

Author:
**616th Special
Information
Battalion**



Her Majesty's Swarm

vol. 1

Author:
**616th Special
Information
Battalion**



Her Majesty's Swarm

vol. 1

Kingdom of Maluk & the Surrounding Areas

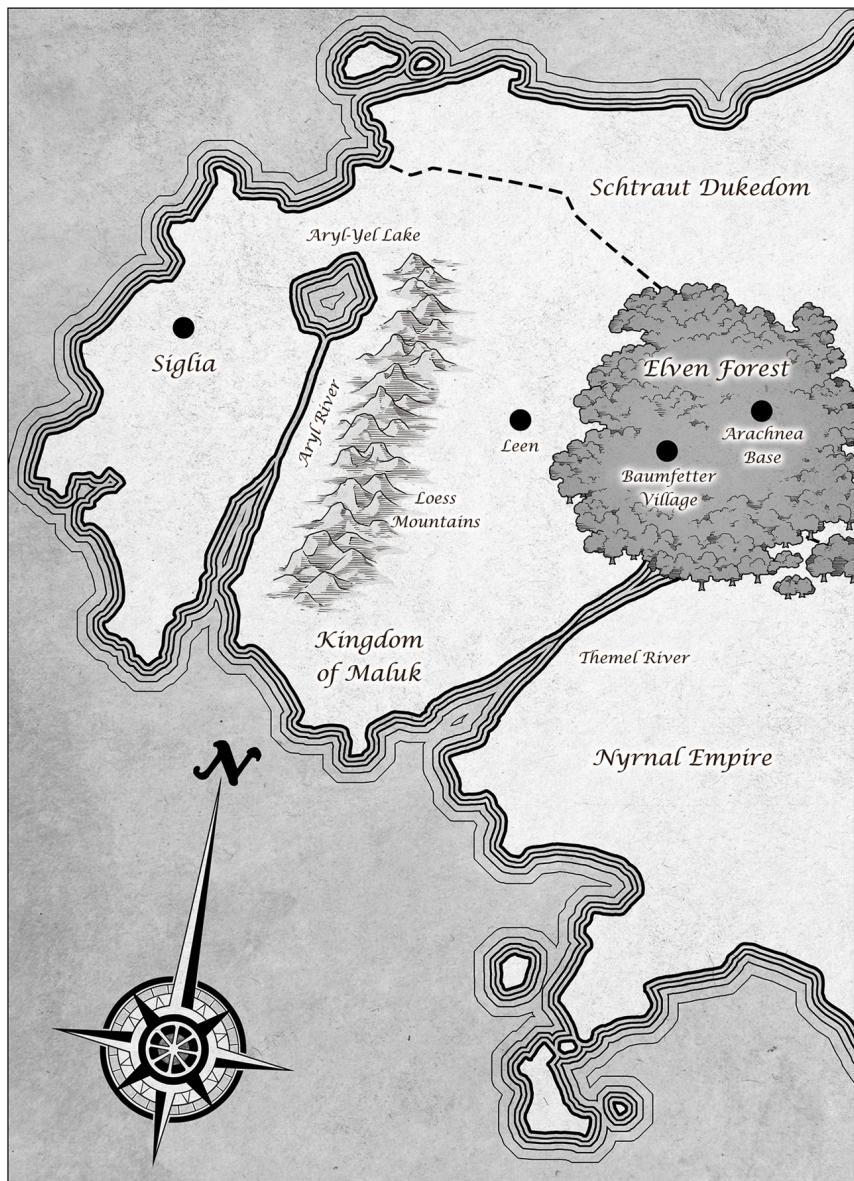


Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Map](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Confirming the Situation](#)

[Plan B](#)

[In the Name of Revenge](#)

[Natural Bloodshed](#)

[The Elf Village's Tragedy](#)

[The Battle of Leen](#)

[Meatballs](#)

[The Battle of the Aryl River](#)

[Fall of the Kingdom](#)

[The Smoldering Flames](#)

[Alteration](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

They were an army of the repulsive and the grotesque.

An aggregate of pure malice and bloodlust.

An inescapable nightmare given form.

A symbol of death most gruesome.

They served as an evil omen, heralding the coming of catastrophe.

These agents of *memento mori* were like the black plague itself; they played out the *danse macabre*, reveling betwixt the living and the dead.

Their distorted flood would surge up from the cesspool of insanity to wash away villages, cities, and nations altogether.

The name of those that rushed and trampled over all was...

†

Once upon a time, there was a certain real-time strategy game. It had the commonplace setting of a fantasy world where a multitude of races vied for supremacy. There were a total of twenty-one factions, each split into one of three alignments: good, neutral, and evil.

One good faction, Marianne, gained power through pious faith. A neutral faction, Gregoria, was ruled by dragons since the days of old. An evil faction, Flame, was a savage tribe hell-bent on spreading destruction across the world.

I remembered there being all kinds of races and factions, each with their own unique characteristics. They all had their own distinct units and structures that allowed for unique, entertaining strategies. But among all the factions in the game, there was one I liked most: an evil faction called the Arachnea.

The Arachnea consisted of a race of insects—or rather, its units were more similar to spiders—and its political system was totalitarianism. Its ecological structure was that of a colony built around one queen.

As for its military, the Arachnea formed troops that devoured their enemies, leaving only bones behind. They invaded the other factions indiscriminately, never once engaging in diplomacy. If I felt like being a bit cynical, I could even go so far as to label it fascist. But it was the one faction I found easiest to play, and I gradually came to adore its many units. When it came to online matches, I would always pick the Arachnea with fixed devotion.

Early-game rushes were one viable tactic to achieve victory; lurking behind the faction's defenses to build up an army big enough to sweep the map was another. Teching into the most expensive units to crush the enemy with punitive force was yet another win condition.

So long as you were able to look past their exterior designs, Arachnea units were relatively balanced and well-rounded. I won countless matches with them, even earning victories in some online tournaments. All my consecutive victories with the Arachnea had earned me a moniker among the other players: “BugSis.” I found it to be a rather cute, charming little nickname and liked it a great deal.

“BugSis is a real Arachnea master.”

“r u cool w/ rl bugs too? i can’t stand spiders :x”

“hey BugSis, I heard there’s a new counter for that macrophage tactic you hate.”

I recalled talking about this and that with my online friends in the in-game chat. Our conversations were always lively, whether we were celebrating a successful new strategy or breaking some record.

But despite playing this game for years, I couldn’t recall its name.

I couldn’t remember.

Why am I...?

Where am I?

My memory is so foggy...

†

Click... Clack...

An odd sound jolted my consciousness awake.

Click... Clack...

It was a peculiar sound unlike the ticking of a clock. It was more like... the sound of a stapler multiplied several times over. Perhaps it was metal clinking against metal. Whatever it was, the sound was wholly unpleasant. It reverberated near my ears and caused my fight-or-flight response to kick in.

“What the...?”

I looked around, still feeling groggy. Immediately, my breath clogged in my throat. Before my eyes was a gigantic spider much larger than a human being. No... maybe it was an ant? Or a scorpion?

The sight of this indescribable creature made me scramble backward in terror. But my back instantly bumped against the mercilessly cold and hard wall behind it. There was no escape. I glanced around, only to see hundreds more of these quasi-spiders swarming around in the dark space. For the first time, I felt a chill of genuine fear scuttle down my spine.

They’re going to eat me alive, I thought.

“Her Majesty has awakened.”

“Wonderful. Splendid.”

The moment these eldritch abominations spoke, a grand realization came over me. Weren’t these creatures the Arachnea’s soldiers that I’d grown so fond of over the years? Weren’t they... the Swarm?

It was all coming back to me—these arachnids were part of the Swarm, collective troops of the evil Arachnea. The brilliant luster of their black, elegantly curved exoskeletons... Sharp, vicious fangs which struck the fear of death into all who witnessed them... Scythe-like appendages that could slice through anyone and anything... Lethal and effective venomous stingers gracing their carapaces...

This was the very same Swarm I had spent countless hours nurturing with only the computer monitor separating us. The ones standing in front of me had long, sharp scythes that were disproportionate to their bodies and long, narrow legs. These characteristics belonged to the Ripper Swarms, an easy-to-mass-produce type of Swarm used for early-game rushes.

There was no mistaking it. I had used legions of this type of Swarm to smother enemy factions dozens upon dozens of times. No unit could be more nostalgic for me. They even helped secure my win in some tournaments.

If I looked beyond the Ripper Swarms, I could see some Worker Swarms, too. They were the worker units that built new structures, repaired existing ones, and produced siege weapons. I often found myself enchanted with the insectile architecture and design of their constructions. They were grotesque but had a beauty of their own, reminiscent of what you might see in a high-quality horror film.

There were also some Digger Swarms next to them. Their production cost was higher than that of the Ripper Swarms, but in exchange, they were capable of a unique action—burrowing underground and digging their way into the enemy's base. They were meant for surprise attacks and were fairly difficult to use. Once mastered, however, Digger Swarms would prove to be dependable units capable of felling entire strongholds without the aid of any siege weapons.

How could I have forgotten about these units after having spent so many years using them in the game? No... Why is my memory so hazy to begin with? Where is this, anyway? Why am I here?

“Her Majesty has returned.”

“Glory to the Arachnea.”

I knew it. They really are the Swarm, and this is an Arachnea camp. But what am I doing here? The Arachnea only exist in the game world, and certainly not in reality. Is this some kind of dream? No, everything feels far too vivid and real for it to be a dream.

I reached out to touch one of them. I could feel the smooth sensation of the Swarm's body. The sound of their clicking fangs echoed in a way that wouldn't be possible in a dream. This was real. The Swarm in front of me, this cold cave—it was all real. Things I thought only existed in my favorite game were right before my eyes in striking detail.

“Order us, Your Majesty.”

“We desire a leader. A leader to guide us.”

“A queen to lead us to victory.”

“A queen to serve as our core and order us.”

The Swarm spoke up, ignoring my uncertainty. Then they all raised their hands and bowed their heads—the Arachnea’s gesture of obedience. They assumed this pose when a player produced them and when they won a battle. It was the sole friendly emote the Arachnea’s insects were capable of. They wouldn’t show this gesture to anyone else but the player. All others would be greeted with scythe, fang, and stinger as the Swarm tore their enemies to bits without a hint of mercy, only to devour their bodies afterward.

The problem was that I wasn’t a queen at all. Even if they called me their queen, I couldn’t live up to that role. I steeled myself, speaking to the Swarm that had insisted I was their queen, worshipping me in the process.

“I’m not your queen,” I told the Swarm resolutely.

“No. Your Majesty is the queen.”

“Your Majesty is, without a doubt, our queen.”

“Have you forgotten the countless times you have guided us to victory?”

Countless times? I guided them to victory? Do they mean the online matches? They remember me winning those, yet I can’t even remember how I got here?

“Lead our conquest today as well, Your Majesty.”

“Our goddess of war and undefeated queen. O, glory to the Arachnea.”

“Your Majesty, order us. Guide us to victory.”

Each individual Swarm spoke in the same manner. That was because they were moving as an aggregate consciousness that had the queen as its core. All were one, and one was all. The countless Swarms in this place were all moving under what was essentially a shared will, and they had no individual differences.

Several hundred Swarms truly believed me to be the Arachnea queen. What if I were to continue insisting that I wasn’t their queen? Even now, when my consciousness was already beginning to blend in with theirs?

Yes, I could tell my consciousness was linked to the hivemind. I knew what they were thinking. These Swarms truly saw me as their queen and craved victory, despite having no idea what kind of victory that was. They revered me as queen, but I couldn’t fathom any of it. If I did continue to deny it, what would become of me?

“Ahaha... Ahahahaha!”

I couldn’t do anything but laugh. Just what was I expected to do? My psyche wasn’t brittle enough to snap and go mad from this much, so I gathered up my remaining sanity in an attempt to adapt to the situation at hand. As my mind struggled to come to terms with this unbelievable reality, my voice of reason was screaming for me to flee. However, my scant sense of self-preservation warned me to stay put.

Frankly, going mad would have made this so much easier.

But I hadn’t gone mad, and so I had to make a choice. Were I to continue

disavowing my position as queen, the Arachnea—which I was no match against —would give up on me and tear me to pieces. But if I acknowledged that I was their queen, I would have to lead these lovely, precious insects.

I didn't want to die. I wasn't farsighted or wise enough to come to terms with my own mortality. Well, some part of me felt the desire to give in and accept death, but its echoes were faint and hollow. A far louder voice desperately urged me to live.

On top of all that, I didn't want to betray the expectations of the Swarm that had battled on my behalf for so many years, albeit in a fictional world. Even if it all took place in a video game, they had fought for me for so long. They were my friends and my most trusted subordinates.

Once I realized this, there was no further need for deliberation. The answer was obvious. There was no other option, no other road for me to tread.

“Very well.” I rose to my feet. With a flourish of my waist-length black hair, I declared, “I will lead you to triumph as your queen. May we be victorious!”

I spoke as grandly as possible, as if to make the whole world aware that I was queen. With this proclamation, I swore my loyalty to the Swarm and promised them victory.

“May we be victorious. All hail Her Majesty!”

“May we be victorious. All hail Her Majesty!”

The Swarm cheered at my words by clicking their jaws in what probably passed as a sort of applause.

What will become of me now that I've sworn myself to these grotesque insects? Was my judgment really rational here, or did the influence of the Swarm's collective unconscious overrun mine and drive me mad?

Maybe it did. Blindly promising the Swarm the conquest they craved when I had no grasp on the situation was an undoubtedly foolish decision. If I had seen another way, I probably would have taken it. And considering what might come next, perhaps I should have desperately sought an alternative.

Nonetheless, I chose not to abandon my insects and instead began to walk the path of the queen. I had no regrets, but I was not confident that my choice wasn't made out of lunacy.

I asked again: did I go mad? Some aspects of the scene led me to believe I might very well have. My memory was hazy and my grasp on the situation was shaky at best. Evidence that seemed to prove I'd gone insane was popping up one after another. But the way I was then, with my consciousness on the verge of being washed over by the Swarm's, I couldn't discern that at all.

I didn't know anything. Not what this world was, not how I came here, and not how I became the Arachnea's queen. Still, I was sane. I wanted to believe that. No... I'd merely convinced myself I was, and perhaps I truly was half-mad already. Had I not been at least somewhat mad, I wouldn't have made the active, unflinching decision to drive this world into calamity at the hands of the

monsters before me.

And so, I became the Queen of the Arachnea—a choice that would transform me into the most abhorrent, terrifying butcher of all.

Confirming the Situation

I took a quick look around and found a small piece of paper. I scrawled upon it all I could remember just before the Swarm's collective consciousness completely washed my memories away.

I was an eighteen-year-old college student, born and raised in Japan. I didn't have a lot of friends in real life, but I had plenty of them online. I knew most of them from gaming. When it came to video games, I was a chatterbox.

I led quite the sad life, if I do say so myself. What I lacked in reality, I sought after on the internet. Still, I had no regrets, and I couldn't claim zero attachments to the somewhat empty life I led in Japan.

I will definitely make it out of this world. I promised the Swarm victory, but at the end of the day, I had my own selfish motives. Rather than focus on the goal of achieving some as yet unknown and unknowable victory, I chose to hone in on my desire to find my way back to Japan.

I made no effort to hide it either. The Swarm likely knew this from the collective consciousness that connected us, but they remained silent on the matter. They seemed to tacitly approve of my wish to go back. Or maybe they intended to leave with me and sweep my world with the black currents of the Swarm.

Whichever it was, the Swarm didn't reject my intent to go back to my own world. I vowed to find a way to leave this world and return home... except I had no idea where to start. *But someday, I will surely find it.*

Thus, my first order of business was to confirm the situation. Scouting was the first order of business in this kind of game, after all. I needed to get a grasp on the terrain, our enemies' positions, and the resources I needed to produce more units—that is, more Swarms. I needed to confirm the logistic path to those resources as well as all other pertinent information about this region in order to emerge victorious.

Those were the Four Xs: eXploration, eXpansion, eXploitation, and eXtermination.

I needed resources. I needed a stronghold. And I needed an enemy. But truthfully, I was still hesitant to fight this so-called enemy. Where was I to begin with? The map was too large. I'd never seen these tunnels, and I didn't recall ever playing a map with tunnels of this size.

I could clearly remember all the maps I'd ever played. In fact, that was an island of perfect clarity in my otherwise hazy sea of memories. There wasn't a single map I didn't know, from the single-player maps, to online ones, to unique, user-made maps. On one hand, this could have been some really niche,

unknown player-made map, but there was no chance a map this large wouldn't be highly-rated by other players, so even that seemed unlikely.

To that end, I divided my Ripper Swarms into pairs and sent them out to scout. Their information came directly to me via the hivemind, and I used it to draw a map of the area. *If we're going to win, we'll have to secure this area*, I thought.

A gold mine. Hunting grounds. A densely packed military installation of unknown affiliation. I was fixated on gathering information in the name of the victory I had promised the Swarm and for the sake of going back to my own world.

But honestly, as far as starting positions went, this one was golden. No matter how much you tweaked the difficulty settings, you'd only start with two to three Worker Swarms and a Ripper Swarm if you were lucky. The Arachnea was a faction that overwhelmed the enemy with sheer numbers, so having this many Swarm units so early in the game was usually forbidden to keep things balanced. It was no simple feat to get these numbers right away.

The Marianne's main resource was faith, which increased with the number of citizens it had and allowed the faction to increase the limit on their number of troops. The Gregoria mined gold, the favorite food of their dragons, to mobilize their forces. The Flame, a fellow evil faction, increased its number of units according to how many sacrifices it made. There was a loophole, though, where the Flame could sacrifice worker units—who didn't subsist on meat—to increase the sum of its sacrifices.

Usually it was hard to build up a number of units in the early game, but the Flame could do it relatively easily. Its worker units subsisted on the most basic foods—fruits and agricultural crops—and could be sacrificed to unlock higher-level units, such as attacker units that were the Flame's counterpart to the Ripper Swarms. That said, for how easy it was for this faction to produce units, the units themselves were unsurprisingly lacking in strength.

The Arachnea, on the other end, lived on meat. It typically gathered meat from hunting grounds, which were generated as part of the map, in order to increase its unit production. Only Worker Swarms could be produced from gatherable plants, with all other units requiring meat to produce.

The game's map generation took that into account, of course, and distributed hunting grounds accordingly. There the Worker Swarms hunted deer and rabbits, carried their spoils back to base, and produced even more Swarms that way. But so long as you knew how to do it, it was perfectly possible to gather your initial army units—in this case, the Ripper Swarms—and rush your enemies' positions before they could set up fortifications.

I had done it several times myself, laying waste to several factions right away. For this method to succeed, you needed to swiftly seize every possible meat resource in the early game, devote them all to producing Ripper Swarms as fast as possible, then rush an enemy base. If the rush was successful, the

Swarms obtained as much meat as the units they'd killed, enabling them to produce even more Swarms as a result.

Massacre, devour, and propagate—once this loop begins, the game is all but won.

While it wasn't impossible, it was certainly a difficult strategy to pull off. Despite that, I already had hundreds of Worker and Ripper Swarms under my command and a number of assorted facilities established from the onset. Whatever difficulty setting had given me this starting setup was an unusual one.

When I viewed the situation like it was the game, it felt as though I had picked up another player's match after they left. *Was there another player at the helm here before I came along? If so, what happened to them? Where are they now? And if the Arachnea existed before I came here, does that mean there are other factions too?* While I couldn't help but wonder, some of these questions weren't anything for me to worry about. Whether there had been another player before or not, the Swarm had shown their loyalty to me. If any such player existed, they were surely gone from this world already.

The Swarm only accepted one queen. In other words, there was no other player using the Arachnea but me right now—unless, of course, there was another player using the same faction. And if there was anyone like that, they may have had some kind of clue relating to how I could go back home.

Additionally, I'd have to be cautious when it came to interacting with the other factions. I could talk to other humans, which meant there was a chance to broker peace with them, but they'd be wary of me because I used the Arachnea. The Arachnea fundamentally didn't deal in diplomacy, favoring declarations of war, so they'd likely suspect me right out of the gate. I could see myself being quickly hated by others.

If this had all been an elaborate setup, I would have started laughing out loud, but the Swarm's collective consciousness in my mind was all too real. I could feel them, experience their senses, and understand their desires.

In other words, victory.

The Swarm didn't know what that victory meant, and therefore I couldn't understand it either. But they still yearned for it. Victory. A victory I would lead them to. A victory we could take pride in. Victory and nothing else.

“Your Majesty, your clothes are ready.”

Beyond the state of this world and the nearby terrain, I needed to figure out my own situation. Being eighteen, I was considered an adult by Japanese legal standards. At least, that's how it should have been, but my body looked somewhat younger now, perhaps fourteen or so. The hooded jacket I wore in place of a housecoat was rather loose on me and tended to slip off my body.

I had no idea why I had become younger or how I had gotten here to begin with, so I did my best to gather my thoughts. *What was I doing before I found myself here? I don't know. The last thing I remember is turning on my PC. My*

beloved PC is barely capable of running the minimum specs for the game, but there I was, hoping to play a round or two—and then this happened?

I don't understand. The discrepancies in my memory are concerning too. For some reason, I forgot all about the Swarms, what I was doing before I came here, and even the title of the game. Do I have some sort of sickness of the mind, or is it the influence of this new world I'm in? If it's the former, everything I've been experiencing until now must've been a hallucination. But if that were true, wouldn't I be given some kind of medical treatment?

I may live alone, but I still go to college and I always call my parents on weekends to let them know I'm doing fine. I really don't get any of this, but I have to keep looking into it. If I can find out how I got here, maybe that'll be the key to getting back home.

