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Dukedom of Schtraut and Surrounding Areas

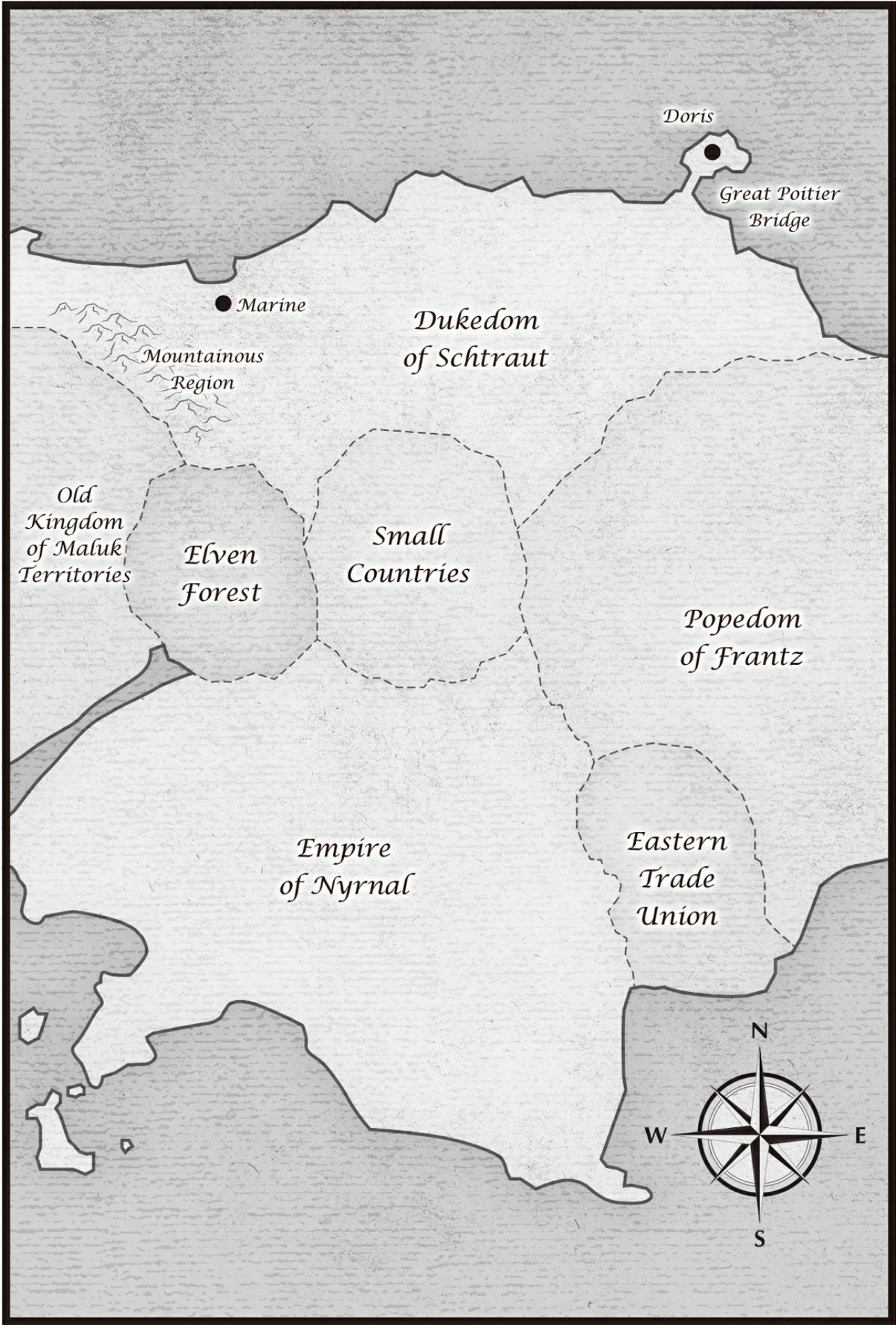


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To the Northern Trade Nation

“I think our next step should be to sneak into the Dukedom of Schtraut,” I declared over breakfast.

The ones who had prepared my breakfast were our captives from the Kingdom of Maluk. They did this for me, their most hated nemesis, because of the Parasite Swarms controlling their bodies. It was admittedly ill-natured of me to enslave them this way, but considering everything the Kingdom of Maluk had done, it was their just desserts.

My meal this morning was bacon and eggs with salad and a little bread on the side. Not a luxurious breakfast by any means, but the ingredients had all been grown and raised by the elves.

“The Dukedom of Schtraut?” asked Sérignan, who was in my company.

“Yep. The Dukedom is located in a position that’s easy for us to attack. There’s a mountainous region between us, but it’s still easier than attacking the Frantz Popedom or the Empire of Nyrnal.”

If we were to attack one of those two countries, we’d need to cross through the elven forest, where our base was, to reach them. And since the elves were under our protection, I didn’t want to turn their forest into a battlefield. It just wouldn’t be right.

There was one other path we could take to attack Nyrnal—crossing over a large river called the Themel. Even if we had the Worker Swarms build a bridge across it, however, this manner of invasion would be a challenge.

It was for these reasons I had set my sights on the Dukedom of Schtraut.

The Dukedom was northeast of the Kingdom of Maluk’s territory and would require crossing a mountainous region to get there. But once that was done with, invading it would be easy. With the Dukedom suppressed, it would be much easier for us to attack the Popedom of Frantz. All in all, it was a very attractive target.

“The people of Schtraut haven’t wronged us yet, but if we don’t put them in their place now, we may soon find ourselves fighting in our own territory. Many elves and Swarms would be lost in the battle. We should control their country as quickly as possible.”

Up until now, my policy was to strike back only when someone picked a fight with us... but this time, I was planning a preemptive attack. The Dukedom of Schtraut hadn’t crossed us, but its position was problematic; the land was a direct path into the Arachnea’s territory. If the people of Schtraut had anything to curse for their impending misfortune, it would have to be the land they had chosen to settle in.

“As you wish, Your Majesty. Then I will go and investigate,” Sérignan said and nodded, seemingly convinced.

“I’ll come with you.”

“But it’s dangerous! The Dukedom is effectively enemy territory!”

“Even I want to be surrounded by humans every now and then. And I joined you when we went into Leen, remember?”

Being surrounded by human remains—well, more like globs of flesh—was causing me to forget what it was like to interact with actual living people. I thought that being around humans might provide some sort of social rehabilitation.

“Besides, I want to see things with my own eyes. I might be able to see everything through the collective consciousness, but I want to witness it for myself, just to be safe. Additionally, I want to be there for any negotiations.”

Right, our objective wasn’t to simply scout out the Dukedom. It was to scout, get a grasp on the situation, *and* try to negotiate with the right people. I might have made the Dukedom of Schtraut my target, but that wasn’t to say there was no room for negotiation. I wanted to determine whether our nation of monsters could interact with other countries as an equal. If nothing else, the potential for diplomacy was there.

“But still, it’s hardly safe,” Sérignan protested.

“Which is why I have you to help me. Oh, Sérignan, my dear knight... You’ll

protect me no matter what, right?”

“Of course! By your will, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan was fiercely loyal and quite devoted to me, as flawed a mistress as I was.

“Erm, what should I do?” piped Lysa, joining in on the conversation.

“You should come with us, too. You can use Mimesis, and your skill with a bow has gotten better, right?”

“Yes, I can pull harder strings than I’ve ever been able to before. I think my accuracy’s gone up, too!”

Now that Lysa had become a Swarm, her muscles were much stronger, which allowed her to pull the strings of unbelievably large bows. I had seen her practice before—the sight of arrows the size of ballista bolts hitting their marks dead center from 300 meters away was astonishing.

“And we’ll probably need one more thing to round out our forces here.”

No sooner had I uttered the words than a man walked into the room. At first glance, he looked like one of the people from the Kingdom of Maluk, but that wasn’t the case.

The man’s face was completely unfamiliar, and he looked to be about thirty years old.

“Who is this man?” Sérignan asked, directing a suspicious glare in his direction.

“Allow me to introduce him to you.” I gestured toward him. “This here is a Masquerade Swarm.”

In terms of fighting power, a Masquerade Swarm was the same as a Ripper Swarm, but it had double the creation cost. In exchange, however, it had a very important ability.

“Masquerade Swarm, undo your Mimesis.”

At my order, the man’s face split in half, revealing two massive fangs. Insectile legs extended out from his back, and his—or rather, its legs turned into a pair of

venomous stingers. With its transformation complete, it stood before us in the unmistakable form of a Swarm.

“Aaah! H-He was a Swarm?!” Lysa exclaimed.

“That’s right, except he’s a Swarm capable of using Mimesis. It’s a special unit capable of sneaking into enemy territory disguised as another faction’s worker unit and causing disruption and chaos from the inside. Isn’t it just perfect for our next mission?”

The Masquerade Swarm’s special ability was Mimesis. Sérignan and Lysa could also use it, of course, but the only *generic* units capable of using Mimesis were Masquerade Swarms.

As their name implied, they masqueraded as unarmed enemy units and infiltrated opponents’ bases, disrupting their operations with all sorts of attacks, including suicide bombing. This made them ideal for missions like our present one, during which it was necessary to sneak behind enemy lines.

“So, Sérignan, Lysa, myself, and the Masquerade Swarm will be infiltrating the Dukedom. We’ll investigate how the people of Schtraut lead their lives, what their political structure is, and what they’re currently trying to do. Naturally, we’ll also check their terrain. We’ll need to figure out the most appropriate way to march into their territory.”

We needed to prepare for a possible war with them, after all. Suppressing the Dukedom might be our stepping stone to reach the Popedom of Franz.

“How many Masquerade Swarms do we have?” Sérignan asked.

“This one will escort us. In addition, we’ll have sixteen detached squads of four Masquerade Swarms all sneak in as well. They’ll act as our support in case we need them. Anyway, we’ll play the part of refugees from the ruined Kingdom of Maluk to infiltrate the Dukedom. I’m not sure if they’ll accept us so easily, but it’s our best chance to cross the border.”

We had slaughtered nearly everyone from the Kingdom, and so we had no one to fabricate documents for us. If I had known this would happen, I would have had someone prepare some documents that allowed us passage to another country. Hindsight at its finest...

“Anyway, we’re setting out tonight. That way, we’ll reach Schtraut’s border tomorrow morning. Until then, prepare yourselves for our mission; do your best to look as much like refugees as possible.”

I had the Worker Swarms make me the shabbiest, most modest clothing possible, and they smeared mud all over Sérignan’s armor, much to her chagrin. Lysa wasn’t sure if she’d pass as a refugee from Maluk if it was obvious she was an elf, so she tied her hair in order to hide her ears.

The Masquerade Swarms donned clothes that had belonged to some of the Maluk citizens we turned into meatballs. Meanwhile, I set to work making whatever else we’d need for our mission. I created new Masquerade Swarms of varying genders and appearances in preparation for the task.

Luckily, we already had plenty of carriages. During our attacks on the various towns of Maluk, I took care to spare the carriages and horses in case we’d need them. I knew putting them aside would prove useful sooner or later.

Night fell soon enough, and it was time for us to depart.



Our small group left separately from the squads of Masquerade Swarms, but we all arrived at Schtraut’s border at the same time. A single paved road made it easy to pass through the mountainous region, and I made a mental note of it in case we needed to traverse it again later in greater numbers.

“Stop! Stop right there!”

When we reached the border, soldiers situated along the checkpoint approached our carriage.

“Yes, can we help you?” I asked, putting on a brilliant smile.

“Don’t play coy with me!” shouted a man who looked to be the leader of the border guard. “The Dukedom of Schtraut is beyond here! Do you have a passage permit?!”

“Yes, well... We have all fled the Kingdom of Maluk, sir, so we don’t have anything of the sort. Our country was destroyed so quickly, we... Oh, it took so much effort just to get here...” I choked, crocodile tears sliding down my

cheeks.

“Oh! Well, you don’t say! Yes, we’ve heard about what happened to the Kingdom. They say it was ruined by an army of monsters. The guild’s doing everything it can to look into it. We didn’t think there were any survivors, though. I’ll approve your passage with my authority as the chief of the border guard. I wish you the very best, young lady. I sincerely hope the Dukedom will become your second home.”

He then issued us a passage permit that would allow us to enter the nearest city. Frankly, I had planned the operation with the full intent of busting in with brute force, but thankfully it hadn’t come to that. After all, what if they had thought we were spies from Nyrnal?

Back in my world, many people felt refugees and their children grew too numerous too quickly, so they weren’t always permitted to cross borders. I had taken this world for a much colder, cutthroat sort of place than my own, so I was surprised to find the people here surprisingly kindhearted. Part of me hoped I wouldn’t have to order the border chief’s death.

I’ve had to kill too many people who showed me kindness already.

“Marine is the first city we’ll reach in the Dukedom; the map says it’s a port town. We’ll spend the day there and immediately start probing for information. Once we find an inn, we can leave our things there and get to investigating. You know what they say: time is money.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Our passage permit obviously included all the cities of Schtraut, so we merely paid a small toll during inspection before entering Marine, our first city in the Dukedom.

When people learned we were refugees from the Kingdom of Maluk, they showed us great sympathy, saying we were lucky to not have been devoured by monsters. That left me feeling a bit guilty.

“Look, Your Majesty, it’s the sea! The sea!”

“Yep, that’s the sea right there. Don’t get *too* excited, though, Lysa.”

Marine, as its name suggested, was a town built close to the ocean. It was near a gulf, and its houses dotted the sloping coast, giving the citizens a view of the trade ships sailing below. The abundance of ships was well beyond what we had seen in Maluk's port towns, standing as proof of how much this country had flourished in comparison.

"Sorry. It's just that... I've never seen the sea before."

"Figures. I mean, you *have* lived your whole life in the forest." I turned my gaze to the ocean. "The sea is vast and pretty, but it can also be very dangerous. It can swallow up and kill people all too easily."

"It's kind of like the Arachnea."

"Yes... It really is."

The sea is just as vast and wholly connected as the Arachnea. Once roused, it brings forth ruin, pulling everything down into its deep, dark embrace... What a striking comparison.

"Where should we rent rooms?" Sérignan asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"Normally, I wouldn't care where, but this time I'd like to sleep in a nice place... Somewhere with comfy beds and tasty food. This town doesn't seem to have a guide for tourists, so I have no idea where we'd find a three-star hotel or something like that."

"Naturally, a secure establishment would be preferable. We cannot allow any harm to befall you, Your Majesty. Shall I choose an inn for us?"

"Go for it, Sérignan. You're right, we shouldn't be complacent now that we're behind enemy lines. I kind of let my own excitement go to my head."

Traveling through the streets filled with passersby and looking at the serene cityscape made me relax a little *too* much, it seemed. This was potential enemy territory. I had to keep my eye on the gates, the walls, and the guards on patrol, considering I might end up laying siege to this city. Unfortunate as it may have been, we really didn't have the leisure to do anything as saccharine as gazing out at the ocean.

"Then I think that inn over there is a good choice, Your Majesty. It's large, and

we can easily situate Masquerade Swarms within and around the building. The surrounding area looks to be fairly safe as well.”

I looked at the inn Sérignan was pointing at. It was just one of many on the adjacent street, but this one in particular looked to be of the highest quality.

“Additionally, the rooms facing the sea should give us a view of the ocean,” she added.

“Thank you, Sérignan.”

Sérignan really was kind. I was lucky to have such a sweet woman as my very own knight.

The Adventurers' Guild

Once we had put all our belongings in rooms at the inn, we swiftly began our investigation of Marine. Frankly speaking, bringing down this city looked to be a cakewalk. The walls were built only as a precaution against smugglers, and there were very few men on patrol. Other than the soldiers walking about to keep the peace, the city's protection consisted of only a single company of men garrisoned along the walls.

None of them seemed to anticipate that this place could become a battlefield. Considering that their western neighbor had just fallen, I felt they were being careless to not even wonder when the monsters might show up on their doorstep.

That said, the soldiers did seem to be working on reinforcing the city's defenses to the best of their ability. They were carrying construction materials up onto the walls, but it wasn't going to be enough. It was clear they lacked either the manpower or the funds to do it... or perhaps both. Anyway, it wasn't as though they were *completely* unprepared.

"All right, let's gather some intel," I said, leading Sérignan, Lysa, and the Masquerade Swarm into town. "Any ideas on how we should go about it? I'd like to get a grasp on the terrain right away so we can attack it whenever we like... but on the other hand, we should investigate Schtraut's internal affairs in case we want to negotiate with them later. Where should we go first?"

This world didn't have newspapers or anything of the sort. Newspapers were a vital source of information about world affairs, so not having them made things difficult. Not that I could have read a newspaper if I *did* have one, considering I couldn't read this world's languages.

"I really don't know," Lysa replied, shaking her head. "If this were the village, you could ask about pretty much anything by going to the meeting grounds. It was the one place everybody gathered together to talk."

"A place where everyone gathers together..." Sérignan mused. "Your Majesty,

perhaps we should go to a tavern?”

“A tavern...? Right. That does sound promising.” Having said that, I took a look around.

Thankfully, I found one easily enough. I couldn’t read signs, but the giant image of a stein overflowing with ale outside the door said it all.

“Let’s head on in.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

I entered the tavern with the three of them in tow.

“Huh?”

The moment we entered, every pair of eyes in the place fixed on us. I was dressed in the refugee clothes the Worker Swarms had made for me—drab as the dress was, it was still a very nice dress—and Sérignan and Lysa were pretty enough to even draw the gazes of other women. It was only natural that we’d call attention to ourselves.

“Ho there, missy... Do ya know what kind o’ place this is??” asked a smallish man sitting near the door—probably a dwarf.

“I do.”

“Then ya know this ain’t a place ya should be loiterin’ about, aye? This is where grown-ups sit down to chat. Yer a year or three away from sittin’ here with the rest o’ us.”

“Oh, that’s what you were trying to say.”

The dwarf was commenting on how odd it was for me to come into a tavern, given that I was only fourteen or so. That wasn’t something I had considered; I’d completely forgotten my current age.

“I might not look it, but I’m actually old enough to drink. Right, Sérignan?”

“Aye! I mean, yes! Her Majesty is most certainly old enough to drink.”

“Sérignan!” I hissed, jabbing an elbow into her side. “You can’t call me that. Find a different name to use here.”

“Hmm. Would ‘Miss’ do?”

"I guess. Let's go with that."

We whispered back and forth, trying to patch up our cover story.

"Well, anyway, you heard her. Can you let us in so we can order something?"

"Eh, do whatever suits yer fancy," the dwarf said in a resigned voice before downing whatever was in his stein. "I don't give a camel's spit if yer head goes rotten 'cause ya become a drunk with half yer foot in the cradle."

I turned to my companions. "Let's grab a seat by the counter. Keep your ears to the ground, all right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

We grabbed a few seats at the bar.

"What'll it be, missy?" asked the bartender and apparent owner of the place.

"Red wine, please."

To be honest, I didn't need the dwarf's warning; I wasn't a good drinker anyway. The legal drinking age back home had been lowered to eighteen, so I had had a few drinks before... but I never found it pleasant. Perhaps I just wasn't cut out for it. Still, I had to at least *pretend* to drink here in the tavern.

"I'll have milk," chirped Lysa.

"And I'll have ale," said Sérignan.

Oh, I could have ordered milk instead. Well, drat. Still, walking up to a tavern and ordering milk feels wrong. Oh well.

For now, we simply had to sit and listen. At any moment, someone might be loosened up enough by booze to say something important.

"Have you heard about the Kingdom of Maluk?" muttered a patron after some time.

"Oh, yeah, I heard about it, all right," said his companion. "A whole country just wiped off the map. Terrible stuff."

Speak of the devil and he doth appear.

"What does the duke think about it? If the monsters march north, we'll have a

bigger problem than the Nyrnal Empire on our hands.”

“Nah, the Nyrnal Empire’s even scarier than them. They say Emperor Maximillian’s the *real* monster.”

Hmm... So this country’s relationship with Nyrnal isn’t favorable. This is an opening we can take advantage of.

“The people over at the Adventurers’ Guild sure have it easy. All they have to do is go spy on Maluk to earn some pocket money. Schtraut can go to hell for all they care; they’ll just take their business elsewhere, the damned peepers-for-hire.”

“Don’t say that! Those adventurers put themselves in plenty of danger. There aren’t enough people to do all the quests the country needs doing. And it’s not like all of them are off to Maluk, you know. Even then, it’s been ransacked by some weird monsters... I’d be shaking in my boots if someone told me to go investigate the roost of some bloodthirsty beasts no one knows anything about!”

Seems like some organization called the Adventurers’ Guild is looking into the Kingdom of Maluk. I’ll have to ensure any Ripper Swarms situated across the border are on high alert. Having them look into our internal affairs would be bad... We should close our borders.

“Cheers to the ruffians from the Adventurers’ Guild! Glory to those bastards!”

“Cheers to the reckless lunatics waltzing into the monsters’ nest in place of our cowardly knights!”

The drunks raised their voices in a sardonic toast as they clinked their glasses together.

“This Adventurers’ Guild sounds interesting. Do you know anything about it, Lysa?” I asked.

“I don’t know much about it, sorry. But adventurers used to show up in our forest sometimes to look for escaped prisoners. I think they’re a bit like mercenaries?”

“How about we try to join them?” Sérignan proposed.

“That might be problematic,” I said. “We’re refugees; no one knows who we are.”

“Refugees from Maluk, are you?” Apparently, the tavern’s owner had overheard some of our conversation.

“Yes. We all fled the Kingdom of Maluk together.”

“That little lady in the dress probably can’t do much, but you two with the armor and the bow look like you’ll do just fine at the Adventurers’ Guild. If you don’t have any other source of income, I think the guild might be a decent option for you.”

I made a mental note that he was nonchalantly calling me useless. *Still, maybe it’s worth a shot.*

“Where do we find the guild?” I asked him.

“It’s on Duke Sven Memorial Street. There’s a big sign; you can’t miss it.”

“Thank you. Here, have this. You helped us a lot.”

I dropped a handful of coins onto the counter and left, the others tagging along behind me.

“We’re going to look into this Adventurers’ Guild,” I said once we were outside. “First, we need to make our way into their organization. It’s already too late to get around to it today, but let’s go for it tomorrow. If they’re looking into what happened to Maluk, they might find out something we’d rather they didn’t.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

With that, we returned to the inn together. The beds were comfy, the food was delicious, and the view of the sea was lovely to behold. I committed my satisfaction to memory.

Thank you, Sérignan. You might have a hidden talent for finding great accommodations.



Just as I’d told Sérignan and Lysa, we headed to the Adventurers’ Guild the

next morning. My exhaustion from our travels caused me to sleep in late; I did my best to keep it a secret, but my two closest companions simply waved it off with a smile.

I'm sorry, you two...

"The Adventurers' Guild should be on Duke Sven Memorial Street." I moved through the streets of Marine, looking for the one in question. "Oh, is that it?"

After walking down the street with the longest name we could find, the four of us came to a large sign depicting a sword and a bow crossed over one another. Apparently, they were recruiting mercenaries or something.

"This does look promising. None of the other nearby buildings seem to fit the bill, after all," Sérignan remarked.

"I wonder what it'll be like inside," Lysa said with a hint of anxiety.

"Only one way to find out. We're going in."

I stepped forward with Sérignan, Lysa, and the Masquerade Swarm following close behind. Incidentally, the Masquerade Swarm was so silent I couldn't figure out what it was thinking. The collective consciousness didn't really tell me much in terms of emotions or opinions, so I wondered if it truly recognized me as its queen, just as the others did.

"You've nothing to worry about, Your Majesty," the Masquerade Swarm said suddenly. "This Swarm will follow your every order."

I almost tripped in my surprise. *Wow, you can talk. That's a relief.*

"All right, in we go."

Just like that, we stepped into the Adventurers' Guild. Actually, there was nothing particularly unusual about it. Inside was a sort of reception area and some desks for filling out paperwork, like you'd see in a government office.

People of all shapes and sizes filled the place, including stout dwarves, dainty women, and burly men. On top of their dissimilar appearances, the sheer variety of weapons and armor that belonged to them prevented any sense of unity among the crowd.

So, these are adventurers... Soldiers for hire. We hadn't run into any during

our conquest of Maluk, but now that I was seeing them in person—a disorganized mess of people with mismatched gear—they didn't seem like a threat. Honestly, I didn't think they would do very well if they fought in a group.

"The Adventurers' Guild, eh?" I whispered, looking around.

"Welcome to the Marine branch of the Adventurers' Guild," said the female receptionist with a smile. "Are you looking to take on a quest?"

"No, we're not really here for adventures. We're just looking around. Sérignan, how strong would you say these people are?"

"It's quite varied. Some of them are strong enough to give us trouble, while others wouldn't even be able to beat a Worker Swarm."

Sérignan and I surveyed the guild carefully.

"I can see there are some quests pinned up there," I said. "Not that I can read them..."

Unfortunately, while I could speak in this world's common language, I couldn't read it.

"Perhaps we could work as adventurers?"

"What? Why should we?"

"Well, Miss, I believe that if we're to look into the adventurers here, forming connections might be the best way to go about it. To that end, if we work as adventurers, we'll naturally create those connections."

Sérignan wasn't wrong; her idea made perfect sense. I asked whether Lysa and the Masquerade Swarm agreed with the plan through the collective consciousness, and they both nodded in unison.

"Then it's decided. We'll join the guild. What's our first step?"

"I think we should register at the reception desk."

Right. I brushed the receptionist off once already, but this time we should really speak with her.

"We'd like to register as adventurers," I told her.

"Oh, of course! I'm happy to be of assistance. Let's start by creating your guild

cards.”

“Guild cards...? Do we need to pay a yearly fee to retain our membership or something?”

“Erm, no. You simply need to complete a certain quota of quests; that’ll be more than enough to keep you in.”

Back home, membership cards tended to come with a lot of annoying expenses and procedures. I certainly hadn’t expected this world to use such a system.

“All right, then. Go ahead with it, please.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Place your hand on this crystal, if you would. It’ll produce your card automatically.”

I felt a little alarm bell go off in my head. What if placing my hand over this crystal revealed my true identity as Queen of the Arachnea? The Masquerade Swarm could be exposed, too. I glared at the crystal suspiciously.

“Um, are you going to register?”

“Yes, I am. But... could you explain something to me?” I began, lining up the questions in my head. “First of all, does this artifact read our personal information?”

“The only personal information it can discern is your name and your stats. People have a right to their privacy, of course.”

I see. That shouldn’t be a problem.

“And it doesn’t read anything else?”

“If we had a device that could read any more than that, the backlash would have been severe. Again, all it reads is your name and stats.”

Yes, I suppose if someone made a device capable of forcibly reading one’s personal information, the police would be making some real strides in their work. If they’d used something like that back when we claimed to be refugees at the border, we probably would’ve had to spill some blood.

“So *are* you going to register?” she asked again, her exasperation obvious.

I felt bad for all the trouble we were causing her, the poor thing.

“Yes. Sérignan, you go first.”

Sérignan stepped up to the crystal.

“I just need to place my hand here, right?”

“Yes, that will do.” The receptionist watched as the crystal lit up and letters etched themselves onto the card. “So you’re Miss... Sérignan, yes? You’ve got very high stats. I think you’ll do fine in any party.”

“I only serve the woman here at my side. I won’t obey anyone else.”

“I-I see...”

Please forgive us, receptionist lady.

“Lysa, you’re up next.”

“Okay!” Lysa placed a hand on the crystal.

“Hmm. It says you’ve got exceptionally high agility and dexterity. Is that bow your primary weapon?”

“Yes, I never go anywhere without it.”

“That makes sense. It suits your stats.”

Looks like Lysa has high stats, too.

“Go on, Maska. Give it a try.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

Calling the Swarm by its full name could potentially expose its identity, so I quickly decided to shorten its name to Maska. Still, its guild card clearly read “Masquerade Swarm.”

“Hmm. Mister... ‘Masquerade Swarm’? A bit of an odd name. Anyway, your stats are good for stealth, so you should make for a good scout.”

The Swarm’s true name had been revealed, but in return, we learned that its stats were also high.

“Just me, then.” I placed my hand on the crystal even as I tried to ignore the bad feeling tugging at the back of my mind.

“Miss Grevillea, right? Your stats are... a bit on the low side.”

“Give it to me straight, doc. How low are we talking?”

“Significantly below average.”

Aww, drat. I knew it. I can't use a sword or a bow like Sérignan and Lysa. I'm as weak as a helpless civilian.

“However, your intelligence and leadership skills are exceptionally high. I'm pretty sure that for those stats, you've set new records for the guild. In fact, those skills are high enough for you to become a general.”

“Just what I'd expect from you, Miss.” Sérignan's praise was rich with emotion. “Impressive as always.”

“Sérignan, all my other stats are at rock bottom. Don't compliment me. Anyway, is our registration complete?”

“Yes. Feel free to take any quests you'd like.”

I've been to video rental stores with tighter regulations than this Adventurers' Guild.

“Oh well. Sérignan, pick a quest for us,” I ordered.

“By your will, Your Majesty.” With a nod, she headed for the bulletin board.

She quickly chose a quest that had a lot of stars printed beside it and walked back to us without any hesitation.

“Sérignan, isn't this a really dangerous quest?” I asked her, grimacing at all the stars.

“It will be fine. We can handle it.”

“Lysa, what does it say about the quest itself?”

“Hmm... ‘Please exterminate the griffins infesting the city outskirts. The reward is one million krans per exterminated griffin, and three million krans per captured griffin.’”

Thankfully, Lysa could read the humans' language.

“Griffins, huh?”

If I remember correctly, griffins are half-eagle, half-lion monsters that can fly.

“Well, they shouldn’t be much of a challenge compared to angels. Let’s take it.”

“Then I’ll go accept the quest at once!” Sérignan cried as she jogged back to the reception desk.

Apparently, she was really pumped about fighting griffins. We breezed through the formalities, and thirty minutes later, we were heading out on our very first griffin hunt.



In order to fulfill our quest, we trekked to Marine’s outskirts. The area was quiet and rural, creating a very peaceful atmosphere. It was hard to imagine that scary monsters might pop up at any moment.

“Where are the griffins?” Sérignan asked, visibly itching to fight. “I was promised griffins.”

“That’s what I want to know,” I said with a shrug. “This isn’t a griffin’s nest, though, so it’s not like they’re going to be here *all* the time.”

“B-But if that’s the case, how are we going to defeat them?” Sérignan whined adorably.

Sadly, now isn’t the time for me to appreciate her charm.

“Don’t worry, I have a plan to draw them out. We’ll be using those,” I said, jerking my thumb in the direction of two cows I had brought along with us.

“The cows?”

“You see, I asked about griffins back at the guild, and apparently they prefer to go after carriages for the horses and farms for the livestock. I figured the best way to attract them was to use bait.”

While Sérignan had been squealing over the prospect of slaying griffins, I had asked the receptionist some specific questions about the quest. Why griffins were infesting the outskirts, how people usually hunted them, those sorts of things. That was how I’d come up with my plan of baiting them out.

“The griffins should be starving since all the livestock’s been removed from the area and carriages have started avoiding this road. I’m certain at least one of these hungry beasts will pounce on a couple of fresh cattle. Let’s tie them up right around... here.”

At my command, Sérignan tied the two cows to a fence along the roadside.

“We should hide downwind of the cows. Lysa, do you still have your bow?”

“Yes, it’s ready.”

Wonderful. We’re good to go.

“Then the rest is up to you. Do as you see fit.”

This humble bumpkin with low stats will make her way off the stage. Hmph.

“I wonder what griffins are like,” Lysa murmured while we waited.

“They’re sort of a lion-eagle hybrid,” I answered. “And they’re big.”

