from the last battle in St. Amritate Cathedral, which served as their base of operations.

"We succeeded in securing Witch Atou," Fenne said. "We also eliminated the King of Ruin, so suffice to say, we achieved the best possible results despite a few hiccups along the way."

"We did. We now know we made the right choice going after Mynoghra," Soalina agreed. "No one could have imagined Mynoghra's Witch harbored such illogical abilities..."

The Brainwashed status inflicted by Slurp allowed Erakino to change her target's affiliation to her own, putting the target under her complete control. They had uncovered a great deal of Mynoghra's secrets by interrogating Atou. Of course, she offered nothing freely, so they had to guess at what questions to ask. In other words, they gained access to all the information Takuto Ira and Atou were privy to, including their backgrounds, achievements, and worst of all, knowledge of the game *Eternal Nations*. All that information was equal parts overwhelming and astonishing.

"Seriously! What kinda overpowered ability lets you steal skills from the enemies you kill? That shoulda been nerfed by the devs! And they coulda summoned even more of these Heroes, right? Man, Soali, your decision to get rid of 'em first was on the money!" Erakino joked around, her gaze trained on a dead-eyed Atou standing motionlessly beside her.

Atou's mind was completely under Erakino's control. She didn't even try to release a piece of her mind to have a conversation like she had with Soalina. She treated Atou like a tool, a puppet, from the moment she gained control. She wasn't going to risk giving the Sludge Witch an inch after nearly getting her brains impaled on a tentacle. Besides, both Saints staunchly advised her against

it, insisting there was no way to win Atou over.

Atou's undying loyalty to the King of Ruin was the real deal. Even if she was incapable of breaking loose and killing them, they'd be in for a round of getting cursed out if they gave her back even a fraction of control.

"We've finished dealing with the King of Ruin and his vanguard witch. The Dark Elves still worry me, though. There's no telling what Mynoghra's remaining forces will do next. What do you plan to do about them, Erakino?" Fenne asked, bringing potential problems to their attention, since the other two were too giddy over their last success to think that far ahead. She often kept people at arm's length, but her isolationist personality allowed her to calmly point out details regardless of what people thought of her.

Even Erakino found herself approving of Fenne and how she drew attention to things they hadn't noticed, so she seriously engaged in those conversations.

"Oh, we've got that covered already! Master placed the enemy characters he's summoned in the area between the Southern Province and Dragontan—uh, the Dark Continent, was it?"

"You mean the unintelligent monsters you told us about before?"

Tabletop role-playing games are full of enemy characters to make the campaigns more entertaining. These enemies can be anything from a goblin waiting for the adventurer in a cave or a dragon protecting unimaginable treasures deep in the mountains. The game master has the authority to play these enemy characters whenever they want to within a campaign, especially if they are a storyteller who likes to entertain their players with unexpected twists. Every twist and turn is up to the game master. It's also up to the game master to deploy these characters to defend certain story elements from the players.

"Will they be strong enough?" Soalina asked. "We could also deploy some of our Paladins to be safe..."

"Nah. No need, Soali! I mean, we can't have our lovely Paladins wasting their time cleaning up small fry! Master's monsters are more than enough to handle a few of Santa's elves~♪!"

In all actuality, the Game Master had placed the largest number of monsters at the highest levels allowed in his campaign. Given the limited management resources a TRPG game master has, they had to deal with certain drawbacks, such as only being able to deploy general monsters existing within the campaign's rulebook rather than creating a unique monster with special settings. They didn't have the ability to check on the monsters or control them from a distance, but that didn't matter when they'd set them loose in the Dark Continent.

The monsters could handle whoever came from the south. The Southern Province's Paladin Order had more important matters to attend to.

"That's true... What with seceding from Qualia, we need to keep our Paladins as close to home as possible," Soalina agreed.

Defeating the King of Ruin was the achievement upon which they were founding their new empire. They still didn't know what kind of external interference was awaiting them, so they wanted to keep as many Paladins on hand as possible to protect their new country.

"The King of Ruin is no more. The Dark Elves are too powerless to rise up and threaten our country even if we leave them to their own devices," Soalina concluded.

"True... We can only hope they get absorbed into Phon'kaven and cease to be a separate faction. We just don't have the time to deal with them right now," Fenne agreed.

None of them realized they'd already disregarded Mynoghra as a finished problem.

"...Which means it's finally time..."

"Yes, it is, Saint Fenne," Soalina replied.

They needed to direct their attention toward the next step that would take them closer to achieving their dreams. The Southern Province was in a precarious situation. Central had already learned about the numerous acts of political overreach and authoritarian purges that had been carried out thus far, and it was no longer possible for them to fend off an investigation with bribes.