I have no intention of staying in this incomprehensible world forever. Once I've led the Arachnea as their queen, I will go back. I may have been a shut-in to some extent, but I still feel that's where I belong. I have no place in this messed up realm where the Arachnea's Swarms actually exist.

“Your Majesty?”

“Yes, sorry. I'll put them on in a second, so just set them over there.”

The Worker Swarm that had brought me some clothes per my request cocked its head as I pointed at my bed. I called it a bed, but it was more of a stone surface with some straw spread over it. You could say I was living *quite* modestly. I made a mental note to elevate the living standards here eventually.

“Let's see the clothes you made for me...”

I spread out the clothes the Worker Swarms had made for me, making sure to keep my expectations appropriately low.

“...I can't wear this.”

However, what I saw was an absolutely gorgeous dress. It was made from a material similar to silk and extravagant enough that it wouldn't have looked out of place in the Victorian era. It had no visible seams, as if the silk was made in the shape of the dress to begin with. Putting aside a few questionable choices, like the exposed cleavage and open back, it was pretty much perfect.

“I suppose that in terms of life's necessities, we've got the need for clothing covered,” I whispered to myself as I put on the dress. “And I have accommodations, even if they call for some renovation. Now I'll have to figure out food.”

Food was crucial. Being human, I needed to eat in order to survive, and the Swarms needed food as a resource to produce more units. According to the game's setting, food was a necessary resource to produce all types of units, unless they were inorganic or draconic units, and as I had already mentioned, the Swarms required meat. Animal meat would do just fine, so long as there was a steady supply. I could do with the leftovers.

“Your Majesty.”

A voice suddenly echoed in my ears.

“Yes?”

“A village has been detected. It is populated. What shall we do?”

The report came from one of the Swarms I had sent out to scout; it was transmitted to me via the collective consciousness. I concentrated on that Swarm’s individual consciousness, which was simple enough. There was a map in mind, the same as the one in the game. I zeroed in on that particular Swarm and projected my energy onto it, which came with the same sensation as clicking on a unit in the game.

Then, a scene surfaced in my mind. I could see a village, and within it about thirty people running around as though in a panic. But something else about them drew my attention.

“Are they... elves?”

The villagers’ ears were pointed and long, making them look strikingly like elves.

Elves were a good alignment race, and their faction was named “Fly Greene.” They were masters of surprise attacks who loved nature and therefore used units that came from the forest, like dryads, for their tactics. There was also a dark elf faction, which was evil-aligned, but these elves had unique blue skin. The elves in this village, however, were just pure, normal elves.

The Fly Greene would appear and disappear in forested terrain, launching surprise attacks that were maddening to handle, but with these numbers, it was perfectly possible to stomp them out. *Would I be able to do that now?*

I would... and without much difficulty. I had sworn to lead the Swarm to victory, after all. I could use the flesh of any elves that strayed too far from the village to bolster my forces and trample the enemy with overwhelming numbers.

That was assuming such force was necessary, of course. The situation right now was a bit different than what I had imagined. In other words, there were contradictions with what I knew from the game.

“Your Majesty, give us the order to attack. With our numbers, we can easily slay and devour them.”

“Wait. There’s something I want to try.”

There were a couple of things I needed to figure out. First of all, was this really the same world as the game? After all, if I had the major premise wrong, I would likely make major errors in judgment.

Secondly, one wouldn’t usually build a village without making sure to put up defenses; if other players were to notice it, they would attack right away, putting a swift end to it. Yet despite being fairly large, this village had no fortifications whatsoever. There were no soldiers, no defensive structures, no walls. It was completely vulnerable, as if the location had remained in its initial generation state from the start of the game without making any developments at all.

It was like they were begging for us to come and bite their little heads off.

Oh, yikes. Really starting to sound like the Swarm here.

Anyway, no normal players, not even the AI, would build a village without any defenses. Taking that and the unfamiliar map into account, it was quite possible that maybe, as hard as it was to believe, this truly wasn't part of the cutthroat video game world. It seemed that this really was some other world, and the Arachnea was a foreign presence that had found its way here.

Yes, just like me.

Therefore, I had to confirm whether that was true before planning my next moves. Picking up the skirt of my long dress, I called a single Ripper Swarm over and hopped onto its back. I then summoned a few other Ripper Swarms and hastened toward the elven village.

If this wasn't the game world, my future plans would be in jeopardy.

†

“Haa... Haa...”

Labored breaths echoed throughout the forest. They were followed by savage shouts—the voices of male outlaws. Two sets of light, almost inaudible footsteps were being pursued by the heavy stomps of five or six men.

“Lysa, hurry! Hurry! They're coming!” an elf boy shouted. He was maybe sixteen years old and had a short bow in hand, which he had aimed behind him as he cried out.

“Just leave me behind, Linnet...” said the elven girl, who appeared to be fourteen or so.

“You know I can't do that! We're going back together!”

Linnet rushed back to Lysa, who was lagging behind, and pulled her by the hand as he took off again. But one arm simply wasn't enough.

“There they are! I've found the elves!” boomed a hoarse voice from behind them.

A group of human men clad in cheap chain mail pointed in the elves' direction. With heavy footsteps, the men closed in, some with arrows nocked in their bows and others clutching daggers or axes. One could tell at a glance that they were a band of outlaws. These men were poachers, but not the kind that went after four-footed game—they were slavers.

“Just go! Run, Linnet! You shouldn't have to be a slave, too!” Lysa pleaded.

“As if! I'm not letting you make slaves out of us!” Linnet fired an arrow toward the men.

“Whoa, there.” A man who looked to be the slavers' leader hopped back. “This one's got claws. All right, boys. Kill the elf with the bow, and capture the woman.”

“Roger that, Boss.”

The slave dealers approached with wooden shields, coming for Linnet with

smirks on their faces as he desperately shot arrows at them. His arrows merely struck the shields, sticking fast or bouncing off hopelessly.

“Linnet, please, just go!”

“Dammit! If only I were stronger... even just a little bit!” Despair was creeping fast into Linnet’s frustrated shouts.

Lysa began to cry. The slavers were almost within arm’s reach of Linnet, ready to grab him and bash his head in with an ax. Linnet’s fate was all but decided.

But at that moment...

“Aaaarghhh!”

Suddenly, the upper half of the slaver who was about to pounce on Linnet disappeared. Or rather, it was torn off... by the jaws of a giant insect. The creature’s fangs and scythe-like hands dripped with fresh blood, and its hollow compound eyes looked around at the other slavers. It was larger in size than the slavers themselves, and it was chomping down on the severed upper half of the one it had killed.

“What the... What the hell is *that*!?” The insect’s sudden appearance drove the slavers into a panic.

But the chaos was just beginning.

Six other bugs sprang out of the thicket and began tearing the slavers to pieces. The men didn’t even have the chance to scream. Their throats were slashed open within seconds, and as a froth of saliva and blood bubbled up from their mouths, the insects continued to ravage their bodies. In the chaos, a few drops of blood splattered onto Linnet’s face.

“Help...” One of them barely managed to raise his voice before his head was cleaved in two by an insectile scythe, leaving him only capable of convulsions.

“This can’t be real! I’ve never heard of monsters like this!” the slavers’ leader screamed. “It’s impossible! What *are* these things!?”

He turned to run, but another insect stood in his way. The monster rhythmically clicked its fangs, as though contemplating whether to rip the man to shreds or eat him alive. There was no trace of emotion in its multitude of hollow eyes.

“Eek! God, help me!” the man screamed, falling to his knees.

In response, the insect before him slowly raised a bloodstained scythe. The moment it swung down, the leader of the slavers would be met with death. He cowered on the ground like a death row inmate awaiting execution, and in this moment, the insect before him gave the striking impression of the grim reaper.

Then, in one swift stroke, he was knocked unconscious.

“Enough.” A girl’s sonorous voice filled the air.

“Are you sure, Your Majesty?”

“Yes. I’ll be needing him later for a little experiment.”

With that, the girl stepped out of the thicket and revealed herself.

“She’s so pretty...”

The girl was beautiful and clad in a dress worthy of royalty. She stood dignified despite the gore-spattered spectacle before her, soiled as it was with the blood and viscera of the slavers. Enchanted, Lysa forgot all about her terror and stared at the newcomer with awe.

“I have something to ask you,” the girl said. “Are you from the nearby village?”

“You know about the... Who are you?!”

Linnet hastily nocked an arrow, and the insects promptly poised themselves to attack. Their scythes at the ready, they gnashed their fangs as their stingers, dripping with lethal venom, vibrated expectantly. If Linnet were to make one wrong move, he would join the corpses of the slavers.

“You don’t need to be so cautious. I just saved your lives.”

“Are they...?”

“Yes, they’re my servants.”

Linnet looked up at the girl with unbelieving eyes. “Are you a witch?”

“No. I am...” The girl tossed her black hair before continuing, flanked by her army of blood-soaked insects.

“The Queen of the Arachnea.” She smiled as though she had told some joke only she understood. “Now then, it’s the first time in hours I’ve spoken to other people... Well, erm, someone who’s *like* another human being. I’ll ask again: are you from the nearby village? Or do you have nothing to do with it?”

“That’s right. We’re from Baumfetter,” Lysa said.

“Lysa!”

“Linnet, she just saved us. We should invite her to the village to thank her.” Ignoring Linnet’s shocked expression, Lysa continued, “We’ll show you the way to the village. Do your... bug friends have to come too?”

“The poor things get worried if I’m too far away, so I’ll have to take at least one of them along,” the queen replied.

“Then come with me, Your Majesty. It’s over that way.”

“Thank you.”

Lysa then set off to escort the queen to their village, with Linnet hurrying after them. But neither of the elves noticed the other insects dragging the body of the unconscious slaver into the trees... or the mysterious smile on the Arachnea queen’s lips.

†

“Linnet! Lysa!”

“Where were you? We were worried about you two!”

I looked on as Linnet and Lysa entered the village the Ripper Swarm had found—Baumfetter Village—and were quickly surrounded by villagers.

“We went to the mountain to pick herbs. Oksana’s cold has been getting

worse, right?"

"Children shouldn't worry about things like that! Though I do appreciate the gesture."

Linnet and Lysa had gone out to pick medicinal herbs that would help a sick villager. They were found by the slavers, who had been lying in wait for prey, and were chased all the way back to the forest. The villagers had noticed they were late coming home and panicked upon discovering that they were missing. It seemed they had just been discussing whether they should organize a search party to find them.

"Did anything happen to you two out there?"

"Well, we kind of ran into slave traders..."

"Slave traders?!" The villagers' eyes widened. "And what happened?! You got away?!"

"Yeah, someone saved us. So, erm, we'd like to introduce her." Linnet and Lysa exchanged glances.

"Yeah. She saved us. She says she's the Queen of the Arachnea."

On cue, I stepped out of the shadows.

"What... What is that monster?!"

"A monster?!"

The villagers' gazes were not fixed on me, but rather on the Ripper Swarm behind me. It stood silently, but its grotesque appearance was likely a bit too... stimulating to those who weren't used to it.

"Don't worry, it won't attack," I said, trying to soothe the villagers. "He's my faithful servant."

"You can control this... this monster?" An old elf stepped forward from the crowd of the villagers. "Are you some manner of witch?"

"I'm not a witch, but the Arachnea's queen. Have you ever heard of the Arachnea?"

"Arachnea? Is that the name of a kingdom? Where is it? I've lived a long time, but I'm afraid I've never heard of such a place."

Just as I thought. The villagers don't know about the Arachnea. If this was the game world, there'd be no way they hadn't heard of the infamous, dreadful Arachnea. No matter how remotely you lived, or what faction you belonged to, or whether you were human or not. Everyone would know the name of the insect-like tidal wave that washed over nations and cities alike.

Not knowing of the Arachnea spelled death in the game world. That meant this world wasn't the same as the game.

I'm sure of it now.

"Well then, Arachnea queen, we thank you for saving our children."

"Don't mention it. I just did what I wanted."

The old elf lowered his head in gratitude, and the other villagers followed his example, but I waved it away. I saved those elves intentionally to curry favor with the villagers, after all, so their deep appreciation made me feel a bit

guilty. I stepped into their fight for entirely selfish purposes; I hadn't saved those kids out of the kindness of my heart.

I knew full well just how vile I really was.

"Actually, I wanted to strike a deal with your village," I said, switching to the main topic. "Could you hear me out?"

"Don't tell me you're another slaver?"

"No, I'm not. I don't need slaves. But what I do need is food."

And just as I said it, my stomach raised its voice in grumpy complaint.

"Erm, I'd appreciate if you could spare me something to eat for now," I told them, a blush creeping onto my cheeks.

†

"Thank you, that was delicious."

I placed my spoon on the table, concluding my meal. Baumfetter's cuisine consisted mostly of mushrooms, vegetables, and beans. The flavor of the vegetables had soaked well into the soup, resulting in a very tasty dish. My being hungry may have added to it, though.

However, this presented a real problem.

"Don't you eat meat?"

None of the dishes they'd served me had any meat in them. They were all vegetarian dishes, with soybeans as the source of protein. *I don't know anything about elven nutrition, but can soybeans really stand in for meat as a protein source? No, elven nutrition isn't important right now. The problem runs a bit deeper than that.*

"We can't hunt during this season," the elderly elf said apologetically. "We do have some dried meat, but..."

No meat, then.

I could produce Worker Swarms using mushrooms and greens, but I needed meat to generate any other kind of Swarm. I'd have to obtain meat if I wanted to increase my forces. No matter who I was going to war against, I would have to build up our numbers in order to grant the Swarm what they desired.

The collective consciousness informed me that the Swarm sought victory, even if the conditions I had to meet for that victory were completely and utterly unknown to me.

"I see. Plan B it is."

I figured this might be the case once I'd discovered this was an elven village, so I had a backup plan in mind.

"Do those slavers always hang out around these parts?"

"Yes, they're a serious problem for us," answered the old elf. "They also work as poachers and constantly disturb the land around here."

"Right. So it's all right if I kill them, then?"

My question was a casual one, so as to not startle the village elder.

“Kill them?” His eyes widened.

“Yes. They’re causing trouble for your village, aren’t they?” I said. “I’d be more than happy to clear them out for you.”

“I see... So that’s the bargain you wish to strike with us.”

“That’s right. I’m glad you catch on quick.”

Essentially, I wanted to strike a deal with them where they would pay us for securing the area. If the area wasn’t safe, that would be convenient for us. I had made them an offer they couldn’t refuse. It was better for them to place themselves under our protection than to live in fear of their children being snatched away by slavers... that is, so long as they could accept the Swarms’ grotesque appearances.

“And what would you ask in return?”

“As many fresh ingredients as you can spare. Of course, to the extent that it doesn’t put a strain on the village.”

I would use those ingredients to feed myself and produce Worker Swarms. Having to obtain food for myself as though I were one of the game’s units was one troublesome aspect the game itself never had.

“Well, we don’t mind, but is that really all you need?” the elder asked.

“I suppose if there’s one more condition, it’s that you don’t look into what we do with the poachers’ and slavers’ corpses,” I answered with a thin smile.

“Their... corpses?”

“Right. Their corpses.”

And that right there was plan B: using the outlaws’ corpses as a food source. I could kill these people without anyone complaining and use them as my ingredients.

Therein lay the Arachnea’s strength, after all: it trampled other factions, consumed them, and multiplied, only to repeat the same cycle with the next faction. There were other factions capable of devouring the competition, but the Arachnea was the strongest among them.

The more enemies the Swarm killed, the larger their numbers grew, enabling massacre on an even larger scale. Forging that kind of diabolical empire was the very essence of the Arachnea playstyle.

“So, never ask what we do with their bodies,” I demanded. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“Understood. I suppose that’s all right,” replied the elf, nodding cautiously.

This was one act of diplomacy that wouldn’t have flown if this were a human settlement. Their being elves enabled me to strike this bargain.

“We’ll come regularly to collect our resources. Oh, and I have a question: can you tell me where I can find the closest city? Preferably one that has trade and a meat market.”

“The town of Leen to the west sounds like what you’re looking for. There’s a large bazaar there, though we don’t make much use of it.”

Naturally, my plan didn't stop at just the poachers and slavers.

"Thank you. Well, I'll have these little ones patrol the area, so if you detect any intruders, just sound some kind of alarm and they'll dispose of them in a flash."

This concluded my work here for the time being. All that remained was to see if my upcoming experiment would bear fruit.

†

I had the slavers' leader dragged back to the Arachnea's base. He was bound and gagged with the Swarms' spun threads, unable to even scream as he was surrounded by dozens of Swarms. I almost felt bad for him, but knowing that he had tried to abduct those elven children and make them into slaves kept my sympathy at bay.

Did a person who orchestrated such a cruel deed deserve mercy? I didn't think so. I coldly stared down into the man's eyes, which begged me for mercy.

"Remove the threads from his mouth."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

At my command, a Ripper Swarm used its scythes to nimbly remove the threads keeping his mouth shut. The blades lightly cut into his lips, but considering what this man had tried to do to those children, he had it coming and then some.

"Wh-What...?! What the hell are these things?!?" the man screamed. "What are you going to do with me?!"

"Shut up." I stepped on his head, pressing my heel into his temple. "I don't want to hear a word."

I could feel something of a sadistic streak spring up inside me.

No. Bad girl. Bad. No getting carried away by the Swarm's thoughts.

"Tell me. Have you heard of the Arachnea?"

"Erm, no. First time I've heard of it. That some kind of organization? Are these... things... part of it?"

"Be. Quiet." I lightly kicked his head to put an end to his babbling. "I'm the one asking questions here."

He didn't know about the Arachnea either, which would have been impossible in the game world. *Just as I suspected. This really isn't the game world at all.*

"Well, if you don't have any information, I guess I have no need of you."

"Hold up! Don't kill me! I'll do anything! I'll give you slaves for free! I've got plenty of pretty little boys! They'll definitely satisfy you! So please...!"

Hearing him beg for his life made me want to plug my ears. The very fact that he was trying to bribe me made me sick to my stomach.

"Oh, I won't kill you. I'll be putting you to good use." I approached a certain object standing beside me.

It was a Fertilization Furnace.

I'd had the Worker Swarms produce it ahead of time. If I had to describe what it looked like, it was like a multitude of human wombs that had been extracted and hastily sewn together. Certainly not a shape anyone would be too keen on imagining.

I loaded all the dried deer and rabbit meat I had gotten from the elf village into the Fertilization Furnace, and then spoke to the construct, ordering it clearly:

“Parasite Swarm.”

The Fertilization Furnace began to writhe and pulsate, making repulsive, viscous noises as the uteri swelled up. A small claw poked through the manufacturing flesh, and the creature it belonged to pushed out into the open air.

It looked like a small scorpion, or perhaps something closer to the famously grotesque camel spider. This newborn horror was a Parasite Swarm, and it would soon play a critical role in plan B's success. It had no fighting capabilities, but it did have a special skill.

“You're a slaver, right?” I asked, letting the Parasite Swarm creep onto my hand.

“R-Right. But I won't attack the elves anymore. You have my word.” The leader's desperate voice began to crack.

It was an obvious lie, of course. If I let him get away, he'd attack the elves again. But if I used him to my advantage instead, that would be one problem nipped in the bud.

“I think it's time you find out what slavery tastes like.” With that, I forcibly stuffed the Parasite Swarm into the man's mouth.

He struggled to spit out the nasty monster that had crept onto his tongue, but the Parasite Swarm vigorously burrowed deeper inside. And once it had fixed itself inside his throat, it spread tiny tentacles throughout the man's body, which eventually reached his brain.

“Ah, aah, aahhh, aaahhhh...”

The man spasmed a few times, and after vomiting once, became completely still.

“Undo his threads,” I ordered.

The Ripper Swarms tore the threads that bound him.

“Stand.”

The slaver got to his feet, just as I ordered him.

“Say, ‘All hail the queen,’” I said.

“All hail the... queen...” The slaver obeyed me with hollow eyes.

Yes, as its name implied, the Parasite Swarm latched onto its victims, turning them into puppets that obeyed any orders its master—or mistress, in my case—gave. If I were to order him to commit suicide, this man would take any measures possible to kill himself.

There were many uses for this unit. It allowed you to take over powerful enemy troops or masquerade as an enemy faction's unit, which you could then use to scout or even attack the enemy's workers.

On top of the simple tactic of Ripper Swarm rushes, the Arachnea was also capable of more intricate strategies that assaulted the enemy when they were least prepared for it. That's what made it such a fun faction to play, and why I was so attached to its units, starting with the Ripper Swarms. Other factions had their good sides, to be sure, but I couldn't help but love the Arachnea the most.

“There you are. Now you know what being a slave feels like.”

The most awful part was that the slaver's consciousness was still there. The Parasite Swarm in his body bound his freedom, but his senses and awareness remained as they were. He could feel the Parasite Swarm clinging to the inside of his throat and the tentacles extending to his brain.

It made for a veritable living hell.

His senses were entirely intact, but his every action was dictated by someone else. It was a nightmare. I couldn't begin to imagine what it felt like to have a creature grip your throat and brain.

But this man was a slaver, so becoming a slave was his just desserts. I could say it with perfect honesty and not an ounce of hesitation. *Serves you right, scum.*

“You have a very important job ahead of you. A crucial job, even, so you better follow through. Not that you have much of a choice in the matter.”

And with those words, my plan B was set into motion in earnest.

Plan B was to obtain meat through non-aggressive means. Right now, we couldn't fight a war, but we needed to prepare for it all the same. For that reason, I came up with this compromise.

I won't know if it'll work out unless I give it a shot. This is, after all, entirely unfamiliar territory for me, so there's no telling what problems might pop up. Unpredictable obstacles or society itself might stand in my way and try to prevent me from achieving my goals.