“As a knight, I’ve always wanted to fight one,” Sérignan said excitedly.

“I’m not surprised. A knight’s job *is* to slay monsters.”

In addition to her profession, she had a competitive spirit that drove her to defeat monsters in battle. Even the mighty Sérignan had a childish side.

“Is wanting to slay a griffin really that childish?” Sérignan asked with a pout, having picked up on my thoughts through the collective consciousness.

“Urgh, sorry... I mean, collecting in-game trophies is just as childish, I suppose.”

When I thought about it, the hunger for video game trophies and the knightly drive to hunt monsters probably stemmed from the same childish desire.

“I’m kind of the same way, but in my case, the trophies I collect are countries I’ve conquered. And those kinds of trophies are much more bloody and dangerous to procure than yours,” I added.

I was moving through this world as though it were a game, so I really wasn’t one to judge. If anything, I was probably the most incorrigible and uncute member of our group.

“Your Majesty, I can hear flapping. Something big is approaching,” Lysa said, keeping her voice low.

“That’ll probably be a griffin. All right, you three, get ready.”

A few minutes later, our mark showed itself. Sure enough, it was a griffin. Just like in the legends, it had the upper half of an eagle and the lower half of a lion. It swooped down and grabbed a cow in its talons, then took off, its prey groaning in pain. The griffin’s razor-sharp talons dug into the cow’s flesh, leaving a trail of blood dripping from the sky.

“Do it, Lysa.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Lysa nocked back a specially made arrow with her longbow and took aim at the griffin. A moment later, she fired.

“Skreee!” The griffin screeched and let go of the cow, and both rapidly fell to the earth.

“Next, Sérignan! Masquerade Swarm!”

“Roger!”

Sérignan and the Masquerade Swarm leapt out of the bushes. The black blade of her corrupted holy sword and the ax the Masquerade Swarm had bought from a blacksmith swung through the air.

My Masquerade Swarm was clad in used leather armor, but this only served as part of its disguise; its protective exoskeleton, hidden beneath the Mimesis, was much tougher. The only Swarm that truly wore armor was Sérignan.

“Skreeeah!”

The griffin shook off the pain of the arrow, or perhaps ceased to feel it as its blood pumped with adrenaline, then spread its wings menacingly at its attackers. This fierce, primal display almost matched those of the angels we’d fought in the Kingdom of Maluk.

“Hiyaaah!” Sérignan bellowed a battle cry, swinging her sword down on the griffin’s neck.

“Skree! Skreeaaaah!” The griffin dodged Sérignan’s blow, thrusting its great beak at her.

But the counterattack was too slow to hit Sérignan, who somersaulted backward and quickly struck its beak with her blade, splitting it apart. The Masquerade Swarm wordlessly struck out at one of its wings, but it was a difficult feat, given the griffin’s incessant flapping. Besides, the Masquerade Swarm wasn’t used to fighting in human form.

“Ah! It’s trying to flee!”

The griffin flapped its wings, soared into the sky, and flew far to the south. Lysa fired another arrow, which sunk into the griffin’s flank. Still, the beast didn’t fall.

“It got away!” Sérignan exclaimed bitterly.

“It’s all right,” I said, looking in the direction the griffin had flown off. “That arrow’s got a special trick: it emits a powerful aroma that the Swarm can track. Now we can follow it to its nest.”

“Amazing... Only you could be this prepared, Miss.”

“Well, I just figured that a creature with wings would try to fly away if it could,” I said, feeling a bit awkward from her compliment. “Anyway, let’s start tracking it down. Masquerade Swarm, if you would?”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

Unlike Sérignan and Lysa, who had humanoid sensory organs, the Masquerade Swarm’s sense of smell was more acute and better-suited to track the griffin.

I hoped it wouldn’t be too long of a hike, though. *Wouldn’t want to tire myself out too quickly, what with my lower-than-average stats and all. Grrr.*

“It should be straight ahead.”

After about forty minutes, we finally found what looked to be the griffin’s roost.

“I’m pooped...”

I was positively exhausted. The beast's nest was in a cave atop a fairly high mountain, so the climb had been pretty tough. Just thinking about the trek back made me want to cry.

"Are you all right?" Sérignan asked, looking concerned.

"Not really. Let's just get this over and done with."

The next five minutes were filled with the griffin's screeching and the sound of clashing metal.

"It is done, Your Majesty." Sérignan presented me with the griffin's disembodied head.

"Good work."

"We also found three chicks in the nest," she added.

"Hmm, really? And what of them?"

"They were still young, so I could not bring myself to kill them."

"That's not good. Not good at all, Sérignan."

They might have been young now, but they'd eventually grow up and threaten the livestock in the area. Additionally, they might even attack humans because we'd killed at least one of their parents.

"Now listen here, Sérignan," I said. "You have two choices here. One: you go back in there and kill the chicks. Two: you take them under your protection, bring them back with us, and once they grow up, you place them in the Conversion Furnace and turn them into Swarms."

The idea of having Griffin Swarms was greatly appealing.

"I will take it upon myself to raise them," Sérignan concluded. "Griffins are powerful creatures, so I'm sure they will make a valuable addition to our ranks."

"That's that, then. They're your responsibility, all right?"

With that, we completed our first quest as adventurers: griffin extermination.



"Welcome back!" chirped the guild receptionist. "I'm surprised you managed

to complete such a difficult quest right after becoming adventurers. No wonder your stats are so high!”

With the exception of one significantly below-average bumpkin. Hmph.

“I have a question,” I said. “How long does it typically take for griffins to mature?”

“Griffins? Hmm... I think it usually takes about six months for them to reach adulthood. That’s why they’re such a nuisance. They grow up so quickly that it doesn’t matter how many of them we kill... It’s never enough.”

“Think you can take care of them for the next six months, Sérignan?”

“Yes, that would be a simple task.”

The three chicks we’d taken were currently hidden away at the inn. Even though they were still babies, their appetite was out of this world; together, they had already managed to devour an entire sheep.

“Anyway, congratulations on a job well done. Here’s your reward of one million krans.”

She plopped a large sack of coins on the counter in front of us.

“Well, well... This could help us a great deal in the long run.”

Y’know, this whole “adventuring” thing might not be so bad after all.

“Pardon the interruption, Miss, but I feel people staring at us,” Sérignan murmured, giving me a slight nudge.

“Oh, those must be the other adventurers here. Evidently, we’ve piqued their interest... just as we planned.”

Other adventurers had taken note of our success, which would allow us to forge relationships and draw out all sorts of information without rousing any suspicion.

As if on cue, a young adventurer clad in plate mail walked up to us.

“Say, are you the ones who killed a griffin?”

“Yes, that’s us,” I said pleasantly.

“You people are amazing,” he said, his eyes aglitter. “That kinda quest is really difficult, so no one’s been willing to take it on for a while now. I can’t believe newbies who just registered today could do it so easily. Where’re you all from?”

The man was overly familiar, bordering on impolite, but maybe that was just how adventurers were.

“We’re from the Kingdom of Maluk,” I told him.

“Maluk, huh... My condolences.” His gaze turned sympathetic. “Are you refugees or somethin’ like that?”

“Yes... Something like that,” I repeated, then regaled him with our fabricated backstory. “Anyway, how much do you know about the Kingdom?”

“Just that the duke’s people have been putting up quests askin’ people to investigate what went down out there. They say Maluk’s bein’ controlled by monsters, so they’ve been sending adventurers to check the place out. No one’s come back, though. Their bodies don’t turn up, either. Seems pretty dangerous.”

So they don’t really know what’s happening inside Maluk’s borders... My blocking off the border seems to be paying off.

“Another question, then. Would you say this country is peaceful?”

“Looks that way, but who can really say? Rumor has it that the Empire of Nyrnal’s demanding to station troops here in Schtraut. Frantz is pressuring the duke to join some kind of alliance, too.”

Hmm... So the shadow of war is looming over this country.

“Is Schtraut on bad terms with the Empire of Nyrnal?”

“They’re pretty uppity folks, ma’am, if I’m bein’ frank. Think everything revolves around them and that the whole danged world should be in their hands.”

So the Empire’s pretty haughty, then, eh? I get the impression they’re bad news.

“Oh, and Schtraut’s been stocking up on supplies, too,” he continued. “Now that I think about it, maybe war’s comin’. Only two reasons a country buys that

many supplies: war or a natural disaster.”

Why not just say that in the first place...? They're definitely gearing up for a war.

“What do you think the Dukedom's going to do?”

“Duke Sharon—he's the current leader, if you didn't know—is trying to avoid war. He doesn't want to fight anybody, not monsters, not Nyrnal.”

I see. They don't want to take part in a war, but they're still preparing in case it happens.

“You know, if you want, you could team up with my party,” the adventurer suggested. “I'm sure we could tackle the really high-ranking quests if we've got you guys on our side. In fact, there's one up right now for exterminating manticores. How about it?”

“Sure,” I said with a nod. “I don't mind joining forces. Let's do it.”



The adventurer's crew informed us that a manticore was a monster with a lion's body and a venomous stinger at the tip of its tail. Allegedly, manticores were extremely dangerous and had a taste for human flesh. They were about as hard to dispose of as griffins, so most adventurers wouldn't take on a manticore-killing quest unless they were *very* confident in their skills. This group only joined up with us because we had slain a griffin, from the looks of it.

It kind of felt like they were piggybacking off of us, but I didn't mind since we stood to gain renown from it all the same. The problem in question was *how* we would go about slaying a manticore.

“Is there any good bait for manticores?” I asked the adventurers walking alongside us.

“Only one thing tends to lure them out, and that's human blood,” replied the guy in plate mail, who seemed to be the party's leader. “One person serves as bait and sheds a little of their blood, then everyone else engages the manticore once the smell's drawn it out. That's the tactic adventurers usually use for hunting manticores, anyway. I think they're probably easier than griffins,

though, considering they can't fly."

Human blood, huh? That means Sérignan and the others are out of the question.

"Should I cut myself and spill some blood, then?" I asked.

"Are you for real? The manticores go straight for anyone who's bleeding."

"But I don't have any other way of contributing. I'll spill some of my blood, and you can protect me with all you've got. I don't wanna be a manticore's dinner, either, so I really need your support."

"Right. Well, don't worry—you can count on us. We'll keep you safe no matter what."

The party escorting us consisted of the young man in plate armor, another man clad in leather armor and armed with a bow, and a woman wearing what looked like a sorcerer's robe. It wasn't a large force by any means, but their experience was dependable.

Right, experience. That was something we didn't have much of when it came to hunting monsters. After all, we were actually the monsters who'd destroyed a kingdom, and we hadn't yet run into any *real* ones during our defense of the elven forest. At best, we simply had to take care of a large bear every now and then.

Come to think of it, the griffin had given us the slip during our earlier quest. I hoped we could learn some monster-slaying techniques from these adventurers without having to run after something again.

"All right, let's make our formation," said the man in plate armor. "We're gonna keep our little princess safe, you hear? Hey, knight lady and you with the ax, you're gonna form the vanguard with me. Bruno and uh, you, archer girl... You stand behind us. Bridgette, you take the rear. We'll keep it busy at the front, so strike it down with your firepower. Is everyone ready?!"

"Wait," Sérignan protested. "This positioning puts Miss in danger. I should be stationed at her side. As a knight, it is my duty to keep her safe."

"That's a bad idea, lady. Our whole operation'll fall apart if you do that. If the

vanguard doesn't hold the front and keep the ones in the back safe, we'll all be in some *real* trouble. Then hunting the manticore won't be our biggest problem."

"No. I must stay at her side."

Well, if this isn't a blunder. I'm glad Sérignan is so loyal to me, but at this rate, everything really will fall apart.

"Sérignan, if you really want to keep me safe, do as they say," I told her. "We came here to slay the manticore. If we can't do that, then we've failed, and it'll hurt our reputation. Most importantly, if you don't follow through with the plan, it will put me in danger."

"M-My apologies, Miss!" Sérignan apologized profusely and then turned to the adventurers. "I will abide by your instructions, then!"

I was grateful to see her backpedal as soon as I said something. At her core, Sérignan was an obedient girl who didn't fuss too much.

She's so cute.



"Are you ready, then?"

"I'm ready."

Eventually, we reached the forest where manticores were said to appear. We assumed our positions, with Sérignan's group in the front and Lysa's group further back. Everyone hid in the bushes, awaiting the manticore.

"Should I do it, ladies and gents?" I asked.

"Go ahead," said the party leader.

I sliced my palm with a knife, allowing my blood to drip down onto the ground.

"Do we really need this much blood?" I said with a wince.

"Uh, no, the manticore would pick up on the scent of even a single drop of blood," replied Bridgette, the woman in spellcaster garb. "They're fundamentally gluttonous little buggers, so they'll take any chance they can to

chow down.”

Gluttonous monsters that jump on any chance to eat, eh? Sounds like the Arachnea.

“Stay close to me,” she urged with a wave. “If you leave my side and end up in danger, I might not make it in time to help you.”

“Yes, I know. I offer pretty much no fighting power, so I’m depending on you, Miss... erm, Bridgette.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got your back. You can drop the ‘Miss,’ too. Just Bridgette’ll do.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, Bridgette.”

Mages had made life difficult for us back in the war with Maluk, but that didn’t mean all mages were bad people. Bridgette had an amicable, trustworthy demeanor.

“Did you hear that?” whispered Bruno, the archer in leather armor.

“I did,” Lysa whispered back with a nod. “Something’s headed this way.”

That’s an elf for you. No one’s more dependable in a forest.

“Heavy footsteps... Bigger than a bear’s, at least. That’s probably a manticore.”

“Definitely. It’s heading this way, and it’s getting faster every minute. It’ll be right in front of us soon.”

Eventually, I too could hear noises coming from the verdant forest—footsteps and a low, rumbling sound. Indeed, something was approaching, and it wouldn’t be long before it would be upon us.

“It’s here...!”

No sooner had the party leader said those words than a monster leapt out from the brush. The creature looked like a lion covered in crimson fur, and a scorpion’s tail extended from its backside.

It was a manticore... and it really did look as dangerous as they said.

“Vanguard! Surround it! Rear guard, cover us!”

Sérignan's group pounced on the giant manticore, which responded by baring its sharp fangs. It comped down on the party leader's sword while thrusting its stinger toward Sérignan and the Masquerade Swarm. Naturally, my minions wouldn't lose that easily.

"Aim for the stinger! If you take it off, it's just a lion!"

"Haaaaah!"

Sérignan lunged at the manticore, slashing off its tail in one clean swipe. The manticore snarled in pain and prepared to strike Sérignan in its rage. At that moment, however, the Masquerade Swarm interfered so as not to give it the chance to counterattack.

"Now!"

Lysa and Bruno unleashed their arrows. They both fired the same type of arrow, but Lysa's—bolstered by her strength—penetrated deeply into the manticore's skull, making it rampage all the more blindly.

With strength like that, she's a monster herself.

"Magic, come forth!"

Bridgette unleashed a magic attack to finish it off, enveloping the manticore in flames. The beast's movements grew more and more sluggish, and it eventually became completely still.

Is it finally dead?

"We did it! We won!" the party leader cheered.

"That was child's play," muttered Sérignan, looking dissatisfied.

"Hey, you're seriously amazing. You just cut down that manticore's stinger like it was nothing! Most people couldn't dream of pullin' off a stunt like that."

"Hmph. It was like cutting through paper. I want to fight a more worthwhile opponent." Sérignan turned to face the rear guard. "Lysa and your magician delivered the finishing blows, too."

"And you, your skill with a bow was impressive," the adventurer said to Lysa. "You pierced through the manticore's skull with an *arrow*! It looked more like a

ballista bolt at that point, honestly.”

“R-Really?” she said bashfully. “I just pinned it down so you could hit it.”

“Pinned it down? For real? You literally nailed it in place!”

Lysa sure had her own way of looking at things.

“Well, I guess this concludes our manticore-hunting quest,” I interjected. “I guess my next question is... are there any monsters more dangerous than griffins and manticores?”

“Griffins and manticores aren’t enough for you? Try the Nyrnal Empire’s wyverns, then. I hear they’re more frightening than anything else. Not that there’s any wyverns in the wilderness, so you’re safe on that front.”

Something felt off about what he’d told me.

“Hmm. You say there are no wild wyverns? Then where does the Empire of Nyrnal get its wyverns?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they found some wyvern eggs and decided to hog them all to themselves. The Empire has too many secrets, so who can say?”

It didn’t make any sense. Why was the Empire of Nyrnal the only country capable of using wyverns?

“I might need to set aside some time to really think about this Empire,” I whispered to myself.

“Anyway, that’s the manticore down. Let’s hurry on back to the guild and let them know we’re done.”

“Sure. Oh, but could you tell me your name first? I haven’t heard you say it yet.”

“Me? I’m Edgar. A pleasure to meet you, little miss.” Edgar gave me an exaggerated bow. “I hope we can quest together again sometime.”

“Sure, if we get the chance.”

With that, we returned to the guild to report our success. Having defeated both a griffin and a manticore in quick succession, our little group became quite famous practically overnight. This notoriety was the key to getting what I was

really after.

High Society

Following our extermination of the griffin and the manticore, we tackled a few more difficult quests. Thanks to that, we became famous not only in Marine, but throughout the Dukedom of Schtraut as well. As it turned out, however, not everyone was pleased about this.

“So yer the adventurers who been stealin’ the show these days, huh?”

One day, when we left the inn and headed for the guild, we were cornered by a group of men in an alleyway. They all wore cheap leather armor and hostile expressions.

“I don’t know that we’ve stolen anything from anyone, but we certainly are adventurers,” I said to the one who’d called out to us.

“Don’t be playin’ coy with me, missy. You and yer friends here have been eatin’ up all o’ the toughest quests, but the rest of us have been strugglin’ to find work because o’ you. Thanks to you people, the guild’s only fillin’ up with really difficult quests now. Get it?”

Oh. They’re trying to blame us for their own ineptitude.

“So what? Get another job, then. I’m sure people like you can find plenty of good work.”

“Are you looking down on us?!” Incensed at my attitude, the man whipped out a blade.

“Is that your way of saying you’re looking for a fight?”

“Just teachin’ you a li’l lesson, that’s all.” He twirled the sword through the air. “Maybe you’ll learn your place if I cut up that pretty face o’ yours.”

“Sérignan, take care of them.”

“By your will.” Sérignan stood between myself and the band of thugs.

“So you wanna go first, eh?! You asked for it!” He lifted up his longsword...

...and a moment later, his arms fell to the ground, severed from the rest of his body.

“Aaaahhhh! *What the hell?!*”

Before anyone could blink, the heads of the five men who’d decided to pick a fight with us were flying through the air. The pavement was splattered with fresh blood.

Obviously, there were no survivors.

Their bodies crumpled to the ground, twitching. The alleyway looked like a scene straight out of a slasher film.

“I get the feeling people are going to keep picking fights with us from here on out,” I said with a sigh.

“They may try, if they want to lose their heads,” Sérignan spat.

Being famous sure is troublesome.

“Anyway, let’s go to the guild already. We’ve got to focus on gathering information.”

We could learn all sorts of things at the Adventurers’ Guild, such as how much the citizens of Schtraut knew about the situation in the old Kingdom of Maluk, how international relations might’ve shifted, and any changes in Schtraut’s internal affairs.

“Oh, hello, Miss Grevillea! We’ve been waiting for you!” The receptionist lady greeted us with a wide smile for some reason.

“Err, is there a difficult quest you need us to handle?”

“No, no. Something amazing happened! An important person from the state is here, and he wants to meet *you!*”

Ugh.

Had we stood out too much? Or was it something else? A number of dreadful possibilities arose in my mind, from us doing too well despite supposedly being Maluk refugees to us being overdue on taxes.

Or... Oh no. Did Sérignan call me “Your Majesty” one too many times? But no,

I could just say that's a nickname, so it shouldn't be a problem. If I were genuine royalty, my name would have been exposed as soon as I registered with the guild. If I were the kind of fairytale princess who shows up in disguise and magically starts taking care of a bunch of dirty work, I would definitely be some kind of celebrity by now. What could this person want from me, then?

"Miss Grevillea? Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine. What does this man want with me?"

"I don't know the details, but it seems he's stepped forward to encourage your activities. Also, the Dukedom sometimes recruits prominent adventurers into their ranks. In fact, the guild has had multiple cases of promising adventurers going on to serve our country. As far as I know, the government makes them knights, but it *is* technically a noble title. Going from being an adventurer straight to nobility is a wonderful promotion!"

Hmm. Getting too tangled up with this country means running quite a few risks, but there's plenty to gain from this, too.

"Oh, and he's also invited you to a dinner party the day after tomorrow! It's like a dream come true!"

"A dinner party?" I tilted my head.

"Yes! There are dinner parties held every now and then in Marine. The local merchant guild's guildmaster and the high-ranking people in the city—or even the whole country—are some of the people you'll find there. You have to be noble or really famous to get an invitation, and everyone wants to be a part of it. A common girl like me can only dream about it..."

It's probably not a party for gathering political contributions, then.

"Meet with the official first," she said, gesturing to one side. "He'll be able to tell you what his business is with you much faster than I can."

"I suppose."

Arguing over this wouldn't get me anywhere. I steeled my resolve and stepped forward to meet this... important person.

“Miss Grevillea, I presume?”

The one who greeted me was a middle-aged man with an impressive beard.

“Yes. To what do I owe the pleasure of meeting you?”

“I can’t say I much approve of your attitude, but I’ll allow it out of respect for your position as a hero of the Adventurers’ Guild.”

What a stuck-up old man. Almost gives me a run for my money in that department.

“I am Count Basil de Buffon. I simply *had* to meet you after hearing of your striking achievements. However, I must admit I’m a bit surprised.” He took a half-step back and looked between Sérignan, Lysa, the Masquerade Swarm, and myself. “Your party is comprised almost entirely of women, and still you managed to defeat both a griffin *and* a manticore. How curious.”

True, the Masquerade Swarm was the only man in the group... though it was actually a genderless creature to begin with.

“Still, I can detect a slight whiff of blood on you. Is my mind playing tricks on me, perhaps?”

“We were forced to cut down a group of hoodlums who tried to attack us earlier,” I explained coolly. “This city is really lacking in public order; it would be great if the local government could do something about it. We have to walk around the streets armed just to protect ourselves.”

“Really now? It must be worse than I thought. Crime among the lower class has been a problem for some time now, but to think there are ruffians out there who would attempt to bring harm to a lovely young lady such as yourself... I’ll be sure to tell the mayor to put more effort into improving the situation.”

Lord Buffon didn’t seem to care whether being attacked like that was enough justification to kill someone in self-defense.

“Well, you wanted to meet us, and here we are. Are you satisfied, Lord Basil?”

“Adventurers these days really *are* quite rude, aren’t they? Still, that dress you’re wearing is divine. Must have been made by a first-class craftsman.”

You hear that, Worker Swarms? You’re first-class craftsmen now. Mommy’s so

proud of you.

“Pardon my boldness, but might you actually be some noble from Maluk who’s working as an adventurer to hide her background?” he asked. “From what I hear, many people lost their lives in the Kingdom of Maluk. The ones responsible for it are still at large, but people say it was some legion of monsters. No one knows which country unleashed them. If it was the Empire of Nyrnal, I can understand why you’d feel the need to hide your background. Any surviving nobles would likely be pursued by those *savages*.”

“No, I’m nothing of the sort. Just your everyday adventurer.”

“I’ve never seen a run-of-the-mill adventurer wear that kind of dress, though. That aside, these three must be your escorts, right?”

It wouldn’t be good for him to suspect I was Maluk nobility. After all, I knew next to nothing about the country; we had simply waltzed in and destroyed it.

“It is true. I am a knight in her service,” Sérignan said.

“Ah, so it *is* true. Yes, it all makes sense.”

I berated Sérignan through the collective consciousness, urging her to keep her mouth shut and not say anything that would land us in trouble. Feeling ashamed, she teared up a little.

So cute...

“I won’t ask you what sort of noble you were or what title you held. If the rumors are to be believed, the Kingdom of Maluk lies in ruins. The last thing I’d want is to cause you grief by dredging up painful memories of your homeland. I’ll leave things as they are until your wounds heal.”

Oh. Now that’s a good idea right there.

Next time someone asked me about Maluk, I could just pretend that they were triggering my traumatic memories. The way this man had effectively reinforced my own cover story without my having to lift a finger almost made me laugh out loud.

“Incidentally, I’d like to ask something of you. Not as an adventurer, but as a noble from the Kingdom of Maluk.”

“Sure. Let’s hear it.”

What is it now? The dinner party?

“I’ll be hosting a dinner party the day after tomorrow, and I’d be delighted if you could join us. The other higher-ups have their eyes on you after your many accomplishments, Miss Grevillea. It would be lovely if you could come and mingle with the rest of the guests.”

So that really was it... I’m not much for these kinds of things, though.

“Sure, I’ll be there. The day after tomorrow, right?”

“Yes, during the evening.”

“Could you possibly lend us two dresses and a tuxedo? I myself have an outfit suitable for a dinner party, but these three do not.”

“That won’t be a problem at all, my lady. I own a clothing store, so you can leave that to me. If two dresses and a tuxedo are what you need, I’ll be sure to supply them.”

Cool, then we’ll all be dressed for the occasion.

“Where will the party be?”

“Marine’s reception hall. Here are your invitations.” Lord Buffon handed one to each of us.

“All right. Thank you for going to the trouble of inviting us personally. I hope we’ll be able to liven up the party.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that. Your attendance alone is all I could ask for. I just want the guests to get a glimpse of our most famous adventurers.”

Wait, what? What am I, a star attraction?

“Fine. I’ll send these three over tomorrow to pick up their clothes. How much will I owe you for that?”

“Please, there’s no need for you to give me a thing. I asked you to participate, after all. It’s only fair I cover the full sum.”

Oh. I thought this old guy was fishy, but maybe he’s actually a decent person. Getting such generous treatment is making me think twice about destroying this

country.

“Let’s meet at the dinner party, then. Oh, and here’s the address for the clothing store. Follow these instructions, and you’ll find your way there.”

Lord Buffon jotted down the directions on a piece of paper before leaving the premises.

“Lysa, can you read this?” I asked her.

“Yes,” Lysa replied, peering at the piece of paper. “It says the party will be held at the third block of Duke Louis’ Glory Road.”

“Got it. Well, let’s head back for now; we’ve got work to do.” With that, I led my three escorts out of the guild.

“Oh, Miss Grevillea! What did he want with you?”

As we made to leave, the chatty receptionist lady called out to me.

“He asked us to come to the dinner party. To bring in guests,” I said dryly.

“Wow! That’s amazing! I can’t believe people from *my* guild are going to participate in one of those parties! This will go down in history! I’ll be cheering you on from behind the scenes, Miss Grevillea! Keep up the great work!”

“I don’t know about it going down in history, but, erm, will the head of Schtraut be attending?”

“Huh? You mean the duke? His Grace sometimes makes an appearance, but not always. I really can’t say, though I do hear he’s been busy lately.”

Tch. And here I thought I’d have a chance to negotiate with this country’s leader directly.

“Thanks for the information. We’ll be off, then.”

“Okay! Make sure to let everyone know you’re from our guild!”

I scurried off so as to not have to put up with any more of her ceaseless prattle.



“All right, the four of us are going to this dinner party!” I declared upon our

return to the inn. “We should be able to pick up information we wouldn’t get at the guild, so that alone is a good enough reason for us to attend. I want you to take this chance to gather any intelligence you can about the Dukedom of Schtraut, *especially* the current political climate. If you happen to learn anything about their diplomatic relations, that’ll be perfect. The Arachnea’s fate depends on our ability to adequately understand their international standing.”

Sérignan, Lysa, and the Masquerade Swarm nodded firmly at my words. *Good. They understand how important the situation really is.*

“The biggest problem we have is that they might figure out our real identities. Lord Buffon misunderstood things, but pretending to be noble can be a challenge. Nobles seriously act like members of a secret society sometimes. A family crest, a motto, our political and personal relations... Those are things we can’t fabricate at this point in time. To that end, if we are approached about any of these topics, we’re going to say we’ve lost our memories due to trauma. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Sérignan. “While we *could* look into mimicking an existing noble family, basing our act on such unreliable information would be dangerous. It would be safer for us to claim we suffer from memory loss, so yes, let us go with that.”

If we really wanted to, we could have the Swarms in Maluk look into a real noble house, but that ran the risk of someone happening to know them, even remotely. Like Sérignan said, the safer course of action was to feign amnesia. Of course, relying on it too much might rouse suspicion... but this was still the best approach we had.

“Anyway, I’ll be giving each of you an assigned role. Sérignan, you’re my bodyguard. Lysa’s going to handle scouting. Masquerade Swarm, sorry, but I need you to secure us a way out. Have our other Masquerade Swarms spread out and gather around the reception hall.”

Sérignan would stick to me for protection while Lysa scoped out the other guests’ bodyguards. The Masquerade Swarm would secure us a way out. I wanted all the Masquerade Swarms we’d planted in the city ready to cover for us if need be.

Hmm... Come to think of it, something doesn't seem right here. It feels less like we're going to a dinner party and more we're gearing up for a special operation.

"We have a couple of problems, however. Firstly, we don't know who to speak to if we want valuable information. If we just randomly ask around, it'll seem unnatural, but we've got no choice but to take that risk. We need to hope whomever we strike up a conversation with is important enough to know a thing or two."

We didn't know the names or faces of any of the Dukedom's VIPs, so we had no way of telling a noble with key information apart from an owner of some small trade guild who knew nothing of value. This wasn't a roleplaying game where we could talk to every NPC—that would just look suspicious. We'd need to zero in on a few promising targets and then stick with them.

"And our other problem has to do with your outfits." I heaved a sigh. "Sérignan, can you take off your armor?"

"I'll try!"

She wasn't *wearing* her red armor, exactly; it was part of her body. Taking it off would be a herculean task. Could she really fit into a dress?

"Nnngh...!"

Sérignan concentrated as hard as she could, trying to pry off the armor. At last, the plates came off, falling on the ground with a heavy *thunk*.

"Is this all right, Your Majesty?" Sérignan asked me, nude as a newborn baby.

"Sérignan," I muttered through gritted teeth. "Your boobs are bigger than I thought. And you have a bangin' body."

"You're really beautiful, Sérignan!" Lysa cried.

I was always thin and seedy, but being aged down to fourteen only made my body all the more unshapely. Still, the fact that Sérignan had bigger breasts than I did hit me like a ton of bricks. Crawling under the covers and willing the heat death of the universe to come over us all felt pretty tempting.

"A-Are you all right, Your Majesty?" Sérignan asked, sensing my envy through the collective consciousness. "Should I shear off my bosoms?"

“No, don’t. But I’m letting *you* handle seduction from now on.”

I’ll be putting Sérignan’s unexpected assets to good use.

“Now, Lysa, can you remove your clothes?”

“Yes, they come off fine.”

Apparently, despite the fact that the clothes Lysa was wearing when she entered the Conversion Furnace had fused to her body, she was able to remove them without issue.

“Masquerade Swarm, how about you?”

“Will this do?” The Masquerade Swarm’s appearance distorted slightly, like a glitch in the air, and it suddenly wore nothing but underwear.

Truly a master of Mimesis. I’m sure things will go smoothly.

“Okay, then our next mission is to go and get you all party clothes. Sérignan, I got you some regular clothes ahead of time, so wear those when you go out. Lysa, be careful your ears don’t show. And Masquerade Swarm... You’ll be fine, I think.”

“Yes. To receive clothes from my queen... I’m truly honored.” Sérignan said.

I figured Sérignan might end up naked if she took off her armor, so I bought her a set of everyday clothes from a tailor, thinking it would prevent complications later on. *Turns out I was right.*

“Anyway, go select your evening clothes tomorrow. Prepare accordingly. That’s all for today.”