A barrage of inquiries requesting an explanation bombarded them daily, driving the messengers crazy.

Since they had already used and abused their authority as Saints to stop Central from conducting any audits, it would only be a matter of time before Central took equally heavy-handed measures to put them in their place. They wanted a little more time to lay the groundwork for their new country. But time wasn't on their side.

The time had finally come for them to secede from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and establish an independent country truly blessed by Arlos.

"We're out of time," Soalina said. "I would like to announce our secession from Qualia and the establishment of our new empire on the next blessed day of rest."

Yet another wheel of fate was being set in motion. The Saints and Witch pushed on toward their dreams, not knowing what awaited them.

"Eh, we got nothin' to worry about, ladies!" Erakino exclaimed. "We've got the ultimate tag team of Eraki, Soali, and Fenny on the job! And we've even got Atouy to do our bidding, too!"

"Yes. Yes, that's absolutely right, Erakino," Soalina responded. "Everything will go perfectly if we work together. No one in this world can stop you and me."

"Things are going to get busy," Fenne interjected. "Come along. Let's move into phase two."

The women stood up. They had a staggering amount of work to do. They needed to fill in High Paladin Fjord Vysterk, Captain of the Southern Province Paladins, and they also needed to hastily notify all the clergy involved in the provincial government. They also needed to work behind the scenes to win over trustworthy businesses in every sector, and then there was the extensive paperwork waiting for them.

Oh, I just realized we haven't even decided what to call our country yet, Soalina giggled, surprised they were too busy to think of a name. Erakino was giving her a funny look for suddenly laughing, so she promptly brought up the subject.



WIND pressure from closing the door behind them caused one of the documents on the table to fall to the floor in the meeting room. Written in sloppy handwriting on brand new parchment was a transcription from *The Ancient Saints’ Book of Oracles*. Soalina had transcribed the section herself to show it to Erakino. However, when she finally did show it to Erakino, her reaction was less than satisfactory. She’d appraised the prophecy as “A confusing poem that doesn’t make a lick of sense.”

In the end, Erakino and the Game Master determined it was insubstantial and lacked bearing on their endeavors, so it was tragically left aside.

With what intentions did the Holy God bestow that poetic prophecy upon his Saints? It mattered not to the women who’d already destroyed the King of Ruin, and so that piece of paper vanished along with their wariness.



<Dark Continent, halfway point between Dragontan and the Holy Kingdom of Qualia’s Southern Province>

“HMM~hmm~hmm~hmm~♪”

A man walked through the barren wasteland humming to himself. The tune he hummed belonged to a song unlike any musical stylings in this world. It was the type of song that would immediately catch the attention of anyone who knew it when they heard it.

The song in question: Mynoghra’s theme song “The King of Ruin” from *Eternal Nations*.

Takuto had heard this theme song more than any other in both lifetimes. It accompanied him as he overran countless empires and worlds, reigning supreme time and time again. He hummed that tune, nostalgic for the glory days made possible with his own wit.

As he went on his way, a mountain of dust suddenly appeared, and a monster sprung out to block his path.

“HISSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!”

“...Blegh.”

Leathery bat wings flapped on the back of a giant serpent standing over thirty feet tall. This magical beast brimming with raw power and bloodlust had emerged from the ground—and it wasn’t alone. A floating orb of flesh with a large mouth, a single central eye, and many smaller eyestalks on top joined the winged serpent along with a lizard with a face and fangs reminiscent of deep-sea fish.

These monsters, who didn’t look like they were of this world, stared at Takuto with gleaming, unintelligent eyes. There was nowhere to run. The monsters followed their instincts and rushed to devour Takuto.

Takuto merely glared at the fools who dared stand in his way.



ALL the preparations to establish a new empire proceeded without a hitch. Sure, Central and the other provinces eyed them with suspicion. They were undoubtedly considering what iron-fisted measures to take against the Southern Province, which wouldn’t respond to any of their inquiries.

But this was the Holy Kingdom of Qualia they were dealing with—an antiquated empire bogged down by gridlock politics and a habit of never passing statutes. With their government, they would be forced to restlessly look on and wait to dole out a response after the Southern Province had already acted. The Southern Province had a speedy legislature on its side with its *magically* unified government.

And now, the day of reckoning had finally come. The blessed day of rest set aside by the Holy God.

Since Saint Soalina had notified the provincial government in advance that she was going to give an important announcement on this day, the area around St. Amritate Cathedral overflowed with crowds that spilled over into the streets surrounding the main plaza.