But it's true what they say: you never know until you try.

Plan B

The slavers' leader took a carriage and rode toward the town of Leen. I accompanied him, along with a single Ripper Swarm, which hid in the cargo hold. The city's gates received constant traffic from peddlers, so it was left open.

We managed to enter the city without much questioning. Thanks to that, our cargo—and the Ripper Swarm guarding it—went undetected as we made our way into Leen. Had we been inspected, I planned to pacify the guard by swiftly jamming a Parasite Swarm down their throat, but it seemed my concerns were needless.

At worst, I'd have had the Ripper Swarm slaughter the soldiers and turn the carriage 180 degrees to flee Leen. Picking this option would have meant we'd never return to Leen again.

“So, where might I find the local tailor?”

In the large town of Leen, my first order of business was to find a tailor.

“Ahh, that must be the place.”

Upon riding down Leen's main street, we found a store that had some elegant clothes out on display. It seemed to be the exact kind of place I was looking for. I had the slaver stop the carriage, and then the two of us disembarked, leaving the Ripper Swarm to watch the proverbial fort.

“Welcome. Oh, it's you. The slaver. What do you want with us?”

While we were at first greeted with a retail smile, the shopkeeper quickly turned sour upon seeing the slaver. Apparently, people in this world frowned upon those who dealt in the slave trade. That was a good thing; I was pleased to learn that this town's citizens were decent folk.

Conversely, if I'd learned that this world welcomed slavery, I'd have been awfully annoyed.

“I came... to sell clothes.”

The slavers' leader was dominated by the Parasite Swarm, and thus effectively by the greater Swarm and myself, forcing him to speak against his will. Normally he'd scream for help and beg to be saved from the monster inside his body, but instead he started bartering with the employee.

“Clothes? You mean things you pillaged off the elves? No one wants threads you ripped off of some knife-ear. Their clothes are far too seedy for our establishment. We only sell garments of the highest quality. Now go away. Shoo, shoo.”

There was discrimination against the elves after all, even though they were trying to live as well as they could off the blessings of the forest. I suppose the

humans of this world assumed the elves to be barbarians of some sort. *How irritating.*

“No. Clothes I bought... from a merchant.”

I’d thought up a story beforehand: he had sold some slaves and received these clothes as the payment. It might come across as suspicious, but that was the only plausible story I could come up with.

I prayed and prayed that the man would believe it. Standing in the shadow of the carriage, I could only transmit my wishes through the air.

“Fine.” The shopkeeper eventually caved. “Show me your merchandise, then.”

The slavers’ leader hauled a chest full of clothes from the carriage and placed it on the counter.

“This is...”

He lifted out a few expensive-looking dresses, woven with silk-like threads by the Worker Swarms. The box was stuffed with dozens of them, ranging from everyday clothes to evening dresses that wouldn’t look out of place at a grand ball. The shopkeeper eyed them with awe.

Thank you, my sweet little Worker Swarms. Your hard work is being appreciated!

“This is amazing,” the shopkeeper breathed, examining the dresses carefully. “I’ve never seen clothes like these before. The nobles would just eat them up.”

He was outright mesmerized with how pleasant to the touch the fibers were and by the intricacy of the designs.

“How much... will you pay for them?” the slaver asked.

“For clothes like these? Twenty thousand floria sounds about right.”

All right, time for some good old haggling.

Having asked the elves about it beforehand, I had concluded that I would sell the dresses for at least 30,000 floria. Still, this was my first time haggling, so I wasn’t sure I’d do it right... but I had to do what I could. We needed as much money as possible, and we needed to obtain it legally.

“Too little. You can... pay more for it. If you won’t give me forty thousand, I will go to another store.”

“Fine. Thirty thousand floria, then. I’ll take them all for that much, and not a single floria more.”

I’d expected the negotiations to take longer than this, but they ended in the blink of an eye.

“No objections. That’s a... deal,” uttered the slaver, who then pushed the chest toward the shopkeeper.

We could have probably bargained for more, but failing the negotiations here could impact our business in the future. Even considering he might have tricked us because of our inexperience, we should still compromise for 30,000 floria.

“There you are, thirty thousand floria. Take it.”

Having accepted the chest, the shopkeeper handed the slavers’ leader a bag stuffed with coins and excitedly carried the chest to the back of the store.

That cleared stage one of my plan.

My original intent was to give the elves these dresses and have them go to Leen to cash them in, but they seemed to fear the town and refused to go near it. I could certainly see why. With people like the slavers around, it was only natural the elves wouldn’t get used to this place.

The teachings of some so-called God of Light declared that nature gods, whom the forest-dwelling elves worshipped, were evil deities. The elves were treated as heretics and barbarians, marked as targets slavers could “legally” capture and sell off for coin. I cared little for religion, but even I believed people should be free to worship anyone or anything they desired.

Not that the Arachnea was weak enough to depend on any gods, of course. The only one the Swarm worshipped was their queen. For their queen, they would offer up their lives or kill virtually any target. The Arachnea’s Swarm didn’t need the forgiveness of some god. Their queen’s forgiveness was all they required, and their actions were always dictated by her will through the collective consciousness.

For the time being, it didn’t seem like I’d have to worry about the possibility of the Swarm revolting against me.

“All right, time for the next stop on our shopping trip. And this is important,” I said, which prompted the man under my control to drive the carriage to our next destination.

And that destination was...

“Meat! Cheap, fresh meat! Get the highest quality meat here!”

Yes, we had come to the butcher.

You see, my plan B was as follows: I’d sell clothes made by my Worker Swarms and use it to buy meat. It was the most peaceful and most boring expansion plan in the history of expansion plans. The Swarm seemed to approve of it, though, as there was no conflict in the collective consciousness.

Knowing that they were fine with my idea was a huge relief. I wasn’t sure what I would have done if they had started indiscriminately attacking random people. This was one obstacle out of the way for my peaceful expansion policy.

There were other potential obstacles, however. For example, the slavers’ leader could be arrested by the town’s law enforcement for his social status, or we could be barred from entering Leen. Another was the possibility of not being able to sell the clothes, or only being able to sell them off for cheap.

Lastly, the Swarm could deny my passive approach and rebel, then haphazardly attack the surrounding region. Looking back on it, I probably shouldn’t have worried about that, though.

The queen was the core of the colony, and the colony couldn’t oppose the queen’s will. The Swarm would remain endlessly loyal to the queen... that is, to

me. I could say that with confidence now, but that didn't mean I was going to throw caution to the wind. I still feared I might end up somehow earning their ire.

But it would do for the time being. *They're loyal to me for now, at least.* Now then.

"Give... meat," said the slaver, hopping down from the carriage.

"Aye, friend. What are you looking for?"

"As much meat as this can buy. All of it." He plopped the sack of 30,000 floria he'd received earlier on the counter.

The butcher looked puzzled.

"Are you holding a feast or somethin', mister?"

"Does it... matter? Give me... meat."

It certainly was a feast in a manner of speaking, as the meat would be positively gobbled up. But mentioning our true motives here was probably a bad idea.

"Erm, I'm not so sure I can give you your money's worth..."

"Unprocessed meat will do too."

What we were doing was effectively the same as walking up to the neighborhood butcher and dropping fat stacks of cash on his counter, demanding everything he had. It was a pretty looney idea, and I wouldn't have been surprised if the plan blew up in my face right then and there.

"Even with the unprocessed meat thrown in, it's only fifteen thousand floria," the butcher said, still baffled. "If you need that much meat, you'll have to hit up other stores too."

I kind of felt bad for the guy.

"I will buy it all for fifteen thousand, then."

"All right. I'll get it ready, so just gimme a few."

It was another compromise, but I didn't really have any other options. I'd spend 15,000 here, and the other 15,000 elsewhere.

"Here you go, fifteen thousand floria worth of meat." The butcher loaded a crate full of meat onto the counter. "You didn't specify what kind of meat you wanted, so I put in all kinds."

It was a *lot* of meat. And I was a veritable carnivore. Hamburg steaks, grilled meat, beef stew, you name it—meat was my soul food, but eating this much would definitely make me get fat.

Also, there was no way of keeping it fresh all the way back to base. Left with no choice, I bid my dreams of steaks and burgers a tearful farewell. *The burgers Mom made really were the best, though.*

"Fifteen thousand floria." The slaver handed the money over to the butcher.

"Thank you for your patronage. You enjoy your feast, mister."

Oh, we will. It's going to be a lovely banquet.

We went on to a few other butchers, spending our remaining 15,000 floria

on more meat as well as some bedding and furniture to make my living space a touch more hospitable.

The Worker Swarms could produce sheets that were softer than silk, but making a comfortable bed was beyond their abilities. All they could manage was to furnish my simple bed with straw. But starting today, I would finally be able to sleep in a comfy bed again.

“Phew...”

After traveling through an unfamiliar town and haggling prices, I was left feeling a little tired.

“That’s enough for today. Buying too much would make us look suspicious... though it might be too late for that.”

With that, we turned our carriage back toward the Arachnea’s base. That was the end of that day. At least, it should have been.

†

I relaxed in the wagon, letting the slavers’ leader handle the reins. Burying my face in my newly bought bedding, I deeply inhaled its pleasant scent.

Soothed by the fresh smell, and reassured by the presence of the Ripper Swarm watching over me, I began to doze off.

Still, I was unsure about what to do next. I’d bought a great deal of meat from the town’s butchers, which would allow me to greatly increase the number of Swarms, but what was I going to use them for?

The Swarm believed I would guide them to victory. But victory over what? Did they wish to conquer the whole world? Or was there some other kind of triumph they desired? Just what sort of objective did they want me to achieve?

All I could hear from the collective consciousness were voices crying out for victory, but none of them described what that victory stood for. They merely said they wished for the Arachnea’s queen—myself—to lead them to victory. So, in response, I could only torment myself in an attempt to figure out what it meant.

Even my attempt was being transmitted to the Swarm via the collective consciousness, but they kept crying for victory all the same. But if they didn’t know how to define that victory, what was I supposed to do?

“Say, Swarm.” I lifted my face from the covers, looking up at the Swarm watching over me. “What do you want me to do?”

The Ripper Swarm tilted its head slightly in a gesture that implied it didn’t quite understand what I was asking.

“What we crave is victory, Your Majesty,” it answered.

“But what kind of victory is that? World conquest? Forming a nation?”

I could have asked the collective consciousness directly, but I preferred speaking face-to-face. I wanted to hear what the Swarm had to say. It may have been connected to the collective consciousness, but right now this individual

was separated from the others, fulfilling the task of his defending the queen. Perhaps its response would be different.

Just what kind of victory is it seeking? Does it wish to conquer this world after all? Is “victory” forming an Arachnea empire? Are there other victory conditions that haven’t occurred to me?

“I do not know. However, we simply hold an immense longing for victory. We desire nothing more than victory, and that will never change. We are sure that you will be able to guide us to the victory we desire, Your Majesty. We trust you to no end, and we wish to serve as your hands and feet as we achieve victory. We are certain you will be able to guide us, Your Majesty.”

“You guys...”

The pressure was on. The Swarm trusted me wholeheartedly at the moment, but if I made a mistake in my “command” of them, there was the risk they might rise up in revolt and turn me into ingredients for the next generation of Swarms instead. Being linked to their consciousness only exacerbated that fear.

They were my charming, beloved bugs, but terrifying monsters all the same. I had to act in a way that would never disappoint them. That said...

“This is complicated,” I whispered to no one in particular.

It really was. In the game, you could win because you were up against someone else. But my scouting had been fruitless so far and only extended to a small part of the world. Any enemies I had were at most the poachers and slavers that disturbed the elves’ village, and they were no match for the Swarm.

Who was I supposed to win against? I needed to lead my adorable little Swarms, but toward what, exactly? To call this situation “complicated” would’ve been an understatement. I had no enemies to speak of at the moment, no concrete goal. What would I fight, and what would I gain from fighting? Unlike the game, there was no clear-cut opponent.

Suddenly, the carriage came to a halt.

“What’s the matter?” I peeked out from the body of the carriage to see what had caused us to stop.

In front of us were several people clad in leather armor standing in formation. They had short bows in their hands, and their arrows were nocked and aimed at my slaver-puppet. I could sense danger; it was clear from their gazes that they were out for blood.

“Moisei!” One man, who looked to be their leader, raised his voice at the slaver. “Looks like ya made a real profit today, ya jackal! But you ‘aven’t forgotton about that debt ya owe us, ‘ave ya?!”

Ugh. Not only is he a slaver, but he’s in debt too? He’s seriously useless.

“I’ll be takin’ yer cargo as a, uh, li’l deposit toward yer debt.”

I couldn’t let them do that. This was *my* precious cargo, not his.

“Check every corner ‘a the thing! Go on!”

The men moved in to inspect our carriage.

This is bad.

I only brought one Ripper Swarm with me today. While I contemplated my chances of success, the armed group circled the body of the carriage.

“Huh?” One of the men pulled a crate full of meat off the top. “What the hell? It’s all meat! What were you thinking?!”

“Oh! And ya got a lovely li’l slave with ya, too. If we sell this one off, that’ll completely clear yer debt, eh?”

They had also found me, and apparently thought I was a slave. They couldn’t have imagined that my relationship with the slaver was quite the opposite. I stayed still so as not to provoke the men, instead fixing a loathing gaze at them.

So they’re slavers too. In other words, scum worth less than the lowliest dog. Does society benefit whatsoever from these people drawing breath? Even if slaves aren’t illegal in this world, I can only see these people as vile, offensive wastes of space.

“Hey, Boss, how about we sell her—”

“Wait a sec... Isn’t there somethin’ weird back there?”

The ruffian was so focused on me he failed to see it.

Yes, the Ripper Swarm standing behind me.

A split second later, the Ripper Swarm’s scythes severed the head of the ruffian leaning into the carriage, causing blood to gush out from his neck stump like a fountain. It spurted, then died out, then spurted again, matching the man’s final heartbeats. It was almost comical in a way.

How is death comical, you might ask? Well, they were slavers. The same kind of trash that would kill and kidnap elven children. And as my conscience was linked to the Swarm’s hivemind, I could kill hundreds of them and not feel so much as a pang of guilt.

I had already decided that there was nothing wrong with killing people like them.

“What...? What the hell did you do?!”

“Boss! It’s a monster! There’s a monster in here!”

The armed men flew into a panic as the Ripper Swarm tore through the carriage’s canopy and sprung out, then charged at them. There was no need for me to give any orders. All I needed to do was inform the collective consciousness that these men were dangerous.

“Shit! Shoot it! Kill the damn thing!”

The ruffians’ boss fired his short bow toward the Ripper Swarm, but the arrow simply bounced off its exoskeleton. The metallic snap of the arrow was soon followed by screaming.

“Freaking monster!”

The other five realized their arrows were useless, and instead took out halberds and claymores to challenge the Ripper Swarm. It may have deflected arrows like they were nothing, but it would take a beating from these heavy

lumps of metal.

The Swarm's scythe-like arms were torn off and its fangs bashed in. The longer the Ripper Swarm fought, the more tattered it became, its form eventually becoming irreparably mangled. Even as it was dying, it waved its scythes in a desperate attempt to protect me, fatally biting into the enemy with its fangs, and stunned them with its venomous stinger.

That's enough. You can stop now.

At least, I wanted to say that, but I was too much of a coward. Instead, I allowed the Ripper Swarm to die in my place. It was the rational choice in order to defend the queen—myself—but even so, words of condemnation and guilt surfaced in my heart.

The Ripper Swarm shredded through the remaining ruffians, stabbing them with its stinger. It was a truly savage battle. But the enemy fought back defiantly, gravely injuring the Ripper Swarm. I could feel its impatience through the collective consciousness.

“Fall back! Move, move!”

Eventually, the Ripper Swarm cornered the three remaining members of the group, but they immediately fled the scene. They got on their horses and galloped down the main thoroughfare in order to escape.

“Ripper Swarm!”

Now that the fighting had ceased, I rushed to its side.

“You’re... not fine, are you...?”

The Ripper Swarm's body was mangled. The halberds had torn off its legs, and the blow of a claymore had cracked its head. Ripper Swarms were initial combat units meant for early-game rushes, and as such, they weren't all that powerful. If the enemy were to deploy units that had upgraded defenses and the like, they could be cleaned up rather quickly.

And yet, I had forced such heavy responsibility onto it.

“Your Majesty... Are you unharmed...?”

“I’m completely fine. But you...”

The Ripper Swarm was worried about me even now.

“Rest assured. We are all in one, and one in all. My consciousness will remain in the collective, and so we need not fear death. What frightens us most of all is the possibility of you falling to harm, Your Majesty... And so seeing you are safe puts us at ease...”

Having uttered these last words, the Ripper Swarm departed this world.

No, it did not depart. Its will remained in the collective consciousness formed between myself and the countless other Swarms.

That's right; the Swarm did not know death. Until the very last of their kind was exterminated, this one Swarm's consciousness would be preserved within the group like a single flicker in an undying flame. That Swarm's lofty desire would linger in the collective consciousness, shared by its brethren and passed down to the next generation of Swarm.

In a manner of speaking, the Swarms were immortal. So long as the queen serving as their core and the collective consciousness remained, their presence would linger even if their physical form died. The will of this brave Swarm that had fought to defend its queen would never disappear.

“I’m sorry. I still can’t accept this.”

I dug a hole in the ground at the side of the road with the help of my puppet, and we buried the Swarm’s body. In my own way, I mourned its death. The Swarm had no need for prayer, but in that moment, I felt the need for it.

And it was true. The will of the Ripper Swarm that died lingered on in the collective consciousness. It would be passed down to another Swarm and one day reappear before me, swearing its allegiance once more. That was the strength of the Arachnea’s collective.

As for me, however, I was an individual with my own set of emotions, and I wasn’t fickle enough to simply accept that another one would take its place. It had fought bravely to the bitter end, and I couldn’t accept its efforts being undone.

I had just borne witness to a death; it was, essentially, the first blood that had been shed under my dominion. It was also the first real, burning hatred I had ever felt. The first deep regret I had ever known. The most transient mercy I had ever harbored. I was feeling a storm of other emotions I couldn’t put into words.

My inner conflict coursed through the Arachnea’s collective consciousness, but the Swarm didn’t seem to assent. Perhaps it was because only one Ripper Swarm had been killed. If we were to go to war, hundreds of them would be sacrificed. Seeing it happen for the first time made me very emotional. The first death of one of my Swarm rattled me to my very core.

Another feeling began to bloom within me, even as my heart was nearly overwhelmed by the collective consciousness. It eased my grief for this single unit and inspired me instead.

“If they hit us, we’ll hit back. I’ll inherit your will,” I said, placing flowers on the Ripper Swarm’s modest grave.

Upon returning to our base, I began preparing for the revenge I would exact in its name.

Yes, I’ve finally found an enemy to defeat.

In the Name of Revenge

“Does this symbol look familiar?” I asked the elder when I returned to Baumfetter, gesturing to something I’d nicked off one of the corpses.

At some point, I’d become a regular guest in the elven village. The villagers were grateful that I—or rather, the Swarms—had kept the forest safe, so they always greeted me with a bowl of warm stew.

“That’s the symbol of a human crime syndicate, I believe,” the elf answered, looking a little disturbed. “I do not know where they’re from, though.”

“I see. So you don’t know after all... I guess this is something only humans would be familiar with.”

I didn’t expect much to begin with. Those armed ruffians were humans, and so the possibility the elves would know much about them was slim. I only asked because I had nothing to lose, and it came as no surprise that they didn’t have the answer I was looking for.

“Still, thanks for the meal. It was great today too.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. We owe you a great deal.”

He was speaking, of course, of the fact that I’d had their children’s wannabe-kidnappers torn to bits. Their parents had been thrilled to see their children return safely, though I did have to ask myself if the kids weren’t traumatized by the experience.

“It’s the Arachnea’s queen!”

Just as I finished my bowl of stew, the two elven children in question, Linnet and Lysa, ran over to me. The two of them showed up together to the elder’s house, seemingly cheerful and happy.

From what the elder had told me, Linnet was several years older than Lysa, who had looked up to him since she was little. The two were childhood friends and as close as siblings... except their relationship wasn’t that simple. Everyone around them could tell Linnet was in love with Lysa, and they all believed the two of them would end up getting married in the future.

Linnet was a healthy boy with handsome features and a sturdy frame, while Lysa had fair, slender limbs. The two of them were kind, considering they were willing to go out and gather herbs for a sick elf. It seemed like fate had brought the two of them together. The pair also occasionally went off pranking the villagers together, which earned them plenty of verbal lashings. These were just some of their many rash adventures. The adults didn’t entirely frown upon their actions, but they were worried that the two youths might have been a little too reckless.

Lysa and Linnet. The two of them seemed perfect together, and they were blessed by those around them as everyone expected to see their wedding in the future. I was quite envious of them, to be honest. I had never had anyone like that in my life.

“Have these, Your Majesty!”

“Mushrooms?”

Linnet was handing me a leather sack full of mushrooms.

“The other villagers told me you like mushrooms, so you can have these!”

“Oh, thank you. Was finding this many a hassle?”

To be fair, it wasn’t me who liked mushrooms, but rather the Worker Swarms. I liked mushrooms just fine, but I couldn’t eat this many. *I should have the Worker Swarms thank Linnet and Lysa at some point.*

“Your servants are keeping the forest safe, so picking herbs is a lot easier now,” Lysa explained. “We had to be careful of the poachers and slavers before, so we could only pick mushrooms around the village.”

The poachers and slavers had apparently loitered around the village often before I came along, which hindered the children from picking herbs unless they were accompanied by adult elves who could fight off attackers.