Sheesh. I didn’t think getting clothes ready for a party would be such a hassle.



“So this is the place Lord Buffon told us about.”

The four of us had followed the instructions Lord Buffon had given us and eventually reached his store.

“There’re a lot of expensive-looking dresses on display.” Lysa gawked at the storefront with sparkling eyes.

“Well, it’s the count’s treat, so pick anything you like,” I said and walked into the store.

“Hello there. May I help you?” said the shopkeeper.

She was wearing a light dress herself, and she spoke to us respectfully. The level of customer service made it clear we were in a high-class establishment.

“We came here at Lord Buffon’s recommendation. Could you help us?”

“Yes, I’ve been informed of your arrival. I would be honored to be of service to a friend of the count.”

Uh, we’re definitely not his friends.

“Perfect, then I’ll save the explanation. Could you show us around?”

“Of course. Right this way, please.”

Sérignan and the others stepped forward automatically. Sérignan’s current outfit was a crimson pinafore dress. It didn’t suit her very well, oddly enough, but she liked it nonetheless. I didn’t have much of a fashion sense.

“Miss Sérignan, what kind of dress would you like?”

“One that’s easy to move in. A dress I could wear while wielding a sword.”

“Erm, we *are* talking about an evening dress, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. If possible, I’d appreciate some armor around the chest and abdomen. I don’t mind if it adds weight.”

Apparently, she couldn’t tell a dress apart from a suit of armor.

“Sérignan, stop bothering the poor clerks with your crazy demands. Could you get her a mature dress, please? One that’s got some cleavage and an open back. I want her to be the most enticing flower at the party.”

“Understood.” One of the employees headed deeper into the store with her to find her a suitable dress.

“What about you, Miss Lysa? What kind of dress are you looking for?”

“Umm... something that’s a bit plainer than the dress our lady here will be wearing,” Lysa said shyly, gesturing to me. “I’m just one of her servants.”

I guess that's the most she can manage.

"Very well." At her signal, another clerk ushered Lysa along. "And as for you, Mister Maska, will this one do?"

"Yes. It is fine."

The Masquerade Swarm had been the first to finish its preparations. It was standing in front of the mirror, looking simply dashing in a tuxedo.

Aren't you a stud.

"Miss Grevillea... You don't need a new dress, I see."

"Yeah, I'm good."

The Worker Swarms had made me plenty of gorgeous dresses, so I didn't have any problems on that front. I was currently wearing one of them.

"May I ask where you got that dress?"

"This one? It's from, err, a tailor in the Kingdom of Maluk, in a town called Leen."

That store doesn't exist anymore, though. Courtesy of yours truly.

"I can't see any seams, and it looks like it was cut from a single sheet of fabric... and gosh, this texture feels like silk. On top of that, its design is bolder than anything even the most imaginative designers on the continent would dare to make. Thinking that the place this dress came from has been destroyed breaks my heart."

"Agreed."

If those knights hadn't stuck their noses where they didn't belong, things would have been much different. Yes, if that hadn't happened, I'd still be expanding peacefully by selling dresses and buying meat. If only those thugs who'd called themselves knights hadn't shown up and burned down my precious Baumfetter... Still, wars have a way of breaking out even when no one wants them.

"Miiiiiss!" Sérignan came running from the back of the store with tears in her eyes. "Look at what this woman is trying to get me to wear! It's shameless! I

don't look like a knight; I look like a prostitute!"

Sérignan was wearing what was, admittedly, a *really* racy dress. It was open at the back and showed a lot of cleavage, and its lower half featured a slit that exposed her pale thighs.

Wowzers.

Knowing Sérignan, I had to admit the look was a bit much. Still, she pulled it off while looking refined rather than sleazy, though I wasn't sure if it was the designer's efforts paying off or Sérignan's natural looks shining through... I hoped it was the latter. Once again, I realized that Sérignan was seriously gorgeous.

"It looks good on you, Sérignan. How about you take it?"

"It does *not* look good on me!" she huffed. "I need something more fitting of a warrior!"

But it really *did* look good on her. She exuded a mature aura I couldn't dream of producing myself.

"Then just ask for one that shows off less skin. Not a normal dress, though; we're trying to capitalize on your seduction skills here."

"Ugh... Understood..."

It took us an hour and a half or so to pick out the right dresses.

"So you like this one, Lysa?"

"Yes! I feel like a princess."

Lysa was wearing a demure green dress. It didn't expose much skin, but it was adorned with gorgeous frills, which sent Lysa over the moon. She liked dressing up, as girls often did. I was glad Lysa had taken the chance to enjoy herself a little.

"And Sérignan, isn't it about time you give up?"

"I... have never felt so humiliated in my life."

Sérignan ended up going with a red dress that was somewhat less showy than the one she'd donned earlier. Despite that, it still had noticeable cleavage and

showed off her thighs. Honestly, any man who wouldn't fall for her while she wore this thing probably didn't have a thing for women at all.

"It suits you. Everyone at the party will have their eyes on you. I'll be counting on you to sweep all the men off their feet."

"But such a mission is..." Unable to bring herself to finish, she trailed off miserably.

It may have looked like I was bullying the poor woman on purpose, but seduction really would be an important task during our intelligence operation.

"Anyway, I think we're all finished here. We'll be taking our leave, if you don't mind. Thank you for all your help!"

"Don't mention it. I'm honored to have been of assistance to a friend of the count."

Having said our goodbyes, the four of us left the shop. The party was tomorrow night, and we were prepared. All we could do now was hope we turned up some useful information.



We entered the carriage Lord Buffon had sent to pick us up and made way for the reception hall. He had been kind enough to pick us up from the inn so we wouldn't accidentally get lost in Marine.

In fact, it was so kind of him that I had to question his intentions; Sérignan and Lysa were two *very* lovely ladies, after all. In any case, we sat patiently in the jostling carriage as it headed toward the hall.

"We're here."

The reception hall was a large structure made of white limestone and surrounded by a vast, spacious garden. It was built upon the tallest part of Marine and offered a view of both the town and the ships sailing at the port. A perfect spot for welcoming guests, indeed. We exited the carriage and walked up to the entrance, where we were greeted by a butler.

"May I check your invitations?"

"Yes, here you are. I'm Grevillea, by the way," I said as the four of us handed

them over.

“Ah, Miss Grevillea’s group. Yes, your invitations are in order. Please, come in.”

We were ushered into the hall. The inside of the structure was as lovely as its outside. A large chandelier shone from the ceiling, and a red carpet was spread over the floor. All around us were clean, white marble walls and sculptures.

“This place is gorgeous,” I murmured. “It really does feel like a palace for the elite.”

“I agree! It’s the first time I’ve seen anything like this. I almost thought it was a temple or something,” said Lysa, nodding.

“Should you find our base lacking, we can renovate the place accordingly,” Sérignan suggested.

“No, it’s all right. A soft bed with clean sheets is all I need.”

I could have asked the Worker Swarms to make our base much more lavish, but wasting their time for the sake of my own self-satisfaction didn’t seem right. Especially right now, when they had the onerous task of remodeling all of Maluk’s territory.

There were mines for us to pick, farms and livestock to maintain, and the defense of our borders to attend to. Redirecting the Worker Swarms from those important tasks to an aesthetic remodeling of our base would be wrong. Unlike this hall, no guests would ever visit our base, so it really would just be for my own selfish enjoyment.

“Anyway, let’s move according to plan. Lysa, scope the place out. Masquerade Swarm, secure us an exit. Sérignan, come with me.”

With that, we split up. Lysa casually observed the guards while the Masquerade Swarm hung around the back entrance. There were additional Masquerade Swarms set up around the building, too. If things took a turn for the worse, we could at least bust out of here.

“Pardon me.”

Just as Sérignan and I were preparing to ask around for information, someone

called out to us.

“I haven’t seen you around. What house might you hail from, milady?”

A handsome man approached me. His arrogant gaze told me he regarded us as little more than a couple of silly little girls.

“My name is Grevillea,” I answered. “I’m from no family in particular; I’m just an adventurer.”

“Oh, *the* adventurer? I’ve heard all the gossip—apparently, your group is highly skilled. Though I must admit you don’t quite look the part.” He cracked a thin, condescending smile.

Sérignan glared at him so intensely, I was fairly confident she’d cut his head off if she’d had a sword in her hands.

“And who might you be?” I asked with a hint of annoyance.

“Ah, my apologies. I’m Marquis Leopold de Lorraine, twelfth head of House Lorraine. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Unreliable Master Adventurer.”

Everything about this guy ticks me off.

“Well, I suppose I might *look* unreliable, but that’s because I’m a commander, not a fighter. The one who handles all the hands-on work is this lady right here, Sérignan.”

“Ah, a woman who uses a sword!” Leopold exclaimed in an exaggerated fashion. “What a world we live in.”

Okay, wow, what a douche.

“Anyhow, I would love to hear the *true* story,” Leopold continued. “I hear you’re actually paying other adventurers so you can take credit for their achievements... They say you’re nothing but pitiful refugees from Maluk who bought accomplishments from others to make it into this dinner party. The guild is a perfect place for a commoner to elevate their status, after all.”

“How dare you!” Incensed, Sérignan made to step forward.

“Sérignan, restrain yourself,” I told her. “Don’t fall for his provocations. He’s

just a third-rate noble spouting nonsense.”

“Excuse me?!” This time, Leopold flared up at me. “Did you just call *me* a third-rate noble?! I’ll have you know I was on the cusp of being elected last season for the Duke of Schtraut!”

Whoops, looks like I got under his skin a little too much...

I had intended to ignore this nobody’s words and move along, but I only ended up digging myself deeper into trouble.

“Oh, I see. So you’re actually a bigwig, huh?” I said, trying to fix things. “But to be frank, *Lord Lorraine*, I don’t think your attitude and your status match up at all. You really need to polish your character, you know? If you keep acting like that, even commoners like myself will end up looking down on you.”

This, of course, only added fuel to the fire.

“I’ll remember this indignity! Once we retake Maluk, I’ll see to it that all your territories are confiscated! And I’ll make sure any Maluk refugees like you are repatriated, even if your country *is* infested with monsters!”

“Oh no. Whatever shall I do?” I replied dryly.

Naturally, I couldn’t care less about either of these threats.

“And to top it all off, I’ll take that knight of yours and sell her into slavery! Look at that body; she’ll make good money at the brothel. I’ll make sure to visit myself, so you would do well to service me to the best of your ability.”

“*What?!*” Now I was seething. “If you’re going to insult Sérignan, you’d better lock blades with her first. Not that I expect much out of *you*. Your scrawny arms would probably snap like twigs if you tried.”

“You dare insult me further?! She can try holding up a sword if she wants, but I would never be bested by a woman! I am—”

“Enough.” In a flash, Sérignan’s right arm caught Leopold by the neck. “May I snap it, Miss?”

“Don’t go that far. I think he’s learned his lesson.”

Having been grabbed at the vitals with a swiftness nigh invisible to the naked

eye, Leopold hung limply in terror.

“Leopold! What are you doing?!”

A young man’s voice and trotting footsteps reached our ears.

“These rude women taunted me, trying to pick a fight!” whined the headlocked noble. “Have someone throw these have-nots out of the party!”

“Calm down, Leopold. You started this fight, didn’t you? I can’t imagine these two fine ladies antagonizing you for no reason.”

The man who had come over to calm Leopold down bore a striking resemblance to him.

“You’re right, he’s the one who started it,” I said indignantly. “We only responded to him in kind.”

“I see.” The man lowered his head. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Roland de Lorraine, Leopold’s younger brother. A pleasure, miss.”

Huh. So he’s not a bigot like his brother.

“I’m Grevillea, and this here is Sérignan. It’s nice to meet you.”

Meeting manners with manners was only fair.

“Come now, let’s go, Leopold.” Roland led his brother away. “We don’t want any more arguments, do we?”

“Blast. I won’t forget this!” Leopold took off after him, leaving that clichéd one-liner as his parting remark.

“You should have allowed me to cut that man down, Miss. With the way he treated you, even death is too sweet a fate for him.”

“Eh, all’s well that ends well,” I shrugged. “That nice guy cleared it up for us. I’m not going to hold a grudge.”

“You’re too kind, Miss. Ruthlessness is sometimes necessary.”

“Going on a rampage here would ruin everything. You do know that, right, Sérignan?”

“Erm, yes. My apologies.”

Besides, I was ruthless enough when I buried the Kingdom of Maluk.

“Everyone, may I have your attention please?” The sound of someone—apparently the toastmaster—tapping on their glass rung out. “His Grace, the thirteenth Duke of Schtraut Caesar de Sharon, is about to make his appearance!”

With that introduction, a young man took to the stage.

“Thank you all for inviting me to this fine affair. I’m glad to say this has been quite the pleasant evening. It’s always an honor to find the time and place to speak to people of fine taste and upbringing such as yourselves. This party is yet another great chance to develop the Dukedom.”

As I listened to the duke’s speech, I looked around the room. Leopold was eyeing Caesar hatefully.

“After the fall of our neighbor, the Kingdom of Maluk, we can only pray that we will overcome the harsh times ahead of us. And of course, we must praise the name of our great nation. All hail the Dukedom of Schtraut!”

“All hail the Dukedom of Schtraut!” the audience cried, following his example.

“Your Majesty, is that the man we’re after?”

“That’s right. I do hope we can meet with him peacefully.”

I didn’t come here to handle small-fry like Leopold, but people with authority, like Caesar de Sharon.

“But it looks like approaching him will be difficult...”

Caesar was surrounded by guests, so we couldn’t exactly walk right up to him.

“All right, then. Sérignan, you’re up.”

“Me?” Sérignan pointed at herself with a bewildered expression.

“Listen to me, Sérignan. I know it’s a bit of a tall order, but try to keep your knightly behavior suppressed for now. You’re going to have to fight this battle using weapons I don’t have. And it’s very important.”

“Understood, Miss. But, erm, whatever could I have that you lack? How am I to fight this battle?”

Evidently, she didn't get it yet.

"Use your body, Sérignan. I'm sorry I have to ask you to do this, but please." With a sigh, I pushed her forward.



"Your Grace, our country really is in a dire situation."

"Monsters to the west, the Nyrnal Empire to the south... We're between a rock and a hard place, as they say."

The duke nodded vaguely at the guests' words. It was hard to tell if he was actually interested in what anyone had to say. He was certainly listening attentively to each and every one of them, but whether he was actually engaged in the conversation was unclear.

Perhaps he was merely exercising a politician's natural gift to appear engrossed no matter who his conversational partner was. Handling politics sometimes required juggling one's attention during these sorts of situations.

"Your Grace..."

He turned to find the owner of the voice—it was Sérignan. Her dress was as open and shameless as could be, and she was approaching him with a flushed face. The duke and everyone around him glanced at her in surprise before quickly averting their eyes from her cleavage.

"Erm, who might you be? Have we met before?" Caesar asked, his face turning red.

"We haven't, Your Grace. But my lady would very much like to speak to you." Sérignan pointed in my direction.

"Ahh, I see. Then let me make some time for you... Ladies and gentlemen, if you'll excuse me."

As Caesar was a man, it only made sense that he would fall for Sérignan's wiles. That said, I'd assumed a politician would be a bit more guarded. *Maybe he's more of a vulgar oaf than I thought.*

If he really was an oaf, though, that was fine with me; in fact, it would work out in my favor. I needed him to be a little stupid, or else he wouldn't dare sit to

negotiate with monsters.

Lured in by Sérignan, Caesar approached me. I put on the best fake smile I could manage and greeted him.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace. I’m Grevillea, an adventurer.”

“Oh, *you’re* the one people have been talking about. I hear you slew a griffin on your first day in the guild, then went on to exterminate a manticore. People on the streets have nicknamed you ‘the Queen’ or something of that nature. The Dukedom suffers quite a few losses to monster attacks, so any help you can offer is most appreciated.”

“But on top of being an adventurer, I have another role. One that’s certainly relevant to your interests.”

“Relevant to my interests...?” Caesar repeated, eyeing me with suspicion.

“I’m actually the queen of the Arachnea. That is, I lead the legion of monsters that ruined the Kingdom of Maluk.”

“*What?!*” His eyes widened in disbelief.

The duke’s reaction was exactly what I had expected. He couldn’t have imagined that the girl pub-goers and guild members called a queen really *was* just that. If anyone had assumed it was true, of course, they would’ve had to be either insane or psychic. It would be similar to someone who had earned the title of “king” in some eating contest turning out to be genuine royalty.

And yet here we were, the cold, hard reality hanging between us. His shock was understandable.

“Can you prove it?”

“I could have some of the monsters that destroyed Maluk—the Swarm—rush into this room right now if you want.” I gave the duke a nasty smile. “But I assume you’ll take my word for it even if I don’t do anything that extreme.”

“Let’s talk this over in a separate room,” Caesar said. He led Sérignan and myself to another area of the reception hall. “You were right; this is absolutely relevant to my interests.”

“Now then... queen of the Arachnea, was it? If I may, allow me to lead with this question: what was your reason for destroying the Kingdom of Maluk?”

Caesar had shooed everyone else from the room, leaving only the three of us.

“Oh, that’s a simple one,” I said lightly. “Retribution and instinct. I had a few elven friends who were needlessly killed by Maluk’s knights, so getting revenge for these friends of mine was part of it. As for the other reason... Well, I must inform you that the Arachnea is a barbaric race. Our instincts spur us to expand. The Swarm is a lovely collection of monsters that endlessly reproduce, devour, and expand.”

“I can understand a desire for revenge, but instinct... Your *instincts* drive you to invade other countries?”

“That’s right. We attack, feed, destroy, and pillage. Those are the instincts of the Swarm that guide the Arachnea. As the queen, I can suppress the unmerciful tide to some degree with my sense of reason. But if I’m gone, those shackles won’t hold the Swarm back anymore, and the Arachnea will become a hellish blaze that indiscriminately consumes everything in its path.”

The Swarm naturally desired to ransack and slaughter in order to grow and conquer. At this point in time, my human characteristics of logic and judgment were all that prevented them from rushing the entire world.

If something were to happen to me, that deterrent would disappear. I explained that to Caesar, making it clear that killing me wasn’t a way out of this.

“And? Have you come to destroy the Dukedom next?”

“That depends on the course of our negotiations here, Duke Sharon. I don’t seek to spill any unnecessary blood. I’m human, after all. Same as you.”

I said this despite knowing full well how I had killed untold scores of my fellow men. I denied them even the last remains of their honor by reducing them to meatballs. A part of me wondered what right I even had to utter those words.

I’m such a hypocritical charlatan. I call myself human now, after all that’s happened?

“Then what would you ask of my country?”

“I want you to provide me an invasion route into the Popedom of Frantz. We intend to attack the Popedom, and passing through this country would be the fastest way there.”

The Popedom of Frantz was the headquarters of the Church of Holy Light, an exclusive, monotheistic faith. There was no doubt we’d have to fight them, which meant we needed to be prepared for war. In that regard, it was necessary for us to have the Dukedom of Schtraut, a topographically important region, under our control.

However, a certain ruler once said, “My country is a nation, not a road.”

“The Popedom is pressuring us with the same demand, actually. They want us to permit their military to march through our lands for the sake of liberating the Kingdom of Maluk. We’ve yet to answer, but eventually we’ll need to give them a reply.”

So the Popedom came up with the same idea...

“Then I suppose you’ll need to decide who to ally yourself with,” I told him, cracking a thin smile. “Though I must warn you that if you turn against us, your country will suffer the same fate as the Kingdom of Maluk.”

“You’re putting us in a rather difficult position, madam. If we turn against the Popedom, that would be a blow in its own right. Their army isn’t to be scoffed at.”

“Sounds like a real dilemma. I sympathize, but you’ll still have to make a decision one way or another. Side with us, or side with the Popedom of Frantz. And if you choose to abstain, well... you’ll probably be attacked by both of us.”

I felt a bit bad for Caesar. He was pressed on one side by the army of monsters that had destroyed Maluk and by his fanatically religious neighbor on the other. Having to choose one over the other must have been difficult.

Still, I needed him to make that choice. If he didn’t, he’d be attacked by both armies, and Schtraut would be reduced to scorched earth. That wasn’t something I wanted, either. I had grown a bit attached to this country, so I didn’t want to see it destroyed.

“Additionally, the Empire of Nyrnal is breathing down our necks. They’re

demanding to garrison troops within our borders. Their modus operandi when they took over the southern countries was de facto military occupation... They say that if we refuse, it'll be tantamount to us ignoring the fact that monsters destroyed Maluk."

Oh my. The plot thickens.

The Empire of Nyrnal was trying to take advantage of my throwing the political field into chaos. I had heard the Nyrnals were tyrants who'd devoured the southern countries, but it looks like they enjoyed pulling some underhanded tricks.

Not that I'm one to talk about playing dirty.

"Did the Empire give you a deadline?"

"Yes. They want us to decide by the International Council." He sounded bitter.

"Oh? You have one of those?"

"Yes. We haven't convened in ten years, but the Council deals with problems pertaining to the continent at large. Our country's part of it, of course. The council's decisions have a great deal of impact and influence on the nations."

The International Council, huh? Knowing their verdict might be beneficial.

"Then I'll have to add a time limit for my request as well. I'll wait until the International Council concludes. Make your choice after that. Do you let the Empire of Nyrnal garrison troops in your country, allow the Popedom to cross your land, or grant us passage?"

"If I let you pass, the Empire of Nyrnal and the Popedom would likely both turn against me at once. What help can you offer us? Would you give us military aid if we were surrounded by your neighbors?"

"We'd give you support, yes. Our army was strong enough to destroy the Kingdom of Maluk; we're plenty capable of defending you even if Frantz and Nyrnal were to assault you from both sides. Well, if you ally with one of the other countries instead, that won't change the end result. Either way, you will witness our ability to trample anyone in our path."

I was putting on a confident air, but I honestly didn't know if I could afford to

send enough forces to defend the Dukedom. If Frantz and Nyrnal turned against us at once, we'd need even more military power than before. It would be different from when we defeated the Kingdom of Maluk... and the Empire of Nyrnal, which had taken over the southern countries, was especially intimidating.

Did the Arachnea have enough power to push back two countries at once? I didn't know yet. But I had to say those words if I was going to convince Caesar. He wasn't someone I needed to be completely honest with, and it wasn't absolutely necessary he ally with us, either.

"I want to believe you, but we have other issues at hand aside from diplomatic troubles. There is a faction here that supports letting the Popedom cross through our land to investigate Maluk. I've been working hard to oppose it."

"Hmm. You're trying to prevent a war at all costs, aren't you?"

"Wars don't make for good money. Fighting battles isn't a merchant's job."

That's the kind of answer you'd expect to hear from a trade country.

War wasn't good for making money, that much was true. Unless, of course, one's idea of economy involved slaughtering other people, devouring their flesh, and taking everything they had.

"Out of curiosity, who's behind that faction?"

"House Lorraine has ties with the Popedom of Frantz. They're the Popedom's representatives, so to speak; they do not hail from Schtraut, but rather from Frantz."

Oh, Lorraine. That third-rate noble that picked a fight with us.

"How can you get a political free hand?"

"That's technically impossible. All of the dukes in Schtraut's history have been subject to other factions' decisions to some extent."

Apparently, the head of state didn't actually have that much power. What a pity.

"What do you think is the ideal choice for your country?"

“Well, obviously I don’t want to fight the ones who destroyed Maluk. And to top it off, Nyrnal and Frantz haven’t offered us any protection, either. The Popedom’s only looking to move their army through, while Nyrnal’s plotting to occupy us during the turmoil. With that in mind, teaming up with your side seems like the right course of action.”

Good. So Caesar’s on our side, at least.

“Would it be possible for us to attend the International Council, too?” I asked, knowing full well it was probably absurd.

“You, attend the council...? As a representative of the Arachnea? I think it would be far too difficult.”

“Then how about I attend as the representative of the Kingdom of Maluk?”

“You’d have to be *from* the Kingdom of Maluk to do that.”

“I can take care of that part. Question is, can a supposedly ruined country participate?”

“I’ll see if I can arrange it. I’ll consider your recompense later.”

I hope whatever compensation he asks for isn’t too extreme.

“Anyway, let us both put some thought into this situation for now and come to our own conclusions. That’s all I can say at this point,” said the duke, and our conversation was over.



“Your Majesty, is this acceptable? We could simply march our forces into this country without any negotiations,” Sérignan said, seeming dissatisfied.

“If we can solve a problem by talking our way out of it, we should,” I replied, rising from my seat. “If we used violence to smash through all our struggles, we’d end up forgetting how to use our heads. Besides, if they end up destroying the bridges and roads, we’ll lose our way of passage all too easily. Occupying this country without bloodshed would be best. The worst possible scenario is that the Dukedom ends up becoming the center of a war between Frantz and Nyrnal.”

I really had developed some attachment to this country, and I didn’t want to

see it ruined in a war... though I *was* prepared to let everything go up in flames if it were truly necessary.

Sérignan and I thus returned to the dinner party, which concluded without us learning anything else of note.

The Dukedom of Schtraut was in dire straits. Just where would fate take it...?

The International Council

One month after Grevillea met with Caesar de Sharon, the International Council was held in the Popedom of Frantz's capital, Saania. The fate of the continent would be decided during this important meeting.

The ambassadors of each country gathered in Saania's meeting hall. The Nyrnal Empire's ambassador stood out among the rest, but everyone was dressed handsomely and the hall was buzzing with activity.

"Now we will introduce the representatives of each country."

After the Pope of Frantz, Benedictus III, concluded his opening remarks, the council's presenter rose to his feet and began reading out the names of the attendees. They were called one by one; the Popedom of Frantz's representative, the Dukedom of Schtraut's representative, the Empire of Nyrnal's representative, and so on, until eventually...

"From the Kingdom of Maluk we have... Her Highness, Princess Elizabeta."

"The Kingdom of Maluk? Is this some kind of joke?" someone muttered.

"From what I hear, it's been destroyed," whispered another.

The attendees were immediately suspicious.

"A good day to you, gentlemen. I am the second princess of the Kingdom of Maluk, Elizabeta," she said, rising to her feet.

It was indeed *the* Elizabeta. What the Council didn't know was that she was being controlled by a Parasite Swarm.

"There's no doubting that this is Princess Elizabeta in the flesh. I can't believe she survived..."

"But where was she all this time?"

Those in attendance confirmed it was her, but they still had their doubts.

"The Dukedom of Schtraut can guarantee that she's been under our

protection,” said the ambassador of Schtraut. “We rescued her and confirmed her well-being and identity. I swear on the name of the Dukedom that this is Princess Elizabeta, and not an imposter assuming her name.”

“We did not suspect anything of the sort, but...”

The other councilmen exchanged glances of disbelief. Sitting before them was, without a doubt, Elizabeta. She was clad in a gorgeous dress, and her gestures—though a bit wooden and stiff—had a princess’ dignified air to them.

But how could the princess have fled if her country had been destroyed? Had the royalty abandoned their people, leaving them to die?

“I understand your apprehension, gentlemen, but Princess Elizabeta was in Maluk’s territories until just recently. I assure you she did not run off to the Dukedom to save herself during the conflict; rather, she’s been fighting for her life in her monster-infested homeland this whole time.”

“So you say, but is there any proof of that?” the presenter asked.

“We have only our testimony.”

Brows furrowed, the other ambassadors struggled to believe him, and all their gazes fixed on Elizabeta.

“Ahem.” The presenter cleared his throat. “The topic right now is how to exterminate the monsters occupying the Kingdom. We believe our friendly neighbor, the Kingdom of Maluk, must be liberated.”

“The Popedom of Frantz seeks to form a unified, allied army,” declared the Popedom’s representative. “This would require the nations of the continent join hands and form an alliance. We must unite. The enemy is a horde of monsters that leveled the Kingdom of Maluk in but a few short months.” He scanned the council, meeting the eyes of each other person in the room. “They’re more fearsome than any beast. We must steel our resolves and fight back. Such is the will of the God of Light.”

“Our nation does not object to this proposal,” Nyrnal’s ambassador replied. “But who will bear the burden of paying the war expenses?”

“Naturally, each country should fund its own portion of the war effort,” the

Popedom's ambassador retorted. "This operation will only be possible if we join forces. There should be no question as to who should shoulder what burden."

"Spare me your talk of alliance," Nyrnal's ambassador scoffed. "This would force the Empire of Nyrnal to dedicate *numerous* men and resources, while the other countries would only send a scant few troops. This is no way an equal effort. If we are truly joining forces here, every nation should pull equal weight."

"Then what do you propose?"

"Well, we should each deploy the same number of troops. That, or any country which cannot send as many men must instead compensate with adequate funds. Of course, we can loan soldiers to any country unable to afford these expenses. We are willing to lend our aid to any nation on the continent... even the poorest of countries."

Nyrnal's ambassador looked around at everyone present. The only country capable of sending out a force that might match the Empire's was the Popedom of Frantz, and none of the smaller countries could afford the war funds.

That said, receiving a loan from Nyrnal now would make any country that did so the Empire's financial slave. The borrowing nation would be conquered financially *and* politically. After all, the Empire of Nyrnal had consolidated the southern countries under their rule with far more words than weapons.

It was clear that the Empire cared nothing for the Kingdom of Maluk and hoped only to conquer what few free countries remained in the south, hence why everyone else despised it.

"This is oppression! We refuse to be a part of an alliance with the Empire."

"Our country is opposed to such an alliance as well."

The purpose of assembling the Council had been to figure out how to handle the monstrous threat endangering the continent, but now the largest threat seemed to have become the Empire of Nyrnal.

"Everyone, everyone, please calm down," Frantz's ambassador said.

"Remember, the Empire of Nyrnal's proposal has not been accepted. If we choose to reject it, it won't be relevant."

“In that case, the Empire will not take part in the alliance. We will look forward to seeing you flounder around without our backing,” Nyrnal’s representative snorted.

“The Empire is being too high-handed. There is a great common threat before us, and we must unite to defeat it,” piped one small country’s envoy.

“Who claimed this threat affects us all equally? The Duke? The Pope? Our country does not recognize these so-called monsters as a threat. We are ready to fight them on our own, if need be. Given the right preparations, we will free the Kingdom without any need for allies.”

“Preparations?” someone asked.

“That is, the Dukedom of Schtraut allowing us to garrison our army within their country. Currently, the Themel River and the elven forest stand in the way of our march. In that case, should the Dukedom of Schtraut accept, we would be able to swiftly cross their border with the Kingdom and begin military operations from the inside.”

True, the Empire’s path into the Kingdom was closed off by the Themel River and the elven forest. If they were to invade Maluk, they would have to go through the Dukedom.

“How does the Dukedom feel about this proposition?” Nyrnal’s ambassador asked, stroking his beard.

“Our country is not prepared to accept an occupation by the Nyrnal military,” Schtraut’s ambassador replied, shaking his head. “The Dukedom would have to make a great many preparations if you were to garrison troops in our lands. Beyond that, we have never hosted a force that large before.”

“I, too, am against it,” Elizabeta added.

“My... What could the princess of a ruined country have to say in opposition?”

“The Empire of Nyrnal intends to invade my country under the pretense of liberation,” Elizabeta said flatly, her eyes devoid of emotion. “The Empire has shown interest in our land for some time now. If your country is allowed free passage, I have no doubt you will attempt to greedily devour our territories. Thus, I absolutely cannot consent to this.”

“Are you implying my country is trying to take advantage of this crisis?” Nyrnal’s ambassador asked, his irritation evident.

“Precisely. You intend to use the liberation of my country as a stepping stone to conquer it. Can we not draw similarities between this ‘proposal’ and your manner of conquest in the southern countries? We are not so foolish as to trust your words.”