Soalina emerged onto the cathedral’s balcony and addressed the people in a voice that mystically reached everyone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have good news to share with you. I, Saint Soalina,

along with Saint Fenne, have succeeded in eradicating the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira, whose evil existence was prophesized in *The Ancient Saints' Book of Oracles*."

The crowd stirred. *The Ancient Saints' Book of Oracles* was often the source of rumors. On the other hand, not every believer was aware of its existence, so only a few people correctly understood what Soalina meant. But with a title as evil-sounding as the King of Ruin, even those out of the loop reeled in shock at the Saint's announcement.

Since the dawn of time, Holy God Arlos and his believers have been fighting against a myriad of enemies. Things had been more peaceful in recent years, but unspeakably terrifying beings ran rampant during the Mythological Era, and every generation since had been taught through the holy book that their god had purged the enemy.

The people took Saint Soalina's announcement to mean the second coming of the Mythological Era was upon them and that she had squashed the seeds of ruin before they could take root.

"It was no easy feat. The King of Ruin possesses tremendous power, and if left to his own devices, he would've inevitably become a being even we could do nothing about. It is nothing short of a miracle that we defeated him."

Cries of awe rose from the crowd. No one, not one, doubted her. Such was the tremendous influence the Saints held over the masses. And beyond that, everyone was under the strong impression that liars wouldn't be chosen as god's Saints.

"God's will was done."

Words of praise for the two Saints and prayers of gratitude toward Arlos filled the air. The crowd put their absolute trust in Saint Soalina, who'd rebuilt the Southern Province in a short amount of time and overthrew even the mythical King of Ruin.

"Yes, everything I have done is as God wills. Until now, I have tried to right the injustices that plague this province, to punish the wicked who disobey God. I pride myself on the efforts I have put into trying to make this province a better place for her people. Therefore, I understand that this has been a test from

God, and at the same time, it is His divine revelation to establish a country that truly embodies His will.”

Anyone who listened closely would hear the inconsistencies in her illogical statements. But was there really anything logical about their religion in the first place? There was always something fanatical about it, and conversely, it can be said by outsiders that religions exist because they share values that cannot be explained by reason or logic.

In the end, thunderous applause and praise was the only response.

“In order to bring about a welcoming peace where no one has to fear the morrow...” Soalina began.

The crowd had reached peak enthusiasm. It was an inescapable fact that the injustices of a few corrupt religious leaders had taken a heavy toll on the masses. Soalina’s Great Purge had gotten rid of most of them, leaving only clergy who truly cared for the people to take their place, but the people hadn’t forgotten their trauma or fear.

Everyone wondered not if but when they would be forced to return to those miserable days. They were fearfully waiting for the moment when those wicked clergy, masters of intrigue and trickery, would return to their positions of power and oppress them again.

“We have removed a great threat to our peace from this world. It is upon this achievement of eradicating the King of Ruin per God’s holy command that...” With all the fear they felt, Saint Soalina’s words were a boon to the people. “...I hereby declare the Southern Province’s secession from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and the establishment of a new empire in Arlos’s name: the Divine Nation of Lenea! Holy God Arlos, please guide your followers!”

The people gave a standing ovation and extolled Arlos’s name in sonorous voices. They then witnessed a miracle before their very eyes.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Oh, what a sight to behold!

Shafts of light shine down from the heavens to bless Saint Soalina's proclamation.

Cheers erupted from the animated crowd.

A solemn and divine light broke through the clouds. It illuminated St. Amritate Cathedral with surreal brilliance and holiness and warmly enveloped Soalina in its radiance.

The people were moved to the point of tranquility, their wild enthusiasm giving way to awed silence. God very rarely showed His miracles. Throughout Qualia's history, there have been very few examples of Arlos directly using miracles. Hence why Saints who could receive His oracles were considered extremely important and were granted the highest authority.

The people of the Southern Province had just witnessed one of those once-in-a-millennium heavenly miracles from God.

A nation whose founding is blessed by God himself. The people could only weep with gratitude for being allowed to witness the first page of a new legend. Just how inspiring would it have been for these people who lived and died by God's word? Everyone in the crowd thanked their lucky stars for being able to come to the cathedral on this day, and they vowed to pass on the story for generations...none the wiser that their so-called miracle was the work of the *ungodly*.



THE Holy Kingdom of Qualia was shaken to its foundation. First, they learned of the disaffection of two of their invaluable Saints: Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne. Then there was news of the King of Ruin from their *Book of Oracles* being destroyed, leading to the founding of a new empire. The worst news of all pertained to the manifestation of one of God's miracles.