But now, the children were free to go about the forest. The Swarms watched over them, thoroughly eliminating anyone who so much as smelled like a threat, and so the forest was becoming quite peaceful. *Linnet and Lysa probably take advantage of that to have little nightly rendezvous, don’t they, the lovebirds?*

“Is that right? I’m glad to see my servants are of help to you.”

“Yes! We’re happy too!”

The elves were all naturally beautiful, which was why slavers targeted them. I didn’t want to imagine where any gorgeous elves they captured might have ended up. But right now, the forest was protected by myself and the Swarm, and so the innocent elves didn’t need to fear capture.

It was a bit strange to think that an evil-aligned faction like the Arachnea was doing something good. Not that there was any need to fixate on one’s alignment, but the Swarm still had a craving for victory and a desire for domination. And if I were to fulfill it, I’d have to go to war, stain my hands red with blood, and receive the scorn and contempt of the rest of the world.

“You can have this too, Your Majesty!”

“What’s this?” I inspected what Lysa had given me. “Is this... a doll?”

It was indeed a doll made from straw and grass. It was coated with animal fur, and thus fluffy to the touch. And unlike a voodoo doll, it didn’t feel malevolent or menacing in the slightest.

“It’s a charm. I made it with Linnet so it keeps you safe, Your Majesty. Linnet and I have charms like this too.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you. I’m glad you feel that way,” I said, patting Lysa on the head.

True enough, similar dolls dangled from their belts.

Lysa and Linnet treated us with the most kindness out of everyone in the village, and despite us being an unfamiliar group of monsters, they graciously repaid their debt. It was a far cry from the slavers and the town of Leen, who treated the elves cruelly for no reason other than their natural-born race.

“Anyway, I’ve received mushrooms and a hot meal, so I suppose I shouldn’t impose on you any longer. You two be careful, all right? The poachers aren’t completely gone yet.”

After thanking the elves for their offerings, I made my way back to the Arachnea’s base. I had a lot left to do.

†

I loaded the meat from Leen into the Fertilization Furnace. I wasn’t intending to use this meat to produce Ripper Swarms, however. I already had plenty of those, enough to overrun a town if I wanted to. Instead, I had much bigger plans for this one.

“Knight Swarm,” I ordered the Fertilization Furnace, which squirmed in response.

A few moments later, a human hand reached out from the Furnace’s mouth.

“Aaahh.”

The creature that emerged was another type of Swarm, only this one had the upper half of a human and the lower half of an insectile Swarm. It had ruby-red eyes and white, braided hair that spilled over its back. The Knight Swarm’s upper half was covered in white armor, and it had a longsword sheathed at its waist.

It gave the immediate impression of a knight.

“At your service, Your Majesty.”

Having crawled its way out of the Fertilization Furnace, the spider-like knight knelt before me and reverently lowered its head.

“Raise your head, Knight Swarm Sérignan.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

This was the Knight Swarm Sérignan, a different unit from the Ripper Swarms. It was something called a hero unit. By gaining experience points, it was capable of becoming even more powerful, eventually growing into a one-man army that could topple the game’s balance.

That said, each faction could produce one hero unit, and only once; as such, the chosen unit had to be carefully raised and protected. Upping its experience points without it dying was a more formidable task than it seemed at first glance.

Like all of the factions’ hero units, the Knight Swarm Sérignan had its own backstory. This unit’s backstory was that it was a knight who had been

exiled for defending a pagan child, eventually coming under the protection of the Arachnea's queen.

Upon swearing allegiance to her, it became a Knight Swarm. Relinquishing the duty it once had to knighthood and institutions which perpetuated persecution, it resolved to become a proud knight in the service of the queen and her Swarm.

That was its backstory in the game, at least. Things might have been different in this reality, and there was already one stark difference.

“You’re a woman?”

I had always thought Sérignan was a man. At least, it always looked male when I saw its sprite on my computer screen. That said, my computer was pretty old, so I couldn’t play with very high graphics settings...

The Knight Swarm Sérignan standing before me had a certain androgynous beauty but a distinctly feminine face, and I could see that she had breasts under her armor. I had to wonder if she had always been a woman, and if so, how in the world had I mistaken her for a man?

“Aye, Your Majesty. I am female... Are you displeased?”

“Not at all. If anything, it’s better this way.”

We were going to work together from now on, so being a mature woman, I was more at ease working with another woman than with a man. Had Sérignan been a man, I would’ve had to be conscious and considerate of that fact when making decisions around or about him.

“All right then, Sérignan. Can you use your Mimesis skill to take human form?”

“Yes, for a short amount of time.”

Sérignan had a special ability called Mimesis, which allowed her to assume the shape of an ordinary human. She shared this ability with another type of Swarm, and they could use it to sneak behind enemy lines and cause a great deal of damage, assuming the enemy didn’t have units capable of seeing through the disguise.

“Can you try it, then?”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

At my request, Sérignan raised an animalistic howl, after which her spider-like lower half contracted and shrunk with dull clicks, morphing into human legs. For the sake of the disguise, her legs were already covered in long skirt armor.

Seriously, how did I think she was a guy?

Thinking back on it, I realized it was rather rude of me. I felt repentant.

“It is done. Is it now time for us to take revenge?”

“That’s right. First we need to find the enemy, and then we’ll wipe them out. We’re going to slaughter every last one of them.”

I could feel my will being swept away in the Swarm’s collective consciousness, but this time, I fully surrendered myself to it. Their

consciousness was now one with my own.

We will take revenge for our fallen Ripper Swarm. This was the raw force spurring me forward right now, and the hivemind purred with approval.

“Then this Knight Swarm Sérignan will accompany you wherever you go, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you. Let’s pay the town another visit, then.”

And so, I set my plan for revenge into motion.

†

I was once again in the town of Leen. Like before, I let the slavers’ leader handle the reins while Sérignan, a Ripper Swarm, and I sat in the carriage. We had come back to trade, but there was another important task at hand.

“Ooh! Did you come to sell more clothes? Thank goodness! The ones you sold me last time were so popular among the nobles that they’ve been *dying* to know when I’ll be getting more.”

The shopkeeper at the tailory gleefully accepted the Worker Swarms’ dresses. Apparently, he’d already sold all his previous stock to nobles and wealthy merchants, and the nobles who didn’t get them in time were clamoring for a restock. Despite being a bit bothersome, their demand understandably pleased the shopkeeper.

“So, same as last time, then? Thirty thousand floria?” the shopkeeper asked, intending to pay the full price.

“No. Twenty-five thousand... will do,” said the slaver. “Have something to ask... instead.”

He took out a scrap of cloth bearing a symbol—the same one I had taken from one of the ruffians who’d attacked him and killed the Ripper Swarm.

“Do you know... this symbol?” he asked.

“This is... Sorry, I don’t know. Take your trouble elsewhere, please.”

He seemed to recognize it, but he was being evasive, which made it clear he was hiding something. I had no doubt he knew the group the symbol belonged to, but whoever they were, this timid shopkeeper didn’t want to get involved with them.

“Shall I go choke the information out of him, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked.

“No, don’t.” I waved her offer away. “We don’t have to bring ourselves to force it out of him. He’s still an important source of income for us.”

This man was useful to us, since he converted the clothes the Worker Swarms made into money, and thus we couldn’t treat him carelessly. Prejudiced as he was toward the elves, we needed him right now. Therefore we would make use of him without creating any needless waves. If we were to question someone, it would have to be an individual unrelated to our needs.

“We’ll use our money to fish out an informant or two. I’m sure we’ll find

the source soon enough,” I declared, patiently waiting inside the carriage as it took off.

“Hey, you. Pull over.”

Just as I expected, we were cornered by a suspicious bunch after a few purposeful rounds of the seedier back alleys.

“Who... are you?”

“Huh? Forgettin’ about us so quick is a li’l insulting, don’tcha think? Don’t tell me ya also forgot about yer debt to the Lisitsa Familia!” said one of the men. The symbol of the armed group that had ambushed us the other day was proudly displayed on his chest.

There was no mistaking it; these men belonged to the same group that had attacked us. I hadn’t expected to find them this easily.

“Sérignan, get ready. We’re going to fight.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” She prepared to hop out of the wagon, and the Ripper Swarm braced itself as well.

“I hear ya put our bossman through hell the other day. Ready to pay the piper now? Don’t think we’ll be givin’ ya an easy death. We’ll squeeze every last coin outta ya and beat ya so hard you’ll be begging for us to put ya outta yer—”

The ruffian’s—rather, the Lisitsa Familia member’s words were cut off by the sight of Sérignan and the Ripper Swarm leaping out from the carriage and preparing for battle.

“Haaah!” Sérignan undid her Mimesis, exposing her Swarm half.

She swung her longsword, which slashed one of the Familia members across the throat. He crumpled to the ground, coughing up blood. Beside Sérignan, the Ripper Swarm fought on with vigor. With Sérignan at its back, this one was protected, freely cutting into six or seven enemies with its scythes and fangs.

“Huh?! What inna hell’re they? Where did these monsters—” The apparent commander of the Lisitsa Familia’s grunts froze up as Sérignan fixed her blade against his throat.

“Move and you die,” Sérignan said, eyeing him coldly. “Our queen has something to ask you, cur. You would be wise to answer. If you don’t, your life is forfeit.”

She turned her eyes to me.

“Hiya.” I approached him with a fake smile. “So you’re from the Lisitsa Familia, right? You attacked this carriage a while back, remember?”

“Who the hell are ya? We don’t have any beef with ya, we just want that slaver. Keep yer noses out of our business.”

It seemed he didn’t quite understand his position.

“Oh, this is our business, all right. Sérignan?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Sérignan stabbed her longsword into his body. There was no need for

verbal cues; the collective consciousness transmitted my orders to her directly.

“Ah, aaah, aaaah!” The Lisitsa Familia man uttered a series of pathetic screeches.

“I’ll ask again. Did your people attack a carriage that passed through here not long ago?”

“Yeah, yeah, it was us!!” At last, the thug fessed up. “The boss led some of our men, and they tried ransackin’ the thing! But they got hit back, so they ran off! The boss wanted payback, which is why we came after ya fer round two!”

He told us a great deal of things. Apparently their boss had upped their mansion’s security and gathered forces to strike back at us. He also put out a bounty on my slaver pet’s head. He kept on babbling, telling me things I hadn’t even asked about. Apparently, his loyalty to his boss only went so far.

“Is that all you know?”

“Th-That’s everything. So c’mon, please. I won’t tell anyone I met ya here, so just let me g—”

In a split second, Sérignan severed the man’s head.

“Good work, Sérignan.”

“I’m honored, Your Majesty.”

There was no point in keeping him alive once he had served his purpose. Had we let him live, I was sure he would have gone elsewhere and wagged his tongue, just as he had done for us.

“Let’s charge their mansion, then. I doubt stomping out a crime organization is going to weigh terribly on my conscience. I believe it’s time for a good old-fashioned slaughterfest.”

With that decided, I went back to the carriage with Sérignan and the Ripper Swarm. I was on the verge of committing a massacre, but I didn’t feel the slightest tinge of guilt. Those bastards had killed one of ours, and I couldn’t forgive them for it, even if the fallen Swarm’s consciousness lingered within the collective.

“Sérignan, Ripper Swarm. You are to slaughter everyone in that mansion. There’s no one worth leaving alive in there. Tear off their heads. Paint the walls red with their blood. That applies even if some of them happen to have green blood.”

“Understood. All will be as you order it, Your Majesty.”

As I order it, huh?

Before I became part of the collective consciousness, those orders certainly would have been mine. Back then, I also feared committing murder, as the guilt would likely have crushed me. Now, however, I was part of the Swarm, and the fire of their will had been lit within me. I felt no more guilt; I felt no more fear.

The only thing I had left to fear was the absence of those very human emotions.

We continued down the road until we eventually reached a large estate.

The Lisitsa Familia's roost was a garish place that reeked of ostentation and vulgar prosperity.

It was time to begin our raid.

Natural Bloodshed

The slavers' leader stopped the carriage in front of the Lisitsa Familia's estate. The Familia's members rushed toward us, incensed that we had pulled up to their base to start a fight.

"Hey, it's Moisei! Finally decided to pay up?!"

"You put our boss through a world'a hurt, didn'tcha, ya bastard?!"

One lowlife after another spilled out of the building, surrounding our carriage and its driver. I stilled my breath, watching things unfold.

"Come on down, Moisei! The boss sure as hell's got a bone to pick with you!"

Just as the men reached out for my slaver-puppet, Sérignan and the Ripper Swarm made their move. Sérignan's longsword severed the men's heads, while the Ripper Swarm used its fangs and scythes to shred them to bits. It all ended in the blink of an eye.

"It is done, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Sérignan, and you too, Ripper Swarm." I disembarked the carriage.

"All right, let's barge in and wipe them out. We need to take revenge for the one we've lost."

With that, I had the slavers' leader open the gate leading to the estate. Sérignan and the Ripper Swarm went in first, and I followed behind.

The time of our retribution was upon them.

Let us spill blood and rend flesh the way only the Swarm know how.

†

"Intruders! We've got intruders!"

The alarm sounded by one of the Lisitsa Familia members was cut short with one swift swing of the Ripper Swarm's scythe. Taking the blow to his brain, the man twitched a few times before collapsing on the floor, a pool of blood oozing out from under him.

Another man who witnessed this shouted, "Dammit! Those freaking monsters are attacking us! Everybody kill 'em before they can take another step!"

Multiple men with short bows and longswords in hand came out of the woodwork and surrounded us.

"Can we break through, Sérignan?" I asked.

"It is possible. But it will put you in danger, Your Majesty." Sérignan

sounded slightly concerned.

“Let’s call for reinforcements, then,” I said, and gave a slight wave of the hand.

As if in response to that small gesture, massive fangs burst out of the floor, digging into a longsword-wielding Familia member who was advancing toward us. His body was bisected, and both halves of his corpse tumbled to the ground.

Digger Swarms.

I’d had them wait safely outside the walls of Leen, then summoned them here in a flash. The Digger Swarms bypassed the walls by burrowing underground, resurfacing beneath the Familia members who had charged us.

This was how you used the Digger Swarms effectively. They were perfect for surprise attacks, as they could pop out at the most unexpected place and time. Digger Swarms flourished in the place where enemies were least cautious —the very ground they stood on.

I had used Digger Swarms in the past to topple highly fortified bases within seconds, so a crime syndicate’s estate was a piece of cake in comparison. As a combined force, the Arachnea and I were more than capable of destroying this extravagant criminal hub.

“Do the prospects look better now?” I asked.

“Yes. Leave everything to us, Your Majesty,” Sérignan answered with a grin. “Being under your command is truly a pleasure. You even planned for a situation like this.”

I felt a bit embarrassed by her praise.

Oblivious to my moment of bashfulness, Sérignan used her insectile legs to leap upward. She landed with a loud *clack* on the mezzanine to cut down the Familia archers stationed there. Despite the fact that I was bearing witness to what was, without a doubt, the sight of my fellow humans being massacred, it came across as somehow beautiful and magnificent. Radiant, even.

I watched, entranced, as Sérignan cleaved through the thugs, blood droplets dancing through the air. The scene was altogether stunning: her half-human form wielding the sword with skill and grace, the blade itself trailing through the air, and the flowers of blood blooming across the room.

It was all so removed from reality that I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

“Your Majesty!” the Ripper Swarm called out as I watched Sérignan fight. It jumped ahead of me, deflecting an arrow with a swipe of its sharp tail.

“Thank you, Ripper Swarm.”

“There is no need for thanks. But you must be cautious, Your Majesty. Watching active slaughter too closely can be dangerous.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful.”

Even as it spoke to me, the Ripper Swarm deflected more attacks coming my way. It might have been an early-game unit, but it still proved to be extremely dependable. I could tell I was growing even more attached to this adorable insect that contributed to my victory.

“What is this?! What’s going on here?!”

While the Familia members fought Sérignan and the Ripper and Digger Swarms, a certain individual burst out onto the scene.

“It’s him.”

The Lisitsa Familia’s boss—who seemed to be the same man who’d ordered the attack on our carriage—had finally made it to the party.

“Who inna hell are ya?! Where did these monsters come from?!” he hollered.

“I don’t answer to you,” I said, then pointed his way. “Take him alive.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.” At my command, the Ripper Swarm stepped forward.

“I will protect you.” Sérignan moved to stand in front of me.

The archers were mostly butchered, but there was no telling when an attack might come, so I was grateful to have Sérignan there to defend me. It felt reassuring, like I had my very own knight. *Well, Sérignan technically is a knight...*

“Erm, technically, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, sorry. I mean, you’re a splendid, worthy knight.”

Apparently my thoughts had been transmitted to her through the collective consciousness. Being linked to a hivemind had its disadvantages, as it turned out. Namely, not being able to inner-monologue in peace.

“Stay back! Listen up, boys! Waste these freakin’ monsters!” the Lisitsa Familia’s boss cried. “Anyone who gets a kill gets a fat prize!”

More men poured out from the depths of the mansion, wielding halberds and longswords. They rushed at the Ripper Swarm, but Digger Swarms burst out from under the broken floorboards, latching onto the assailants and dragging them underground.

The other Familia members froze up at the sight of the underground threat, quivering with fright. Things were far from over, however. We wouldn’t rest until we had wiped them all out and forced the head of the snake to submit.

“Think you can make it, Ripper Swarm?”

“It won’t be a problem, Your Majesty.”

The Ripper Swarm pounced on the enemies that had been stunned by the Digger Swarms’ attacks. It ripped, tore, bit, and stabbed into them in just about every way imaginable. Every single one of its victims was delivered to death’s door.

It was bloody tragedy, in the most simple, literal meaning of those words.

The Lisitsa Familia’s once-glamorous mansion was filled with holes because of the Digger Swarms. Sérignan’s and the Ripper Swarm’s attacks had dyed the walls and floors a deep red. Corpses lay scattered all around the room.

Even as I observed the casualties, I felt nothing. Corpses were par for the course on the battlefield, and it was only natural for them to bleed. Bodies only stayed clean in video games. No, even in video games, corpses were grotesque.

Carnage begat gore and bloodshed; that much was obvious.

“Hello?! Anybody there?! Somebody, please, come out an’ kill those monsters! Hurry up already!”

The Lisitsa Familia’s boss screamed for help, but by now, all his men had either died or fled the mansion. Cry as he might, no one would come to his aid. His fate was already sealed.

“Capture him alive, Ripper Swarm,” I ordered once again.

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

The Ripper Swarm’s venomous stinger glinted in the light.

“No! Don’t! Stay back! Stay—” The Ripper Swarm’s stinger stabbed into the man despite his desperate shrieking. “Aaaah, guh!”

As the venom pumped into his veins, the boss frothed at the mouth and fell over, losing consciousness. His body thrashed and writhed on the floor. The Ripper Swarm’s venom wasn’t lethal or even damaging, but it did stun the opponent for a time. It was a pretty weak paralysis effect, but more than enough to knock out the boss.

“Sérignan, tie him up.”

“As you wish.”

At my order, Sérignan enveloped the boss in what looked like spider’s threads and tied him up.

“Sérignan, Ripper Swarm, look through the mansion for survivors. Stick together so you can cover one another if necessary. Just to be on the safe side.”

“By your will.”

I couldn’t afford to lose Sérignan, who had gotten even stronger during her time here at the mansion, and I had grown so attached to the Ripper Swarms that even a single unit’s death enraged me. I couldn’t care less about my enemies dying in droves, but I would not stand for a single injury inflicted upon one of my allies.

I’m sure that makes me selfish. But isn’t that just how people work?

“All right, we’ve really let loose and caused a riot here, so let’s go before any of the neighbors notice us and start panicking. I’ll make sure things quiet down soon enough, though,” I said, taking a Parasite Swarm out of my pocket. I looked down coolly at the Lisitsa Familia’s boss, paralyzed at my feet, and then stuffed the Parasite Swarm into his mouth.

†

Leen’s police—or rather, Leen’s knights soon discovered the massacre at the Lisitsa Familia’s estate. Dozens of the Familia’s members were found dead, their corpses mutilated beyond recognition. Many of the knights vomited at the gruesome sight.

The culprit for the case was found almost immediately: he was the boss of the Lisitsa Familia. He was found sitting at the mansion’s doorstep, a bloodied

sword in hand, and he readily admitted that everything had been his doing. Based on this confession, the knights arrested the man, charging him with numerous counts of murder, and sentenced him to death by hanging.

The corpses were left as they were and then cremated. But there was something unusual about them no one noticed at first: the number of corpses was less than the amount of Familia members. The knights concluded that some of them must have conspired to commit the murders, then fled after the fact. As such, they decided to try and track them down.

Not that their search would bear fruit, of course.

“Let’s load up the corpses, then. We’ve got quite a few, so we’re going to be growing in numbers today.”

I stuffed the corpses of the “missing” Familia members—who had been killed on my orders and then carried off in the mouths of the Digger Swarms—into the Fertilization Furnace.

“What will you produce today, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked as she heaved the corpses into the furnace.

“Right. I think I’ll just make more Ripper Swarms. It might be time to carry out a rush,” I answered.

There was probably a simpler way of loading the corpses into the furnace, but for the time being, this would do.

I already had a significant number of Ripper Swarms, but not enough for a rush. Having become the Arachnea’s queen, I had promised to lead them to victory, and so I had to keep my mind fixed on that victory.

But the conditions for said victory, as well as the enemies I would have to beat in order to claim it, were still as unclear to me as ever. Thus far, we had only battled against slavers, poachers, and a single crime syndicate. There was no country or faction for us to defeat yet.