“This is unacceptable! We came here out of a sense of duty to save the Kingdom of Maluk from its plight, and you choose to slander us as invaders?! Even if you *do* form an alliance, we refuse to take any part in it!”

“We are all well aware the Kingdom is in a state of crisis and that it must be saved,” Frantz’s ambassador interjected before turning to look at Elizabeta. “Those monsters crushed Maluk and could march on any one of our own countries next. We are all equally vulnerable.”

“I am opposed to the Empire of Nyrnal’s participation in the war,” the princess said sternly.

“But without their strength, we—”

“Maluk has a resistance movement numbering twenty thousand men,” Elizabeta said before he could finish. “If our resistance could rise to action, we would be able to free the Kingdom unaided. For those of you who are concerned the monsters might attack you next, I suggest you work on bolstering your defenses.”

Elizabeta’s consistently flat, robotic tone and neutral expression made her declaration rather eerie to behold.

“It seems the Maluk *leftovers* want neither our help nor that of the alliance,” muttered Nyrnal’s ambassador, looking a bit baffled.

“Are you sure of this, Your Highness?” Frantz’s ambassador asked.

“I am.”

“But the monsters are still at large. If they invade another country, it would be a catastrophe,” said another council member in a quivering voice.

“What even *are* these monsters?” inquired another.

“Based on the Adventurers’ Guild reports, these monsters have never been seen before anywhere on the continent,” said the presenter. “They look much like insects, but they’re as tall as a human being. These beasts have been seen feeding off human corpses, so we can conclude that they’re also man-eaters. Please look at this for an approximation of their overall appearance.”

He motioned toward a large board, upon which was plastered a sketch of a monster drawn by one of the adventurers dispatched to scout out Maluk.

It was a drawing of a Ripper Swarm. It had giant scythes, sharp fangs, a venomous stinger, and slender limbs. The ambassadors swallowed nervously, discomforted by the sight.

None of them had ever seen anything like these creatures before. Even the adventurers had likely run into them there for the first time. No one had any idea what weapons were effective against them or how the monsters behaved, let alone how to begin approaching the issues of their advance or defeat. Instead, the men in the room could only groan at the grotesque sketch as they racked their brains for a solution. At worst, these creatures could be marching into their own lands next.

“How many of these monsters are there?” someone asked after some time.

“According to the guild’s investigation, there are over two hundred thousand of them,” the presenter replied. “They seem to come in different forms and varieties, but those are our best estimation of their overall numbers.”

“Two hundred thousand? Unbelievable... What a nightmare.”

“Where in the world have they been hiding all this time? With that many, there should have been more eyewitness testimonies.”

The immense number left the councilmen aghast.

“Where were they originally sighted?”

“We do not know. There were no survivors in Maluk...” The presenter stopped himself and looked at Elizabeta. “Though perhaps you would know, Your Highness?”

“Princess Elizabeta, do you know where the monsters came from?”

“We don’t know either,” said the princess. “They appeared suddenly from the south before destroying every village and town in order to take the whole country.”

The Swarm had actually appeared from the east, but Elizabeta told the International Council they had come from the south.

“The south? Could it be that the Empire of Nyrnal produced those creatures?”

“That’s extremely suspicious. The Nyrnal Empire has skilled sorcerers... Perhaps they asked them to create some new type of chimera!”

Elizabeta’s words exacerbated the discord and mistrust among the ambassadors, who turned at once to question the Empire’s representative.

“That’s absurd! Do you all lack sensibility?” he shouted, enraged. “Do you truly think we’d create an army of monsters strong enough to threaten the continent and then unleash them on Maluk unchecked? Remember, the great Themel River stands between us and the Kingdom!”

“You could have loaded the monsters’ eggs on a boat and sent it across.”

“That’s true. And the monsters might be able to cross water, too.”

The voices doubting Nyrnal wouldn’t stop. The Empire had been so overbearing that it was universally hated by other nations. There was some prejudice to the ambassadors’ behavior, of course, but there was no denying that the Empire of Nyrnal was merely receiving its just desserts.

“Your Empire has a means of producing wyverns. If you can create wyverns, who’s to say you can’t create other monsters?”

“True, true. The Nyrnal Empire’s wyverns are strange to begin with. What magic do they use to create creatures that don’t exist in the natural world?”

“If they can create wyverns, I’m sure creating monsters like this is perfectly possible. So long as the Empire can’t prove its innocence, we cannot and will not trust it. These monsters are a very real threat to our country.”

Wyverns were flying beasts that only the Empire of Nyrnal could employ. It was this airborne threat that had earned the Empire many victories in battle. There were a number of theories as to where the creatures had come from;

some said Nyrnal had entered a pact with the devil, who produced the wyverns, while others insisted they were chimeras the Empire had developed on its own.

None of those theories had solid proof, but they were more than enough to arouse fear and suspicion among other nations. The Empire had trampled far too many underfoot to gain anyone's trust.

"This is a travesty! That's it! The Empire *refuses* to take part in this farce any longer!" Nyrnal's ambassador had finally lost his temper. "If you want to be snapped up and killed by those monsters, do so on your own! We'll handle them ourselves! And we won't participate in your alliance, either, you damnable prejudiced fools!"

With that, he stormed out of the room.

The Popedom's ambassador sighed wearily. "Now that that's over... I propose that the rest of us form an alliance to combat this threat. What say you?"

"I agree. And by God, I've had enough of the Empire's oppression."

"So long as the Empire isn't part of this alliance, we are willing to join."

With Nyrnal's representative gone, the rest of the meeting went smoothly. The International Council agreed that each country in the alliance would send as many soldiers as possible, with the Popedom volunteering to shoulder a large portion of the war funds. The Dukedom of Schtraut was to allow military passage when possible. Now that the Empire of Nyrnal was out of the picture, the only question that remained was whether the Dukedom would allow the allied forces to pass through its borders.

"At this point in time, Schtraut will have to decline any passage of military forces through our territory," the Dukedom's ambassador declared.

"Then when *will* you allow it?" Frantz's ambassador asked.

"When the threat is in sight and we judge that crisis is unavoidable. Our country is not merely a road to Maluk."

Letting a foreign army walk into one's territory was a risk. There was no telling when the liberation army would turn traitor and invade the Dukedom. They would have to be wary.

“But if the monsters in Maluk were going to bare their fangs at another country, you would be first in line,” Frantz’s ambassador pointed out. “Do you still intend to wait until the threat surfaces? It might end up being too late.”

“We have an army of our own. If need be, we could buy time until aid arrived.”

“I still believe you should join the alliance. If you don’t, the Dukedom might be destroyed. Can you not rethink your decision?”

“I’m afraid I must decline. The Dukedom is an independent country that’s perfectly capable of defending itself. If the monsters attack, we’ll fend them off until you arrive. It is not without reason that we’re considered a major power on this continent.”

“My word. This group simply cannot make any decisions, can it? We’re sorely lacking when it comes to cooperation. The entire continent is in danger, but each country is too preoccupied with defending itself.

“The Nyrnal Empire withdrew, and the Dukedom of Schtraut is declining our offer. At this rate, it’ll be centuries before the Kingdom of Maluk is liberated.”

In the end, the outcome of the International Council was thus: every nation in the Council except the Empire and the Dukedom formed a military alliance, and this alliance would supply aid to the Dukedom if the need arose. In other words, very little had actually been determined or achieved.

“Are you sure that was wise?”

As Nyrnal’s ambassador stormed out of the conference room, his aide couldn’t help but express some concern.

“It’s fine. The Emperor himself ordered this.”

“His Imperial Majesty ordered you to leave the Council before it concluded...?”

“Yes. He ordered me to manipulate the flow of the discussion and nothing else. We never had any intention of joining an alliance in the first place, and so I was to make those absurd demands. If we truly did want to join the alliance, we would’ve used far more clever means. But His Imperial Majesty only wants to

see direct results.”

The Empire of Nyrnal had no intent of joining the alliance led by the Popedom to begin with—such was Maximillian’s will. In that case, what did the Emperor intend to do? If he hadn’t believed the Council would be effective, how did he intend to oppose the Arachnea?

“I must give my report to His Imperial Majesty,” the ambassador said. “But remember: he is always thinking of the future, and no matter what, he does not wish to see the continent overrun by monsters.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

“In the name of the Empire. May we be victorious.”

“In the name of the Empire. May we be victorious.”

The two Nyrnal diplomats entered a carriage that whisked them away from Saania to the Empire’s capital of Vejya. Meanwhile, the Arachnea writhed in the shadows, and the other nations on the continent began working together to maneuver against this common enemy.

Having sided with neither the Popedom of Frantz nor the Empire of Nyrnal, the Dukedom of Schtraut was under immediate threat. Despite these circumstances, however, Schtraut continued leisurely devoting itself to trade. Normally, the Dukedom would have been able to play the card of economic sanctions to force other countries to concede to its whims... yet it chose not to.

Why was the Dukedom so complacent? Did its ruler have some other objective in mind? Now that the International Council had drawn to a close, these questions—and other concerns—hung heavily in the minds of its participants.

What sort of move would the Empire and the Popedom, the two leading powers of the continent, make next?

Those Who Stride Forward

“The operation was a success,” I said with a smirk.

I was back at the Arachnea’s base. I couldn’t have been more grateful to Duke Sharon for helping me sneak Elizabeta into the International Council. With just a few sentences, Elizabeta threw the council into complete discord. She caused Nyrnal to leave the Council and allowed the Dukedom assume a vague stance regarding other countries’ passage through its territories. It was a perfect diplomatic victory for the Arachnea.

“Did it go flawlessly, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked, having picked up on my instructions to Elizabeta through the collective consciousness.

“Yep. It sure did. They’re completely divided. Divide and conquer is a basic strategy; we don’t want the enemy to unify and attack us together. With our enemies separated, we can crush them one by one while they quarrel.”

Divide and conquer—the most elementary tactic. We were effectively up against every other nation on the continent, but by making sure they didn’t cooperate, we would be able to pick them off one at a time.

The fact that some sort of alliance *had* been formed was a pity, but without the Empire, all it meant was that the Popedom’s army had become a little bit bigger. We could handle the smaller countries on the side while fighting Frantz’s main force.

Still, I wondered whether we could defeat the Popedom of Frantz to begin with. Unfortunately, our enemy already knew about the Swarm. Some of the guild’s adventurers had slipped through the Swarm’s defenses, infiltrated our territory, then reported back about the Swarms’ characteristics. A blitz wouldn’t work this time.

“Well, we’ll show them. I don’t know what cards Frantz has up its sleeve, and we don’t have a means of finding out... But no matter what comes, we’ll force our enemies into submission.”

I was prepared for a war against the Popedom of Frantz. It was already rearing to strike and would likely declare war regardless of whether we wanted to retaliate. Praying wouldn't make the upcoming war go away. The only way to do that was to stomp out the aggressors and win.

“For now, we need to organize the army we'll station in Schtraut, though. Ripper Swarms won't be enough for this. They can serve as the army's core, but we'll need siege units for breaking through fortifications.”

I beckoned some nearby Worker Swarms and approached one of our Massive Fertilization Furnaces. True to its name, it was gigantic—five times the size of an ordinary Fertilization Furnace. Needless to say, the units it produced were enormous. So far, I'd been producing units that fell into the “small” category, like Ripper and Digger Swarms, but I was about to create much larger units now.

In the game, the barbaric Flame faction used huge units like Forest Giants and Trolls. The draconic Gregoria faction towered over the opposition with mythical beasts like Leviathans and Behemoths. The pious Marianne faction brought forth Angels and Cherubs. These were all big, powerful units with very high production costs.

A Ripper Swarm rush was only viable in the early game. Relying on Ripper Swarms for too long could bring about an unexpected defeat; the enemy could easily wipe them out with heavy equipment and intense firepower. In order to avoid this, I had decided to produce new units to win the upcoming battles.

“All right, let's begin.”

I didn't expect these to make it in time for a war over Schtraut, though. The battles around the Dukedom would be quickly decided. Whether it was Popedom or the Empire that chose to step in first, the battle for Schtraut wouldn't last long. The Dukedom itself was wide but hardly tall, so either enemy nation would have it suppressed within days.

Even if the Arachnea joined in from one side, the attacking nation would be able to quickly conquer the Dukedom's capital if things worked in its favor. And if that happened, it would no longer be a battle over the Dukedom, but a three-way conflict on what had once been Schtraut's land. In summation, although this could become a drawn-out war, the actual domination of Schtraut would

end all too swiftly.

So, even if I were to produce slow-moving, heavy units with high attack and defense, they wouldn't be ready in time.

"I guess that's fine," I mused aloud, watching the Massive Fertilization Furnace shudder and quake. "Heavy units still have great value. I'm sure we can use this Surface Battleship during the *next* battle."



"Duke Sharon isn't allowing the alliance passage?"

The question echoed through the Lorraine family estate.

"Yes, apparently so," said Leopold, the current head of House Lorraine. "Even though Nyrnal's man stepped out of the International Council, the Dukedom's ambassador boasted that this country is capable of defending itself and refused to approve passage. How irksome."

This was, of course, the same man who had argued with Grevillea during the evening party.

"But can this country really hold back an army of monsters?" asked Roland, Leopold's younger brother. "Wouldn't it be better for us to give the alliance permission to pass and have *them* stomp out the monsters for us?"

"The duke's probably hoping to toady up to those fiends. Kissing up to others is his specialty, after all. He'd probably get down on one knee and plant his lips upon the monsters' feet if it would preserve his position."

Leopold's relationship with Caesar was particularly sour. They had been political opponents during the last election, and to top it off, their families had a long-standing feud stemming from a broken engagement dating back fifty years ago. The shame inflicted upon House Lorraine had become a lingering grudge that influenced their relationship even to the present day. This sort of behavior was typical of Schtraut's nobility.

"This is a major problem, and if we don't handle it properly, the Dukedom of Schtraut will be wiped off the face of the map," Leopold muttered, pouring himself a glass of brandy. "The monsters will destroy us, and if *they* don't, then

the Nyrnals will take advantage of our weakness to grind us under their boot soles. Either way, it would be our end.”

“There isn’t much we can do about it, though, is there?”

“What are you saying, my dear Roland? We’re one of Schtraut’s most prominent families. We have great wealth and authority; with these at our disposal, we can overturn the duke’s foolish policies. In fact, we could even persuade the other nobles to rally and impeach him. Oh, it’s a *perfect* idea. That is precisely how we can send Sharon’s head rolling.”

“Impeachment? Are you serious?” Roland eyed Leopold as if doubting his brother’s sanity. “We’d need two thirds of the nobles to vote in favor, and I highly doubt we can get that many of them to agree. Some of them voted for Duke Sharon over you.”

“Oh, come now, we can just bribe them,” Leopold scoffed, taking a swig. “Some nobles have taken a real dent in their coffers since the Kingdom of Maluk fell. If we offer them financial aid and new business prospects, I’m sure they’ll come around.”

“What sort of business prospects?”

“Employing immigrants. You see, the Adventurers’ Guild reports say Maluk’s been completely devoured by the monsters and is now uninhabited. I think sending in people from Schtraut and other countries to rebuild that abundant land is a fine idea, don’t you agree? I, for one, feel it is an excellent opportunity.”

Leopold was proposing to send people to help rebuild the now-unpopulated territories of the Kingdom of Maluk. Both the Dukedom and the Popedom housed many people who had been driven to bankruptcy and had a bleak future ahead of them. His plan was to send those people to resettle in Maluk and reclaim its rich lands and resources. They would resume excavation of the mines, plow the farms, and raise livestock. Schtraut’s nobles were all traders, so a selection of these traders would accompany the immigrants to Maluk, then profit off their work by selling them essential supplies and bartering for their products.

Roland thought to ask about Maluk’s survivors, but he swallowed his

question. The Kingdom of Maluk was effectively in ruins, and its former citizens had no real rights; Elizabeta, for instance, had spoken as a representative of the survivors in the International Council, but her words had gone completely ignored. And while this was an attractive business strategy, it would be built on the sacrifice of innocent people.

“That... might work, yes. Erm, have you already begun working on the impeachment?”

“Yes, a few people have started acting on it—behind the scenes, of course. If Duke Sharon were to find out we’re moving to impeach him, he’d immediately start some kind of countermeasure. That man’s attentive when it comes to his own security.”

Though it was the first time Roland had heard of the plan, Leopold was already making moves in the shadows. He had urged a few nobles on the verge of bankruptcy—but who still retained voting rights—to approve of the impeachment plan.

“Besides, everyone knows that if the allied army passes through, it’s a prime money-making opportunity. Selling the soldiers supplies would produce excellent profits,” Leopold said, chuckling heartily.

“I understand, but isn’t it possible Duke Sharon is denying the allied army passage for a reason? You should keep that in mind. We could be making a major mistake here.”

“Sharon’s just a coward,” Leopold spat, pouring more brandy into his glass.

Neither of them could imagine that the duke had actually allied with the monsters that had destroyed Maluk—the Arachnea—to ensure the country’s security.



Inside the duke’s residence in the capital city of Doris, the prime minister, Cardinal Charon Colbert, gawked at his superior.

“Are you serious, milord?” he asked.

“Quite serious. We ally with the Arachnea,” the duke replied.

“Are you aware that this so-called Arachnea is the present enemy of the entire world? Schtraut is a nation dependent on trade; allying with a universal villain means our trade routes will be cut off.”

“Still, we’ve no choice but to throw our lot in with the Arachnea. I’d prefer to give up on Frantz’s delicious wine if it means my country won’t suffer the same fate as Maluk.”

With its destruction of the Kingdom of Maluk, the Arachnea had marked itself as a heinous villain. Choosing to ally with this faction of monsters meant that Schtraut was also declaring itself an enemy, which would cause the other nations to condemn the Dukedom and cease all trade with it.

“The Popedom alone won’t stop the Arachnea, and if we overlook Nyrnal’s participation in this war, our country might lose its independence. This is our only way of avoiding that, Charon.”

Frantz’s military was about equal to what Maluk had once had, so they wouldn’t pose much of a threat to the Arachnea. An alliance backed by the Popedom wouldn’t be enough; that was a fact.

But if Schtraut were to allow Nyrnal, which had aspirations to take the north, to occupy its territory, it would almost certainly find its lands stolen from beneath its feet in the middle of the war, or perhaps even annexed.

Thus, Caesar felt the only way for his country to come out unscathed was to ally with the Arachnea and turn their greatest foe into their strongest ally. This was the only means he had available to protect Schtraut’s independence. Any other choice would force him to choose between protecting his country from the Arachnea or struggling to maintain sovereignty. However, he couldn’t help but wonder if there were some other magical solution that would enable him to do both.

“And you think the Arachnea is more trustworthy than Nyrnal?” Charon asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“I’ve spoken directly to a woman who calls herself the Arachnea’s queen. She looks young, but her wit is sharp. During our conversation, she expressed that she has no desire to attack us, but she may be forced to if we allow Frantz and the alliance to pass through our territory. Like myself, she doesn’t wish to see

the Dukedom become a battlefield.”

Caesar had met Grevillea on the night of the dinner party and again the following day. He was confident in his judgment of people, and he felt Grevillea was a trustworthy young lady.

The fact that monsters hadn’t yet flocked into Schtraut was proof in its own way. It was safe to assume that the monsters weren’t limited by a lack of stamina. There were 200,000 of them squirming about in Maluk, after all.

“Understood, milord. If that is your will, I can only abide by it. But... do be careful. House Lorraine will likely oppose this decision. They may well be seeking to impeach you.”

“Lorraine... Agh, what a thorn in my side. They must still hold a grudge over that failed engagement, even fifty years later. And now of all times, when the Dukedom is menaced from both outside and within.”

Charon was already anticipating House Lorraine’s schemes. Leopold of House Lorraine had once run against Caesar for the position of duke, and their families had a long-standing feud as it was. The younger brother, Roland, was more rational and open-minded, but Leopold himself was far too impulsive to be reasoned with; he was a man who thought the world revolved around himself.

“Unite the nobles while dealing with Lorraine’s plot. Our country must be unified if we’re to conquer this crisis,” Caesar ordered.

“Yes, milord. I will do everything in my power.”

With that said, Caesar began working on the one thing he *could* do: form an alliance with the Arachnea.



The Dukedom of Schtraut’s national congress was filled with noise and tumult.

“To summarize, we’ve made our preparations to ally with the Arachnea. They’ve informed us they will grant us military aid and work alongside us to redevelop what was once the Kingdom of Maluk,” Caesar declared over the discord in the room.

“An alliance with the Arachnea?”

“We’re allying with the monsters that destroyed Maluk?!”

“Isn’t that betrayal?!”

Some of the congressmen were visibly confused. All they knew was that the Arachnea was the faction of monsters that had destroyed Maluk and become the enemy of the entire continent. The idea of siding with creatures universally hated by the other nations was so shocking that they couldn’t wrap their heads around it.

“The Arachnea is willing to defend us from the Empire of Nyrnal. On top of that, its leader has informed me that she has no desire to take our lands for her own. She has even agreed to deploy an army to help us, and she is relinquishing command of that army to us. How is it possible not to believe someone who is willing to grant us this much? They are clearly trustworthy allies.”

“Can you truly be sure they’re not after our land?” one of the congressmen asked. “They’re a flock of monsters. They might be friendly toward us now, but they still destroyed the Kingdom of Maluk.”

“If they were, they would not have brought up the topic of working alongside us to redevelop Maluk,” Caesar answered. “They’ve come to us, asking that we aid them in developing their territory. This offer is a great chance for the Dukedom.”

Grevillea had offered to cooperate with the Dukedom of Schtraut to rebuild the ruined, unpopulated lands of Maluk. She’d acknowledged that the farmlands and gold mines would go to waste without assistance from Schtraut. That had been one of the Arachnea’s bargaining chips.

“But if we ally with them, we’ll be branded traitors by the rest of the world!” another congressman cried, rising to his feet.

“Even if we are, we will have gained a powerful ally with the vast lands of Maluk under their control,” Caesar replied. “That would give us all the supplies we need to survive. And if we ally with the Arachnea, other countries may join as well.

“Our country isn’t the only one under threat by Nyrnal’s militant ways. I’m

well aware of how we'll be seen by others, but I can assure you that will not last long. Once everyone acknowledges the Arachnea's existence, we will be antagonists no more. And this future is near and within reach."

Caesar had thought through these words again and again. The Arachnea was a group of grotesque and powerful beasts; joining forces with them would be a struggle. Convincing the congressmen and maintaining diplomatic relations were equally difficult tasks.

"Let us begin our vote on the matter, then," said the chairman of the congress.

As the voting began, the congressmen sat with hardened expressions. They knew full well that this vote would decide the future of the Dukedom of Schtraut, and so they considered their vote seriously.

Some defiantly voted against the alliance, while others quickly voted in favor.

"I am in favor," said Basil de Buffon.

Upon hearing that the girl he had invited to the party was actually the queen of the Arachnea, he felt rather positive about the alliance. He didn't see the girl as a monster, but as a reasonable human being. From his point of view, Grevillea having a human heart meant she could be negotiated with.

"Allow me to declare the results."

After thirty minutes, the voting was concluded and the tally began.

"Two hundred voted in favor, while one hundred and one voted against. The measure in question is now approved."

The room exploded in disagreement.

"Wait just one minute!" shouted one man above the rest. "This vote is invalid!"

It was, of course, Leopold de Lorraine. He rose from his chair to draw everyone's attention.

"What seems to be the problem, Lord Lorraine?" the chairman asked.

"It has been discovered that during the last election, Duke Sharon's faction

committed foul play,” claimed Leopold. “I have my evidence right here. Duke Sharon *bribed* congressmen to vote in his favor. Not only that, but he hired *prostitutes* to keep them company during an evening party! It’s also been confirmed that illegal narcotics were being distributed!”

Confused whispers began to fill the air.

“Are you sure your proof is concrete?”

“Yes; in fact, I’ve confirmed the authenticity myself. A group of my men gathered testimonies from the prostitutes.” Leopold held up a stack of documents.

Bribery wasn’t uncommon, of course. Leopold himself had “donated” funds to other congress members during the election in order to secure their votes. However, Caesar had been elected primarily because Leopold had been too occupied with cozying up to the Popedom of Frantz.

“These are lies! I never hired any prostitutes!” the duke snapped.

Even if the bribery bit was partially true, the accusations that he had hired prostitutes to entertain guests and dealt in illegal narcotics were entirely fabricated. Leopold himself had persuaded the prostitutes to give false testimonies in exchange for some “gifts” of his own.

“No, it’s all true. As such, I propose we impeach Duke Sharon!”

The moment the word “impeach” left Leopold’s lips, the room began buzzing once more.

“This is absurd!” cried Basil. “Our entire country is under threat from all sides! We can’t afford to have a re-election now, you stupid, power-hungry nobody!”

“I am *not* a nobody!” Leopold shrieked, stomping his foot. “I propose impeachment!”

Impeachment would require one week of deliberation, followed by a round of voting. Leopold planned to use the deliberation period to paint Caesar as a traitor while buying off the other nobles. He would also take this chance to bring up the immigration business plan.

His proposition would attract the attention of nobles and bankers alike, as it

gave them an opportunity to profit off of Maluk's plentiful resources without becoming enemies of the other countries.

What this proposal did *not* factor in were the 200,000 Swarms infesting those lands.



One week later, the day of the vote arrived.

"We will now hold a vote regarding the impeachment of Duke Caesar de Sharon," announced the chairman of the congress, and the rest of the participants took their seats.

Leopold was confident in his victory. He'd spent the past seven days bribing other nobles in order to buy their loyalty. Meanwhile, the duke was tired and ashen-faced after all the repeated attacks on his character.

"The results of the vote are two hundred and four in favor, seventy-three against. The decision is made: Duke Caesar de Sharon shall be removed from office."

"Do we hold another election, then?" one man asked.

"With the Popedom pressuring us to let them pass through..." chimed in another.

"Until the election is held, I shall serve as the Duke of Schtraut," Leopold declared.

"On what legal basis, exactly?"

"Legal...? Surely it is enough that we are lacking another man equipped for the job; besides that, I must remind you that I lost the prior election for duke by only the tiniest margin. I have no doubt I can gather enough support."

In other words, Leopold had absolutely no legal basis for his proposal. According to the law, if a duke were to be impeached, an election was to be held immediately. But a brand-new election would take at least twenty-four days to arrange.

To the west of Schtraut was the army of monsters that had destroyed Maluk; to the east was the Popedom of Frantz, which was pressuring the Dukedom for

permission to pass through. To add to the chaos, the Empire of Nyrnal was threatening to invade from the south. The Dukedom needed a representative as soon as possible.

“I am the only one who can lead this country through its current plight,” Leopold said.

“That’s absurd!” Basil barked back. “We wouldn’t *be* in this state of mayhem were it not for your fabricated evidence and cries for impeachment! If anyone’s thrown this country into dire straits, it’s you!”

He continued cursing at Leopold, calling him a dog of the Popedom, a traitor to the country, and a swindler in the shadows. But despite his complaints, the congressmen approved Leopold as the Dukedom’s interim leader.

At last, Leopold was Duke of Schtraut, just as he’d wished ever since Caesar had plucked the Dukedom from his grasp.

“The very idea of an alliance with the Arachnea is an affront to the God of Light, and I refuse to uphold it! We will survive only by clinging to our faith! All hail the Dukedom of Schtraut!”

But only a scant few people met his exclamation with enthusiasm. While many of the nobles had received financial backing from Leopold, they weren’t quite sure whether he was truly capable of overcoming the looming crisis.

Still, Leopold had already gained the power and authority he’d wanted—that fact was irrefutable. His first order of business as leader was to allow the Popedom of Frantz to cross through the Dukedom’s territories.

His second was to purge the opposition.

The Purge

“Oh, this is bad,” I whispered. I had observed the recent events in Schtraut through the collective consciousness from the safety of the Arachnea’s base. “Our biggest enemy has strong-armed permission to pass through the Dukedom. I can’t believe the impeachment plot actually worked... I thought things were going well with Duke Sharon, but I guess I’ll have to fight that third-rate noble, Leopold.”

Caesar and I had discussed forming an alliance at length. I made many concessions, including giving the Dukedom the right to develop Maluk’s land for itself. In exchange, the duke had to forbid other armies—especially the Popedom’s—from crossing through his territory and into ours.

Now that that third-rate idiot had assumed the position of Duke, all those negotiations had gone down the drain. I didn’t think it could get any worse, but he followed up with the pettiest, most inane move imaginable...

He began a political purge.

Leopold’s purge involved hanging any nobles who opposed his stances and burning their domains to the ground. It was a primal, asinine strategy of the highest order. The Dukedom had the Arachnea as its next door neighbor, and somehow it had us beat in that department.

Worse still, he had a flock of other third-rate nobles backing him. The situation was spiraling out of control.

“Sérignan, there’s been a change of plans. Now that it’s come to this, we have to subjugate Schtraut by force. Get ready to set out at once.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she replied with a bow.

“War again, huh?” I muttered sadly. “Fighting is the Swarm’s way of life, but I can’t help but feel a hint of regret. I really did like that country.”

At my side were a great many Ripper Swarms and some new Swarms I had just recently produced. Meanwhile, Sérignan and Lysa were making the

necessary preparations for our march. The Masquerade Swarms I had snuck into the Dukedom would be an asset to our invasion; they would slay and devour soldiers garrisoned inside the border's walls and help us break into the country.

"Listen up, everyone... Our alliance with Schtraut has fallen through. The country that was supposed to be our ally was stolen away by a foul usurper and has now become our enemy." My voice resonated through the collective consciousness. "The usurper has, in his foolishness, made us the enemies of his country. We are no longer on good terms; the Dukedom of Schtraut is now acting in direct opposition to us. And the enemy must be exterminated. Such is the law of the Arachnea."

The Arachnea devoured all. All who opposed the Arachnea would be consumed.

"We will tear the enemy apart and swallow them in our dark tide. There is no need for mercy. Trample them thoroughly and utterly. May victory shine upon the Swarm."

"All hail the queen!"

"All hail the queen!"

Voices of praise filled the collective consciousness.

Wait, no... Stop it. I really wanted to ally with that country so we didn't have to shed any needless blood. But I failed. I'm just a hopeless idiot.

"Your Majesty." Sérignan stepped in front of me, interrupting my self-derision. "It is not your fault that your efforts did not bear fruit. That usurper is to blame. Let us set forth and strike him down."

"You're right. It's time, Sérignan."



"We've arrived, Your Majesty."

"Yes... It's only been a short while, but it still feels nostalgic."

Our forces decimated the guards stationed at Schtraut's reinforced border, allowing our entire army to enter the Dukedom and begin our conquest. My

Masquerade Swarms, stationed all over the country, informed me that the enemy forces had already begun mobilizing their army but were weighed down by internal opposition and domestic backlash.

That's what you get, you third-rate noble.

We stood before Marine, the first city we'd visited in the Dukedom. The city gates had been opened by the Masquerade Swarms, but something felt off.

"Your Majesty, do you smell that?"

"I do, Sérignan. It reeks of blood and iron. The bastards really did it."

The seaside city I'd grown fond of had completely changed since the last time we'd been here. The buildings had been razed to the ground and reduced to rubble. The inn Sérignan had first chosen for us was burning, and the sight of its expensive furniture between the gaps in the blackened roof made me wince. This was where we had stayed while working hard as adventurers, but now it was crumbling to ash.

We soon found that the tavern was on fire, too. The owner who had given us information and some unlucky patrons were riddled with projectiles. The dwarf who'd warned me not to drink at such a young age was lying in a pool of blood.