The wheels of history in the making were set into high gear.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

The establishment of a new empire has been declared:
Divine Nation of Lenea.

~Peace will come to all living beings in the name of God.

~Sorrow and suffering are now a thing of the past.

~True justice, God's love, exists here.

OK

The Ancient Saints' Book of Oracles: Passage on the King of Ruin Tremble in fear of the King of Ruin.

It is a calamity that destroys the world.

The harbinger of death and terror.

It is a raging inferno.

A ruthless blizzard and explosive thunderstorm.

It is blood and blade. Screams and death throes.

Quiver in fear of the King of Ruin.

It is far from you.

And near to you.

It is the sun that shines at dawn.

The all-encompassing night.

It is your enemy.

Your best friend, too.

Shudder in fear of the King of Ruin.

It is the darkness of the beginning.

iT iS YOU.



AROUND the time a certain Witch and her two Saints had their dearest wish come true and were brimming with hope, Takuto was apologizing profusely to Elder Moltar through their telepathic connection.

“Like I said, I’m sorry! Don’t be so mad... Yeah, uh-huh. This is all part of the plan. Whoa, don’t start weeping on me for real! I’m safe! Totally in one piece! Everything’s all good here.”

His nature as a Japanese citizen had him bowing over and over again as he tried to appease the elderly sage lecturing his ear off. Perhaps he felt a bit guilty about the way he handled things too, because he set his kingly dignity aside to

sit through his elder's scolding. He couldn't come out strong when he made an old man cry. There was a limit to how awkward and uncomfortable a situation could be.

While Takuto was internally reflecting on the fact he should've laid better groundwork for his departure, the conversation, which mostly consisted of equal parts lamentation and remonstration, finally ended.

"Yeah. I know. I'll contact you after I settle things on this side. Take care of prepping everything just as the twins told you."

Apparently, Elder Moltar couldn't solve the riddle Takuto had left for him, but the twins did pass along Takuto's orders. Takuto was relieved arrangements were being made without delay. Now it was his turn to act. He could just adjust his approach as needed on the spot. He thought it'd be fun to tell Elder Moltar the riddle's answer when it was time to make things happen.

Takuto cut contact with Elder Moltar and let out a small sigh.

"...Time for business," he said to himself, glancing over his shoulder.

What was reflected there could only be described as a child's playground from hell. Monsters had been crushed, torn apart, and chopped to bits. Blood and gore painted the surroundings, and the ground was covered in lumps of charred flesh that had been lacerated and bruised, making one wonder what kind of attack was used. It was a tragic mess that made it impossible to tell what the original shape of anything was anymore.

"Batwing Coatl, Gazer, Devourer..." Takuto muttered, determining the types of monsters from the red, green, and purple blood splatter. "They look like they're from Elemental Ward 4th Edition..."

Only a handful of people in this world would understand what he meant. Aside from Takuto, only Erakino and her Game Master knew. The campaign title the Slurping Witch didn't even share with her dear new friend for fear of it getting out was just uttered by the one who bore the name King of Ruin. The four little words no one could know was discovered by the last person they wanted to know.

"Hmm~hmm~hmm~hmm~♪"

Takuto turned on his heel and moved forward, humming that familiar song. Darkness blacker than the deepest void of nightmares was almost upon the holy empire.



Afterword

LONG time no see. Fehu Kazuno here.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra Volume 4*.

What did you think this time? I sure hope this volume made you think, “*I want to read the next volume. NOW!*”

Unfortunately, despite this being the fourth volume, I just can’t seem to think of anything to write in the Afterword. Now, if this was Twitter, I could think of a million things to write!! You see, the thing about Afterwords is that you don’t want them to affect the feeling that’s left with the reader after the main story. That’s what makes writing them such a struggle.

Oh, by the way, this is my Twitter handle: @Fehu_apkgm

I pop on and off to Tweet about things at random, so if you have any interest in the author of this series, please check it out.

Okay, back to the point, this fourth volume was basically meant to lay the groundwork for the next volume. From here, things get extra exciting until they reach the ultimate climax. Speaking on behalf of everyone who worked on this book, we would be more than thrilled if you look forward to the next volume and continue to support the series!

Well, I was limited to only one page for this Afterword, so forgive me for cramming the acknowledgments in here.

I want to extend my thanks to Jun, the illustrator, GC Novels’ editing department, my editor, the proofreaders, the design company, everyone else, and last but not least, you, the reader. Until next time.

CONGRATULATIONS
ON MYNOGHRA
VOLUME 4!





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