Just who is our opponent? We were still carrying out the important task of scouting our surroundings, the Ripper Swarms having spread out all over in search of information. The Digger Swarms were also traveling underground, listening carefully to conversations in towns and settlements.

It was thanks to their efforts that I learned of the Kingdom of Maluk, situated directly to the west. I didn’t know what alignment they belonged to, but I did make out that they were a fairly large nation nearby.

To the east was another nation, the Frantz Popedom, which was a tolerant, religious country that didn’t offer up any sacrifices. In other words, it was likely a good-aligned faction. Seeing as the Arachnea was an evil-aligned faction, it meant that we might eventually have to face them.

I knew nothing about who or what was to the north and south. There were apparently nations there, but I knew neither their names nor their cultures. To begin with, it was borderline impossible for the Ripper Swarms to pick up much about other cultures during their exploration. Any people who saw them would consider them monsters and attack them immediately.

Being a grotesque faction came with its share of drawbacks. If I could just unlock some newer, higher-tier units, I could produce Swarms that could naturally mingle with townsfolk in order to gather intel. Unfortunately, I needed far more resources for that.

From what I could tell from the slavers' maps, our base and the elves' forest were in the center of the continent. This knowledge was pretty discouraging, since it meant we were inherently in a disadvantageous position, surrounded by possible enemies in all directions.

“What should we do next, I wonder?”

We had no clear enemy to fight and no apparent win condition, so for the time being, I built up my forces in preparation for an attack.

However, as I would soon find out, the enemy was going to come to us first.

The Elf Village's Tragedy

Six months had passed since we started trading with Baumfetter in exchange for their security. The number of slavers and poachers had diminished considerably. Apparently, they had realized this was a forest of death. But that meant we were gradually losing a source of precious meat.

Still, my force of Ripper Swarms had grown to numbers that made attacking another country possible. Had this been the game, I would have been ready to rush an enemy base right about now. Except I had no idea who I was supposed to attack in this world. Thousands of Ripper Swarms were an excessive force if all I was up against was groups of poachers.

Now that things had calmed down, I only had five or six Ripper Swarms patrolling Baumfetter, and that was more than enough to handle any slavers harassing the elves. Deploying a larger number for no reason would simply frighten the denizens of the village, and it ran the risk of my Swarms being spotted by benevolent humans who did their work in the forest.

“It’s so peaceful.”

Despite being part of a dangerous, aggressive race like the Arachnea, I enjoyed peace. The stew the people of Baumfetter served me was always tasty, and through selling the Worker Swarms’ dresses, I could obtain meat. That said, the demand for the dresses was gradually decreasing because of the excessive supply.

“Your Majesty, shouldn’t we go on the offensive?” Sérignan asked me.

“Who would we attack, though?” I asked back.

“Hmm. Let us attack the town of Leen. In doing so, we would obtain all that they have. We would do well to work on our research.”

In the game, research unlocked new units and structures. Research required gold and souls, though different types of research required different amounts and varieties of resources. Developing new units required souls, while new structures required gold. Some factions were exceptions, though; those who used golems needed gold to unlock those units, and ghost-type factions used souls to unlock their structures.

We had gained quite a healthy stock of souls, which allowed us to unlock newer units, but we hadn’t yet gotten around to unlocking structures.

“I just don’t like the idea of attacking Leen for no reason. We’re using them for trade, so they’ve been useful to us.”

We used Leen to cash in the Worker Swarms’ dresses and periodically stock up on meat. I didn’t know where we’d go to trade those things if we razed Leen to the ground.

“Once we destroy Leen, we can assail the Kingdom of Maluk. That would settle all our problems, for we would obtain meat, souls, and gold.”

What Sérgnan was suggesting might have been ruthless, but it was logical nonetheless. The Arachnea wasn’t a faction that employed trade. It thrived on pillaging, pillaging, and more pillaging until there was nothing left to take. In making the Arachnea dependent on trade, I was using it in a way it was never meant to be used.

A true Arachnea player was as merciless as possible, unflinchingly wiping out the enemy and using their flesh and souls to further fuel her unholy crusade.

“You’re right. We should consider a plunder economy.”

As the Queen of the Arachnea, I had promised to lead them to victory. Hiding in the comfort of our tunnels and hunting stragglers down like we were fairy-tale forest monsters wasn’t becoming of us, and it didn’t bring us any closer to fulfilling our aspirations.

If we wanted to win, we would have to stain our hands with blood.

“*Your Majesty.*” A voice suddenly called for me from the collective consciousness.

“What is it?”

“*We’ve detected a large force marching toward Baumfetter. They are not poachers or slavers. It’s a well-armed, highly trained force. What should we do?*”

“What...? Do you mean an army?”

An army indeed, but from where?

“*They carry what appears to be the banner of the Kingdom of Maluk,*” the Ripper Swarm scout replied. “*They will reach Baumfetter shortly. Your orders, Your Majesty?*”

“Intercept them for as long as you can.”

“*Acknowledged.*”

That Ripper Swarm would likely die. A single Ripper Swarm was no match for an organized army, and even if we hurried, we wouldn’t make it to Baumfetter in time.

“At least now we have pretense to open hostilities.”

The Swarm’s spirit is definitely alive within me.

†

“Humans! Humans are coming!”

“They’re knights, not poachers or slavers!”

Knights were marching into Baumfetter from all directions. Their plate armor and shields deflected the elves’ arrows.

“Look! The Arachnea queen’s servants are here!”

Just as the situation in Baumfetter was turning critical, two Ripper Swarms rushed into the fray, engaging the knights in battle. Their scythes penetrated the

shields and armor, cutting into the knights' flesh and spilling their blood.

“Ooh!”

However, the knights barely flinched at the Swarms' attacks. One knight drove his sword into a Ripper Swarm that had crunched down on his arm, causing it to fly off and curl up as it entered its death throes. He then had another knight—an apparent sorcerer—heal his wounds.

“Damned monsters!” the knight spat before resuming his march. “The rumors were true. There really is a witch here.”

“Go, go, go! Destroy the heretics' roost!”

Cavaliers appeared from the forest, stabbing the elven archers with lances. The infantry also moved forward, standing in a line as they shot a flurry of flaming arrows into the elven village. Screams rose from the settlement as elves fled the buildings and houses that had caught fire. They were non-combatants: women, children, the sick, and the elderly.

The elves who could fight aimed their arrows at the gaps in the knights' helmets, but young Linnet wasn't capable of such a feat. He simply fired arrows at random, just barely keeping the knights' progress at bay. It wouldn't have been a surprise if he were suddenly told to run.

“Linnet!”

“Lysa?! What are you doing here?!”

Linnet was fighting desperately to protect the elder's house when Lysa ran over to him.

“The fire is everywhere! Linnet, we have to run!” Lysa begged him, struggling to catch her breath. “If we go where the trees are thickest, their horses won't be able to follow us!”

“But I have to protect the village!” Linnet violently shook his head. “If we abandon this place, where will we go? Besides, it's not just these knights in the forest! There are dangerous monsters out there too!”

“But if we stay here, they'll kill us!”

“You might be right, but we have to try!”

Linnet wanted to protect his village, while Lysa wanted him to be safe. The chances of either of their wishes coming true were decidedly slim. The elves were being completely overwhelmed by the knights. Walls of flame blocked their escape routes, and the infantry were gradually surrounding them. The cavalry were galloping through the village, hungrily seeking new victims.

“Gah!”

Another elf fell, tumbling to the ground as one of the soldiers fired an arrow right through him. The enemy's archers may have been inferior to the elves, but they were skilled enough to hit their targets' vitals with deadly accuracy.

“Urgh...”

“Azlet's down too! Can you still fight?”

Only three elves capable of fighting remained, Linnet included.

“Slaughter the long-eared heretics! Charge!”

Another group of heavily-armed knights charged them, intending to finish off the few elves that could still fight and then kill the ones hiding in the elder’s house.

“Dammit all! Is this really the end?!?”

Linnet’s life had been saved once before. He had managed to escape the clutches of slavers. And yet now his hometown was being put to the torch, his friends and loved ones slaughtered before his eyes. *Why does such a terrible thing have to happen? Does God really not exist in this world?*

But just as that thought crossed Linnet’s mind...

“That’s enough.” A woman’s dignified voice echoed throughout the burning village.

“What the...?”

“A girl?”

The soldiers turned around suspiciously, their eyes falling on a single girl clad in a beautiful dress. Her black hair fluttered around her like a dark halo, boldly contrasting with the surging flames behind her.

“An ally of the elves?”

“Looks like it. Archers!”

The knights aimed their arrows at the girl and fired at once. The arrows zoomed through the air, whistling as they cut through the wind on their way toward the girl’s chest... only they never met their mark.

“You shan’t lay a hand on Her Majesty. On my honor as a knight, I will never allow it.”

The arrows flying toward the girl—the Arachnea’s queen—were flicked out of the air by Sérignan’s sword. She stepped forward, her Swarm half on full display, and stood before the queen to guard her.

“Another monster!”

“Kill them! In the name of the God of Light!”

The knights turned the tips of their blades away from the elves and in the direction of the Arachnea’s queen.

“Too naive. You’re pathetic,” the queen said, her lips curling upward in a sneer. “You thought you could beat me with those numbers?”

She cleared her throat, and declared in a resonant voice:

“Tear them to bits, my servants.”

Not a moment later, Ripper Swarms exploded from the trees. But it wasn’t just a handful of them. Tens of thousands of Ripper Swarms spilled out of the forest. The ones who had remained in the tunnels until now. The ones made from feasting on the flesh they bought from Leen, from the poachers’ and slavers’ corpses, from the bodies of the Lisitsa Familia. The never-ending banquet of flesh had compounded their numbers. Clicking their jaws menacingly, they surrounded the knights.

“Know the strength and terror of the Arachnea,” said the queen.

And with that as their signal, the Ripper Swarms surged forward.

“Blast, where did they get these numbers?!”

“Cavalry! Cover for us!”

Faced with an army of Ripper Swarms large enough to cover the whole area, the knights were in a state of panic. Surrounded on all sides, they huddled together in a defensive formation in an attempt to push them back.

For the Ripper Swarms, however, these men were but spoils to be plundered.

The cavalry that had oppressively circled the village were the first to fall. Each cavalier was engaged by three or four Ripper Swarms that bit into their limbs and dragged them down from the horses. The men’s bodies were stabbed with scythes, their throats penetrated by fangs. Those who died on the spot were fortunate. Those who were unlucky enough to avoid fatal blows were dissected alive by the Swarm.

“Form a circle! Hurry up!” shouted a man who looked to be the knights’ leader. “The Knights of Saint Augustine will not fall prey to such beasts!”

“Captain! We must summon the Angel! If we don’t, we’ll be wiped out!” one of the subordinate knights cried ominously.

“Ngh... I can’t believe we have to summon the Angel for something like this!” The captain clenched his jaw in frustration, but then quickly started chanting, “Servant of the God of Light who resides in the heavens, I beseech you to descend before us, Angel Agaphiel!”

Once he finished his chant, an angel descended onto the village. She was a majestic girl with white wings and clad in a white fluttering robe—truly worthy of being called an angel. She descended from the heavens and landed lightly on the ground, her eyes closed. Her face bore a cold, mask-like expression.

“*Children of man. Do you seek salvation?*” the angel’s voice echoed in the minds of everyone present.

“We seek salvation. We beg of you, put these vile monsters to death!” the captain exclaimed.

“*Very well. They are without a doubt beings of a malevolent nature. Incarnations of evil that stand in offense of all that is good.*”

With that, the angel lifted one hand, unleashing a blast of blinding light. The Ripper Swarms hit by the blast evaporated without a trace. The remaining Ripper Swarms unflinchingly continued their assault on the circle of knights, but Agaphiel continued to vaporize them. At this rate, they’d be wiped out, no matter how many of them there were.

The angel Agaphiel. A servant of the God of Light worshipped by these knights, able to manipulate light as a subject of faith. The knights’ guardian angel was exceptionally suited for battle.

Her appearance made it clear that the holy knights of the Kingdom of Maluk made use of these sorts of units. They protected the Kingdom from invasion by neighboring countries and enabled it to rule over this region in a

sort of hegemony.

No matter how well-armed a country's soldiers might have been, no matter how great their strongholds, they were all too brittle to withstand an attack from an angel like Agaphiel. In this world, angels were a symbol of power that could not be opposed.

Until now, that is.

"Oh, they've got an annoying one on their side," said the Arachnea's queen. "Sérgnan, can you handle her?"

"Leave it to me, Your Majesty," Sérgnan answered with a smile.

It was a smile of one confident in her victory. A savage, delighted smile.

"Come at me, you pitiful flies. I shall carve the weight of your helplessness into your flesh as I cut you down."

As Sérgnan said that, she was charged by all the knights at once. Sérgnan leapt toward Agaphiel, who held up a hand to shoot her down, but twisted her body in midair to avoid the attack. Another blast of light came her way, which Sérgnan avoided by firing a string to reel herself back toward a tree, and then kicked against it to continue her assault on Agaphiel.

And then Agaphiel entered the range of Sérgnan's sword.

"Haaah!" Sérgnan swung her crimson sword, slashing into Agaphiel. But it was no mere laceration.

She severed Agaphiel's head completely.

"Aaagh..."

The angel did not bleed, but instead burst into particles of light, which soon disappeared.

"What...?"

The match was decided in the blink of an eye, leaving the knights aghast.

A moment. A moment was all it took.

The angel, their symbol of absolute power, had been cut down and destroyed with a single sweep of the blade. The only forces able to defeat angels were other angels, or an army tens of thousands of times larger than the angel's.

But the insectile knight before them had cut the angel down, overwhelming this indomitable icon of strength with mere swordplay.

They shivered in unison. The angel who once struck terror into the hearts of all who saw her had been taken down with a single blow.

"The way you cut down the angel was lovely, Sérgnan," the queen said, visibly impressed.

"My blade is a sacred sword, meant to cut through the holy powers held by corrupt paladins." Sérgnan had a hint of pride in her voice. "If an opponent tries to do Your Majesty harm, be they angel or god, your knight will cut them down."

"Let's mop up the rest of them, then." The queen turned her gaze to the knights, who shuddered in fright.

“I can’t believe it... Agaphiel...”

“We’re done for...”

The realization had sunk in that they were no longer hunters—they were now prey.

“Ripper Swarms. Leave no one alive.”

At the queen’s order, the Ripper Swarms moved in as one, tightening their circle around the knights. Each knight was attacked by anywhere between four to seven Ripper Swarms, leaving them with no hope of survival.

Heads were lopped off. Hearts were pierced through armor. Limbs were torn from trunks and torsos. One by one, the knights died in gruesome fashion. Rushing at them in waves, the Ripper Swarms tore their enemies apart, leaving only a mountain of corpses in their wake.

“Good work.” Once it was all over, the Arachnea’s queen bid the Ripper Swarms to carry the corpses off. Naturally, these would go on to become materials for new Swarms.

“Now, let’s hear what happened. I’m pretty pissed right now, I must say,” the queen huffed as she made her way to the elder’s house.

†

“It’s all right now. I’ve wiped out the enemy,” I said, stepping into the elder’s house.

“Oh... All right,” said one of the few remaining elven warriors. They all seemed bewildered. “That was some incredible power. The Knights of Saint Augustine are some of the finest warriors on the continent, yet you defeated them all.”

“Someone, please help! Linnet was shot!”

Not a moment after I had announced my victory, Lysa raised her voice, asking for help. Linnet had been shot by one of those wretched knights’ archers... and through the chest, at that. He was just barely breathing, and bloody froth was erupting from his mouth whenever he sputtered. At this rate, it didn’t seem as though there was any hope of saving him. He was going to die.

“Lysa, it’s too late,” someone murmured. “There’s no saving him.”

“No! Why...? Why?!”

“Ly...sa...”

“Linnet! Please, hang on!” Lysa begged him even as he gasped for air.

“Live on... and be happy...”

“Linnet, Wait! Linnet! Don’t go!”

There was nothing to be done, and I found it absolutely infuriating. An angel had answered the knights’ call, but no one heeded Lysa’s desperate cries.

And just like that, Linnet passed on.

The doll dangling from Linnet’s belt was stained red with blood. As it

turned out, the charm had done nothing to save him.

I was beside myself with anger. How was it that the accursed angel had been permitted to exist, and yet this charm couldn't save a single child?

There was no mincing words, here; I was pissed. *Angels? Knights? As if. They're murderers, and no less monstrous than the Arachnea. It's Linnet who deserved God's grace here.*

“You were so brave, Linnet,” I whispered to his still form. “I don’t know if we would’ve made it in time if it hadn’t been for you. You were a true warrior, and may you rest in peace.”

Those were my true feelings, as honest as my fury. I had saved Linnet once, and he’d been kind and friendly to me since. Sure, he’d had his initial doubts and apprehensions about me, and he had tried to put up a tough front. But at his core, he was a kind and gentle boy. A boy whose life had been taken far too soon by a band of thugs masquerading as knights.

Lysa wept at his side. She had loved Linnet, but that flicker of innocent love had been mercilessly, tragically stomped out. Watching her bury her face into Linnet’s body and cry broke my heart.

At the same time, my heart harbored a little relief among the waves of sorrow. The grief and anger I was feeling served as proof that my humanity had not yet been completely swallowed up by the Swarm’s collective consciousness. I understood full well that if it had, these precious emotions would be absent and unfelt.

“I’d like to speak to the elder. Is he still alive?”

“Yes, he’s fine. He should be further in.”

The elven soldiers moved to clear a way for Sérignan and me. I walked on with a heavy heart.

“It’s the Arachnea’s queen!”

It seemed that many of the elves had taken cover in the elder’s home. Some of them were injured and some were unharmed, but they were all terrified by the attack they had experienced. The children were all nestled tight against their parents.

“I wiped out the knights outside. It should be safe now,” I said lightly.

The old elf was baffled. “Truly?! You defeated those knights? Unbelievable...”

“You can take a look outside if you’re worried. There shouldn’t be anyone left out there.”

“No, I have no doubt that what you say is true.” He shook his head.

“You’ve done much for our village already.”

“Do you know why they attacked you?”

“The poachers and slavers likely reported us to the knights, telling them we attack humans. I’m certain it was in retaliation for keeping them out of the forest.”

Personally, I felt that any death of a poacher or slaver was simply payment

for their own mistakes. Yet those miscreants had gone off crying to the knights in order to get revenge on the elves. *The sniveling cowards.*

“And the knights believed their report?”

“Humans have always been suspicious of elves. They spread rumors that we abduct and eat humans, or skin them alive.”

So that was why the elves refused to set foot in human settlements. If they did, they’d be condemned as barbarians and lynched by the humans living there. I first felt it when I dealt with Leen’s tailor, but the humans of this world truly had harsh prejudice toward the elves. It didn’t seem very civilized to me. Ironically, I felt that the people who regarded elves as suspicious barbarians were the truly barbaric ones.

“I understand what happened now. It would appear that I’m partially responsible for what happened here today.” I heaved a sigh.

“It is not your fault. You’ve protected us from the slavers and poachers thus far, and we cannot blame you for that. No one faults the walls when a town is sieged, you know.”

“I see. That does make me feel a bit better.”

Deep down, however, I still felt responsible, and my mood was pitch-black. True enough, people *didn’t* blame a town’s walls when it was attacked; everyone had the right to defend themselves. But that was why I was so bitter about our failure to protect the elves and the scum who had gone and tattled on us.

Additionally, I wondered if maybe I had been *too* effective at providing defenses for the elven village. All walls really do is stand tall and block the way. They don’t have the faces of nightmarish horrors, or fangs to bite people to death.

Was I really a mere wall in this situation? Or was I ruling over the forest like a storybook monster, baiting the knights to come dispose of me and my minions? The guilt bubbled up inside me, but the collective consciousness denied it.

Was I responsible for this or not? I couldn’t tell.

“You are not at fault here, Your Majesty,” Sérgnan said, likely sensing my frustration and anxiety through the collective. “The responsibility falls solely on the slavers and poachers who attacked this forest and the knights who burned down the village at their behest. You acted merely to defend the elves; there is no room for doubt on that.”

“Thank you, Sérgnan. That really helps.”

You really are a dependable knight. Right now, your kindness is my saving grace.

“So what will you do now?” I asked the elder.

“We can no longer live here in Baumfetter. Once the knights realize their comrades won’t be returning, they will send an even larger force. I believe we will have to flee somewhere else.”

“I see. Do you have any idea where you might go?” I was worried about them. “Is there any place in this forest where you can live in peace?”

“Truth be told, I don’t know,” the elf said weakly. “The forest is too vast and dangerous. Wild beasts and monsters prowl the forest depths, and sadly it is those places where the forest is most bountiful.”

That much was natural, since the forest was an undeveloped region. There was no way of knowing where beasts lived or what parts were habitable without wandering through the woods. It wouldn’t be easy for Baumfetter’s survivors to find a new home. Perhaps their fate was to scatter as refugees... but I wasn’t coldhearted or foolish enough to stand by and let that happen.

“Then I have just the solution,” I declared. “A plan that will ensure a life free of pursuit and persecution for each and every one of you, *permanently*. A way to get revenge for the elves who were murdered here today, and for you to remain here so you can rebuild your homes.”

“Does such a way truly exist?” His deeply wrinkled eyes widened with hope.

“Yes. It’s simple, really, and I can do it.” My lips curled up in a grin so wide that my teeth were bared. “All I have to do is destroy the Kingdom of Maluk, who sent the knights to attack you. Easy enough to understand, right?”

The surviving elves could only swallow nervously as they watched me. Their expressions told me that they couldn’t even imagine what was to come. But I had already made my decision.

I will raze the Kingdom of Maluk to the ground.