Next, we stopped by the Adventurers' Guild, which had also been thoroughly destroyed. The party we'd worked with to take down the manticore had clearly protected one another to the bitter end. They lay with their glassy eyes fixed forward and not a single wound on their backs: Edgar, the swordsman who had guided us and taught us so much; Bruno, the archer who'd fought alongside Lysa; and Bridgette, the sorceress who had worried for my safety... They were nothing but corpses now.

While there, we also came upon the body of the chatty receptionist. After being assaulted and murdered, her head had been stuck upon the guild's signboard.

Just what did these people do wrong? All they wanted was to live in peace. Hatred and anger bubbled up inside me. But thinking back on it, hadn't I done the same? When the Kingdom of Maluk's knights attacked the elven forest, I struck back out of vengeance and many innocents died. Am I any better than

those who brought about this tragedy?

My actions were in no way just, but they were not truly evil, either. We'd had a noble cause: to defend the elven forest. At the time, the Kingdom of Maluk had been, without a doubt, an intruder that put the Arachnea at risk.

That didn't mean the massacre was justified, though. In the end, there was no real justice in this world, only repugnant deeds hiding beneath righteous banners to promote people's selfish goals. Even back in my old world, it hadn't been easy to decide who was right and wrong when it came to war. Everyone was right... and everyone was wrong.

But in that sea of gray morality, I could confidently say this: the "justice" enforced by Leopold and his lackeys was so downright wrong that it made me sick.

"Who was this town's mayor again?"

"It was the man called Basil, Your Majesty."

Oh, that old fart. He helped us a great deal.

It wasn't long until I found him. He had been hanged in the city square, and his body swung back and forth in the wind.

"Let him down," I ordered.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said a Ripper Swarm, obediently setting to the task.

"Once we are finished here, you are to turn all the citizens into mincemeat. Not out of hatred and contempt, but out of a desire to absorb their wills. This is the only way we can pay our respects."

Leopold had done this; there was no doubt about it. He was cutting down the opposition one after another. He was killing any nobles who went against his decisions and burning their lands to the ground.

These people must have hated the soldiers who came to slaughter them and their families and comrades. They probably cursed their own powerlessness, lamenting that they were not strong enough to change their tragic fate. At least, that was my impression.

Rest assured, you didn't die in vain. I'll turn you all into meatballs, and you will

fuel the forces that will destroy the man who did this to you... and the Popedom, too.

It was an awkward, grotesque mourning rite, but my gesture was filled with the utmost respect.

Forgive me.

One by one, we turned everyone in Marine into meatballs—the innkeeper, the people at the tavern, the Adventurers' Guild receptionist, and Basil de Buffon. We used them to bolster our forces and set up a forward operating base in Marine. After building a Fertilization Furnace, we used Marine's departed to create more Ripper and Digger Swarms, which we then sent out to the front lines.

I couldn't help but feel uneasy about this gesture, but it also seemed oddly fitting. In this way, the citizens of Marine would be able to exact revenge for their own deaths.

Let us press onward, everyone. I have a great deal of hatred and frustration to let out today.



The idiot noble finally deployed an army from the northwest to stop our invasion. It was a mish-mash of soldiers gathered from other nobles' territories. He sent a detached force of 100,000 soldiers, but their gear and weapons weren't consistent and they lacked coordination.

We clashed in the Samhul Plains, a flatland with excellent visibility. It was a great place to fight—a fine stage upon which to trample the enemy.

"Ripper Swarms, are you prepared?" I asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Ripper Swarms are good to go.

"How about you, Lysa?"

"Ready, Your Majesty!"

So is Lysa. Excellent.

“And you, Sérignan?”

“I am, Your Majesty.”

My knight is ready to fight as well.

“Then let’s begin,” I said, urging them forward. “Sérignan, Lysa, you two go ahead.” I would let them lead the pack and break through the enemy’s front lines.

“Ripper Swarms, march!”

300,000 Ripper Swarms followed my order. Conquering Maluk had netted me enough resources to build this force of Ripper Swarms, and this was still only a fraction of my total army. Their numbers would only grow larger as we went along.

“Sérignan, Lysa... I want you to kill as many people as the Ripper Swarms do—and then some, if you can. Earn those points, girls.”

“Understood, Your Majesty!”

Honestly, I could finish this battle just by rushing the enemy with Ripper Swarms. Our impending victory was obvious; we had three times as many troops. There was no real need to bother with strategy, as we would one-sidedly slaughter the enemy either way.

Still, I couldn’t afford to do that; I needed Sérignan to gain experience points. Besides, simply defeating the enemy with sheer numbers didn’t have the elegant flavor I preferred when it came to battles. I wanted to thoroughly and carefully make my preparations, then crush my enemies with deadly efficiency.

“Aaahhhh!”

“Hah!”

Sérignan cut down enemy soldiers with her longsword one after another. Meanwhile, Lysa was firing off countless headshots with her longbow.

“Don’t take them on by yourselves! Group up and surround them! Those girls aren’t normal!” barked one man, presumably the enemy’s commander.

“You heard the man! Surround them!”

Sérignan and Lysa are keeping the front lines busy. Good; they shouldn't be able to move.

"Ripper Swarms, advance from both sides. Box them in."

Taking advantage of the enemy's distraction, I sent my Ripper Swarms out in two massive wings. The ragtag army flew into disarray as the great insectile pincer closed in on them. As the Ripper Swarms advanced into the fray, they began shredding the soldiers apart. At this point, the rest was easy—with the enemy's formation in tatters, this would be a simple extermination.

"Help me!"

"I-I surrender! I surrender!"

"Have mercy! Please, spare me!"

Some of the soldiers here had probably been in charge of setting fire to Marine, so I couldn't afford to spare anyone. They had provoked our wrath, so they needed to face the consequences. If they felt entitled enough to bring death upon others, we had the right to bring death upon them.

I'd prepare myself if I were you, Leopold. Your personal army is next on the chopping block.

"Help me! Somebody, save me!"

Oh, would you look at that. A survivor.

"Sérignan, why aren't you killing him?"

"I thought he could serve as an example, Your Majesty."

"An example, huh? Planning on stringing him up as a warning or something?"

"Actually, if I may be so bold, I was thinking we could have the Ripper Swarms tear him apart or flay him alive in front of his comrades. Our enemies seem to be under the impression that we are beasts of some sort, so I believe we should show them otherwise. They must see that we're intelligent beings capable of calculated cruelties."

"Not bad. I like it, Sérignan. A public execution would show them we're intelligent and that we do more than murder willy-nilly. Let's show the fools

who picked a fight with us what we can really do. We'll keep him alive until the next battle."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

We were the Arachnea, an organized faction of sentient beings connected by the collective consciousness. I couldn't allow them to lump us together with mindless beasts. The Ripper Swarms, created solely for slaughter, were far smarter than the third-rate buffoon trying to snuff us out.

"Still, a simple execution is lacking in taste. Let's have him confess his crimes."

"Confess?"

"Yes. He'll confess to slaying the citizens he was supposed to protect and to massacring numerous innocents. It should strike a blow to the enemy's morale... assuming they can still feel shame, that is." I looked down at my hand, where a Parasite Swarm had begun coiling around my fingers.

In one quick motion, I shoved it into the pleading soldier's mouth. Under my control, he would report the truth of what happened in Marine to the rest of his comrades. I would've preferred him to willingly admit to those crimes, but I couldn't expect that level of decency from one of Leopold's underlings. The man probably didn't even think he'd done anything wrong.

Despite preparing this punishment, however, I didn't really feel like I'd achieved anything. It just felt hollow. Having dealt with that matter, I led Sérignan, Lysa, and the Ripper Swarms further east into Schtraut.

The towns along the way were in about the same condition as Marine. I saw many nobles who must have opposed Leopold hanged in their territories, which had then been burned down around them.

Those poor nobles... And all these innocent commoners... It's fine. I'll avenge each and every one of you. Retribution is the only mercy I can offer.

Reality and Reverie

For some time, we pursued our enemies without catching up. They burned places down as they fled... Not that their scorched-earth tactics were enough to stop our charge.

“They’re getting desperate,” I muttered upon seeing yet another torched town.

The townsfolk had all either been hanged or decapitated. They must have resisted, or perhaps they were subjects under a noble who’d opposed Leopold. Whichever they were, it was a terrible sight. Not that I was in any position to speak after what I’d done to Maluk.

“We’re stopping here to rest for today, Sérignan.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

We had been marching the whole day, but the nobles’ army was always one step ahead of us. The Dukedom’s own forces were nowhere to be found. While they were far more organized and well-equipped than the nobles’ soldiers, they avoided fighting at all costs.

Our enemy was being frustratingly elusive, which left us with no choice but to halt, rest, and refuel.

“Shall we have hot pot today? We’ve got plenty of ingredients.”

We had some kelp to make soup stock as well as mushrooms, vegetables, and dried meat. I decided that tonight we would feast on hot pot—a mouthwatering meat and vegetable stew that was hard to turn down. I was sure Sérignan and Lysa would enjoy it, too, so I wanted to put my all into making it.

But first, I was positively parched. The Ripper Swarms had procured some water from the local wells, so I filled a cup and lifted it to my lips. Just as I took the first sip, however...

“Ngh!”

A searing pain ran through my chest, and it felt as if my throat was rapidly closing up. I tried coughing a few times, but it didn't make me feel any better. The agony spread through my body, shooting from my chest to my back and then down into my stomach. Unable to endure, I crumpled to the ground. I couldn't breathe, and the pain was threatening to drive me mad.

Poison...! That's it; they must have poisoned the wells. You actually pulled a fast one on me, you stupid bastards...

"Your Majesty!" Sérignan, having noticed something was wrong, dashed over to my side. "Are you all right?! What's the matter?!"

I pointed to the cup rolling on the ground with a shaking finger.

"The water is poisoned...?! Curse them!"

Now that they were aware, Sérignan and Lysa wouldn't meet the same fate. That was a relief.

Thank goodness...

"Your Majesty! What happened?!" Lysa also ran over to us.

"Lysa, Her Majesty's been poisoned! Do you have some medicine that might be able to help her?!" Sérignan asked, her voice cracking with desperation.

"I have some herbs that might serve as an antidote, but I don't know if they'll work against this kind of poison..."

"At least try it! If Her Majesty were to die, I... I...!"

Knights aren't allowed to cry, Sérignan.

"Open her mouth, please. I need to dissolve the herb in water first."

"Here, use this; it's clean water. We can't use the wells—they've been tainted by the enemy."

Lysa and Sérignan worked fast to help me recover, but I didn't think their efforts would mean much. The pain had already spread through my entire body, and I couldn't work up the strength to speak anymore. I doubted there was any saving me at this point.

"It's ready! Have her drink this."

“All right.”

Sérignan tried to pour the antidote mixture down my throat, but it only spilled from my mouth.

“Damn! I’ve got no choice... Forgive me, Your Majesty!”

Something soft pressed against my lips. I realized it was Sérignan’s lips only as my consciousness faded to black.



I awoke in a room. Namely, *my* room. I was in my apartment back in Japan.

All around me were familiar things: my kotatsu, a calendar flipped open to the month of December, my fridge... and enshrined at the back of the room, as if it were the real master of this space, was the desktop PC where my favorite game was installed.

“I’m... back?”

At first, I glanced suspiciously at my surroundings. Then I hopped to my feet and opened the fridge. A pleasant chill wafted out and brushed against my skin. Inside was a plate of pork-and-ketchup stir-fry and some salad... A meal I had made myself.

This really was the world I belonged to. I was finally home.

Next, I looked around for my cell phone.

Where did I put that thing? Ah, there it is.

My smartphone was in its usual spot, plugged in and charging. I hurriedly picked it up and opened the contacts list. With trembling fingers, I dialed my mom’s number and pressed the phone against my ear.

“Hello? Mom? Can you hear me? Mom...?”

“Yes, I can hear you just fine. What’s wrong?”

It was her. It was really Mom’s voice.

“Mom, I... I’ve killed a lot of people.”

“What? Are you talking about that game of yours again? Spend your free time

however you want, but make sure you don't neglect your studies."

Naturally, she didn't believe me.

"Take care of yourself, okay, Mom? I'm doing fine, so don't worry about me."

"Well, aren't you a good kid? Don't forget to come visit for New Year's. We'll be waiting for you."

We both hung up the call.

"Okay, I *am* back. I'm... finally home."

Why, then, did I feel so lonely?

I wondered what had happened to Sérignan, and Lysa, and the Swarms. Had they managed to conquer the Dukedom of Schtraut? Had they successfully defeated the Popedom of Frantz? And what about the Empire of Nyrnal?

I hope they're all doing well.

After that thought passed through my mind, I naturally reached out to turn on my PC. The computer buzzed as it came to life, and once I had reached the blank desktop, I clicked the icon for my favorite game. It booted obediently, and a gloomy tune played through my speakers as the program began a new version update.

Did the interface always look like this?

Once the update had concluded, the game loaded. I clicked "Load Saved Game," then the latest save file. It had a map name I didn't recognize, but my chosen faction was, as always, the Arachnea.

It all felt oddly nostalgic.

Once the save had loaded, I began to play. My faction occupied a land in the west, and it was about to invade a land in the northeast. I had a large army of Ripper Swarms—one so large it actually caused the game to lag. The army was championed by my beloved hero unit, the Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan. Looking at it filled my heart with affection. Another unit stood beside Sérignan, an Elf Archer Swarm called Lysa.

Huh? "Lysa"... Was she added in the latest update? I can't remember, but it

sounds so familiar.

I randomly selected a group of Ripper Swarms and advanced them forward. The screen briefly flashed a message: “Enemy Detected.” My Swarms had encountered a group of enemy soldiers. I pulled back my little group momentarily, luring the soldiers in, and then had the rest of my Ripper Swarm army surround them and attack.

Some of the enemy units tried to escape, but they weren’t much of a threat; I wiped them out with ease. Their remains were converted into meatballs with my units’ Predation ability, and these were then carried off into flesh depositories where they would be used to produce more Swarms.

I checked my flesh depositories, only to find they were quite full. Perhaps fashioning some new units was in order. Just as I thought to do so, I scanned the map... and saw the very same units I was about to create.

Oh, I already made them? Man, I’m a real creature of habit.

Still, those units were too far from the front lines, so I had to make do with what I had on hand. Instead, I sent my Ripper Swarms out to scout. Apparently I had planted some Masquerade Swarms in various enemy cities so they could gather information. I used the intel they provided to mobilize my army.

I could only win by taking out all enemy units and structures. With that victory condition in mind, I decimated the enemy’s defense forces and worker units stationed in various towns. Ripper Swarm losses notwithstanding, bringing down the enemy’s defenses was a breeze; they were almost *too* weak.

Pushing my units onward, I crushed anyone and anything I came into contact with. Soon the enemy faction started sending out cavalry units—probably its main force. Their charge attacks were powerful, so I decided to send out my Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan to intercept them. I also had my Archer Elf Swarm Lysa support her with ranged attacks.

My Ripper Swarms, being early-game offensive units used for rushes and provocation, were no match for the cavalry. The cavaliers tore through them as if they were made of paper... but the fallen Swarms cleared a path so Sérignan could strike. She swung her sword this way and that, protected by Lysa’s covering fire.

It worked. The enemy's assault was growing slower, and the units were demoted to mere infantry on horseback. I took this opportunity to surround them with a relentless Ripper Swarm assault. I was losing more and more Ripper Swarms by the minute, but the enemy couldn't withstand these repeated attacks.

Within moments, Sérignan had wiped out every last one of them, securing us an invasion route. I ordered my Swarms to charge. The Masquerade Swarms committed suicide bombings in order to pry open the gates. Once my Swarms had a way in, it was killing time. The insectile comrades I'd cultivated for over a year butchered the enemy and ruined their structures with indiscriminate ferocity.

It was one-sided annihilation.

Things might've been harder for us if the enemy had deployed some heavy-armored units, but all they had left was infantry and light cavalry. Ripper Swarms were more than enough to handle these. Our side suffered some losses, of course, but so long as Sérignan was alive, I didn't mind having to make sacrifices. All the other units were disposable pawns that didn't gain any experience points.

This was just a game, after all. It wasn't as though the humans or Swarms were really dying; this was all just a world of ones and zeroes. While I was lost in thought on the matter, my countless troops overwhelmed the enemy. Nearly half of the enemy's country was already under our control.

Y'know, I'm pretty hungry. I should take a break and eat something. Maybe those leftovers in the fridge? Yeah, that sounds good. Can't get my strategic juices flowing without some good old heavy calories.

The moment I stood up from my chair, however, my computer beeped out a notification sound. I turned to look at the monitor, only to see two new text boxes. One of them had the heading "Is this where your game ends?" Curious, I clicked it open.

"You are capable of so much more than this. The other world is where you truly belong. You could go anywhere else, but that world is the only place where your talents will be acknowledged. You haven't forgotten the oath you swore to

your precious bugs, have you? You promised to lead them to victory. Absolute victory."

Where I truly belong...? I belong here, in Japan. I mean, this is my place. Going to pointless lectures, then coming back home to play this game... That is my world. Is there even any other?

My mind beginning to swirl, I opened the second text box. This one was called "Wake up!"

"Your Majesty, please wake up. We need you. You are our guide. I beg of you, please wake up! Once you return to us, you can lead us once more. You cannot die on us, Your Majesty."

As I read the second message, tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't even understand why I felt so emotional; all I knew was that someone needed me to save them, and it was my duty to answer that call. If I didn't go, whoever sent this message would surely fall apart.

"You're leaving?" said a voice from behind me.

I whipped around to see a strange girl standing in my apartment. She was wearing all white, gazing at me with sorrowful eyes.

"A foul being has ensnared your soul," she said. "It's the Devil's Game. This game has no way out... and no ending. You are the Devil's entertainment, dancing around in the palm of its hand. Yet here you are, ready to return. Are you certain of your decision?"

"I have to," I heard myself say. "They're waiting for me."

What? Who are they?

While I didn't know, I could tell "they" were extremely important to me. I couldn't just abandon them. There was no way I was going to leave them out there to fend for themselves, even if I couldn't remember who they were at the moment.

"I see. So you're leaving. I made this space for nothing, then. A pity."

Suddenly, the room began to crumble away. The walls, the furniture, the flooring—all of it peeled away into nothing.

“So this... wasn’t my apartment?” I asked, flustered.

“No, it wasn’t. It was a transient space I created using your memories. I thought being here would put your soul at ease... It truly is a pity. This might not have been a definitive solution, but it would have healed your soul, even if your body were to perish. Despite that, you still choose to go back to the Devil’s Game.”

I could hardly keep up with what she was saying.

“But someday, I will save your soul. I promise you, I will save you before the Devil’s cage closes.”

She reached out and took hold of my hand. Hers was warm and soft; it reminded me of something, but I couldn’t recall what. No... Something within me was *resisting* the memory. There was a wall around my heart, and inside, something was screaming.

“Never forget your human heart, _____.”

“Wait, my name...!”

But the moment I said those words, my consciousness once again began to fade away.

What was it she called me? What was my name?

I was filled with unease. Something told me that the moment I would come to know that name, I would truly return to my own world.

Discord

“Majesty...! Your Majesty!”

Someone was calling for me. But how could that be? Why would someone treat *me* like a queen? I was just a gamer—a lonely girl fixated on the one game she liked. Why would anyone call me “Your Majesty”?

Oh, right... I still need to put my leftovers in the microwave. I haven't even had dinner yet. I think I have salad dressing somewhere, too. I just have to heat it up and then I'll have a nice meal.

“Please, I beg of you, wake up...” the voice sobbed.

My eyes fluttered open. As my vision adjusted, I saw that I was no longer in my familiar apartment. I was lying on a bed in a different room, an old-fashioned one with exotic-looking details. There were no lamps or light bulbs, so all that illuminated the room was the natural light shining in through the window. A woman was gripping my arm, her face buried in my chest.

“Sérignan...?” Her name spilled out of my mouth.

“Your Majesty! You're awake!” The woman sat up with a start and gaped at me excitedly.

“I... What happened to me?”

I couldn't make sense of my situation. Just moments ago, I was still in my room, playing the video game. Why was I here now? My mind was a complete mess.

“Your Majesty, are you in any pain?”

“I'm... I'm not a queen,” I said, shaking my head.

“Oh no. Have you lost your memories? Perhaps you contracted some disease that muddled your recollection...?”

“Um, I don't know. I have no idea what you're saying, I swear.”

I'm just an unremarkable gamer who happens to be really good at using the Arachnea. Wait, the Arachnea? Haven't I been playing that faction a lot lately?

"Lysa! Her Majesty's awake, but something's wrong! Come here!"

Lysa? Another familiar name... Isn't that the new playable unit they introduced in the last update? She was in my faction last match, and she helped Sérignan handle the cavalry's charge.

"I'm here!" another girl cried, running into the room.

Just like in the game, she was an elven girl with the lower half of an insect, and she was carrying a longbow. She slung the longbow behind her back and hurried to my side.

"Your Majesty, how do you feel? Are you all right?"

"I'm a little confused..."

Why am I talking to a video game character? I play a real-time strategy game, not a role-playing game. But... it all looks so real. Sérignan's cheeks and Lysa's slender arms look so soft and silky, like they'd feel pleasant to the touch.

"Erm, pleasant...? Well, um, if that's what you want, Your Majesty," Sérignan stammered.

"Huh?!"

They heard my thoughts? That's impossible. But wait, aren't I...?

"Sérignan, can you tell me what my position is?" I asked, suddenly thinking more clearly than before.

"Your position, Your Majesty? You're our queen—the Arachnea's queen. You promised to lead us to victory."

Yes. Now I remember.

It was all flooding back to me. This was a world where the Arachnea existed, but was treated as an outsider. A coup d'état had broken out in the Dukedom of Schtraut, so I was marching an army of Swarms into this nation to suppress it. We had to complete our conquest before the Popedom of Frantz invaded.

My memories had returned, yet there was still one doubt in my mind.

"But someday, I will save your soul. I promise you, I will save you before the Devil's cage closes."

Is this place a cage? What did that girl mean?

"Sérignan... and Lysa." I took a deep breath. "I remember everything now. I am your queen. I can't believe I forgot something so important. I am supposed to lead your conquest... I'm so, so sorry."

"Oh, Your Majesty!" Sérignan clung to my body and began weeping once more.

"C'mon, no crying," I said, embracing her. "You're a knight. You've got to be dignified, you know?"

"I truly thought you had forgotten all about us! I was completely useless while you were sleeping... I didn't know what I'd do if you didn't wake up."

"That's enough," I said, wiping her tears away with a corner of my shirt. "I'm sorry for worrying you, Sérignan. I'm all right now. I won't go anywhere, not until we have earned the victory I promised you. I would never go back on my word. Anyway, how long was I asleep?"

"Two or three days," Lysa said, relief written plainly on her face. "We've been applying an antidote little by little."

"Two or three days, huh? Has anything changed since?"

"Nothing yet," Sérignan reported. "It looks like the enemy is struggling to gather their forces."

"Right. Then let's get back at them. They need to be punished for this nasty trick they pulled. If they want to murder, I will show them firsthand how it's done."

"Never forget your human heart."

I wouldn't forget—but this was something that had to be done. We needed to get revenge. Our enemies had massacred the citizens of Marine, and they were intent on staining every other city with blood. It was only fair that we slaughtered them in kind.

An eye for an eye... Isn't that how humans work?



“This is ridiculous!”

A shout echoed through the main camp of the nobles’ army.

“We came to fight and win, so why must we bide our time here?! We should be engaging the enemy—pushing them into a decisive battle! Are you saying we’re fated to lose this battle?! We should be fighting the enemy right this minute! Do you not agree, friends?!”

The one conducting this passionate speech was Marquis Adrian de Arden, who had an army of 50,000 men. He was loudly criticizing the actions of the fourteenth Duke of Schtraut, Leopold de Lorraine.

“Now is the time to hold our position, Lord Arden,” said Roland de Lorraine, Leopold’s younger brother and the commander of the nobles’ army. “Fighting back would be playing right into the enemy’s hands. We’ve received word that the Popedom’s army has begun to march, so we should meet with them and join forces before engaging the enemy. Our adversary wants us to move carelessly so they can exploit even the smallest mistake.”

“He’s right, Lord Arden,” said one noble. “Oh, and do keep in mind that Duke Lorraine is hanging his opposers left and right. You’d do well to obey his orders, assuming you don’t wish to find yourself next in line at the gallows.”

“Good grief,” harrumphed another. “We should never have let Duke Lorraine take control. This sort of thing would’ve *never* happened if Duke Sharon were still in power. Impeaching him was a mistake. While it might be too late to say that now, I can’t help but complain. I mean, look at the state of affairs!”

Many of the nobles were greatly displeased with Leopold’s “administration.” They hated and feared his quick execution of those who opposed him, and they loathed that his incompetence had led to the Arachnea’s invasion.

“Please don’t say that,” Roland begged, trying to placate them. “Leopold has established an alliance with the Popedom; we have no need to fear the Arachnea or Nyrnal any longer.”

“So now we’re supposed to bend a knee to Frantz’s sleazy holy men? We’d be better off serving Nyrnal.”

“That’s right! The Popedom of Frantz is just another arrogant country bent on domination. They act like they’re the only nation who follows the God of Light. ‘Sizable donations to the Church will absolve you of your sins’... Pah! I never would’ve expected that the God of Light would be hurting for money, all of things.”

Roland’s attempts at persuasion fell on deaf ears as the nobles made their grievances known.

“The Popedom of Frantz will make a great ally,” he said firmly. “I’m sure of it.”

It was hard to tell just how much Roland actually trusted the Popedom. Frantz had long weaponized faith in order to squeeze all sorts of things out of the Dukedom and its citizens, including funds for papal inauguration ceremonies and religious festivals. To many, the Popedom was a leech that would use any excuse to suck more money from other nations.

Was allying with a country like that truly the right idea? Both the Popedom of Frantz and the Empire of Nyrnal were haughty, powerful countries in their own ways. Considering recent events, perhaps the Dukedom really would have been better off under Nyrnal’s control.

“Lord Roland... Please, be honest. Was allying with the Popedom the right decision? Has your brother led us down the wrong path?” asked one of the nobles, his expression grave.

“It’s... hard to say at this point. Speaking frankly, gentlemen, I do think the impeachment was a mistake. Changing leaders during a national crisis creates far more problems than it solves. It’s difficult to judge whether my brother can exhibit the leadership skills Duke—erm, Lord Sharon had. Purging so many nobles during these difficult times will cause an even greater rift between our people.”

Roland disagreed with the impeachment, as he knew the many problems a change in leadership caused when war was on the horizon. Now the Arachnea was crawling around in the western end of their lands, and Roland was beginning to doubt if they had any way of pushing back the invasion. Perhaps if they had allied with the Arachnea, like Caesar de Sharon had proposed, all this trial and tragedy would have been avoided.

One of the nobles sighed. “Still, we’ve already given Duke Lorraine the power to steer this ship. All we can do now is ensure we do not sink to the bottom.”

“True. Our hands are now stained with the blood of the nobles and blackened from torching their lands. Pray as we might, this is one thing that won’t change.”

The nobles present were the ones in charge of destroying Leopold’s opposition. Under the pretense of unifying Schtraut, they had hanged innocent men and reduced their lands to ash.

“Pardon me, sirs! I have a report!” A soldier on horseback cantered up to them. “The monsters have been sighted! Fifty of them! They appear to be fleeing to the west!”

“There we go! Finally, a chance to show our worth!” The marquis and the other nobles quickly rose to their feet.

“Wait, this could be a trap!” warned Roland.

“I’ve heard enough out of you! Now is the time to *fight*! The Popedom might be our ally, but we still have to defend our own country! We’ll show Frantz we’ve still got the spirit of an independent nation!”

The hot-tempered nobles ordered their soldiers to head west, hoping to take revenge for their recent losses. Some 1,600 cavaliers and 150,000 infantrymen stormed out in pursuit of the enemy.

Not a single one of them returned.

Two days later, Roland learned that the entire detached force had been decimated. He quickly gathered the remaining nobles, and they all fled as fast as they could to the east.



“The enemy’s splitting its forces up,” I observed, watching the carnage unfolding before me.

The squad of Ripper Swarms I’d sent out to scout had successfully lured the enemy away. Once the soldiers had been led to an area where the terrain worked in our favor, the whole army of Ripper Swarms had descended upon

them. The enemy troops had stormed into our trap with bloodlust and zeal, only to end up as blood splatters on the ground.

I found it strange that the enemy had detached another chunk of its army to send our way—first 100,000, now 150,000. Normally, consolidating these forces to create an army of 250,000 would have made much more sense. Sending out multiple battalions spread units too wide and made them easy pickings.

“Maybe there’s a problem with the enemy’s chain of command?” Sérignan proposed.

“Could be. The coup is fresh in everyone’s minds, after all.”

Leopold had only just seized control of the Dukedom of Schtraut from Caesar de Sharon. Stupid and petty as he was, Leopold’s first order of business had been starting a political purge. It would be impossible for him to maintain order now.

“Are they not awaiting the Popedom of Frantz’s army?” asked one of the Ripper Swarms.

Each individual Swarm’s thoughts were transmitted through the collective consciousness, and their words were usually quite brief. According to the collective, they had just finished annihilating the 150,000 soldiers.

“That could be. If the Popedom has been given permission to enter Schtraut, maybe Leopold’s underlings are dividing their forces to buy time until Frantz’s army arrives. I imagine the nobles in charge of these soldiers just so happen to be Leopold’s political rivals...”

Traditionally, the duke of Schtraut was chosen through an election. Leopold probably saw other nobles with authority as threats to his re-election and so had shuttled them off to die in battle. The more I thought about that man, the more I hated him.

“He’s a traitor to his own country,” Sérignan said, bristling. “He keeps whittling down the Dukedom’s army, and now he’s forcing it to nurse off another nation for protection. If the Dukedom places its military affairs into the hands of the Popedom, it will be entirely subject to Frantz’s will. What a stupid, cowardly man. I can’t help but hate him, and I’m not even on his side.”

“Agreed,” I nodded grimly. “I can’t stand Leopold. I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him... and as luck would have it, I can. Anyway, keep heading east, and wipe out the enemy as you go. Ruin their towns, too. Any settlements that remain belong to the nobles who destroyed Marine, so there’s no need to show them mercy. Turn their citizens into meatballs and gather up all their gold. We need to unlock new structures.”

We were fast approaching the heart of Schtraut. The trade country’s well-paved roads hastened our march. We built FOBs near the front lines along the way. Our objectives were simple: crash down upon enemy cities with a wave of Ripper Swarms, reduce the citizens to meatballs, and gather up all their gold.

One, two, one, two.

Even without a drum and fife to give us rhythm, we marched onward. Eventually, the first town’s walls came into view. I ordered the Masquerade Swarm stationed there to blow open the gates. In addition to Mimesis, the Masquerade Swarm also had a special Self-Destruct ability. The resulting explosion created a hole wide enough for us to pass through.

“God, oh, God of Light! Please, deliver us from this evil!” cried one of the soldiers guarding the gates. The rest of his comrades also babbled out terrified prayers.

Praying will get you nowhere. Search the world over, but you won’t find God.

Their faith meant nothing. It would not spare them from being crushed beneath our feet.

A legion of Ripper Swarms rushed into the town. They climbed up the ramparts, killing the soldiers who were trying to take aim at them with ballistas. The mages were also quickly found and exterminated. I hadn’t forgotten the time Sérignan was blown back by a wave of magic right before my eyes.

“Your Majesty, what are your orders?”

“Same as always. Crush them. Destroy them.”

Overrun them.

The Swarms spilled out into the city streets, indiscriminately killing everyone

they met, be they soldiers or civilians. A part of me wondered if this was the right thing to do.

“Never forget your human heart.”