Until nothing but rubble remains.

†

“Everyone, listen up.”

I stood on the stone platform I had found myself on when I first awoke inside the Arachnea’s base. Sérgnan was at my side, and the platform was surrounded by all my tens of thousands of Swarms.

“The time for war has finally come. The name of our enemy is the Kingdom of Maluk. These scoundrels attacked our allies, nearly wiping them all out.”

My voice was quiet, but filled with intensity.

“Their butchery took the life of a friend of mine, and plunged my other friend’s heart into despair. These cowards deserve no mercy. No pity. No forgiveness.

“They will receive no kindness from us. When we face these dogs, we need only three weapons: bloodlust, hatred, and contempt. Our bloodlust will devour them. Our hatred will rend them asunder. Our contempt will secure their fates. You are to consume and destroy the enemy. *Kill them all.*”

The Swarm silently listened to my speech.

“This is a massacre. Every bit of their flesh will become material from which we weave new comrades. The more you kill, the stronger an empire the Arachnea will become. So slaughter, murder, and dispose of them to your hearts’ content, even if they are infants or elders. Just as the enemy has.”

It was not mass murder; it was extermination. I had decided to wipe the Kingdom of Maluk off the face of this world. Was it because the elves had been attacked? Because of Linnet’s wrongful death? Or was my consciousness finally being absorbed by the Swarm, which had an innate, never-ending hunger for prey?

My will or the Swarm’s, it didn’t really matter. Either way, I intended to carry it out.

“In the name of the Arachnea, I will lead you to victory!” I cried, rallying my forces.

“Glory to the Arachnea! All hail the queen!”

“Glory to the Arachnea! All hail the queen!”

The Swarm cheered, celebrating the coming of the war they’d been waiting for. At last, they had the chance to slay, devour, and coat the world in the dark carapace of their race. All other races were the enemy, prey to be gobbled up in their blood-stained jaws. Such were the Arachnea. Such was the Swarm.

I was about to commit genocide and compound our propagation, all to satisfy my need for retribution. *Yes... As the Swarm should.*

“We will obey your orders and attack the Kingdom of Maluk. Under your command, Your Majesty, we will surely succeed. All hail the queen!” Sérgnan said, her voice rich with praise.

“Now then, my minions,” I continued. “It’s time for war. You’ve all waited a long time for this, but now your wish will finally come true. Wield your power as ruthlessly as you like. Let the rumbling of our march strike terror into their hearts. May the sound of your gnashing fangs disturb their slumber. Let your shadows reduce them to a cowering mess.”

With that, I accepted the Swarms’ gestures of fealty and retired to my room with Sérgnan.

My personal quarters had become a lot more comfortable and hospitable since I first arrived. My bed now had soft covers instead of straw, and I had drawers and shelves for storing my personal effects. It still wasn’t quite a match for my apartment back in the old world, since it lacked a computer and heating system, but hey, it was home in its own way.

“Sérgnan, I’ve already decided on our invasion route. It was the first step in my plan.”

“Yes, I am aware, Your Majesty. Ever since you came to this land, you’ve been striving for the Arachnea’s victory.”

Sérgnan had already learned everything through the collective consciousness, which made this quick.

“There are three main roads leading to their capital: a direct path from the town of Leen, a path from the southern farmlands, and a path through the northern mining regions. We’ll split our forces up along those three routes, consolidate them near the capital, and then go in for the kill.”

My proposed war plan split the Swarm up across three routes. Our primary objective was to destroy the Kingdom’s capital, but that alone wasn’t enough. We were going to decimate everything that made up the Kingdom of Maluk, and eradicate anyone who stood in our path.

Such was the law of the Swarm.

The mines, the farmlands, the villages, the towns—we would dye it all red with the blood of their people, leaving the land vacant and deserted. This fight was unlike anything I had experienced in the game, but I still intended to fight according to its rules.

If I were to carelessly leave behind survivors, the possibility existed that someone might one day rise up against me in revenge. Yes, I would have to be thorough in my conquest. That much was true both in the game world and in this reality.

“We’ll topple each town with a mix of Ripper and Digger Swarms. This traditional Ripper Swarm rush will clear our way forward. It won’t be easy because they already have dedicated defenses, but the Digger Swarms should be able to take care of that. With their help, we’ll break through whatever defends their walls.”

For the time being, there was no way of knowing just how much “game time” had passed since the start of the “match,” but Maluk’s towns were surrounded by walls, which were in turn garrisoned by knights and militia. It was safe to assume the enemies’ defenses were sound.

But my side had a secret weapon that could break through anything they had. And that was none other than yours truly.

As a player, I had pulled off Ripper Swarm rushes under difficult conditions many times over.

I’ve done it before, and I can do it now, I thought to myself.

“Sérignan, you come with me. I’m going to have you fight on the front lines and stock up on experience points. You’re a unit with high growth potential, and I have high hopes for you.”

“I am grateful for your praise. This Knight Swarm Sérignan will do her best to answer your expectations, Your Majesty.” For a moment, I thought my words would bring her to tears, but then it seemed like she had something to add. “Erm, if I may consult you about something... My body is rather hot, and it feels like something is itching to burst out of my chest. What could this be?”

“Your body feels hot?”

Puzzled by her words, I placed a hand on Sérignan’s forehead. She did feel hot, but wasn’t as though Swarms could catch colds. They were a species resistant to disease.

“Maybe you’re going to evolve soon. You did defeat that angel, so it’s possible that earned you a lot of experience points.”

“Evolve, Your Majesty?” Sérignan echoed with a vacant expression.

It was a bit cute.

“Don’t you know what evolving is? Well, no matter. It feels like something is changing inside you, doesn’t it? The Knight Swarm’s evolved form is called the Bloody Knight Swarm. Imagine yourself clad in red armor; that’ll be your new form.”

The Bloody Knight Swarm was Sérignan’s next step in her evolution. Her body would change, and she would gain armor as bright and red as freshly shed blood.

“Red armor... Red armor...”

Sérignan reflected on my words, gripping her head in a desperate attempt to imagine her evolved form. Actually, scratch what I said earlier—it was *really* cute.

“Oh, all right! I think I’ve got it! I can see it!” Sérignan exclaimed after some time. “No, I think I’m seeing the image in your mind through the collective consciousness!”

Apparently, she could see how I was picturing her transformation. Her human skin and white armor would crumble away like sand, revealing a brand-new exoskeleton that would serve as her armor. This crimson carapace would grow thicker and smoother, and a new pair of insect legs would spring forth from her back.

“Your Majesty... Is this what I will become?”

“Right, that’s your evolved form. You will be reborn into the Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan. I look forward to seeing you perform faster, more audaciously, and with even more heroic flair.”

When she became the Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan, she would not only have new coloration and an additional pair of legs, but she’d also receive a huge stat boost. As an intermediate unit, she would defeat most enemies with one blow.

To begin with, Sérignan was considered a strong hero unit that required slightly less experience points to level up than other hero units, *and* she had slightly higher stats. This was balanced out by the fact that toward the endgame, she needed more experience points to advance and her stats didn’t increase quite as much. Still, once she reached her final form, she reigned over all as one of the highest-ranked units in the game.

In fact, Sérignan was one major reason why the Arachnea had so much potential as a faction. Raising Sérignan properly meant eventually getting a unit capable of breaking the game’s balance.

“You should try to evolve, if you can. Good luck, Sérignan.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I was sure Sérignan would be able to change soon enough. But right now,

we had to focus on our march on the Kingdom of Maluk.

†

Meanwhile, in the Kingdom of Maluk...

“Hmm. So, the Knights of Saint Augustine have been wiped out.”

King Ivan II, the ruling sovereign of Maluk, absorbed this surprising report. It had been many years since the aging king inherited his throne from his predecessor, and under his reign, the Kingdom had flourished.

He had made efforts to build infrastructure for the farmlands, which it made it easier for farmers to bring their bountiful harvests to larger cities. He’d built fortresses and strongholds along the southern borders, which had previously been exposed to military threats, ensuring the populace lived in peace.

His achievements had earned him much praise among the citizens. To top it all off, he lived modestly and without luxury as an ardent believer in the God of Light, exercising humility and frugality per the Church of Holy Light’s teachings. The Kingdom’s subjects supported him all the more for it.

The king had four children: the first prince and heir apparent to the Kingdom, the second prince who acted as his aide, the first princess who had been married off to a neighboring country, and the second princess, who was still a young child. He saw each and every one of them as his lovely, adorable jewels.

“Wasn’t the enemy merely a handful of elves?” asked Prime Minister Slava Smirnenski. “I find it hard to believe the Knights of Saint Augustine, our most elite force, would be crushed by tree-hugging apostates.”

Slava had thus far served Ivan II and the Kingdom with unwavering loyalty. Several of Ivan II’s greatest accomplishments could in fact be attributed to this man’s candid advice. The king had a great deal of trust in his subordinate, who could not be bribed or swayed.

But it was also Slava who had suggested sending the Knights of Saint Augustine to the forest. He’d received reliable reports that “respectable” citizens of the Kingdom were being attacked by the forest elves, resulting in dozens of casualties, and so he had proposed that the king dispatch his troops to get rid of them. Much to their surprise, the knights had been eradicated instead.

“And yet they *were* defeated,” countered Omari Odevski, Minister of Defense. “We must think of a countermeasure immediately. We might have an unforeseen enemy on our hands. Perhaps it’s the Empire of Nyrnal to the south, attempting to invade us and steal our land.”

The Themel River flowed along the two countries’ borders and served as a natural barrier, and so the Empire of Nyrnal couldn’t advance north and invade Maluk directly. But if they were to go through the elves’ forest, which was in the center of the continent, then the Empire would have a way in.

Still, there were no paved roads in the forest and no large villages or towns to serve as supply hubs, and on top of that, the forest was home to all sorts of monsters and beasts. After considering these factors, such a roundabout attack seemed unlikely.

Even moving a small band of soldiers through that forest would require more effort than was probably justified, so marching an army large enough to pose a threat would require an unimaginable amount of labor and resources.

The trees inhibited the movement of carriages, the animal trails tripped up cavaliers, and the rivers and streams running through it would be a challenge for heavy infantry to pass through. Omari agreed that it was unlikely, but remained cautious, proclaiming that even if the path was difficult, it was not impossible.

“Emperor Maximillian cannot be trusted. That turncoat promised us peace, then went and attacked our southern regions. I wouldn’t be surprised by anything that bloody country does. Perhaps they even bribed the elves to secure them safe passage through the forest.”

“Perhaps. The elves cannot be trusted either, after all.”

There was a great deal of antagonism between humans and demi-humans. The elves feared humans while the dwarves scorned them, and mankind believed both races to be inferior.

The humans saw the elves as barbarians who lived in the forest only because they couldn’t build cities. They were untrustworthy creatures who shut themselves off from the God of Light in favor of worshipping trees. It was even rumored they offered human sacrifices, gossip which many truly believed.

Yes, the rumors.

Elves were barbarians. Elves skinned humans and used their pelts as trophies. Elves ate human babies. Elves kidnapped virgin women and sacrificed them to their forest gods. If the Arachnea’s queen were to hear them, she would surely scoff and laugh derisively at the gossiper. The elves, on the other hand, would be outraged at the sheer cruelty and baselessness of the rumors men took to heart.

“We may have to wipe out the elves. If we rid the forest of them, the Empire of Nyrnal won’t be able to use them to attack us.”

“And how many men would we need to do that?” asked the king.

“Five thousand would be more than enough, I believe,” Omari answered. “The elves are weak. Their arrows cannot penetrate our armor. Five thousand trained soldiers can sweep the eastern forest and free our Kingdom from this menace.”

“But what of the matter of the Knights of Saint Augustine? Doesn’t it mean the elves have already allied themselves with the Empire? We’d need an even larger force if that were the case.”

“Right you are, milord. But maintaining a line of supply through the forest would be difficult,” Slava added. “Even if they traded with the elven village, it

probably wouldn't be enough to keep the army moving. From what I hear, there are less than a thousand elves in the forest."

Omari sunk into contemplative silence. Procuring one's supplies nearby was par for the course. After all, there was no powerful means of transportation in this world, nor were there guns, so traveling forces had to either buy food from farming communities or pillage regularly in order to maintain a supply line. It was clear that the meager forest elf population couldn't sustain an army by any means.

"Hmm. In that case, it's not likely there are dozens of troops lying in wait in the elven village. So their force was large enough to defeat the Knights of Saint Augustine, but not enough to launch an invasion?" the king estimated.

"I believe so," Omari said, nodding. "However, I still can't quite piece together how Nyrnal managed to pull this off. They either deployed some kind of powerful weapon manned only by a small number of people, or they showed off their wyverns. Yet we haven't heard word of any new weaponry, and I find it doubtful they'd use their wyverns there."

The Empire of Nyrnal was famous for its wyvern forces. Among the major powers, it was the only one with units capable of soaring through the skies. Many wondered why Nyrnal alone had been given that privilege, but no one knew the answer.

"So with that in mind, how many men will we need to defeat both the elves and the Empire's troops?"

"Between ten and twenty thousand should guarantee our victory. Such numbers will be costly, but we'll surely be able to beat our enemies into submission."

Ten to twenty thousand men... This was but a fraction of the Kingdom's total military, but it was an expense the king couldn't ignore. All in preparation for an imperial army that might not even be there.

"But did the Empire truly dispatch a squadron to the forest?"

"That's the only explanation I can come up with," Omari replied. "Do you really believe the Frantz Popedom or the Schtraut Dukedom would attack us? It's unthinkable."

"Then I suppose we have no choice but to prepare. Gather the army by tomorrow and send them out into the forest. Then you are to do away with our enemies. Leave no one alive."

"Also, issue a diplomatic appeal to Nyrnal's ambassador, asking that they withdraw their forces. If he chooses to play dumb, we'll do as we please with the Empire's men," Slava added.

"So be it, then. I look forward to hearing of our victory."

"Yes, milord. We will win at all costs."

At that point, none of them were aware that what lurked in the elven forest wasn't the Empire's advance party at all.

A celebratory parade marched through the streets of Maluk's capital city, Siglia. Soldiers clad in armor stepped to the rhythm of the fife and drum corps. The cavalry, the pride and joy of the army, nobly strode forward as their horses' hooves clicked against the flagstones.

A force of 15,000 had been mobilized, but only a fraction of them were on parade. The advance party was already approaching the town of Leen, which was near the elven forest, and these forces were setting out to join them.

“I can't see any of the mages.”

“They're not used to being part of these kinds of parades.”

Some among the 15,000 were mages. For both offense and logistics, their presence was invaluable on the battlefield. They rained fireballs down upon the enemy like multiple rocket launchers, and they could heal the wounded as though carrying out divine miracles. Their value was made clear when the Knights of Saint Augustine had been healed by their comrades. Magic took a long time to master, but once it was attained, it became an indispensable resource.

Mages didn't like to stand out, however. They stayed out of such gaudy festivities, thinking they would look too shabby in comparison; they also weren't very social to begin with.

“Can we win this fight, Father?” asked Elizabeta, the second princess.

“Of course,” King Ivan II assured her. “These are our country's proudest, mightiest warriors. The elves and the Empire's forces stand no chance against them.”

The twelve-year-old watched the marching soldiers with abundant curiosity. It seemed that her young mind was fascinated by the parade. Her expression was that of a child playing out her own march with toy soldiers. Those innocent blue eyes had been spared of all the filth and foulness of this world.

“I've been told the elves are wicked creatures. They hide in the forest and attack hunters, stripping them of their skin and eating them alive.”

“That's right, Elizabeta. They may appear handsome, but they are evil beings whose souls are dyed black by malevolent gods. Had they been born with true, just hearts, they would be worshipping the God of Light.”

The God of Light was the sole deity worshipped by the Church of Holy Light. This god was revered throughout the continent, and those who paid allegiance to other gods were persecuted as heretics. The elves, for instance, worshipped forest gods, and were therefore detested as outcasts and undesirables.

“Oh, I *do* hope they get rid of all the elves. Knowing that something so terrible exists in the world scares me so badly I can hardly sleep at night.”

“Quite so, dear. Tolerating their presence here was a mistake to begin with.

We should have done away with them much sooner. If we had, we wouldn't have had to shoulder such a large-scale invasion as this one."

The people of the Kingdom of Maluk believed that anyone who rejected the God of Light had less intellect and civility than animals.

"Let us pray to the God of Light so these soldiers may receive His protection. We will ask that suitable retribution falls upon the heretics, and for everlasting peace in our beautiful Kingdom."

"Yes, let us pray that the vile elves will be wiped out to the last, and that the Empire of Nyrnal's hopes of invading us are nipped in the bud."

The 15,000 men dispatched from the Kingdom were called the Eastern Garrison. With the prayers of their king and princess to see them off, they set out for the elven forest, not knowing what awaited them there...

The Battle of Leen

The Kingdom of Maluk's forces gathered in the town of Leen. Because of the army that was garrisoned there, the town was bursting with chaos. The high-ranking officers secured the inns, gathered up provisions, and hastily ran in and out of shops, ensuring the army wanted for nothing.

"What's your take on this war?" Gran Ginzbel asked his colleague as they sat down for drinks at the tavern. Gran was the commander of the first regiment's third battalion, while his companion led the first battalion.

Gran was a man in his mid-thirties, making him a bit old to serve as commander of a battalion in this world. He'd always proved his worth in training, however. The reason for his late promotion was likely his tendency to speak too frankly and too often. He had left his wife of five years and his adorable three-year-old daughter behind in the capital in order to come to Leen.

"Strange war if I ever saw one," replied the other man with a sour expression. "Hard to believe the elves wiped out the Knights of Saint Augustine. Their captain was capable of summoning the angel, you know? How did a couple of knife-ears stand up to the Kingdom's strongest knights and an angel?"

The Knights of Saint Augustine were famous for their martial might. When the southern countries had invaded with an army of 30,000, the knights had stopped them with mere hundreds and pushed them all the way back to the Themel River. The children of Maluk relished tales of these knights and their acts of heroism.

"So you think the elves ambushed them?" Gran asked.

"Nah, the higher-ups are thinking Nyrnal might have an advance force hiding in the forest. The elves' forest would give them a way into our territory without crossing the Themel, after all."

The other commander wet his finger with wine, then used it to draw a crude map of the continent on their table. With the elven forest in the center, he demonstrated how the Empire's forces could get into Maluk's territory without going through the river.

"Nyrnal's Imperial Army, eh? I hear they're all pretty strong. They unified the five countries of the south into one empire in just four years, after all. They definitely sound scarier than the elves."

"I'd be careful of the elves, too. They're crafty bastards that like to set up traps designed to catch humans. And once they catch someone, they cut off their ears and nose, poke out their eyes, strip off their skin, and eat them. Getting caught by the elves is the one way I'd never want to die."

Almost all rumors surrounding the elves were these sorts of dangerously tall tales. No one sought to confirm their validity, of course. Few humans came in contact with the elves, but they still spread those rumors because they felt the elves had turned away from the God of Light, choosing to instead worship the gods of the forest. Because of that, people were willing to believe the elves were capable of just about anything else.

Whenever children went missing near the forest, the elves were the first to be suspected. Not wolves, not bears, but the elves. And every time, the Kingdom would send out a force to suppress them, burning down a village as a lesson. The elves would then hide deeper in the forest out of fear, making contact with them even more difficult and the rumors all the more outrageous.

Elves ate humans. Elves sacrificed virgin maidens they'd stolen away to their gods. Elves were reincarnations of criminals. There were more hateful, superstitious rumors about the elves than one could count.

"But we're under General Chernov, huh? I'm kind of worried he might make us do something pointless. Rumor has it he's really anxious to get promoted to marshal, so he pushes his men pretty damn hard. Some even call him Chernov the Murderer."

"Yeah? I always took him for a calm, collected sort of fellow. He always knows just how to be considerate of his men."

The fact that they didn't have to camp outside and instead got to sleep in warm beds was due to the hard work and insight of Chernov and his military staff. The rank-and-file soldiers had to camp out in tents, of course, but the officers themselves would spend their nights in comfortable inns and establishments.

The same could be said of their meals. Thanks to the supply officers' efforts, they could eat fresh meat and vegetables. The soldiers were grateful that they didn't have to subsist on the usual hard bread and jerky doled out on the battlefield.

"But still, not knowing who we're up against is eerie. Sure would like to know if it was the elves or Nyrnal's men who wiped out the Knights of Saint Augustine."

"Agreed," Gran said, nodding. "Knowing our enemy would change how we engage them, after all. If it's the Nyrnals, we'll have to rely on the troops to keep them busy. If it's the elves, we'll have to evade traps and crush them with sheer force."

"Hope it's the elves, personally."

"At worst, they might have joined forces and we'll have to face them both."

The two kept on chattering, their lips loosened by the sweet wine.

"Let's pray to God that's not the case, then. May the God of Light grant us His protection!" the first battalion's commander shouted, picking up his glass with a clumsy, sweeping gesture.

“Right you are.” Gran smiled bitterly and raised his glass. “May the God of Light grant us His protection!”

Gran didn’t believe in God’s power all that much. He’d never seen the angels, and he had grown up in a village so poor that if God did exist, He had certainly forsaken it. He wasn’t convinced that the God of Light would pull through for them in the worst-case scenario.

Yet even he felt pressed to pray to God this time. And desperately, at that.

†

The bell rang out at three in the morning, before dawn had risen.

“What is it?”

General Chernov, leader of the entire Eastern Garrison, rose from his bed and consulted his staff officers to get a grasp on the situation.

“Right, well, the alarm was sounded because one of Leen’s gates is under attack. The fighting is still ongoing; the town militia is engaging the enemy.”

“The gates are under attack?! Why leave this to the town militia, then?! Should an economic center like Leen fall, it could be a fatal blow to the Kingdom! Send our forces in at once and push back the assault!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

At General Chernov’s orders, the officers took off.

The gate in question was to the east. The first battalion was swiftly deployed to meet the enemy—the same one led by Gran’s friend from the tavern. His unit had been the first to reach the eastern gate.

However...

“What in God’s name... is this?”

Where the ground near the gate should have been was a great, gaping hole. And from within that hole, sharp fangs gouged into the militia fighting desperately to protect their town and dragged them down into the earth. The militiamen frantically tried to resist, firing off their crossbows and longbows, but the monsters hiding in the hole swiftly evaded their projectiles.

The first battalion’s commander couldn’t believe what he was seeing. It was as though they had charged headlong into a nightmare.

“Hey, you there!” shouted a man who looked to be the militia’s leader. “If you stand there, they’ll bite your head off! Get up to the gate or climb up a building, hurry!”

“You heard the man! Go up, *up* I say! On the double!” The first battalion’s commander had begun barking orders to his men, but he was a moment too late.

Fangs burst out from the ground, sunk into his men, and pulled them into the depths below. Even the sounds of their screams were ripped downward with unrelenting force.

The other soldiers could only cry out in terror as they cowered in place.

Even though they had seen that staying on the ground was dangerous, their fear choked their judgment, forcing them to act irrationally.

Humans so often suffered this affliction; however illogical, their primal instincts would dominate their behavior. Even as the fear pumped their veins full of adrenaline, some soldiers were rendered completely incapable of moving.

“Hurry up, come on! At this rate, we’ll be picked off like flies!” the commander called out.

A few brave soldiers who managed to suppress their terror, hurriedly clambering up nearby walls and buildings. The commander then swiftly ran to the walls, climbing up to the gate in order to better understand their situation.

“What’s going on?!” he asked.

“These monsters have been attacking us from the ground for a while now!” answered the captain of the militia. “We can’t do a thing!”

“So these beasts are the enemy?”

The captain had a *very* bad feeling. The monsters attacking from underfoot were frightening enough, but his intuition told him there must’ve been another threat at play here.

“Oh, God! More monsters are coming! A... A *swarm* of monsters is approaching the gates! There’re so many of them, I can’t count them all!”

The commander’s gut had been right on the money. While the militia and first battalion were being ambushed from underground, a large force of monsters was approaching from the east. They looked like a cross between a spider, a scorpion, and an ant. Whatever they were, though, they were marching toward the eastern gate in multitudes.

They covered the earth and advanced in organized columns. There wasn’t any military force around them capable of subduing this many enemy troops. The 15,000 men dispatched from the Kingdom of Maluk wouldn’t be nearly enough to push back this monstrous tidal wave. Once the commander realized that, he was so shaken with fear that he briefly forgot everything else.

“The monsters are destroying the gate!”

The monsters from underground had regrouped before the gate and were now attacking it. They too looked like a cross of several insects rolled into one, except each of their fangs was the length of a human arm. They were using these massive fangs to bite at the gate’s bolts, gradually wearing them down.

“Archers, ready your bows! Don’t let them get through!” shouted the commander.

At his order, arrows were fired at the monsters, but their lustrous black armor deflected most arrows. Arrows that sunk into their joints or compound eyes, however, did seem to have an effect... The wounded monsters went berserk.

Any beast hurt by an arrow started thrashing on the spot, ripping any unlucky men in its vicinity to shreds. They would even ram the walls with their

bodies, the impact sending soldiers tumbling down into the frenzied fangs below.

“Stop! Hold your fire! You’ll get the the men up there killed!”

“But, sir, there’s a large army of insects marching upon us!”

Not only were giant bugs destroying the gates, but an immense force of insects was approaching them from afar. The rustling of countless insectile footsteps echoed disturbingly in the soldiers’ ears and caused the earth to rumble beneath their feet.

The situation was desperate.

“They’ve destroyed the gate!” someone cried out.

“Shit, shit, shit! What the hell are these things?!”

At last, the last bits of the bolts were broken off, and the gate swung open.

“Could these monsters have killed the Knights of Saint Augustine?”

“They came from the forest. We couldn’t stop them. They really must be the ones...”

As the soldiers’ morale plummeted, their hands stopped moving, save for the quivers of fear.

“Well, keep shooting them, unless you want to end up in their bellies!

Shoot, I say!”

The first battalion’s commander alone fought to maintain his men’s spirits and keep up the offensive. However, the army of monsters ruthlessly stormed through the broken gate and began scaling the walls. One soldier after another was devoured. No... Not devoured. They were simply torn apart, as if the monsters were children fighting over a toy.

“You damned monsters! Monsteeers!”

The commander swung his sword, desperately trying to knock the creatures away... but it was all in vain.

Before he knew it, his subordinates had all been wiped out, and he was surrounded by six of the giant insects.

“Ahaha... hahaha...”

He dropped his sword, his expression dyed over with despair. Within seconds, he was hacked to pieces.

Now that the enemy had broken through Leen’s defenses, nothing could stop them from flooding into the town.

†

“Fall back! Retreat! We can’t beat them here!”

The Kingdom of Maluk’s army had tried combatting the insects pouring into Leen for an hour, but their efforts were all for naught.

Swords couldn’t penetrate the monsters’ hard exoskeletons, which also deflected arrows. That aside, there were thousands—no, tens of thousands of them. The Eastern Garrison boasted 15,000 men, but they couldn’t hope to

stand up to this many fearsome, organized creatures.

The insect army pushed down on Leen with their numbers, ripping through everything in their path with their fangs and scythes. The streets were littered with the mangled corpses of soldiers, but the monsters paid them no heed as they rushed toward the town's center.

“Retreat?! Where the hell do they expect us to run?!” Gran cried out, appalled.

He had taken to the battlefield personally, sword in hand, just as the order to fall back had arrived. No matter where they went, they would be surrounded by bugs in all directions.

“Commander, the west gate is open!” his adjutant said. “We should head there straightaway!”

“Yes, all right. But before we do, we’ve got to do something about these monsters!” Gran said, cutting away a flock of them with his claymore. Regular longswords and arrows couldn’t get through the bugs’ natural armor, but heavier weapons like halberds and claymores were capable of chopping through it.

“Any soldiers with halberds and claymores, cleave a way open! Let’s go!” he shouted.

“Understood, sir!”

Thus, they made for the western gate. Screams were rising from all corners of the town. The insects made no distinction between soldiers and townsfolk, preying on whoever they encountered. Gran was certain that somewhere among them, he heard the barmaid from last night’s tavern excursion shrieking in terror.

But as things stood, Gran and his men didn’t have the time to save Leen’s innocent citizens. Staying alive was the most they could manage. No matter how many screams and pleas for help reached their ears, they had to ignore them and reach the western gate.

Gran felt he had to survive this and live to see tomorrow. For the sake of the beloved wife and daughter he’d sworn to protect, he had to escape from this nightmare alive. To that end, he could not save anyone but himself. As he repeated this mantra in his mind, Gran continued to run for his life.

His armor felt too heavy, and he desired nothing more than to take it all off. But he feared that the insects would tear him to bits, which drove him to bear the burden of his armor.

“Halt! Are you friend or foe? State your affiliation!” A high-ranking officer stopped their mad dash, trying to maintain control of the situation even in the swirling chaos.

“First regiment’s third battalion! We were given orders to retreat!”

“Retreat?! You intend to abandon Leen? To hand over a keystone of the Kingdom to these... these *bugs*?! Your sin would stain the honor of Maluk’s military for years to come! Return to your station and fight! I will not allow

you to retreat!"

"But we were *ordered* to retreat!" Gran shouted at him.

"And we gave no such order! General Chernov said that we're to defend this town down to the last man standing! Now return to the front lines and—"

At that moment, fangs exploded out from the earth and sank into the officer's body. He was then dragged underground, leaving only the echoes of his scream behind. No one tried to save him.

"We're falling back. No way are we sticking around for a death sentence," Gran said.

The surviving third battalion soldiers nodded.

Gran was no longer a soldier, but a man who had left the most important part of himself at home with his family. Same as the other soldiers, all he wanted to do was leave this hell behind. Courts-martial be damned.

"Just a bit more to the gate, and then we can get out of this hellhole. We're almost there."

However...

"Trying to flee, are you?"

The west gate was not open, as they had expected. Well, the doors were, but a great spiderweb blocked off the way, preventing anyone from coming or going. Several corpses were entangled in the thick strands.

"Impossible..." Gran's stomach dropped.

"If you intend to pass through here, you will have to face me. I am the Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan."

The one calling herself Sérignan had the lower half of an insect and the upper half of a beautiful woman. Her features were covered in armor as red as blood, and she held a black longsword in hand as she stood in Gran's way.

"We've got no choice... Force your way through, men! Archers, cover for us! Infantry, forward march!"

Gran didn't think of the woman before his eyes as a fellow human; she was the enemy.

The infantrymen, clad in thick plate mail and armed with halberds and claymores, stepped forward, while the archers took aim at the woman—no, the monster calling herself Sérignan.

"Attack!"

The archers unleashed their arrows at once, marking the start of battle.

"Pathetic."

Sérignan fired a shot of silk from her abdomen toward a building across the street, then used it to launch herself over. In so doing, she evaded the arrows that would have rained down upon her.

"Let's go!"

Despite their determination, the infantry began to fall apart.

"Gaaaah!"

Sérignan aimed her sword at the thin gaps in their helmets, crushing their

eyeballs with deadly accuracy.

“Don’t hesitate! Keep pushing!”

Gran understood just how grievous the situation was, but he also knew they had to fight. If they ran, this monster of a woman would give chase and slay them all. Even if they could manage to shake her off, they had a whole army of monsters crowding the streets at their flank. Their only way forward was to get rid of Sérgnan and break through to the outside.

“I see. This is all humans can manage.”

Three heavy infantry charged Sérgnan at once. She stabbed two of them through the chest with the legs on her back, then swung her longsword at the third, slashing his throat. The men crumpled to the ground in pools of blood, where they lay still and unmoving.

“Come at me, humans. I shall slay you all, and make you into feed that will birth my new comrades.”

Sérgnan advanced on Gran with her longsword in hand and the two legs on her back aimed in his direction.

“Heavy infantry, switch to defense! Archers, keep shooting!”

Gran realized the heavy infantry’s sluggish movements couldn’t keep up with Sérgnan’s swift motions, so he ordered them to serve as a shield for the archers.

“Too dull! Too weak! Too pathetic!”

Countless arrows rained down upon the blood-red knight, but she knocked them all away with her tail and sword. Not a single one managed to scratch her.

“This is impossible! We can’t fight this thing!”

“Somebody, help!”

Realizing that their attacks were futile, the archers panicked and began to flee.

“Wait! That way’s crawling with bugs! You’ll get yourselves killed!”

Gran tried to stop them, but his words fell on deaf ears. The fleeing archers were cornered by insects creeping out from the alleyways, and their bodies were promptly mutilated by scythes and fangs. The archers’ dying howls soon faded, until only an eerie silence remained.

“Will you fight like a fool? Or will you surrender to your fate, and become our sustenance?”

Sérgnan walked up to Gran and the infantry, her sword at the ready.

“Nobody’s going to just roll over and let you make them into mincemeat!”

Gran steeled his resolve and ordered the remaining heavy infantry to attack Sérgnan at once. However, Sérgnan fired strings at the ground, which tangled themselves around the soldiers’ feet and tripped them up. Gran was the only one to break through, but she handily intercepted his slash.

“Not yet!”

Refusing to give up, Gran brought down his blade again. Right, right, left, up, right. He swung at her in every direction, but Sérgnan’s swordsmanship

was extraordinary. She deflected all of his attacks, not allowing a single one through. Then she struck back, cutting a deep gash into his right arm.

“Dammit,” Gran cursed through gritted teeth.

“Are you all right, sir?!”

The infantry managed to disentangle themselves from the strings and hurried to his side.

“Charge her!” he growled in response. “She can only handle three at a time! Any more than that and she should be in trouble!”

“Yes, sir!”

Five heavy infantry abided by his order, engaging her at once.

“I can only handle three a time, you say?”

Sérignan smirked mysteriously, bending her tail toward the heavy infantry. And as the five men lunged at her...

“What?!”

Gran couldn’t believe his eyes.

Sérignan bound two of the infantry with her strings, then swiftly put down the remaining three with her sword and insectile legs. After that, she killed the two entangled infantry one after another in graceful, fluid motions. Blood danced through the air, and the flecks that flew onto her crimson carapace blended in perfectly.

“Come, face me. You’re the last one left,” Sérignan declared, pointing her longsword at him.

“You godforsaken hellspawn!” Gran shouted back, propping himself up on his sword. “The elves must have summoned you all with some kind of black magic!”

“You think the elves summoned us? What utter nonsense! We were given life and flesh by none other than Her Majesty, the exalted Queen of the Arachnea! The elves did not summon us. The Arachnea are a superior civilization that greatly eclipses the elves!”

“Arachnea? So that’s your country’s name... Why are you invading us? Are you barbarians that know nothing of culture and humanity?!” Gran’s voice was tinged with pain.

“How ridiculous. It was your people who attacked us first. You slaughtered our allies and thus spurred Her Majesty’s wrath. It was your actions that made our queen decide to wipe your wretched Kingdom off the face of the earth! Your country will be erased from this world. None of your people will survive. Such was Her Majesty’s decree. If you resent that, blame the Knights of Saint Augustine for attacking Baumfetter.”

“So it was you who killed them after—”

Before Gran could finish his sentence, Sérignan severed his head. The blood that spurted out gave her armor a deeper, darker luster.

“Well done, Sérignan.”

“Your Majesty!”

The Arachnea's queen approached Sérignan. She was clad in an elegant dress that made a striking contrast with the bloody, corpse-covered battlefield.

"You talk too much, though. Just take out the foot soldiers; you don't have to engage them in conversation. Sparing every one of your victims attention would just waste precious time."

"My apologies, Your Majesty!" Sérignan lowered her head, still keeping a watchful eye on the queen.

"Eh, it's fine. You were awesome, though. Just what I'd expect from my precious hero unit. I'll raise you into the strongest Swarm in existence. And that's why I can't have you die on me, capisce?" The queen's tone was gentle.

"Yes, my queen," Sérignan said, her eyes a bit teary. "I shall survive, no matter what may come."

"Oh come on, no crying. Are you a seasoned warrior or a little kid?" She patted Sérignan's head.

"Forgive me. I'm simply too grateful for your kind words."

"Listen, wipe your nose and go finish this battle. Once we're done here, we'll go to the next town, and the one after that. Then, we'll storm their capital... Siglia."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

And so, the curtains were drawn on the Battle of Leen. The Eastern Garrison's 15,000 men were wiped out, along with 150,000 of Leen's citizens.

Unfortunately for those who hoped the nightmare would end soon, the Arachnea queen's Ripper Swarm rush was only just beginning.

Meatballs

While I oversaw the conquest of Leen, my Ripper Swarms rushed the northern and southern regions of the Kingdom. The formula for each assault was the same: the Digger Swarms would destroy the gates, leaving the militia incapable of handling the Ripper Swarms flooding into the city.

The Swarm had hoisted their banner of bloodshed, made clear their mantra of massacre, and swiftly set about their slaughter.

Veni, vidi, vici.

The Ripper Swarms had torn through soldiers and townsfolk alike without a hint of mercy, and the Worker Swarms had gathered all the corpses in one place. Now there was only one thing left to do.

“All right. Time to make some meatballs,” I told the Worker Swarms.

“Meatballs, Your Majesty?” replied one of them.

“Yep. You did that in the game, right? You turned the enemy troops and worker units into meatballs. It’s easier to carry them to the Fertilization Furnace that way, and they take up less storage space.”

“You desire for us to make prey orbs? Understood. We will begin shortly.”

“Thanks!”

Evidently, the Worker Swarms understood my request. They attended to the bodies, turning them into mincemeat with their claws and scythes. The victims’ clothes and armor clung to the final product due to the Worker Swarms’ adhesive saliva.

Among the corpses were the tailor and the butchers I frequented. I felt nothing in particular toward their deaths, however. This was war, and it was only natural for the other side to have casualties.

Was this a Swarm-like line of thought? Was my consciousness now completely controlled by the collective? Had I been dominated by the will of a savage species that saw all others as prey to be devoured?

No. Not at all. The tailor and butchers had made the decision to demonize the elves, calling them barbarians... and far worse. It was because of their unreasonable hatred and preposterous gossip that the Kingdom of Maluk had gathered an army to slaughter the elves in the first place.

They had started this war. I merely met their hostility in kind.

I was certain that had I left the soldiers and innocents alone and allowed them to live in peace, it would not have been long before they would attack the elves again—or perhaps even us.

While I was lost in thought, the Worker Swarms continued making mincemeat. Once they were finished, they divided it up and wrapped it up into

neat, round meatballs. The Worker Swarms had called them prey orbs, so that was probably the more correct term to use. It didn't really matter though, did it?

“What would you have us do next, Your Majesty?”

“Put two-thirds of them into the new Fertilization Furnaces. You finished building them, right?”

“Yes, construction is complete.”

The Kingdom of Maluk was annoyingly large, and going back to our base in the tunnels every time would take far too long. Speed was paramount for rushes.

In this regard, the Arachnea was the ideal faction for this sort of strategy. Ripper Swarm production was cheap and fast, which meant it was possible to amass a large army early in the game. That said, the early game was the only time the Ripper Swarms were viable. They were short-lived units that could easily be defeated by upgraded units in the late game.

The Kingdom of Maluk was large, and our current number of Swarms wasn't enough to cover it all. I intended to destroy everything down to the smallest village, which would require far more significant numbers. To that end, I decided to set up forward operating bases that would function as headquarters on the field.

These were small support structures that functioned as miniature bases, or hives of a sort. They were built around the Fertilization Furnaces, which produced the Swarms, and were also equipped with flesh depositories for storing resources.

We set up one such FOB with the bare minimum of what we'd need right in Leen's central square. We would use this place to produce more Swarms to send out on the front lines.

I wouldn't normally have gone to this much trouble for an ordinary Ripper Swarm rush. Those required you to gamble everything on speed, in a manner of speaking. But the enemy had the potential to withstand the rush this time, so I had to be extra cautious. The enemy had walls, for example, and they could summon powerful beings like that angel.

Speaking of which, I swear I know that that angel from somewhere. I definitely remember killing an angel like that at some point... Oh well.

Whether the enemy came out to greet us or we marched upon them, we just needed to stomp them out. The Ripper Swarms would reduce everything to mincemeat and transform the ground they walked on into a hellish sea of blood.

“All Fertilization Furnaces, produce Ripper Swarms.”

I'd considered producing some mid-tier units instead, but decided to focus on Ripper Swarms for now. They were the fastest-moving units I had, with the Digger Swarms being the second. Mixing in slower units now would just drag everyone else down, and we already weren't going as fast as we should have.

As I mentioned, speed was imperative for rushes. I had to swiftly snuff out the enemy before they had time to deal with us.

“The bases to the north and south are completed, and they’re currently mass-producing Ripper Swarms. Soon there will be a hundred thousand of them... If I were playing this on my PC, it’d probably overheat and shut down.”

The Ripper Swarms had also defeated the northern and southern armies, devouring their inhabitants to further bolster their forces. My consciousness was now linked with over 100,000 individual Swarms, and I could feel their blips in the collective consciousness crawling all over my brain.

“The Ripper Swarms are to set off in groups of fifty as soon as they’re completed. Attack them in waves. We’re going to teach them how frightening a Ripper Swarm rush can be. Show them how you devour everything in your path and topple even so-called impregnable fortresses.”

The collective consciousness sure is convenient. I didn’t have to lift a finger; my orders were instantaneous, just like they were when I played the game. It allowed me to observe everything as if from above, which helped me come up with the best possible strategies.

“Sérgnan, come with me to the front lines. I’m going to need you to grind some levels.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. But wouldn’t it be better if you stayed behind, where it’s safe?”

Hmm. She had a point. I wasn’t much use on the front lines of battle. If anything, I would probably get in the way. The Arachnea’s units were the brawn while the queen was the brains.

“Still, I’ll go. I want to see what I’ve done with my own two eyes.”

I decided to go after all. I had to bear witness to what I had wrought. Seeing things through the collective consciousness wouldn’t be enough.

“If that is your will, I will guard you with my life.”

“I’m counting on that.”

The front lines would likely be littered with corpses. Those would then be carried off to a forward operating base, where they would be made into meatballs that would give birth to more Ripper Swarms.

What would I think when I saw that? Would I regret my actions? Would I pity them? Would the responsibility of it all weigh deeply upon my conscience?

Impossible. Somehow, I knew none of that would happen.

“Let us go, then, Your Majesty.”

I walked on alongside my grotesque, adorable insects. I had promised them I would guide them to victory. Regret, mercy, and moral responsibility had no place in my heart. If anything weighed on me, it was the fear that I might not be able to guide them properly.

Will the Arachnea be able to win under my leadership?

No, there’s no sense in asking; I’ll prove I can do it. If anyone can, it’s me, so I’ll pull it off. No matter how much blood I’ll need to spill. My losing would mean the annihilation of these little ones that adore me so much, after all.

“Sérgnan, I’m not going to lose. I’ll prove that I can win this, no matter

what or who I'm up against.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. And we will follow you wherever you go.”

And so we left for the front lines, our hearts swelling with resolution.

†

“Aaargh! Can someone explain what in blazes is going on?!”

King Ivan II was fuming during a meeting with his councilmen in the royal palace in Siglia. The king thought they had sent their troops on a simple errand to do away with the elves and Nyrnal’s advance forces. He had even granted permission to use an excessive force of 15,000 men for the job.