That girl’s voice echoed in my mind. Had I lost my human sensibilities? Was I doing something my human nature would forbid? Had my heart become the heart of a monster?

“Is something weighing on your mind, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked, sensing my anxiety through the collective consciousness.

“Just a bit. Sérignan... Do you think I’m still human?”

“You are human, Your Majesty. No matter what others may say, that fact will not change. However, you are still the Arachnea’s queen—the one meant to guide us. You are human, but you are no *mere* human.”

“I see.”

You say I’m still human, but I’m pretty much convinced that I’m a monster now, complete with a monstrous heart.

There was no point dwelling on it, though. Our hands were already stained by the anomalous act of war. War was a peculiar thing; only in wartime would someone who dropped an atomic bomb on hundreds of thousands of innocents be hailed as a hero. I myself was now deeply invested in war, so perhaps it only made sense that I was going a bit mad.

To end this war and exact my revenge, I would destroy this town and any others we came across. We would murder. We would make our meatballs. We would pillage what remained.

All of this was to end the fight over the Dukedom of Schtraut and to allow the Arachnea to live in peace. I might have been willing to slaughter, but it wasn’t without meaning. Even if I did lose my human heart, the Arachnea would accept me. And so long as they gave me a place to belong, I was happy.

Still, I got the feeling I was moving further away from Japan and the world I truly called home. I felt that if I continued along this path, I would never return to my own world. I would never spend another precious moment with my

friends or family again. That thought left a tinge of loneliness in my heart.



“Leopold!”

Roland was storming through the duke’s residence in Doris, the capital of Schtraut.

“Where is Leopold?!” he cried, grabbing a nearby servant by the collar.

“Erm, His Grace is resting on the second floor,” the servant choked out.

“Laying about at a time like this...” Roland said bitterly.

He climbed the staircase in search of his brother. The duke’s office and bedroom were on the second floor; Roland checked his bedroom first.

“Leopold!” he said, swinging the door open without bothering to knock.

“What is it, Roland?”

Leopold was resting indeed. He was surrounded by several prostitutes and countless bottles of alcohol, chatting with a few other men. This certainly wasn’t how one would want to find a politician during wartime; if the people of Schtraut were to hear of this, it could easily spark a revolt.

“What do I want? Leopold, do you have any idea what’s happening to our country? There’s an army of monsters marching upon us from the west, and the nobles’ army is in tatters! Yet you’re just sitting here drinking with whores?!” Enraged, Roland grabbed a bottle and threw it onto the floor. The glass shattered, and its pungent contents pooled on the floor.

“What’s got you so on edge, my dear Roland?” Leopold said, casually opening a new bottle to pour one of the men a drink. “The nobles’ army has been cut down a bit, that’s all. Even if it does get wiped out, our victory is assured. We have our trusty allies from the Popedom, after all!”

The men he was entertaining were officers from the Popedom of Frantz. Their army was stationed just outside the national border, ready to cross into the Dukedom’s territory as soon as the order was given. The only reason they hadn’t yet crossed was because Leopold wanted to allow the Arachnea to wound the other nobles by destroying their collective army.

“Then tell our *allies* to come and help us already! Our front lines are on the verge of collapsing, and our cities are falling one after the other! Are you planning to rule over a pile of rubble?!”

“How dare you! I’m doing everything in my power to save this country! I stationed extra soldiers in our cities, and I ordered the towns in the enemy’s path to be burned to the ground! This should have slowed down their progress! Yet you stand here and criticize me?!”

“And *I’m* saying everything you did was absolutely useless! Our enemy is already deep in Dukedom territory! Soon they’ll break through our meager defenses and go deeper still! Did you *really* think scorched-earth tactics would work against man-eating monsters?!”

These scorched-earth tactics had unexpectedly rendered the enemy’s leader comatose for a few days, but they could not slow down the Arachnea. Not only did the Swarm have no need for food, but they even used the flesh of corpses they found in the burned-down towns to create more resources. All Leopold had really done was provoke the ire of their queen.

“You’re saying my stratagems had no effect...?”

“As far as I can see, nothing has changed for the better.”

“Then we have no choice but to rely on the Popedom’s army,” Leopold said bitterly. He turned to one of the officers. “As of this moment, you have my approval to cross the border. Please begin your march.”

“It will take our army two weeks at the earliest. Is that acceptable?”

“What?” Leopold went white. “Why would it take you so long?! You must come to our rescue at once!”

“Our soldiers have been waiting at the border all this time, you know. It’ll take some time to break down their encampments and have supplies ready for the march. I’m afraid these are steps we have to take.”

There was some truth to the officer’s words. The Popedom’s army was fatigued from spending so long in the border camps, and it would need time to reorganize. All told, it would take the soldiers about a week to prepare.

That wasn't the whole story, of course. The officers were also waiting for the Dukedom of Schtraut to crumble so they could swoop in and incorporate it into the Popedom.

"I told you placing that much trust in a foreign army was a mistake," Roland said with a sigh.

"Ah, I'd nearly forgotten... Sir Roland, you are to be made a paladin," said one of the other officers. "In light of your courageous spirit and your service to the people, His Holiness has decided to bestow this honor upon you. We hope you will continue to fight in a manner befitting of this title."

"You want me to become a paladin so I can buy you more time?"

Frantz wanted the Dukedom weakened so it could take over, but the Popedom wasn't looking to acquire a country that had been *completely* destroyed; it needed to be worth taking, at least. To that end, they elevated Roland to the rank of paladin in order to increase morale. Naturally, the move was made entirely for the sake of the Popedom itself.

"Fine. I accept."

"Splendid. Take this, then. Normally His Holiness would give it to you himself, but current circumstances dictate that this task falls to me."

The officer who'd spoken fixed a medal bearing the insignia of the Knights of Saint Agniya onto Roland's chest.

"There's nothing for me?" Leopold asked, disgruntled.

"Should we win this battle, you will also be awarded honors, Your Grace."

"Assuming we live that long," Roland said dryly. "They're charging toward Doris at breakneck speed. I suggest your friends from Frantz leave this place, unless they're also looking to be torn to shreds."

The officers from Frantz eyed Roland with scorn, but they certainly weren't interested in clashing with the enemy's front lines.

"I'll be riding out to meet their army with our finest soldiers. The cavalry, all of them. Any objections?" Roland asked his brother.

"Do whatever you want," Leopold said, pouring his umpteenth glass.

“May victory be upon us,” Roland muttered. With that, he headed out to deliver his orders to the troops.

The Cavalry

That day's battle was one none of us would ever forget.

"The enemy's cavalry is on its way?" I asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty. A group of twenty-five thousand cavaliers. They seem intent on clashing with us here."

"Hmm. So they're trying to bring this fight to a head..."

For some reason, the Ripper Swarm's report filled me with a sense of déjà vu.

Didn't I see something like this before?

"Well, it's all right. I'll think of a countermeasure. Mobilize the Worker Swarms."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

I was confident I'd be able to handle the cavalry. The Arachnea didn't have any mounted units, so an Arachnea player had to use her head if she wanted to take care of them. Now was the time to show off the strategies I'd been working on.

"Are you tracking the enemy's movements?" I asked.

"We have Digger Swarms deployed around the perimeter, functioning as scouts. Based on their observations, we know the cavalry are traveling fast along the main thoroughfare and advancing on our position."

Hmm. Charging headlong at us, huh?

A cavalier's charge was menacing. I had no intention of underestimating them.

"Have my orders reached the Worker Swarms?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The Worker Swarms have already begun working as per your specifications."

I had given the Worker Swarms an order to produce something for me...

Something that would surely change the course of the upcoming battle.

“Summon Sérignan and Lysa for me, please.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Those two were my most treasured subordinates; they were crucial to securing our victory.

“You called for us, Your Majesty?”

“Reporting for duty!”

Five minutes later, Sérignan and Lysa showed up.

“Ah, there you are. Did you know we have an army of cavaliers advancing on our position?”

“Yes, I heard it through the collective consciousness,” Sérignan nodded.

“You two will be playing a key role in intercepting them. Your task is simple. Cavaliers are problematic because of their charge, which is both fast and powerful. Their speed bolsters the impact of their blows. But if we can take away their momentum, they’ll just be infantry on horseback.”

In the game, mounted units were quick and had a charging bonus, but if you were able to reduce their momentum, they were easy to defeat.

“The march so far has diminished our forces to a mere fifty thousand, but that should be more than enough to annihilate them. Let’s make a show of it, shall we?”

Many of the Ripper Swarms were exhausted. They hadn’t come out of our latest battles unscathed, and each fortress or city we’d occupied had caused us significant losses. Their numbers were decreasing faster than I would’ve liked.

To top it all off, I’d had to station Ripper Swarms in our newly occupied territories to defend them and maintain control. Some enemy soldiers might try to circumvent our main army and strike the areas we’d conquered, so leaving a garrison in those territories was absolutely necessary.

We were preparing to create new Swarms, of course, but we were also working on something else entirely. If I could amass large enough numbers, our

new unit would soon overturn the war. I was looking forward to it.

“There are a few ways of slowing down a cavalier. On one hand, we could create some sort of obstacle; putting down obstructions horses can’t run or break through will force them to stop. On the other, we could meet their charge with a larger number of soldiers and whittle them down.”

The methods I had listed were pretty orthodox anti-cavalry tactics.

“I see. What path will we take, then, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked.

“It’s simple,” I said with a smirk. “I’m going to have you two become obstacles. Big obstacles the enemy will never be able to power through.”



“Gentlemen! It is time to destroy the invaders violating our land!”

Roland was in the middle of rallying the 25,000 cavaliers, his paladin’s medal gleaming on his chest.

“Make no mistake; our enemy is powerful. The nobles’ army tried to keep them at bay, but those soldiers were massacred by the enemy. We’re the only force capable of defending this country now. The Popedom of Frantz’s army isn’t coming fast enough. At this rate, Doris will fall and its citizens will be butchered. A terrible fate will befall your friends, family, and loved ones.”

In response, the cavaliers roared with anger.

“That’s right, brothers! We *should* be angry! Turn your rage into a weapon, and use it to cut down your foes! We are the mightiest warriors on the continent, unmatched in both skill and bravery! The sounds of our hoofbeats will rattle our enemies’ hearts! Our charge will send them scuttling away like the spiders they are!”

For all his zeal, Roland didn’t believe a word he was saying. He knew the strongest cavaliers on the continent were the Empire of Nyrnal’s Black Horse Knights, and he hadn’t heard anything to suggest the Arachnea were even capable of fear. They always stormed in like berserkers and fought until life abandoned them.

Regardless, he wove lie after lie into his speech in order to inspire his men.

“We will capture their leader, the infernal Queen of the Arachnea! Without their queen, the invaders will be nothing but monsters. While hunting monsters is normally an adventurer’s job, they’re all currently quivering under the teats of the Eastern Trade Union, so it’ll be ours instead.”

Roland’s words elicited a bit of laughter from the soldiers. Adventurers were by no means mercenaries. They had all quickly fled the Dukedom once it became clear it was about to become a battlefield. Now they were all hiding out in the Eastern Trade Union, which sat between the Empire of Nyrnal and the Poppedom of Frantz. Here, the guild’s influence was strong.

Still, it was only natural that they would escape, since even innocent adventurers weren’t exempt from Leopold’s political purge. The queen of the Arachnea had seen this firsthand when she’d visited the ruins of Marine. These few adventurers who’d decided to flee had lost all love or loyalty for the Dukedom of Schtraut and had run for their lives.

“We will crush the enemy! Once we capture their leader, we will put an end to the invasion! We shall be victorious!”

“Yaaaahhh!” the 25,000 cavaliers cheered, clashing their weapons together.

“Our scouts say the Arachnea’s stronghold is located in the village beyond this narrow road. There’s no doubting the enemy lies in wait for us, but we are the Dukedom’s last hope. Keep that in mind!”

All that remained of Schtraut’s military forces was Doris’ defensive garrison and this group of cavaliers. But since Doris couldn’t afford to deploy the garrison, the only real offensive force was the cavalry. At this point, Roland wasn’t relying on Frantz’s reinforcements at all.

“Let’s go, gentlemen! Glory to the Dukedom of Schtraut!”

“Glory to the Dukedom of Schtraut!”

Thus, the cavalry set out to attack. They surged forward, avoiding or breaking through any obstacles in their way. Mobility was the cavalry’s forte, and Roland capitalized on it to deftly break through the Arachnea’s outer defenses and enter the rear gates. His cavaliers rushed into the heart of the village.

A few minutes later, they reached a narrow road situated between two steep

cliffs.

“They should be at the end of this road!” Roland shouted.

“Sir! We’ve completed our reconnaissance,” said one cavalier, riding up to Roland.

“Good work. What’s the situation?”

“The enemy’s waiting for us, and they’re on high alert. There’s thirty thousand bugs up there, standing in a line formation. They’re completely blocking the path to their stronghold.”

“Thank you. Good work. Gentlemen! Prepare to charge! We are going to trample the enemy underfoot! Are you ready?!”

“Glory to the motherland!”

“Chaaaarge!”

The entire force of 25,000 cavaliers galloped down the road, with Roland leading the charge.

“Enemy sighted! Enemy sighted!”

True to the reports, the end of the road was crawling with giant insects.

“Forget it! Keep moving!” Roland shouted. He used his lance to run through the bugs at the center of the Arachnea’s army. The Ripper Swarms were pierced by weapons and crushed beneath the horse’s hooves as they, too, advanced forward.

“Aaaaah!”

But as Roland was riding ahead, he suddenly heard screams from both sides of the cavalry.

“What? Are those traps?! Where did they hide them?!”

As it turned out, there were anti-cavalry obstacles set up on either flank of the Swarms’ formation. Sharpened tree spikes poked out from the ground like porcupine quills. The horses were spooked by the objects and stopped in their tracks, which prompted the Ripper Swarms to lunge at the cavaliers and rip them to shreds.

Cavaliers riding behind the front lines ended up colliding with the ones who'd stopped. Their horses tripped over the spikes, only to topple over and get skewered. The spikes had been hidden well; Ripper Swarms had stood in front of them on either side in order to conceal them. The cavaliers had charged directly at the Swarms, taking the bait.

"Blast, they've hit both our flanks! But we can still break through the front!" Roland yelled, spurring his horse onward.

Roland's path was littered with Ripper Swarm corpses, which his men trampled as they followed his lead. Though their left and right flanks had perished, the remaining soldiers gripped their lances and sabers with fervor.

"Just a little more, men! We're almost through!"

The tail end of the Ripper Swarm army was in sight; they had nearly reached the Arachnea's stronghold.

"This is as far as you go!"

Suddenly, a monster with the lower half of an insect and an upper half of a beautiful woman stood in his path.

"Out of the way!" Roland shouted.

"I refuse! Now, turn back or die!" Sérignan said, brandishing her black sword.

"If you won't move, we'll have to use force!" Roland thrust his lance forward.

"Try it, if you can! Soon you'll be kneeling under the weight of your own helplessness!" Sérignan lunged at the paladin.

With a single swing of her sword, she sliced through Roland's armor and into his abdomen. Blood gushed out from the wound as he slipped off his horse and onto the ground.

"Who's next?!"

Sérignan wasn't merely there to fight Roland, but also the many cavaliers accompanying him. Her corrupted holy sword flitted through the air, gracefully slashing this way and that. As she danced around her enemies, she reaped their lives one after another.

“Here I go!” Lysa, who had been standing behind Sérignan, began using her longbow to shoot down the remaining cavaliers.

Her victims tumbled to the ground with arrows in their heads, and then they were crushed by their own dying horses.

“Are we still trying to break through?!”

“It’s pointless! We have to fall back! Fall back!”

The remaining cavaliers had lost their fighting spirit and were now trying to escape, but it was far too late. The Ripper Swarms’ fangs and scythes shredded into the opposition, lacerating the horses and making mincemeat out of their riders.

“Retreeeat!”

“But what about Sir Roland?!”

A few cavaliers who’d been held back by the spikes began to flee.

“Who cares about him?! Our lives are more important right now!”

Before they could go anywhere, however, more Ripper Swarms swooped down from the cliffs. They ripped the cavaliers off their mounts and tore them to pieces.

“So this is where it ends...” Roland uttered, cradling his bleeding stomach.

“Oh, so it’s you who’s in charge of this whole affair,” said a voice from behind him.

It was the girl he’d met during the party, Grevillea.

“You... I met you in Marine...”

“That’s right. You gave me a hand back then.”

“No... Don’t tell me *you’re* the Arachnea’s queen...”

“Sorry, pal, but that’s precisely who I am,” she shrugged. The gesture was almost comical, considering the situation. “Sérignan, apply pressure to his wound. He has information we need, so we can’t let him die here.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

At Grevillea's—the queen's—order, Sérignan stopped Roland's bleeding.

"Tell me, is Duke Sharon still alive?" Grevillea asked.

"Leopold killed him. Just like he killed everyone else who opposed him, so he'd be the only one with any power."

"Do you think what your brother did was a mistake?"

"I do. He's in the wrong here. He's playing the role of a despot who believes in the Popedom, but in the end, they turned their backs on him. If only we hadn't listened to him and impeached Caesar de Sharon, we'd be much better off now..."

Roland was suddenly assailed by a fit of coughing. Blood trickled out from the corner of his mouth.

"I hear venom in your words. Do you hate Leopold?"

"I do... I hate him," Roland wheezed, his voice thick with loathing. "Leopold reduced the Dukedom to ashes, and he'll probably flee so he doesn't have to face the consequences. How could I not hate him for this?! I love this country! I wanted to see it flourish! But Leopold ruined everything! No one can put this shattered nation back together anymore!" His shoulders drooped.

"How would you feel if I told you there is still a way for you to fight for Schtraut?" asked the queen.

"Fight? With these wounds? That's impossible."

"Where there's a will, there's a way. A way for you to take revenge on your brother for what he did to your country." Grevillea's lips curled into a devious smile.

The Monster Called the Sea

Every single one of the 25,000 cavaliers who had accompanied Roland de Lorraine had been slaughtered.

This news shocked Leopold to the core. He'd been confident the cavalry would turn the tide of this war in their favor. Even if they'd merely served as throwaway pawns, he'd at least expected them to push back the invasion and buy time for Frantz's reinforcements. However, they hadn't even managed to do that; Leopold's scouts had just reported that the monsters' army was still advancing toward Doris.

"Your Grace! What are we to do?!"

"Will our garrison be able to hold them off?!"

Urgh... My head hurts, Leopold thought. But this isn't the alcohol. Must be stress...

"Shut up! Let the generals handle this!" he screeched, slamming his fist on the table.

"How irresponsible!"

"There's no way they'll hold the line until Frantz's reinforcements arrive..."

The surviving congressmen were unanimously opposed to his attitude.

"Shut up! Shut up! Get out of here this instant, or I'll have you all hanged!" Leopold roared.

After that, the men were forced out of his residence.

"Blast! Blast it all! Why won't anything go my way?! Where did I go wrong?!"

Leopold's life up to this point was little more than a string of failures. He'd failed to run the family business and was forced to depend on his younger brother. As soon as Roland had taken over, everything had suddenly improved, and everyone had seen him as the rightful owner of the business... Despite the fact that Leopold was the rightful, legal heir.

His married life hadn't gone smoothly, either. No sooner had he become a husband than he began chasing after other women, provoking the fury of his new wife and her family. While he had been able to silence them with money, he had been forced to divorce his wife. Soon enough, his relationships with his mistresses had soured as well.

And now *this*.

He'd somehow been able to drive his nemesis out of office and take over Caesar's position. He had even hanged the man. But then the monsters had started flooding in from the west and trampling his cities, and now they were creeping ever closer to Doris.

His last ray of hope had been the Popedom of Frantz, but they'd effectively abandoned the Dukedom and left it to its fate. Not a single one of Frantz's troops had yet crossed the border; their last report had said only that they were preparing to set out.

Nothing ever went right for Leopold. All of his endeavors had ended in failure.

"Dammit! Why?! Why does nothing I do ever work out?! I know I'm talented! I'm a skilled businessman, politician, and noble! So why, why, *why* does the world conspire to ruin me?!"

Leopold would not admit his mistakes. He believed that he was always right and that everyone else was wrong. His failure to run the business wasn't his fault; it was Roland's for trying to steal it away. His marriage failed not because of his adultery, but because his wife was prejudiced and prude.

Naturally, he attributed his failure in this war to multiple factors: the Dukedom's generals were incompetent, the soldiers were poorly trained, the officers had chosen the wrong strategy, the Popedom of Frantz had not sent their reinforcements as promised...

But no matter how much he shifted the blame, the Dukedom of Schtraut was still on the verge of collapse, and the enemy was still approaching. Leopold had instructed his generals to gather any remaining troops in the capital, but he'd given them no additional orders. Truthfully, he didn't know what else could be done.

Hands shaking, he took a swig of brandy.

“Your Grace.”

“Hm? Oh, erm, hello, Sebastian.” Leopold regarded the figure that approached him with a start. “Have the Popedom’s reinforcements finally arrived?”

The one who approached him was a military marshal by the name of Sebastian de Silhouette.

“Apologies, Your Grace... They have not.”

“Dammit! Curse those Frantzian dogs!”

Sebastian was an experienced soldier who’d served the Dukedom for many years. Leopold had left Doris’ defense strategy entirely up to him, making him the highest-ranked commanding officer when it came to defending the capital.

“How many men are they sending?” asked Sebastian.

“I don’t know. The damn charlatans wouldn’t specify. I trusted them, and they betrayed us.”

“Then we have no choice but to defend the city and force the enemy into a siege. Thankfully, since Doris is coastal, we can have supplies ferried to us at any time. We could hold this position indefinitely.”

“But those monsters leveled the other cities so quickly. Do you really think we’ll be able to keep them at bay?”

“It’s possible, Your Grace. Thanks to Doris’ topography.”

“Hm...?”

Being a coastal city, Doris had a large port and shipyard, and it served as an economic hub.

“Doris is essentially an island. Its only connection to the rest of the continent is the great Poitier Bridge. If we destroy the bridge, the monsters shouldn’t be able to enter the city.”

“Yes... Yes, that’s right! It doesn’t matter how many monsters are out there; they can’t cross rivers or seas. If they could, they’d have attacked Nyrnal by

now. The fact that they haven't means we can protect Doris!"

Poitier Bridge was usually full of peddlers and trader caravans, but it was closed off and devoid of pedestrians during wartime.

"But won't knocking out the bridge be difficult? Not even our mages would be able to destroy it completely."

"It would take time, yes, but it would make it much harder for the enemy to invade. If we don't, I have no doubt the enemy will try to cross."

This bridge was an extremely durable structure; no known explosives could put so much as a crack in it. Leopold found it hard to believe that their mages would be able to do much damage. Still, the enemy *had* to cross the bridge to reach them. It was the only way to enter Doris on land.

"If we gather our forces on the bridge, we can keep the monsters at bay with ballista fire and magic attacks while holding the gates closed. In doing so, we'll be able to hold the line. As large as the bridge may be, it does restrict how many monsters can cross at any given time."

Poitier Bridge was the width of five Ripper Swarms. The marshal saw this as a chance to force the Swarms into a bottleneck, then rain attacks down upon them—and the bridge itself—before they could reach the city walls.

"I see! That's a splendid idea!" Leopold exclaimed, believing this was the path to victory. "Position our army on the bridge and have them hit the enemy with everything they've got! Put some ballistas atop the bridge as well!"

"One moment, Your Grace. We must account for every possible contingency. Gathering *all* of our troops on the bridge would be dangerous; we should leave at least a few men inside the city."

"Sebastian, how else could they enter the city? Do you think those monsters can walk on water? Or that they have ships? Impossible. Their only way of entering Doris is crossing that bridge. Now, hop to it, if you would. I'll send some scouts later on to confirm we've got everyone gathered on Poitier Bridge."

"As you wish, Your Grace."

Leopold was already beginning to act as if this operation had been his idea. He had all but convinced himself that he was a savior capable of delivering Doris from this crisis.

Sebastian, on the other hand, was dismayed, as his only strategy—and the city itself—was now in jeopardy. After a bow in the duke’s direction, he left to gather the soldiers.

“Yes. Yes. I can win this... and I will. This time, I’ll succeed!” Leopold popped open a new bottle of expensive brandy to celebrate his impending victory, filling his glass to the brim.



“So that’s what Doris looks like,” I mused.

I already knew of it from the Swarms’ reports, but now I could see firsthand that Doris was like a fortress floating over the sea. Seizing it would be no easy task. Simply rushing over their bridge and through their front gates would result in a... *very* warm welcome. It would no doubt strike a painful blow to my forces, and our assault would end in failure.

Still, there was no other way to enter the capital. The bridge was the only route connecting Doris to the rest of the continent. In all other directions, the city was surrounded by nothing but open sea.

“What should we do, Sérignan?” I asked.

“My apologies, Your Majesty, but I can’t say. If only we could use ships, we’d be able to sail into the city. But the Swarm can’t operate a ship, nor is it possible for me. It seems like forcing our way across the bridge is our only way in, does it not?”

Right, the Swarm couldn’t use ships. They had no way of crossing rivers or seas. In the game, the settings made this weakness pretty irrelevant. Reality, unfortunately, wasn’t so kind to us.

“So, your conundrum is your inability to operate ships, then?” came a young man’s voice from beside us.

“That’s right, Roland. Ships would allow us to conquer that island with

minimal losses. That's nothing but a dream for us, though."

I was speaking to Roland—the new Roland, whom I'd made into a Swarm. He was now the Knight Swarm Roland, as I had christened him. Just like Lysa, he had the lower half of an insect and a tail that hid a venomous stinger. His main difference from Lysa, however, was that he also had another pair of insectile legs growing from his sides. These legs had giant claws, and they were as flexible as human arms.

"Why not hire sailors to operate the ships for you?" Roland proposed.

"Sadly, all the cities along the coastline were destroyed by that stupid noble's army. There's no one left alive for us to hire."

"Then perhaps I can give it a try."

"What?" I gaped at him. "You know how to commandeer a ship?"

"I've dabbled in it. I had to sail a few times while helping Leopold with our family's business, so I'm no stranger to seafaring. I should be able to handle one well enough, assuming a storm doesn't break out."

Well, didn't I just hit the jackpot?

On top of being a skilled knight with a fair spirit, Roland could even sail a ship.

How versatile. I could stand to learn a thing or two from him.

"Roland, I want you to try operating a ship so that knowledge will circulate through the collective consciousness. That way, the rest of the Swarm will learn how to do it, too."

"By your will, Your Majesty. We'll gather ships from the coastal towns and have a force of Swarms prepare to attack Doris." With that, Roland mounted his horse and took off.

"Can we really trust him, Your Majesty?" Sérignan asked, watching him suspiciously.

"Sure we can. He won't betray us. Can't you tell how intense his hatred is through the collective consciousness? I can. He wants to settle the score with his idiotic brother. He won't stop until Leopold's dead and the Popedom of Frantz lies in ruins."

“I can feel his hatred, yes, but...”

The emotions emitting from Roland were all negative: hatred, betrayal, and seething rage. He loathed Leopold and the Popedom for driving his country to ruin. We had these two enemies in common now, so I believed we could trust him to help us.

“Sérignan, he can’t lie to us. We’re all brothers and sisters connected by the same great consciousness. I trust Roland the same way I trust you.”

“The same way you trust me...? Hmph. Between Roland and myself, who is more trustworthy?” Sérignan asked, a hint of jealousy in her voice.

“Well, of course that’d be you,” I replied, cracking a small smile. “You’ve been protecting me since the very beginning. You’re my dearest knight, and I trust you more than anyone.”

“Oh, Your Majesty, I... I’m very grateful!”

“Oh, here come the waterworks. C’mon, knights shouldn’t bawl at the drop of a hat.”

To me, the Swarm were like my adorable children. This included all the Ripper Swarms that had fought for me so far, the Worker Swarms that toiled every day to craft things for our army, the Digger Swarms that awaited my orders underground, the Masquerade Swarms working undercover, and Lysa, our resident elf-turned-Swarm...

Naturally, this meant Sérignan, too. She was my most precious, irreplaceable knight.

“All right, let’s map out our operation,” I said. “Just popping up with a bunch of ships is really lacking in finesse.”

It was time to bring down Schtraut’s capital.



At Poitier Bridge just outside Doris, everything was eerily quiet. It was early morning, and the sun had not yet risen. No birds chirped to fill the air, so the only sound that could be heard was the rolling waves crashing against the cliffs.

“The enemy *is* coming, right?” asked one of the soldiers garrisoned at the

gate.

“They’re bound to,” answered another. “This is the capital; it’s the one place they won’t overlook. They’ll definitely attack us, and we’ve got to stop them. It’s all up to us now.”

There was no telling when the Arachnea might attack. There were bonfires lit over the bridge, providing meager light that licked the city walls. The soldiers could only see parts of the bridge itself, and everything else was covered in a veil of darkness.

Suddenly, a disturbing metallic clacking sound reached the soldiers’ ears.

“What was that?”

“I’ll go check.”

One of the noncommissioned officers used a pair of binoculars to get a better look. It was then that he saw it: a massive army of insects. They were charging Poitier Bridge in massive numbers, heading straight toward the gates.

“Enemy sighted! Get ready to intercept them!”

From the gate, they could see a massive army of Ripper Swarms storming the bridge like a great black wave. The sight was so terrifying, it could drive a man mad.

“Prepare the ballistas!”

“Shoot them with crossbows!”

The soldiers rained down bolts upon the incoming Ripper Swarms. Normal bows simply lacked the penetrating power to be useful; the ballistas and crossbows, on the other hand, could exert much more force. The bolts easily punctured the Swarms’ exoskeletons.

“Mages, cast your spells! Drown them in fire!”

As commanded, the mages moved in. They unleashed both simple, silent spells and advanced spells that required chanting to complete, showering the bridge in fireballs. The simpler spells only combusted upon impact, but the advanced spells weren’t so simple; their fire was adhesive, clinging to the target as if it were covered in flammable liquid that burned indefinitely.

The Ripper Swarms were falling to the flames one by one. Their allies stepped unflinchingly over their bodies as the flames continued to spread. Seeing that the Ripper Swarms were unafraid of fire caused some of the mages to panic.

“Don’t let up the attacks! They’re planning to overwhelm us with their numbers! Stop them no matter what!” This order came from one of Schtraut’s military commanders, who was in charge of the group.

Without warning, an explosion rang out from within the city walls. The makeshift fence they had set up along the gates’ second defensive line was blown apart, and the nearby soldiers had been flung to the ground. Some of them had been mangled beyond recognition by the mysterious blast, while others were still writhing painfully on the ground, begging for help.

“What just happened?!” the commander shouted.

“I don’t know, sir! We’re still trying to grasp the situation!” cried one of his men.

The cause of their panic soon became evident. Apparently, a suspicious civilian had run up to the fence and exploded on contact. Any soldiers caught in the blast had been blown several meters away. The shockwaves ruptured their internal organs, and the ones who were still alive were now coughing up blood.

“There are saboteurs in the city?!”

“What do we do, sir?!”

That simply wasn’t possible. Only advanced magic could produce such a powerful blast. It was unthinkable that someone who could silently cast a spell of that caliber would be used as cannon fodder.

“Aim your crossbows at the walls! Keep an eye out for enemy saboteurs!”

Even as the commander barked these orders, a group of people emerged from the city and walked right through the ruined fence. The moment the crossbows were about to fire, the strangers’ heads split open, revealing a pair of sharp fangs. Insectile legs burst out from their backs and their own legs morphed into tails tipped with stingers. The five monsters rushed up the walls with frightening speed.

“Wh-What the...?! What *are* they?! Oh God, they’re insects! Those monsters can disguise themselves as humans?!”

Confusion and terror scrambled the minds of the soldiers, and their weapons continually missed their marks. Meanwhile, the insects had moved past the fence and were beginning to self-destruct against the walls. The ramparts shook, nearly knocking the commander and his men onto the ground. Doris’ sturdy metal gates were heavily damaged by the impact, nearly coming off their hinges.

“The inner gates!” one soldier cried out as the gates fell apart.

“Calm down, we still have the outer gates!” replied the commander.

Doris had two sets of gates for its protection. The first set of gates was made of wood and located outside the city. The inner gates were made of sturdy metal... and were now completely destroyed. That only left the wooden gates. Would they be able to hold back an army of Ripper Swarms?

“Stay alert for enemies within the walls as you repel the attack on the bridge! The enemy is trying to gain momentum! If we don’t defend the walls, Doris is finished! If the city falls, I don’t need to tell you what’ll happen to your families and loved ones!”

At that very moment, however...

“Sir!” An unfamiliar soldier approached the commander.

“What is it? Get to your position already—”

Before he could finish, the soldier exploded.

The commander, who was standing only a meter away from the soldier, was blown to bits. The terrified screams of nearby soldiers caught in the blast filled the air.

“Dammit! Their saboteurs are even mixed in with our soldiers!” cursed one of the officers. “Hey, if any of you detect any soldiers you don’t recognize, report them immediately! They could be enemy spies!”

As the battle raged on, chaos quickly overwhelmed the men atop the walls. Leopold had ordered for a large—even excessive—number of them to be

stationed there, and so the bulk of Doris' army was struggling to maintain order.

"Fight on in the name of the Dukedom! Stop those monsters!" The officer who'd spoken up just before took on the role of the dead commander.

"Yeeaaaah!" The soldiers met his words of encouragement with a war cry.

Incidentally, the Ripper Swarms' rush was slowing down—no, it was coming to a halt entirely. They had pushed beyond the charred remains of their comrades to close in on the gates, but the crossbow and ballista fire had forced them to evade, then finally retreat.

"Ahaha! The monsters are fleeing! Serves you right, cockroaches!"

"Victory is ours!"

The soldiers at the gates rejoiced at the sight of the Ripper Swarms falling back.

"Did we win...?" the officer wondered aloud.

After trampling countless cities across the Dukedom, the Ripper Swarms were retreating for the very first time. The officer found it hard to believe as he watched the monsters scurry away. Had they truly won? Yes, that had to be it. The enemy had accepted defeat. The gates had taken a lot of damage, but in the end, they had held fast in the face of the invasion.

"We did it! We won!"

"Yaaaah! Victory is ours!"

The soldiers cheered, throwing away their helmets and lifting up their crossbows. They were overjoyed, as they believed that they had at last vanquished the insectile scourge.

Their blissful celebration, however, did not even last five minutes.

"Where's your commander?! I need him right this instant!" Sebastian de Silhouette bellowed from atop the walls.

"He died in the line of duty, sir. I'm currently the one in charge," the officer answered.

“Hmm, right,” Sebastian nodded. “Then prepare to move into the city at once! We must hurry!”

“What do you mean, sir? Is there a riot?”

“A riot? You really don’t understand, do you?” Sebastian sighed. “I suppose I can’t blame you, since you were fighting on the front lines until now. Listen up: this was a diversion. That wasn’t the enemy’s main force, and that’s why you were able to push them back. The enemy’s army invaded us from the sea, and they currently have control of the city center. They’re heading this way right now. We need to intercept them, hence the urgency. They’re smarter than we ever could’ve imagined. Anything could happen from this point on.”

“From the sea? That’s absurd. How were they able to cross??”

Before he could hear the answer, screaming broke out in the distance.

“The real fight is about to begin. Leave a small detachment here and move out. Now!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

The screaming was gradually becoming louder as the officer hurriedly gathered his subordinates. They armed themselves with melee weapons and got off the ramparts, forming a line as they made their way into the streets.

“That’s why I told him to leave a platoon in the city,” Sebastian whispered as he watched black smoke rise in the distance.

The Arachnea had completed its landing and was now beginning its rampage. The battle had turned on its head, and now the soldiers were plummeting toward defeat.



Less than thirty minutes until sunrise, we boarded a wooden ship to make our way to Doris. Roland said he’d picked the finest ship for us, but honestly, it was a pretty rough ride. I was so seasick I thought I might die, and Lysa was pretty pale, too. Roland and Sérignan were the only ones that looked fine.

Well, the Swarms did too, of course. I loved my babies to pieces, but they had no way of understanding how much I was suffering.

“We’ll be there soon,” Roland told me.

“Okay. Urgh... I can’t wait to get back on solid ground,” I replied wearily.

I had ridden ferries before, but this was, without a doubt, the worst cruise I had ever taken. It swayed, squeaked, shuddered, and shook. It was as though everything about this ship was designed to kill its passengers. I felt like it might capsize at any moment, and I wanted nothing more than to get back to the sweet embrace of solid ground ASAP.

“Roland, how soon is ‘soon’?”

“Hmm, I’d say about thirty minutes.”

To distract myself, I accessed the collective consciousness and confirmed the situation of the battle on the walls. The Swarms endured severe damage as they stormed Poitier Bridge. They were assailed by bolts and fire, and the gates seemed to loom ever farther away, but still they charged onward.

I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for using you like disposable pawns in this operation. But this is necessary for our victory. Forgive me. In exchange, I’ll make sure we win.

I mourned the Ripper and Masquerade Swarms that were being sacrificed in this battle, but I steeled my resolve in the name of victory. My nausea died down a bit, and the churning feeling was replaced with a strong desire to succeed.

I have to win no matter what. I’ve sacrificed too much already. Losing anything more isn’t an option.

I still had hundreds of thousands of Swarms under my command, but even still, I cared for each and every Ripper Swarm. I couldn’t let them die in vain.

“Your Majesty, the enemy is gathering its forces to defend the walls,” Sérignan reported.

“Yeah. The Ripper and Masquerade Swarms gave their lives to give us this opening. We can’t let it go to waste.”

“We absolutely won’t. Our brethren made great contributions to ensure our victory.”

“They sure did. Whatever it takes, we’re going to win this.”

Sérignan and I were filled with the determination to end this war.

“We’ll be reaching land soon, Your Majesty!” Roland called out. “When we do, it’s going to be a little rough!”

“I’m used to it by now! It can jostle me around as much as it needs to!” I shouted back.

In the moonlight, we caught sight of all the ships sailing alongside our vessel. They were all wooden ships we’d gathered from Schtraut’s harbors. Some of them were so old that they looked like they might sink at any moment, while others were newer but smaller in size.

All of these ships were full of Ripper Swarms.

“Soldiers tend to be weak after sailing, so I hope the Ripper Swarms at the gate do a good job distracting the bulk of their forces.”

Landing operations were risky. We’d be sitting ducks if the enemy were to take up positions at our landing point; they’d wipe us out before we knew it. They could also just hit our ships with magic from afar and send us to a watery grave. Still, we had to take a leap of faith if we wanted to win.

“Five minutes to land!”

At Roland’s shout, the other ships accelerated, making a beeline for Doris’ shores.

“The Ripper Swarms are surprisingly good sailors,” Roland said, visibly impressed.

“They move as part of a collective consciousness,” I explained. “When one of them learns something, the others learn it as well. If each of them were to learn one piece of information, they would all gain that information at once. They’re a much smarter, more efficient form of life than humans.”

Yes, the Swarms were extraordinarily fast learners. One of them could learn biology and the rest would gain that knowledge immediately, despite never opening a biology book. If I asked a handful of them to study biology, physics, chemistry, math, and music, the entirety of the Swarm would absorb all those

topics at once. That was the strength of the collective consciousness.

In the game, this mechanic only really extended to the Swarms gaining experience without taking part in a battle. When applied to a more realistic setting, however, this ability showed a startling range of applications. The Swarm could very well be the smartest, most efficient life form in this world.

“Landing in just a few seconds! Brace for impact!”

Our ships blitzed through the sea and rammed onto the shore.

“The enemy hasn’t noticed us yet! Begin the operation!” I called out.

On my order, the Swarms flowed out of their ships and hopped onto the wharf, beginning their charge into the city. One group broke off to storm the lighthouse and the docked warships to exterminate the soldiers inside.

“Your Majesty, we’ve landed successfully!” Sérignan reported.

“Yeah. I couldn’t have asked for anything more. Good work, everyone.”

My bugs were currently running through Doris’ streets, the first warm rays of sunlight reflecting off their claws. After our successful landing, victory was close at hand. Now that our enemies had been pushed to the edge, sending them flying down into the abyss of despair would be easy. We would light fires of panic and fear into their hearts and rightfully enact our vengeance for all that had happened.

“Sérignan, Lysa, and Roland—make way for the Duke’s residence. It should be at the highest point of this island. I’m sure you’ll find it soon enough.”

“I’ll lead the way,” Roland said with a nod.

“All right, Roland. Let’s go.”

The Swarms had two objectives upon landing on Doris. The first was overtaking the duke’s residence; we had to take out Leopold if we were to win this war. Plus, I had a whole laundry list of grudges to settle with him. Letting him die easily wasn’t an option.

Secondly, we needed to take out the second gate. Opening it from the inside would allow the Swarms outside the walls to regroup with us. Once the gates were open, the enemy would be rendered helpless. They could pray as much as

they wanted, but the Swarm would overrun them just the same.

I left the second gate to the Ripper Swarms, and set out with my squad to raid the duke's residence. I felt bad for the people of Marine. They had treated me so well, only to become casualties of this war.

But I'll be taking revenge for you now.

I wanted to bring unimaginable pain upon Leopold and have his head stuck on a pike at the city gates. Resolved to make him suffer, I hopped onto a Ripper Swarm's back and followed Sérignan, Lysa, and Roland to find Leopold.



"What's going, Sebastian?! Didn't we push back the enemy assault at the gates?!" Leopold snarled.

The duke had just received a report that his soldiers at Poitier Bridge had crushed the enemy's charge, so he had been confident that they'd won the war. However, he had just heard that a large army of Swarms had seized Doris and killed their troops, and that it was marching on the gates from within the city itself.

"It seems the enemy has staged a landing operation. We didn't anticipate they'd be able to use ships... Apparently, they're more than just monsters."

"Are you kidding me?! Stage a counterattack and retake the city at once! I thought you planned for every contingency, you incompetent buffoon!" Leopold's shout echoed through the manor. Around them, the windows flickered with distant fires from the burning city.

"You call *me* incompetent? I was against stationing all our forces at the gates. I told you we should leave a reserve force behind. *You* are the one who rejected my proposal, Duke Lorraine. The responsibility for this falls on you!"

Indeed, Sebastian had been opposed to sending all of their soldiers to Poitier Bridge. He'd assumed the chances of a surprise attack were slim, but he had suggested they leave a force behind just in case. Leopold was the one to refuse his counsel.

"You imbecile! What right do you have to speak back to your leader?!"

Leopold bellowed, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth. “I’m the Duke of Schtraut! You dare criticize me?! The responsibility for this falls on *you*, sir!”

“The very fact you were ever appointed Duke was a mistake. If you hadn’t impeached Duke Sharon, none of this would have happened. Your blind belief in Frantz’s double-dealing ways makes you the worst possible leader.”

“Dismissed! You’re dismissed from your post! I’ll have you stripped of every rank and medal you’ve ever gotten! You’ll regret insulting me when you rot in the dungeon for the rest of your life!”

“I don’t think you quite understand the situation, Duke Lorraine. Doris will fall within mere hours. Considering what happened to the other cities, the only thing waiting for both of us is death. Dismiss me now if it makes you feel any better; I can certainly say your threats don’t make me feel any worse.”

Yes, the city of Doris was on the verge of collapse. A militia was being rapidly organized in the city streets to try to stop the Swarms’ advance, but they had no armor and were equipped with feeble weapons. They would be easy pickings for the Ripper Swarms.

The Swarms were gaining control of the city at a steady pace. As soon as my seafaring Swarms had left their ships and moved to ransack the city, the Swarms outside had doubled back down on the outer gates, which were now nearly destroyed. The soldiers on the walls had been torn apart, and the mages’ heads had been ripped off before they could resume firing their spells.

The capital of Schtraut was fated to fall. It was only a matter of an hour or two.

“There has to be some way to win... Some way to survive this. An idea that a lunkheaded soldier like yourself didn’t have the brainpower to come up with. Come on, Leopold, think! It wouldn’t make sense otherwise... I always succeed in the end, after all.”

Leopold took another swig of brandy and started pacing around his room like a restless tiger.

“Give it up. We have no more cards to play. If only you had acted more prudently, things might have ended in our favor.”

“Shut up! I did not lose! I will win and survive this! Go off and die for all I care!”

All of this could have been avoided. If only he hadn't used the nobles' army as sacrificial pawns, or if only he'd had the diplomatic sense to see through the Popedom's intentions... Or if he had simply chosen a course of action that wouldn't have provoked the Arachnea.

It was one “what if” after another. But the past had no place for possibilities, only facts. There was no going back in time to take back one's mistakes; one had no choice but to accept reality as it was.

“Your Grace! The enemy! They're headed this way!”

The voice alerting Leopold of his imposing doom had arrived, all too soon and all too mercilessly.

End of the Usurper

We stood before the entrance to the duke's residence.

"Guards! Guaaards! Assume your positions!"

A company of soldiers was stationed around the entrance. They were armed with crossbows, which they quickly pointed toward us. Evidently, they had learned that they needed to use crossbows at minimum to do any damage to the Swarm. Indeed, a crossbow bolt could badly injure Sérignan.

Assuming it hits, that is.

"Fire!" an officer shouted, and the guards all let off their crossbows at once. Their sights were fixed on Roland and Sérignan, who made up the front line of our little force.

"Haaah!"

The two of them knocked away the crossbow bolts with quick swipes of their swords.

"Lysa, keep them pinned down!"

"Roger that, Your Majesty!"

Lysa pulled back the taut string of her longbow and began firing one arrow after another. Her arrows pierced the guards' throats, and they crumpled to the ground, clawing desperately at their necks as their screams refused to come out. Lysa kept up her attacks, shooting down as many men as possible.

A crossbow and a longbow were extremely different when it came to reload time. Crossbows had powerful force to their shots, but they took time to reload. Longbows were weaker, but they had a much faster rate of fire. Now that she was a Swarm, Lysa wielded a huge bow that gave her monstrous strength a wide range. Even if you didn't consider her new Swarm status, however, Lysa was a far speedier shot than any of the guards.

"Well done, Lysa! We shall handle the rest!" Sérignan called out, a savage

smile on her lips.

She leapt toward the guards, her black blade swinging through the air. The remaining guards desperately tried to reload their crossbows, but they simply didn't have enough time.

"Aaaaah!"

Sérignan's battle cry reverberated through the air as she split a guard's head in two. The guard wobbled to the floor, his body spasming as the crossbow slipped from his hands and clattered on the ground.

"It's not over yet!"

After a graceful landing, Sérignan spun where she stood, jabbing her stinger into the fray. Then she lopped off another guard's head.

"Damn you!"

At that moment, another guard finished reloading his own crossbow and cocked it at Sérignan. He was too close for her to evade or cut down the projectile.

"I'll cover for you!" Roland cried, jumping to her defense.

I let out a sigh of relief. Roland sliced off the guard's hand, then used the momentum of this slash to cut off the guard's head. Blood flew through the air, dyeing Roland's black carapace a dark, metallic red.

"Nice job, Roland. Let's keep moving."

Sadly, I couldn't contribute much with my significantly below-average stats. And so, while Sérignan, Roland, and Lysa handled the screaming guards, I turned my consciousness toward the battle going on at the city gates.

We had already succeeded; the outer gates were open. Hundreds upon thousands of Swarms were rushing through them, flooding the city of Doris. The remaining mages desperately fired off spells, trying to blow the Swarms away along with the gates if they had to. But at this point, their magic wouldn't stop the flood.

The army of Swarms entered the city streets. Men who had run away from the gates and the militia had barricaded themselves inside civilians' homes,

using furniture to block off the doors. They made a desperate attempt to resist, shooting crossbows and casting spells through the windows.

“Crush them,” I ordered.

My Swarms, faithful creatures that they were, executed my order unflinchingly. The Digger Swarms we’d brought over on the ships burrowed beneath the houses and broke through the floors, devouring everyone inside. Meanwhile, the Ripper Swarms that had passed through the gates broke through the barricaded entrances and set about killing anyone they encountered.

No one could stop these creatures. The militia was pathetically armed with scythes and hoes, which did nothing to suppress my giant insects. These farmers’ tools bounced off their exoskeletons without doing any damage, leaving the militia exposed to attack.

The guards failed to reload their crossbows in time, so they only managed to take out a Swarm or two before they were devoured. Even if the Ripper Swarms were hit by a crossbow bolt, they could still charge onward so long as they hadn’t been hit in the vitals. It took three crossbow shots or a blow from a claymore or halberd to permanently down a Ripper Swarm.

But these humans couldn’t be expected to act calmly in the heat of the battle. Dizzy with fear, the guards fired their crossbows in all directions, and they lacked any larger weapons.

It was pitiful, really. Leopold’s incompetence as a leader had driven them to this point. I almost had to be grateful for how awful he was; if he’d have anticipated the possibility of our landing on the island and set aside men to deal with us, we might have been the ones tasting defeat.

All hail Leopold, huh? Thanks to this useless duke, Doris is now ours.

“Your Majesty, we’ve suppressed the guards.”

Oh, whoops.

While I had been occupied with the fighting at the gates and within the city, the duke’s security had been totally wiped out. It happened all too quickly. The other two weren’t hero units like Sérignan, but they were still immensely

useful. That was a given, of course. The only member of the Arachnea who wasn't talented and skilled was me.

"You're a skilled individual, Your Majesty. If you weren't, we would not have won this battle."

"I appreciate the compliment, Sérignan."

My stats are still as significantly below-average as they were before, though. My intelligence and leadership skills are apparently extremely high, but who's to say how trustworthy that appraisal really was.

"If we're done handling the guards, let's go meet the duke. We've got so much catching up to do with our good friend Leopold," I said, leading the others into the manor.



Once we were inside, we looked around for additional guards, but there were none in sight. Evidently, they were all dead. It was honestly a little anticlimactic. When we took down the Kingdom of Maluk, they had at least used that weird jewel of theirs to try to put up a fight. Here, on the other hand, we were only met with silence.

"No angels or monsters hiding around the corner, are there?" I wondered aloud.

"The Dukedom of Schtraut doesn't have any knight orders capable of summoning angels," Roland answered. "And it doesn't have anything like the Jewel of Evolution the Kingdom of Maluk possessed. I think their resistance is at an end."

"Right. Well, I hope he doesn't try anything else. I'm not one to look for complications when there's no need for it; I'm not masochistic like that. I'll take my easy wins when I can get them."

I'd had enough of angels and monsters. Seeing those things crawl out of the woodwork was bad for my nerves. I was all for more human methods of fighting. I'd take battles using primitive weapons over supernatural phenomena like angels every day of the week.

“Let’s look for the duke, then. He and I need to have a little chat.”

With that, we began searching for him.

Come out, come out, wherever you are... I have enough bones to pick with you to build a skeletal model or two...

“Ripper Swarm, can you pick up on his scent?”

“It is possible, Your Majesty.”

“Great. Aren’t you a good boy? Handle it for me, okay?”

My reliable hound would sniff out this cowardly bird who seemed to want to just fly away.

Now, let’s have Duke Lorraine come out and greet us, shall we?

“Lysa, can you keep an eye on the entrance? I wouldn’t want to be surprised by any reinforcements. Use the collective consciousness to call over Ripper Swarms from the streets if you have to.”

“Leave it to me, Your Majesty. I’ll be on the lookout.”

Thankfully, there was only one road that led to this building. So long as we kept an eye on that, the enemy shouldn’t be able to reach us. They could decide to take an unpaved road instead to avoid detection, but I doubted any one of them could think that far ahead in this chaos. The soldiers were scattered around town, and their chain of command had long since fallen apart. They were at the Ripper Swarms’ mercy... which didn’t exist, of course. I didn’t anticipate any tricky moves.

Truth be told, the only reason I really left Lysa to watch over the entrance was because I didn’t want a young girl like her to see what was about to happen. What we had in store was a touch too radical.

“There is someone ahead,” the Ripper Swarm said.

“Good. Sérignan, open the door.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.” She kicked the door open, then entered the room, her sword held high.

“There you are, Arachnea.”

Sitting there wasn't Leopold, but an aging man. He was clad in a Schtraut military uniform, and its decorations informed me that he was a marshal. His expression was heavy with the sort of resignation I had seen countless times before in our conquests.

"Yes, here we are," I said. "We've got an appointment with one Duke Lorraine. Would you happen to know where we might find him?"

"I believe he took some soldiers with him and barricaded himself in the wine cellar. Tell me, miss queen of the Arachnea: why did you destroy the Kingdom of Maluk? That was the real catalyst for these events, after all. If you hadn't done that, things would never have come to this. Where did you come from, and why did you do such a thing?"

"To answer one of your questions, we came from another world. A place that's far unlike this world of yours. I don't believe I have to tell you where our base is and where our journey began."

"You're right. But... another world, you say? Who could have imagined there was a world where monsters like you reign supreme..."

I was somewhat thankful that he didn't ask me why we had come to this world. I didn't know why I'd been brought here, either.

"As for why we destroyed the Kingdom of Maluk, it's because they provoked our wrath. Besides that, the Arachnea has a guiding instinct, a never-ending hunger to invade and conquer. We kill, we eat, and we pillage. It runs in our blood."

"The never-ending hunger to conquer, eh? You're quite similar to mankind, then, aren't you?"

"What?"

Did he just compare the Arachnea to the human race?

"Humans kill their enemies just the same. We humiliate our foes, wanting to deprive them of as much as we possibly can. Our weak conscience keeps this desire in check, but those chains come off far too easily. I've seen enough wars to know this to be true."

“Yes... You’re right. We aren’t too different from humans. I’d forgotten.”

Every day, the news back in my world was filled with reports of gruesome wars, murders, rapes, thefts... The list went on and on. Yes, humans could be just as savage as the Arachnea. I had thought we were special, but strangely enough, that was its own sort of conceit.

“However, I must admit your invasion was a truly barbaric one. You consumed entire villages, cities... entire nations like animals. If you call that instinct, then I can understand. You are indeed a living tidal wave.” He unsheathed the sword at his waist. “Queen of the Arachnea, I am a soldier from Schtraut’s military. I’ve sworn fealty to the Dukedom. To abide by that duty, I will fight.”

Apparently, the old man had been waiting here all this time because he was resolved to die.

“Sérignan, be his honorable opponent.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.” Sérignan stepped forward to meet his challenge.

“Then let our match...”

“Begin!”

The aging marshal swiped with his sword, and Sérignan swung her own down to meet him. Their blades locked together, and hers pushed his aside by the smallest of margins. Sérignan’s blade then slid into the man’s chest, and crimson blood gushed out from the wound.

“I have done... my duty.” The old man fell to his knees, then collapsed headfirst into the ground, breathing his last.

“He was an honorable man,” I said.

“Yes. Worthy of respect,” Sérignan murmured, looking down at his corpse.

“That was Sebastian de Silhouette,” Roland said, entering the room from behind us. “He was a veteran known for being stubborn, but I didn’t think his obstinance would go this far.” Roland approached the man and gently pressed his lids shut.

“He said Leopold is in the wine cellar, right? I’ll show you the way. It’s protected by a metal door, but that shouldn’t be much of an issue.”

I hoped Roland was right, but I got the sinking feeling that things wouldn't be that simple.



We approached the wine cellar. Its door was bulky and made of metal, more of a vault door than anything else.

"The wine cellar also doubles as a shelter in times of emergency, so the entrance is pretty sturdy."

"It doesn't have any escape tunnels, does it?"

"None that I've heard of, but I can't deny the possibility. This is their final stronghold, after all."

It wouldn't be funny if they slipped away now that we'd come this far. I had to catch Leopold no matter what and teach him a lesson.

"Sérignan, can you open this door?"

"I will handle it." Sérignan drew her corrupted holy sword and faced the door. "Haaaaah!"

Sérignan's voice erupted from her lungs as she swung her sword at the door. To my surprise, she actually cleaved it straight in two, sending both halves falling to the ground. The thing was four centimeters thick, so I was shocked her blade had managed to cut through it.

"I detect multiple beings in this place, Your Majesty. Not all of them are human," the Ripper Swarm warned me.

"Be careful, you two. There's no telling what might be hiding down there." What the Ripper Swarm said bothered me.

What's down there that doesn't smell human?

"By your will, Your Majesty."

"You can rest easy."

Sérignan and Roland advanced into the dark wine cellar. I could definitely sense something lurking down there. An animalistic growl issued from below, as well as the sound of something writhing and squirming.

I never was good with these kinds of jump-scares...

“Seriously, be on your guard, there’s something down there—”

But before I could finish my sentence, an animalistic shriek nearly ruptured my eardrums.

“Dammit! Didn’t I say no more angels or monsters?!”

I could hear shelves and bottles crashing down on the floor as the beast came closer and closer. I had no idea what kind of creature could produce that sound, but as it approached, I found myself frozen in fear.

“Your Majesty, you must get back!” The Ripper Swarm grabbed me and pulled me out of the cellar.

As I was flung out of the cellar, the beast came into view. It looked like a giant serpent, except it had a rooster’s legs and wings. A substance that looked like noxious smoke was rising from its mouth.

“That’s a basilisk!” Roland exclaimed, pulling out a black longsword similar to Sérignan’s.

“A basilisk? You mean one of those venomous snake things?” I asked, vaguely recalling hearing about this creature.

“Yes, the Dukedom is the basilisks’ natural habitat. Their venom is said to have been used in the past to assassinate dukes. They’re a famous type of monster, and the Adventurers’ Guild even often issues quests to cut down their population.”

As he spoke, he used his sword to deflect the basilisk’s sharp fangs as it shook its head and lunged at him. This only made the creature angrier, prompting it to attack Roland even more ferociously.

“Poison, huh? This thing must have been their trump card.” I gazed at the toxic smoke trailing up from the Basilisk’s mouth. “They’d have the enemy carelessly enter the cellar, where the basilisk would poison and eat them. That won’t work against us so easily, though. Don’t mind the poison, you two. Just kill it.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Each time the Basilisk breathed out, it exhaled more toxic smoke into the wine cellar. Were any normal human to enter the cellar, they would likely start coughing up blood until they succumbed to the poison. It did nothing to Swarms, however, which had poison resistance as one of their racial skills. They could easily walk through lethal poison and nerve gas without so much as a tingle.

Roland had become a Swarm, and Sérignan was one to begin with, so the poison didn't faze them one bit. They only had to face off against this vicious monster. I, on the other hand, wasn't a real Swarm, so going into that toxic fog would kill me.

"Haaah!"

"Graaah!"

Sérignan and Roland leapt at the basilisk, their swords drawn.

"Skreeeeah!" The basilisk shrieked as blades sliced into the scales along its torso.

Despite its injuries, the basilisk kept up a steady stream of attacks. It swiped its claws at Sérignan and tried to sink its fangs into Roland, but they each deflected and blocked the attacks. By now, the basilisk was no longer a threat; it had fallen prey to a stronger predator.

Sérignan's and Roland's attacks were gradually cornering the creature.

"Roland, let us finish it off!" Sérignan exclaimed as the basilisk staggered backward.

"Understood, Miss Sérignan!"

The two of them moved perfectly in sync, driving their blades into the basilisk's body. Sérignan's sword pierced its throat, while Roland's stabbed into its heart. Bloody froth bubbled out of the basilisk's mouth, spilling onto the cellar floor.

This creature could be dispatched by mere adventurers, so of course it was no match for Sérignan and Roland. The basilisk pathetically slumped on the ground, spitting up poison, and breathed its final toxic breath.

“Is it done?”

“It is, Your Majesty.” Sérignan wiped the basilisk’s blood off her blade. “All that remains is to find Leopold the coward.”

“Now then, there should be a hidden room somewhere in this wine cellar,” I said. “They probably didn’t stay in the same room as the basilisk, assuming they’re not completely stupid. Ripper Swarm, sniff them out.”

We were back to the hunt. I entered the wine cellar after waiting for the air to clear, taking a look at a cupboard the basilisk had knocked askew during its rampage.

“Your Majesty, the smell seems to be coming from behind the cupboard.”

Apparently, I’d accidentally happened upon the secret entrance.

“Good job, Ripper Swarm. You probably get in by moving this cupboard aside. See, look at the floor; there are marks that look like something skidded against the ground. Roland, you open the door. Sérignan, Ripper Swarm, cover for him.”

“By your will.”

Roland shoved the cupboard away, while Sérignan and the Ripper Swarm prepared to charge into the room.

“I’m opening it!” Roland exclaimed and whipped open the secret door, his sword at the ready.

“Yaaargh!”

As the door swung open, a group of soldiers stormed out of the secret room. Sérignan jumped forward, cutting them down one by one, while the Ripper Swarm used its scythes and fangs to slay the others.

“W-Wait! Don’t kill me!” whimpered someone from inside as the last soldier fell.

“Come on out, Leopold. Well, I guess they call you Duke Lorraine now.”

“Wh-Who are you?!”

“Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea. You’re Leopold de Lorraine, right?”

I didn't even have to ask; I knew this was the same man who had mocked me during that evening party. A man so cowardly and wretched, Roland couldn't even consider him a brother anymore.

"Th-That's right. I'm Duke Lorraine, the ruler of Schtraut. I-I've been preparing to make peace with you. I have a... proposition! Yes! One that will benefit us both. I know neither of us wants this war!"

"Do you, now? Well, unfortunately for you, I'm not looking for peace. The only thing I want is your head on a pike."

With that, the Ripper Swarm dragged Leopold out into the open.

"Now, what are we going to do with you? I should mention that seeing what you did to Marine *really* pissed me off. I figured it'd only be fair to get back at you for that. Hmm, how should I go about it though?"

"Please don't... I beg of you! I was only trying to protect my country!"

Maybe he did believe that deep down, but the way he'd gone about it was so awful that it gave our methods of "peacemaking" a run for their money. That aging marshal had said human instinct is kept in check with the small cuffs of one's conscience, but this man completely lacked anything of the sort.

Obviously, I wasn't one to criticize people lacking a conscience, but I still hated this man with a passion. Why had the adventurers and the receptionist who'd treated us well had to die? Why had the people we'd chatted with in the tavern become part of this? Why did this man have to keep killing everyone we became involved with? It was infuriating.

I hate him.

"He has to pay," I concluded. I turned to Roland. "You don't mind me doing whatever I want with your brother?"

"Go ahead. He's no brother to me now."

"Roland! Have you forgotten that we're family?! All the things we did together, everything I've done for you! Yet you abandon me?! The God of Light will never forgive that! This is treachery!"

Roland winced, but not because those words pained him.

“You were the one to abandon me first, Leopold. You’re the one who caused all of this. I told you to be cautious about impeaching Duke Sharon, but you ignored me. If hell truly exists, I hope you’ll spend eternity down there, stewing in regret.”

The man-turned-Swarm had no familial love in his eyes. He stared down at Leopold with disgust, as if he were filthy vermin.

“No objections? Good,” I said, taking a Parasite Swarm out from my sleeve. “Then let’s begin your execution.”

I always carried a Parasite Swarm with me in case I needed it. And boy, was I going to need it.

“Sérignan, pin him down and hold his mouth open.”

Sérignan did as I told her. I unceremoniously shoved the Parasite Swarm between his lips. It slithered into his throat, fixed itself in place, and began extending its tentacles into his brain.

“Tear off your own nails,” I ordered.

Leopold did as he was told. He began tearing off his own fingernails, screaming all the while.

That must be painful, Leopold. A true, agonizing nightmare. But didn’t the people of Marine suffer something much worse?

“Break your own fingers.”

“Tear off your ears.”

“Gouge out your eyes.”

I gave one command after another, and Leopold obeyed, yelling and weeping all the while.

“Roland, is this hard for you to watch?”

“No. This man betrayed his own country and sentenced millions of innocents to their deaths. If anything, what you’ve done isn’t nearly enough.”

“Really? Wow. You’re one hell of a guy, you know that?”

If I had to watch a relative go through something like this, I’d try to stop it no

matter what. I'm a weak human being at heart.

"Then this is the last one. Use this sword to tear open your guts, and pull out your own entrails."

I handed down his final order. Hurting this man any more would do nothing to bring back the kind people of Marine. This revenge was only a form of self-gratification. It only served to satisfy my sadistic streak. I wasn't sure if it had been born from the collective consciousness or if it had been a part of me to begin with.

"Gaaah... Aaagh..."

Leopold tore his own stomach open and weakly began pulling out his internal organs. As his blood pooled all over the floor, Leopold fell down into it and stopped moving.

"It's over now. Revenge really is such a hollow thing," I whispered, looking down at his mangled body.

"You have brought him to justice, Your Majesty. This was right."

"I can only pray that it was. Well, not to the God of Light, anyway."

With that said, I left the wine cellar behind me. It was finally over.

Or was it...?

With Leopold dead, the Popedom of Frantz would likely cross the border to occupy the Dukedom's territory. The task of stopping them fell to me, the queen of the Arachnea.

It is my... I am... I...

"Your Majesty?!"

I'm... really tired all of a sudden...

Temptation and Suggestion

When I came to, I found myself in a familiar place.

“This is...”

My furniture... My room.

I picked this apartment because it was pretty close to my university. There was a convenience store nearby, a bookstore... Even a family-style restaurant I liked was just a short walk away. I spent my days as a student in this blessed, comfy environment.

“Maybe I’ve been gaming too much...”

I had just woken up from some sort of vivid, realistic dream, but I couldn’t remember any of the details. Then again, it probably wasn’t all that significant if I’d forgotten about it in a couple of minutes.

“_____.”

I heard someone call my name, and I was overwhelmed by a wave of nostalgia.

Who’s that? Is there someone else in my room?

“Ah, you’re awake. This is an imperfect space, so I was worried you might not come to. I’m relieved to see you’ve regained consciousness.”

The person speaking to me was the girl wearing white I had spoken to once before.

“Is this my apartment?” I asked.

“In a way. This scene is a reconstruction of the place in your memories, so I’m afraid you aren’t *really* home.”

This is my place, but it also isn’t?

“_____”, I’ve been desperately trying to guide your soul. Whatever your mistakes, you are an existence worthy of direction. But my efforts were

corrupted, and as a result, you were sealed in that world. I admit, that was my error.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Sandalphon, the conductor of souls. Nothing more, nothing less. Despite being trapped in that ruthless world, you have managed to hold on to your own will and resist wholly losing yourself to the Swarm’s consciousness. That’s a truly wonderful thing. However, I cannot imagine you will be able to keep that tenuous grasp forever. In time, you will be integrated into that world and will be forced to play yet another game.”

“‘That world’...?”

I couldn’t understand what she meant. I had never left the country, let alone studied abroad. I didn’t know any other worlds. I was, all in all, a person with very little knowledge and very few interests.

“It will be all right. I promise I will save you, no matter what. This is all because of my blunder to begin with, and I intend to make amends. Saving you is the natural course of action.”

Have I ever needed to save someone? Yes...

The word “save” jogged my memory. There was someone I had to save.

“Put me back in that world,” I heard myself say.

“You want to return? Would you not consider staying here until help arrives?”

“They... My little ones need my help.”

Yes. Sérignan, Lysa, Roland and the rest of the Swarm. How could I have forgotten them? I promised them victory, but I forgot about it all too easily.

“It’s a fabricated world full of captives, yet you would willingly leap back into it?”

“They need me.”

The image of Sérignan crying flashed in my mind’s eye.

“You are far too kind a soul. I can understand your desire to save them, even if they might not be human. Your heart is filled to the brim with mercy, and

that's precisely why I must guide you to salvation." Sandalphon's gaze bore into me. "Are you truly confident you'll be able to survive?"

"I am. My allies are just that dependable."

"Well, I think that's enough out of you, Sandalphon."

Someone suddenly cut into our conversation. It was another girl, though this one was dressed in frilly gothic garb from head to toe.

"No fair, trying to snatch away what isn't yours. Bad Sandalphon! Bad! Her soul belongs to me. Haven't you lot said it before? God has no salvation to offer _____."

"Those words are a thing of the past, Samael. I suggest you bite that forked tongue of yours, foul creature. Do you have any idea how much you've hurt her?"

Sandalphon referred to the gothic girl as Samael.

"Hah! You call *me* a snake, but your dogmas change so quickly that I'm surprised your own tongue hasn't tied itself into a knot! My creed is as consistent as it's ever been. Souls who have _____ belong to us; I won't hand them over to anyone else. Do you really think you can save her?"

"I fully intend to. Even a soul who _____ has a right to salvation. There's no point in judging her by the standards of the past."

Samael's mouth turned up in a nasty grin.

"Does she really have that right, I wonder? A soul who _____ is tainted. Guiding such a soul would only cause our loathsome Lord grief, wouldn't it?"

"It would not. The Lord wishes to see as many souls saved as possible. Hers is no exception. This was what she decided after all her arduous hardships."

I decided something? Decided what?

"Unacceptable," Samael scoffed before her gaze slid over at me. "Why don't we let her decide, then? She can either go with you, or she can follow me."

"You *can* be saved. Please choose the path to your salvation, _____."

"You belong in that world, don't you?" Sandalphon said, her voice thick with

temptation. “The world where it’s mankind against the grotesque. That’s where you’ll truly find peace. Isn’t that right, _____?”

These two girls, completely opposite in every way, were both calling out to me, beckoning me to choose. However, my heart was not with either one of them.

“Let me save them. Please. I don’t want anything else.”

Sérignan is crying, I just know it. I need to go and comfort her.

“Contract rejected, huh?” Samael said with a shrug.

“I know she’ll choose the road to salvation,” Sandalphon said gently and walked up to me. “Go to that computer and press the power button. It will return you to that world. I swear, I *will* save your soul. No matter what. And so, I must remind you...”

I did as she said, pressing the button.

“You must never forget your human heart.”

A draining feeling swept over me, pulling me down and away somewhere, but in my last moments, I turned and nodded in Sandalphon’s direction.



“...Majesty! Your Majesty!”

As I jolted awake, I found myself lying on a sofa.

“Is Sandalphon here? And Samael?” I asked, the dream I’d just experienced still fresh in my mind.

“There’s no one by that name here, Your Majesty,” Sérignan said. “Oh no... Have your memories left you, perhaps?”

“I’m fine. I remember you perfectly, Sérignan.”

I could never forget her. She was my precious ally.

“Hic... Thank goodness... What a relief!” Sérignan buried her face into my chest while sobbing like a child.

“Lysa?”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Did you discover any other forces here?”

“No, it has all quieted down by now. All the fighting in the streets and on the walls is over.”

Right...

The struggle for the Dukedom of Schtraut was drawing to a close. It had been a harsh war. A lot had happened since we first snuck into Schtraut and worked as adventurers. We had sown chaos in the International Council, and then we’d had to interfere once inner strife had broken out in the Dukedom. I was more exhausted than ever before.

“I see you’ve come to, Your Majesty,” Roland said, returning from the cellar.

“Yep, I’m back in business.”

“I had Leopold’s corpse made into those... meatballs. I thought it would be a fitting end for him.”

“Well, that’s hard to say. There are multiple meanings in making someone into mincemeat.”

The Ripper Swarms’ scythes could reduce an abhorred enemy to a lump of flesh or compact a former ally and integrate them into our ranks. Alternatively, a meatball was merely that—a ball of meat to be used or stored.

“I’ll admit, I was rather taken aback by your fainting.” I detected a note of concern in Roland’s voice. “I wonder if there was still some basilisk venom in the air. Does anything feel off about your body, Your Majesty?”

“Let me know if you start feeling bad, all right? Baumfetter’s herbalist taught me about all sorts of medicine,” Lysa chimed in with a furrowed brow.

Standing between two powerful allies fussing over me, I felt I was a very fortunate queen indeed.

“Your Majesty, are you really, truly sure you’re okay?” Sérignan asked, her eyes still wet.

“Yes, I’m completely fine. If anything, I have to wonder when you’ll stop

fawning over me like that.”

“M-My apologies! But I really am glad you’re unharmed...” With a hiccup, Sérignan nestled her face into my chest once more.

“I’m sorry for worrying you. I’m fit as a fiddle. I will continue to lead you all, just as I have been.” I directed this speech into the collective consciousness. “But our true victory is still out of reach. The Popedom of Frantz set up the Dukedom, sealing its fate... and right now, we are the Popedom’s biggest foes. This war won’t end until we defeat them. It won’t be long until they march their soldiers into this land, too.”

The Popedom had lingered in the background thus far, but it was, in fact, the instigator that had driven the Dukedom to ruin. It was quite clear it had waited for us to destroy the Dukedom, hoping to occupy the country once it was on its hands and knees.

“We will topple the Popedom of Frantz. And I will fight on, until you obtain the eternal peace and victory you desire. Will you follow me?”

In response, the collective consciousness bloomed with assent. Sérignan knelt by her sword in a gesture of fealty, while Lysa and Roland bowed down before me. They were all in perfect agreement. It was almost frightening, but it also made my heart swell with joy.

“Victory to us! Victory to the Arachnea! We mustn’t simply wish for it—we must strive for it. So long as we work hard, we will certainly achieve it.” With these words, I concluded my speech. “How was my little monologue, Sérignan?”

She beamed back at me. “Inspiring words, Your Majesty. We will do as you say and work tirelessly to secure our victory.”

“This does leave us with a problem,” I said. “What are we going to do with the Dukedom?”

Thanks to the war and the political purge, Schtraut’s population had been reduced to almost nothing. Rebuilding would require a great deal of effort.

“We will find a way,” Roland said. “Just as we have conquered all the obstacles we’ve faced so far. We can rebuild so that one day, Schtraut reemerges as a flourishing trade country. No, not ‘can’... We must.”

“Rebuilding after the war is important, but the fighting isn’t quite over yet. We still need to deal with those traitorous snakes in the Popedom. Without true peace, we can’t hope for a new beginning.”

The Popedom of Frantz abandoned the Dukedom in its time of need. They will pay for this.

I looked out the window. The fighting had died down already, but pillars of smoke were still rising from areas scarred by the mages’ fireballs. How long would it take just to put out those fires and rebuild the capital? Thinking about it made me dizzy.

This was where our unsung heroes, the Worker Swarms, would show their worth. They would need to work their hardest to make this capital breathe again. The thought that we could bring about not just death and destruction, but also rebirth and reconstruction, was a huge relief.

The Shock of Schtraut

News of the Dukedom's defeat by the Arachnea rapidly reached all corners of the continent. Saania, the capital of the Popedom of Frantz, was no exception.

"So, the Dukedom has fallen... Everything must have gone according to plan, then," Pope Benedictus III said weakly.

"They were bound to taste God's judgment sooner or later," replied Cardinal Paris Pamphilj, his second-in-command. "The only thing those fools believed in was profit. God has delivered their punishment and shown the world that faith is truly important. Now their nation has been purified."

It had been Paris' choice to abandon the Dukedom. He'd purposefully ordered the allied army to hold its position at the border rather than advance, damning Schtraut to its fate. With the army's aid, the forces in Doris might have been able to fend off the Arachnea's invasion, but instead, they had been left to die.

But what had driven him to this decision?

"You call it God's judgment, but the people of Schtraut were simply overrun by monsters. Those creatures are an affront to the God of Light. They are no instruments of divine retribution, but an influx of evil..."

"No, no, Your Holiness. They *are* the Lord's instruments, you see. As you know, the God of Light guides anything and everything in this world. Even this army of insects was brought about by His will. At least, so long as they judge the infidels."

Contrary to Paris' words, the Dukedom of Schtraut had not experienced some holy cleansing, some righteous purge. It had simply been invaded by the Arachnea and destroyed. To call it God's will was an insult to both the Arachnea and the very God of Light he was so quick to invoke.

"You are right in that the Dukedom cared little for spirituality; anyone could tell they had more faith in economy. Despite that, I think the people of other nations will care less about this and more about the fact that the Dukedom's

bankers will no longer have a grip on their coffers.”

“Interpret it as you will, Your Holiness. The fact remains that retribution has been delivered. Everything works according to the Lord’s will, and the God of Light never errs.”

Benedictus himself had received considerable loans from the Dukedom of Schtraut in order to fund his election—and this was money he had yet to return. Even the Empire of Nyrnal and the Eastern Trade Union owed large debts to the Dukedom’s bankers.

For those indebted to the Dukedom, news of the nation’s fall could not have been better. The money-hungry bankers no longer existed, and so these funds no longer need be collected. This was precisely why Paris had chosen to abandon the Dukedom.

Paris himself owed massive debts to Schtraut which had weighed heavily upon his shoulders ever since he’d become a cardinal. As time went on, he felt that repayment might be impossible. While being a cardinal came with considerable income, and he had plenty of dealings going on under the table, he was a frivolous spender with no penchant for saving.

But now the bankers had all been slaughtered by the Arachnea. Paris would finally be able to sleep at night, and he could even acquire *more* funds from the Eastern Trade Union—funds he would use to become the next pope.

Everything Paris did was in the name of his own interests. All his talk of divine retribution was simply a convenient way of describing the situation. Paris only wanted to free himself of his debt to Schtraut and pave his own path to the papacy.

“Even if this *was* divine retribution, our enemies are devils all the same. The elves, dwarves, and other demi-humans still worship a legion of demons. If those fiends plan to attack the Popedom of Frantz, the God of Light will show them his radiant majesty in a flash of fire and brimstone. In the name of God, the allied army will slay those monsters. Every last man on this continent will know that He is the only deity worthy of worship.”

“Hmm... The enemy has leveled both the Kingdom of Maluk and the Dukedom of Schtraut in quick succession. Will the alliance truly be able to stand up to

them without the Empire of Nyrnal? Not only that, but when the army is occupied with fending off the monsters, the Nyrnals themselves may try to intervene.”

The rift between the alliance and the Empire of Nyrnal was still ongoing. Despite repeated appeals from the allied side, the Empire made it clear they had no intentions of joining forces. Hence, the alliance had to proceed without aid from the greatest power on the continent.

Worse yet, the Empire’s refusal to participate meant that the alliance couldn’t depend on its power if the situation got out of hand. It also meant that the Empire was poised to stab Frantz in the back while the alliance was occupied with the Arachnea.

“May the God of Light grant us his protection... although our victory is certain. We need not fear the legion of monsters or the Empire of Nyrnal.” Paris smirked. “Besides, if worse comes to worst, we have the heritage of Marianne given to us by the God of Light. Should we call upon the Seraph Metatron, we will easily reduce the infidels to ashes.”

“I only pray things need not come to that.” Benedictus III met Paris’ sardonic smile with a bitter expression. “There can be no telling what the Seraph might do. A heritage of the past is not something we should trust so easily.”

Metatron was an angel spoken of only in myths and legends. But if this exchange were to be believed, could that mean it actually existed in the Popedom of Frantz?



Off the coast of Frantz, there was an archipelago. While many of its isles were rather small, there was one central island much larger than the rest. Its name was Atlantica, and it was a haven for pirates.

From there, pirates staged assaults on trade cogs from all over, raided port cities, and hauled in their plundered booty. Rumor had it that if any of this bloodstained treasure were to leave Atlantica’s shores, whoever came to possess it would be haunted by evil spirits.

“The Dukedom got sacked?!”

Achille Alessandri, the leader of Atlantica's pirates, was a man with an eyepatch over his right eye. Contrary to his savage appearance, he was quite civil and had a knack for politics; he'd been promoted to his position by the previous leader thanks to his negotiation skills.

The one-eyed pirate had promised the old man a sizable sum of gold in exchange for his retirement, as well as a safe hideaway and a pension to boot. Once they'd shaken hands on the deal, Achille had taken control of the pirate colony.

His promises had gone unfulfilled, however; Achille had leaked the hideaway's location to governmental authorities, and the former head of the pirates had been hanged for all his misdeeds. Yes, Achille truly knew how to negotiate... to get what he wanted, that is.

"Apparently, a massive army of bugs popped up on the mainland and has been running amok. First they sacked Maluk, and now they got Schtraut, too. People have been bettin' on which country'll be next on the chopping block."

"Who d'ya think'll win?" asked his companion.

"The Popedom of Frantz."

The man Achille was speaking to bore a deep scar across his right cheek. He was Blasco Bartoli, Achille's right hand and a man known for his ferocious disposition. He'd fed many disobedient subordinates and hostages whose families didn't pay up to his shiver of sharks. Atlantica had an inlet where Blasco bred the sharks, and this location doubled as an execution ground. The seafloor was littered with bleached bones, and the sharks were always circling the waters in anticipation of new victims.

"Then we should probably hold off on attackin' Schtraut for a while, eh? Can't see anythin' good comin' outta that. I figure a horde o' monsters that knocked two countries outta existence won't have much worth takin'. Gotta keep the risk 'n' return in mind, savvy?"

Pirates may have seemed like savages, but they were actually rather methodical people. If they were to provoke a strong country too much, that nation could dispatch a force to suppress them. With that in mind, they kept their pillaging and murder down just enough to ensure they didn't come across

as too much of a threat. Anyone who disobeyed Atlantica's rules was mercilessly executed, which maintained peace in the pirates' haven.

"Well, if you ask me, I think now's exactly the right time to attack Schtraut," said a woman sitting opposite Achille.

She had a tall, voluptuous frame and, in contrast to Achille, an eyepatch over her left eye. The fact she was expressing outright objection to Achille's opinion was proof of her bravado.

"And why should we do that, Isabelle?"

"Because if the country is wrecked, it means there's no navy to crack down on us pirates. Raiding a port town means we can take anything we want and dip out no problem. What reason do we have *not* to raid the Dukedom?"

She was Isabelle Ismael, a pirate who had recently distinguished herself from the rest of the bunch.

"That's a decent point. Those creatures can't go out to sea, after all."

"Nah, turns out they can. Y'know Doris, the capital? It's on an island floating in the sea off the coast of Schtraut. Apparently, the damn buggers used ships to attack it."

Somehow, the Arachnea's use of ships to ferry tens of thousands of insects to Doris' shores and destroy the capital from the inside had already become common knowledge.

"True, but still, they're just *bugs*. They ain't meant to live out in the sea. It's not like we're dealing with Sirens or Sea Serpents here, ya know? I ain't scared of them. If you're too afraid of the big bad bugs, I'll just sail out on my own and get filthy stinkin' rich. Don't expect to get a cut, though."

With that, Isabelle rose from her chair and left the room, twirling a knife between her fingers.

"Can't say I like the neophyte," Achille said with displeasure in his voice. "That woman pisses me off. Shows no respect for authority, ya know?"

"Aye, well, she'll get herself into trouble sooner or later," Blasco replied. "People like her get too full o' themselves and end up makin' some kinda huge

blunder. She'll come crawlin' back to you for help, matey, just you wait. And when that happens, we can take turns ridin' that sweet body o' hers."

Just as big changes were occurring on the mainland, the tides were turning even on the island of Atlantica.



Nestled between the menacing superpower of the continent, the Empire of Nyrnal, and the religious center that was the Popedom of Frantz, was the Eastern Trade Union.

"Silence! I said silence!"

A wooden gavel knocked against the table several times, its echoes traveling through the Pleasure City of Khalkha, hailed as the entertainment center of the continent. It was said that any manner of pleasure could be found in Khalkha.

As if to punctuate that point, brothels lined Khalkha's streets. Women wearing nothing but lingerie beckoned to men walking by their establishments, while equally scantily clad men brandished their muscles to draw in female customers. Of course, sometimes these prostitutes lured in members of the same sex; this was just one example of how liberal a city Khalkha truly was.

Indeed, the Pleasure City of Khalkha permitted fulfillment of virtually any desire. All manners of gambling were allowed, narcotics forbidden throughout the rest of the continent's countries were exchanged without inhibition, and death matches were held in underground arenas.

The Popedom of Frantz had declared Khalkha a corrupt hotbed of sin worthy of burning in God's sacred flames, and the Empire of Nyrnal secretly saw it as an hindrance to its unification efforts.

True to its name, the Eastern Trade Union was a land of merchants. It had been formed by a number of business and trade guilds from multiple countries. The Adventurers' Guild and Mercenaries' Guild formed their military might.

At present, this merchants' country was wavering.

"An army of monsters destroyed an entire country?! That's absurd!"

"That's right! And the so-called allied army is clearly just Frantz's military!"

At the heart of Khalkha was the Union Assembly Hall, the operating center of the Eastern Trade Union. Currently, a meeting was being held to discuss the Dukedom's fate.

"The fall of the Dukedom is indisputable fact," said the chairman of the meeting. "Macaulay, our contact from the Informants' Guild, has confirmed it. It seems their few remaining refugees are currently fleeing to the Popedom. You're not doubting Macaulay's report, are you?"

"Still, we should refuse any offer to join forces with Frantz! Those maniacs have already said thirteen times that they wish to see the beauty of Khalkha burned to the ground by the God of Light's fire and brimstone! We can't possibly ally with the likes of them!"

"No, they said it *fifteen* times. They recently held another speech where they reminded everyone that God will cast judgment upon our city. Those damnable crooked monks!"

Angry shouts broke out in the meeting hall.

"Silence! I will have silence!" The chairman once again banged his gavel. "Withdrawing from the alliance is an option, but it goes without saying it will aggravate our relations with the Popedom. If Frantz were to be conquered by the bugs, however, who will lend us aid? Do we turn to Nyrnal? The possibility is certainly there..."

The chairman's idea was met with fervent refusal.

"Nyrnal is out of the question!"

"The Adventurers' Guild will protect you!" cried one guild master from the Adventurers' Guild.

"That's right! Slaying monsters is our duty!" said another.

"In that case, we must first ascertain what sort of enemy we're up against. We've heard that they're insects, at least, but that doesn't help us develop a countermeasure. Do any of you have an adventurer skilled and courageous enough to infiltrate a torched land crawling with monsters?"

"Yes, we have someone who fits the bill!" called out one particular guild

master, raising his hand.

“Then I’ll leave it to you,” said the chairman with a nod. “Have them observe the enemy and identify a weak point if possible. Additionally, see if there’s any chance of... negotiation.”

“What...? You intend to negotiate with those hellspawn?!”

The chairman’s words were met with exasperated criticism by the attendees. None of them yet knew that the Arachnea was composed of sentient, intelligent creatures. They all thought the monsters were no different from griffins or manticores that killed livestock and attacked people.

“I merely want to see if there’s a chance! We must probe every possible angle if we are to make it through this! Now, this meeting is dismissed!”

And so the turbulent meeting came to a close. Few people knew what course of action this little merchant nation would take.



Now that both its neutral neighbors were lying in ruins, the Empire of Nyrnal was bristling at the ever-encroaching presence of the Arachnea. On this particular day, the sound of boots clicking against flagstones filled the city of Vejya as countless men marched in a military parade.

It was the sight of a country preparing for war.

In addition to all these foot soldiers, one force unique to the Empire showed off its might: the wyverns. Formations of wyverns soared through the sky, breathing flames hither and thither as they went. The sight elicited cheers from spectators, prompting the wyverns to rapidly circle around and draw a trail through the air.

These bright-red wyverns were the driving force that had made Nyrnal into the vast superpower it was today. Were it not for these wyverns, the Empire would be just one of many unsubstantial countries in this region. The wyverns’ mobility and firepower had shaped and upheld the Empire’s might.

Wyverns were the aerial annihilators also known as “red reapers.” Some people said they were flying furnaces, ready to cremate anyone unfortunate

enough to taste their flames. They were a truly terrible threat. Even some mercenaries would run away in fear at the sound of their wings flapping in the distance.

These flying devils formed the heart of Nyrnal's army, and mere arrows could not pierce their hides. Nothing short of a ballista would do against these beasts. However, the wyverns wouldn't allow enemies to build stationary weapons or fortifications; they would simply burn the construction sites to the ground before they were finished. It was doubtful as to whether it was even possible to beat the wyverns this way, and so they remained the symbol of Nyrnal's invincibility.

As the saying went: "Fear the red scales of the wyvern, for they are the harbingers of death."

As the Empire's subjects watched them with reverence, the dragoons riding the wyverns continued their acrobatics, showing off their skill and proficiency. Among the crowd were ambassadors from other countries, and the sight was as intimidating as the citizens found it exciting. That was because this showy display doubled as a threat; it warned these ambassadors that should they turn against Nyrnal, the wyverns would reduce their country to cinders.

"Your Majesty, a word?" murmured Bertholdt von Bülow, the Empire's Chief Cabinet Secretary.

"What is it?" asked Emperor Maximillian, his eyes still on the parade.

"The Dukedom of Schtraut has fallen. The capital, Doris, lies in ruins. Meanwhile, the allied army shows no signs of moving. Our informants tell me that the Popedom of Frantz is trying to make use of this incident to reorganize their financial prospects and expand their political sphere of influence."

"Naturally. Why can't Frantz's rotten old monks brew up something nicer once in a while?" Maximillian's lips curled up in a thin smile.

Bertholdt's intelligence network was vast. It extended not only throughout the Nyrnal Empire, but also into the Popedom of Frantz, the Eastern Trade Union, the now-ruined Dukedom of Schtraut, and many of the smaller neutral countries. Even more frightening was that he had spies among the pirates of Atlantica.

Nothing occurred on the continent that escaped Bertholdt's attention. This unusual man had sown eyes and ears in every corner of the land. Consequently, Maximillian had chosen to place his trust in the man, and Bertholdt had attained his current position.

"Still, an alliance without our support is like a man without a spine." Maximillian paused to politely applaud the dragoons' performance. "It's clear they'll crumble sooner than later. There is no real alliance beyond its name; in truth, the so-called alliance serves only the Papedom. The only question is when they'll become foolish enough to provoke the monsters and bring about their own demise."

"Then the False Mobilization Project will go according to plan?" Bertholdt asked.

"Yes, as agreed. I leave it in your capable hands." Maximillian side-eyed his advisor, and added sharply, "You would do well not to fail me. Be meticulous in gathering your intelligence, and proceed with utmost caution."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

As the dragoons and their wyverns wowed the crowd with their flips and flames, others began to move in ways that would shape the fate of the world.



"Now then, ladies and gentlemen. We have written a new page into this story, and the blood of our victims has served as the ink. A beautiful, ruthless, and entertaining story, reeking with blood and gore."

Samael stood in the dark ruins of a filthy, dilapidated castle, illuminated by a beam of moonlight as though she were center stage.

"The despicable Arachnea. This vicious empire's terrible tyranny has already reduced two countries to rubble. The nations that remain are moving solely in pursuit of their own interests, and they have no real means of stopping the insect army. When this vicious faction once again bares its fangs, who will be consumed next?"

Samael began to twirl about as she chanted in singsong, her red eyes glittering all the while.

“Aaah, aaah! Tremble in fear and pray for a cure, but the upcoming tempest no one can endure. As the bell tolls and the land blooms with deaths, battlefields bleed and soldiers take their last breaths. Really, more could you want from such a world?”

She froze in place, letting her black locks sway to and fro.

“The wyverns of Nyrnal are a horrible sight. Don’t they make the Nyrnals the true masters of might? They will take to the skies and blot out the sun, and their flames will torch everything and everyone! What’ll be left then, huh? They can even burn up the Arachnea’s bugs, after all...”

Samael smiled viciously.

“The land of dragons once was lord over all the world with its dragon horde. But after it had long prevailed, fate took a turn, and then it failed. Once hailed as noble and sublime, its strength has now been lost to time. The Empire of Nyrnal is thus the heir to the fearsome beasts that rule the air.”

Samael continued her small dance, upping the tempo as she spun her tale.

“But the land of dragons has taken up its old mission; through Nyrnal, its new heart now thrums with ambition. The world will once again tremble in terror as the wyverns take flight for the new dragon-bearer. Will that long-lost dream of world domination come to fruition or end in damnation? Who will rot, and who will stand in dominion—it all rests in the hands of Emperor Maximillian.”

Wyverns... Those abhorrent, awe-inspiring monsters.

“Still, they have met their worthy match in the Swarms that sting and bite and scratch. This wicked army thrives on blood, and every victim feeds the flood. The Arachnea moves as a legion, its strength in numbers and cohesion. For every five the wyverns burn, ten more will rise to take their turn.”

The Arachnea... An empire that prided itself in overwhelming the enemy with its numerous Swarm.

“Who will emerge victorious? Aaah, a game, a game! A fun, fun game! All work and no play makes me a dull girl.”

Samael cackled and continued to cavort over a map of the continent.

“Who will be the next to fall? Will it be the Empire of Nyrnal or the Popedom of Frantz? Maybe the Eastern Trade Union, or perhaps Atlantica’s pirates? Let me fill that dried heart of yours, withered from eons of boredom, with fresh blood. And, in recompense, show me how you spill rivers of blood yourself.”

After that, Samael tore through the map with the heels of her shoes and vanished into the darkness. The continent remained in tatters. It was not truly her heels which had torn it apart, but hatred, selfishness, and needless pride.

A hollow-hearted allied army had left its allies to die. The Empire coiled quietly in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Such injustices were all too human; the Arachnea’s appearance had not driven mankind to unite.

Be it the name of God or the Emperor, each country was only acting in its own best interests, kicking others away or abandoning them entirely as it writhed to protect itself.

The Popedom of Frantz: a land of fools who prayed with one hand and bribed with another.

Atlantica: an island of savages who thrived on pillaging.

The Eastern Trade Union: a utopia for those who desired freedom, pleasure, and money.

The Empire of Nyrnal: a land that spread its wings not in the name of liberty, but death.

The Arachnea: a legion of murderous insects only restrained by its queen’s feeble grasp on her own sanity.

At last, the actors had all gathered. The Kingdom of Maluk had been razed to the ground and the Dukedom of Schtraut had been wiped off the face of the map. Only five factions remained.

Which would survive? Which would be ruined? Which would emerge victorious?

Despite their fear of the Arachnea, mankind had not banded together, and the continent was completely divided. With the current state of affairs, would

the large empires come out on top, or would it be the much more flexible small countries?

The Popedom's soldiers brandished the just banner of the alliance, believing themselves to be the heroes who would save the continent. Atlantica's pirates sailed their ships, hoping to take advantage of the chaos to wrench more tainted spoils from the hands of the dead.

Meanwhile, the Eastern Trade Union's guilds were on the move, trying to come up with a way for their small country to survive the coming crisis. The Empire of Nyrnal's wyverns flew through the skies, preparing to land a special blow.

As each country began to steer its course, it was time for the Arachnea's queen to make a decision. Where would she strike next? The Swarm and the alliance were already glaring at each other from across the border; a fight could break out at any moment.

But the Arachnea had spread too thin, and the long strip of land extending from Maluk to Schtraut had become something of a vulnerable flank of their territory. The wrong decision could lead to the Arachnea's hasty retreat, so the queen needed to make the right choice.

"Right... From here, we will go out to sea."



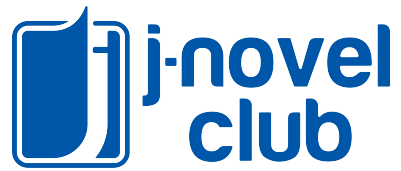
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Swarm is their first series.





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