Additionally, Omari had already started talking about the celebrations they’d have to hold for their victory in a few weeks.

But soon enough, their high spirits had been crushed.

First, they had lost all contact with the Eastern Garrison, and it was speculated that their troops had been completely wiped out. 15,000 men, gone. It also seemed that they had been so swiftly, thoroughly defeated that not a single one of them had had time to write home about it.

Then, the king and his council started receiving reports from all over of grotesque monstrosities attacking their towns and villages. The enemy had apparently overwhelmed militia and soldiers alike with unimaginable numbers. Not a single report of a victory arrived at the palace.

“What is going on in my Kingdom, Odevski?!”

“Erm, I’m afraid I don’t know, milord. Nothing is clear at the moment,” Omari replied nervously. “Most of the men we sent to investigate haven’t returned, and those who did make it back are too afraid to speak of what they saw.”

“Are you saying the Nyrnals launched a full-blown invasion? Do they intend to stake a claim in our land?”

As soon as the council had learned of the Eastern Garrison’s defeat, they had sent out a search party. Astonishingly, the search party, composed of a few elite soldiers from Maluk’s military, had nearly been wiped out themselves. The few survivors who had returned were crippled by their terror, and only managed to mutter deliriously about insects.

“No, according to Nyrnal’s diplomats, the Empire isn’t part of this,” said Slava. “Their ambassador denies any involvement. And from what our intelligence division tells us, their army truly has not mobilized.”

The Empire of Nyrnal insisted it had nothing to do with this strange string of events. According to them, they had no men stationed in the forest and hadn’t conspired with any elves to destroy the Knights of Saint Augustine. They had nothing to do with the chaos going on throughout the Kingdom, either.

In fact, Nyrnal’s ambassador was outraged by the accusations. He claimed

they were a terrible insult to diplomacy, and an offensive attempt by the Kingdom to push responsibility for their problems onto the Empire.

“Then who *is* attacking us? Who else is capable of such savage invasions?”

“We do not know, milord.”

No one could answer him.

“How is it possible that our enemy has come this far and we don’t even know who they are?! Our country has never known such failure! What reports we *do* have say that the enemy has already concluded their takeover of the loess mountains, and are pushing further ahead.”

The loess mountain range extended slightly to the west of the Kingdom’s center. It was a steep area containing several narrow roads that served as the Kingdom of Maluk’s supply routes during emergencies.

It was tight terrain, and the roads came to a bottleneck—the only exit on the mountainside. This geography provided the Kingdom with an excellent western line of defense, as it prevented enemies from marching through the mountains in large numbers; sporadic or straggling troops could easily be picked off with a few of the Kingdom’s soldiers. The fewer the enemy troops, the easier a counterattack would be later on.

However, the mountain range had already fallen into enemy hands. No one knew how, but the few soldiers from Maluk who had escaped the mountains had been hunted down and killed by enemy hordes.

Yes, this was the Arachnea queen’s wave attack in effect. The Kingdom’s soldiers had tried to block their path at the bottleneck, but the Digger Swarms destroyed the ground beneath them. After that, the onslaught of Ripper Swarms decimated the remaining soldiers.

The Swarm had truly crashed down upon them like a series of surging waves. Their exoskeletons deflected arrows, rendering bows useless. However, ballistas and attack spells implemented from the fortresses had proven effective against the Ripper Swarms. The loess mountains had been littered with the pierced and charred corpses of Ripper Swarms that had fallen victim to the humans’ weapons... but the bodies of soldiers who’d been swept away in the black tidal wave far outnumbered them.

Her tactics were undeniably fearsome.

The defensive line of the loess mountains had been crushed by a massive Ripper Swarm rush. Not only had the Swarm overrun the mountains, but they had also built a new forward operating base there. The soldiers were reduced to meatballs placed in flesh depositories or loaded into the Fertilization Furnace to produce more Ripper Swarms.

“How are we supposed to stop them?!”

“Thankfully, we still have a point to hold them back... the Aryl River. We will strike at the enemy as they try to cross the Aryl,” said Omari.

The Aryl River flowed west of the loess mountains. It started in the Aryl-

Yel Lake, then flowed south through the Kingdom of Maluk. The river was the Kingdom's second line of defense after the loess mountain range. No matter who the enemy was, they would be defenseless for a time when crossing a river. Those precious moments of vulnerability were when the Maluk military tended to strike.

While the enemy tried to cross, the Kingdom's soldiers would shower them with attacks from the opposite bank. If the enemy did manage to land, the soldiers would charge them before they had time to organize. That way, the enemy forces would crumble at their most vulnerable and die on the Aryl's banks. The invasion would be stopped before it could truly begin.

“A battle along the Aryl, you say? Gather our forces, then. This battle will be a decisive one. Gather all the men who were split up between our strongholds and bring them together for this battle. Can you do that, Omari?”

“Of course. I've already told some of our men that the Aryl is to be defended. We have a great deal of men stationed at every bridge. It will be a difficult battle, but this also gives us the highest chance of emerging victorious.”

The enemy's identity was still unknown, but the Kingdom of Maluk had decided to hold a defensive battle along the banks of the Aryl River. Would such a plan work, given that they didn't know who the enemy was? Whatever the outcome, this was their only option. The sad truth was that should the enemy break through the river, the capital would be right before their eyes. Failure here would spell doom for the Kingdom of Maluk.

“Set off immediately, then. Stop the enemy at the Aryl River, no matter what.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty. I will begin preparations at once.”

And with that, the war council drew to a close.

“Father!”

As Ivan II left the large meeting room, bereft of concern and anxiety, he was greeted by his little Elizabeta. She wasn't allowed to join the war meeting, so she had patiently waited outside.

“Father, did we stop the invasion? I am so very afraid... If the enemies are allies of the elves, they may eat humans, too!”

“Everything will be all right. We've just discussed a plan to stop the invasion, and it will succeed. We'll use the might of all our forces to stop these villains, and you will have nothing more to fear. That's as certain as the sunrise at dawn, my dear.”

Even young Elizabeta had heard of the coming invasion. The enemy had swiftly defeated the 15,000 soldiers of the Eastern Garrison and kept on marching, and their second division had just taken the loess mountains.

It was a tyrannical invasion, to be sure. The ladies-in-waiting were already grieving, certain of their doom, and the noblewomen spoke of where they might flee with trembling voices. Those who couldn't fight had no choice but to wait

in fear of the invasion.

“I hope so. There is so much terror and sorrow in the court,” Elizabeta said, on the verge of tears. “Many have brothers, fathers, husbands, and sons who set out to fight and never returned. One can only imagine what those barbarians did to them...”

“Rest easy, darling. We will not be defeated. Stefan will also be on the front lines, so do pray for his safe return. The people of the Kingdom should all pray for their loved ones at a time like this.”

“Yes, Father. I’m sure he will be fine, and return to us alive and well. I, too, shall pray for his safety in battle.”

Stefan Stroganoff was a descendant of a long-running house of dukes, and related by blood to the royal family. Being a princess, Elizabeta had been promised to him at the age of eight, and their engagement was met with countless blessings from the people. Elizabeta herself was excited for the day she would wed Stefan. In just two more years, she would be deemed old enough to marry him, and the two of them would be on their way to starting a happy family.

Having a duke marry a royal would further solidify the Kingdom’s politics. Domestic affairs would stabilize, and the country would be able to divert attention to external affairs—namely, trade and relations with the Nyrnal Empire.

But Stefan was already considered an adult and head of a duke’s household, so his duties as a noble demanded he take to the battlefield. Even if they had been married, he would likely have left Elizabeta at his estate and gone to fight anyway.

Elizabeta prayed to the God of Light time and again, begging for Him to protect Stefan. She wished that her beloved would return to her safe and sound, and that the two could wed with blessings from the citizens and the God of Light Himself. At the moment, nothing mattered to her more.

“The battle will begin soon. Let victory be on our side.”

“Yes. Please win this war, Father.”

Yet no one could tell who would emerge victorious.

The Battle of the Aryl River

I stood at the top of a hill with Sérignan at my side, overlooking our surroundings. Before us was a large river. I had already known it would be here, but seeing it filled me with anxiety.

In the game, rivers were considered nigh-impassable terrain. There was no direct way of crossing one under normal circumstances. Most factions, including the Arachnea, had very few units capable of swimming. Some aquatic factions could cross rivers, yes, and the Gregoria faction could produce Sea Serpents capable of swimming, but they were in the minority.

Whatever the case, though, the Swarm couldn't swim across. The fastest way to the opposite side would be over a bridge, but the Swarms I had sent ahead on recon had reported that all the bridges in the area were tightly guarded.

I could try to muster an attack and push through, but our enemy was adapting to us and had employed a number of mages and ballistas. Mages in particular were a real nuisance.

The Arachnea didn't have a unit that matched up well against spellcasters, so I couldn't think of a good way to get past them. They were weak to melee combat, which meant the enemy would likely send loads of footmen our way to keep us from reaching them.

If I could just unlock more units, I could use Swarms capable of ranged attacks, but I had nothing of the sort at the moment. There was no point in bemoaning what I lacked, but the fact remained that having more ranged units would have made everything go smoother.

Without them, I'd have to push through a heavily defended bridge with sheer numbers. It was the strategy that required the least amount of thought, and it was also the least refined. Naturally, it would cause our side a great number of casualties, and I didn't want to subject my cute little babies to that.

It was time to put on my thinking cap and come up with another tactic.

“Worker Swarm.”

“What is it, Your Majesty?” One of the Worker Swarms turned toward me and tilted its head.

“We need a way to cross the river. Can you make it happen?”

“With enough time, it can be done.”

“I'll make sure you have plenty of time. I want you to prepare us a path to cross the river a little ways upstream from here. Understood?”

“By your will, Your Majesty.” Immediately, it began walking upstream with its fellow Worker Swarms in tow.

The more of them working together, the faster the construction process would go. For the time being, twenty Worker Swarms could handle the job.

“All remaining Worker Swarms, begin building siege weapons. I need four Bone Trebuchets.”

Siege weapons required gold to unlock, so I could only make the most basic ones. A Bone Trebuchet was, as its name implied, a contraption that launched the bones of the dead. It was capable of firing long distances but dealt little damage. However, it would be more than enough to harass the enemy.

“Ripper Swarms, begin your charge.”

Once the Bone Trebuchets were complete and had begun firing bones at the enemy, I ordered the Ripper Swarms to advance. They would flood the bridge and crash into the soldiers like a mighty tidal wave.

During the conquest of the loess mountain range, we’d caught the enemy off guard and managed to power our way through. But this time the enemy was cautious and well-prepared, and the river prevented me from using Digger Swarms. It was a difficult position, and thus I needed my Ripper Swarms to work extra hard. Even if it meant rushing to their deaths.

I had mourned the death of a single unit, and now I would be responsible for many, many more. This world must truly hate us... and me especially so. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have forced me to make such cold, pragmatic choices.

“Ballistas, fire!” cried out the enemy commander.

Thick bolts were fired in quick succession and ran through a number of Ripper Swarms. Their brethren merely stepped over their corpses, rushing to meet the enemy. Since they were all linked by the collective consciousness, they didn’t fear death. They strode forward, leaving a mountain of corpses behind them, like living, breathing meat grinders.

I couldn’t help but feel bad for the ones that’d fallen, but it was a necessary sacrifice.

“Prepare your spell attacks!”

Those despicable mages again. As they chanted their spells, fireballs rained down on the bridge, setting it aflame and burning the Ripper Swarms alive. But even so, their rush didn’t stop. My lovelies were earnest. Ripper Swarms would chase their foes to the depths of hell, not stopping until their fangs reached flesh. They were endlessly faithful and believed in me with all they had.

My precious, adorable insects.

The enemy had 50,000 men, while we numbered 150,000. If this battle lasted much longer, they would be the first to fall, but I didn’t want to win if it meant reducing my Swarms to lifeless husks. My current strategy was an absolutely brain-dead one, and I was far too concerned for my Swarms’ well-being.

As that thought crossed my mind, the sixth formation of Ripper Swarms reached the other side of the bridge. They swung their scythes, lopping off the

heads of the heavy infantry, severing their limbs, and bisecting them at the torsos.

“Heavy infantry! Fight back!”

The enemy had about a thousand heavy infantry, and the rest were just pikemen. If the Ripper Swarms could just break through the heavies, the rest would be easy pickings.

“Rrngh!”

But the heavy infantry were tough nuts to crack. Maluk had apparently learned from its previous failures and had equipped their men with heavy weapons, like claymores and halberds, that were effective against the Swarms. The Ripper Swarms weren’t exactly losing, but whenever they missed, they had their fangs chipped off, their scythes broken, or their heads crushed in.

“Pesky humans,” I muttered to myself as I watched the battle unfold.

“Your Majesty, the enemy is trying to sink the bridge,” said Sérigan.

I’d already noticed that before she said it, though, thanks to the collective. The enemy was firing explosive spells and catapulting rocks at the stone bridge. They had drawn more than enough Swarms in, so they intended to topple the bridge and cut off our aisle of retreat, then finish them off. It was a simple, predictable maneuver. Apparently, they still thought we were nothing but a group of unintelligent monsters.

“Let them sink it, if they wish. The others have already finished.”

You see, our *own* bridge had just been completed.

Without anyone noticing, the Worker Swarms had built a bridge upstream. It was made from stones and bonded together with the Swarms’ sticky saliva. All Ripper Swarms not engaged in battle were already using that bridge to cross over to the other bank.

This way of building a bridge was actually possible even in the game.

“The enemy has landed on our side!”

“What the hell?! They made a bridge?!”

This reckless attack on their bridge was simply a diversion. I wanted to fool them into thinking we couldn’t produce a bridge of our own so they would focus their efforts on holding back this assault. I felt bad for the Ripper Swarms that had lost their lives in the endeavor, but it had all worked out.

When getting past an obstacle, you should always do so as far away from your enemy as possible. Inspired by that tried-and-true strategy, I took a gamble and ordered my Swarms to form a bridge over the Aryl River. Now, tens of thousands of Ripper Swarms had crossed the river untouched by the enemy and were closing in on them.

The Kingdom’s soldiers could only flinch in the face of our attack. It was all too apparent how panicked the enemy was, which was awfully amusing to watch. Now we just had to stomp them out.

But the real party was just getting started.

“Lord Stroganoff, sir! The enemy has already crossed to our side of the river! Roughly seventy thousand enemy troops are marching on us! What do we do?!”

“Good God! They’re not just bloodthirsty monsters...? You’re telling me those *things* can strategize?! Well, I can assure you we won’t be outwitted by an army of dumb, ugly brutes!”

Duke Stefan Stroganoff, the man in charge of protecting the central bridge, was gradually losing his nerve. All around him, Ripper Swarms were ruthlessly attacking his men. Initially, he had thought they were just some heretofore unknown monsters, perhaps a species that had mutated, randomly attacking people in droves to feed. This mutation was responsible for the creatures’ insane strength, and they were only able to defeat the soldiers because of their numbers and this unnatural power.

However, that theory had been proven wrong. Their enemy was actively employing battle tactics right before his eyes. They were not mindless monsters, but creatures with intelligence matching that of mankind. The attack on the bridge was no doubt a diversion. His men had grown complacent while successfully dealing with the advance forces, but before they knew it, the enemy had built a bridge and launched a pincer attack from the other side. It was a blunder they could not recover from.

Had Stefan won this battle, he would have been a national hero and finally married the beautiful—albeit young—Princess Elizabeta. Marrying a member of the royal family meant more than earning the commoners’ blessings; he would have also obtained a social status above and beyond that of all other nobles. All his dreams and aspirations had crumpled under the weight of a single bridge built by giant insects. His brilliant future had been snatched away in their grotesque claws.

“We still have one more trick up our sleeve. Knights of Saint Julia, onward!” Stefan barked as he faced the incoming enemies.

An order of knights less than a thousand strong heeded his call, rising to meet a force of 70,000 Ripper Swarms.

“I’m counting on you!”

“We’ll handle this, Lord Stroganoff!” replied the captain of the knights. “Servant of the God of Light who resides in the heavens, I beseech you to descend before us, Angel Mayaliel!”

The holy order’s trump card was their angel. It was a different angel than Agaphiel, the one Sérgnan had faced in the forest. This one was clad in armor and held a shining longsword. The only aspect the angels shared beyond their breed was the blinding light that emanated from their bodies.

“*Children of man. Do you seek salvation?*” Mayaliel asked.

“We do! We are fighting for our very survival! If we cannot rid ourselves

of these vile monsters, the Kingdom of Maluk will fall! Hundreds upon thousands of citizens will be massacred! Please, lend us your aid!"

"Very well. I will assist you. These beings certainly are vile beyond compare. By my duty as an angel, I will strike them down!"

With that said, Mayaliel flew up and then dove toward the rows of the Ripper Swarms. Swinging her blade, she cut through hundreds of Ripper Swarms in one fell swoop. The Ripper Swarms, capable of shrugging off most attacks, were dropping like flies.

The same thing had happened last time, when the Swarm fought Agaphiel. They couldn't hope to match her. Mayaliel's sword was as powerful as Agaphiel's rays of light. It cut through the Ripper Swarms' sturdy exoskeletons like a knife slicing through hot butter, eliminating them by the dozens every second.

The Ripper Swarms lunged at Mayaliel like wild animals, but their fangs and scythes had no effect. Angels were special beings either protected by some mysterious power or simply gifted with bottomless stamina. They were the worst possible match for the Arachnea.

Additionally, angels were immune to almost all types of attacks, making them very tricky opponents. The only record of an angel's defeat was during an attempted invasion by the Empire of Nyrnal, and exactly *how* they did it was still unclear.

"Is that all you foul beasts can manage?! Then you shall perish here!"

But just as Mayaliel prepared to sweep away the next group of Swarms...

"Haaah!"

Someone soared out from the Ripper Swarms' flank and attacked her. Their motions were far too fast and fluid to belong to any of the Ripper Swarms. It was only natural, of course, because the one coming at Mayaliel was none other than Sérgnan.

"Another gnat appears!" Sérgnan spat as she brought her sword down on Mayaliel, who was completely caught off guard. *"By the will of our queen, you will become rust upon my blade!"*

"That's a corrupted holy sword! You damnable creature... Are you a fallen paladin?!"

"My background is of no importance! I am but Her Majesty's blade and shield!" Sérgnan did not falter, launching another attack at the angel.

"So be it! I will strike you down with all my might!"

Mayaliel spread her wings and soared into the air, then plunged toward Sérgnan with her longsword at the ready.

"Ngh!"

Mayaliel's powerful dive-bombing attack knocked Sérgnan to the ground.

"I will not fall! I am Her Majesty's knight! No matter what may come!"

Sérgnan rose to her feet and jumped again, swinging at Mayaliel.

"Your efforts are wasted, vile one!" Mayaliel evaded the slash and

smoothly moved in for a counterattack.

Her knee sank into Sérignan's stomach. Sérignan fell, moaning in pain, and barely managed to land on her feet. Her role as the queen's knight was the core of her fighting spirit; this was what made Sérignan an individual and set her apart from the rest of the collective.

“I can still fight! I am Her Majesty’s knight, and nothing you do will change that!”

Sérignan quickly fixed her stance and shifted to the next attack. Except this time, she wasn’t simply trying to swing her sword at the angel.

“*Rngh! Threads?!*”

Sérignan shot adhesive threads from her tail, coiling them around Mayaliel and her longsword and yanking her forward. Unable to maintain her posture, Mayaliel fell toward Sérignan. At the same time, Sérignan began her charge. This tactic turned the tide of the battle in an instant.

“Take this!”

Sérignan’s corrupted sword cut into Mayaliel’s body, and a scream erupted from the angel’s mouth.

“And this!”

As if relishing the torture, Sérignan marred her opponent with blow after blow, slashing Mayaliel’s shoulders, stabbing her stomach, and lacerating her legs.

“There’s far more where that came from! You will suffer until death claims you, you miserable gnat!”

“*Cease, you coward! Stop this at once!*”

The threads completely restricted Mayaliel’s movements, and the sword was repeatedly sinking into her flesh. The angel couldn’t budge in the face of Sérignan’s overwhelming loyalty and the strength it granted her. Mayaliel could only curse as she received the knight’s sadistic abuse.

“*Damn you... Damn you! Do not think this is enough to fell an angel!*”

At that moment, Mayaliel forcibly tore off the threads and lunged at Sérignan.

“*Taste my blade, vile one!*”

“No, you shall perish!”

Sérignan and Mayaliel clashed, each holding a blade in hand.

“*Hack!*”

Mayaliel’s neck was cut clean through; without a doubt, it was a fatal wound. The angel did not bleed from the cut, but instead burst into particles of light—much like Agaphiel had before her—and disappeared from this world.

“The sublime Mayaliel was defeated?! It can’t be!”

“Impossible! An angel can’t be slain!”

Upon seeing Mayaliel vanish, the Maluk soldiers reached new heights of terror. Their angels were supposed to be all-powerful, incontestable holy beings who reigned over all. The soldiers simply hadn’t believed Mayaliel could be

defeated in battle.

But they had forgotten that the Knights of Saint Augustine, who could also summon an angel, had already been conquered with ease. Obviously, they had no way of knowing the true power the Bloody Knight Swarm Sérignan possessed. After all, how could the Kingdom's men have imagined that this one creature had the latent ability to even bring down a god?

“Foolish humans! You will all kneel before our queen!” Sérignan proclaimed with a wave of her sword.

“It's all over! We're done for!”

“Don't run, you idiot! We fight to the last man standing!”

Their chain of command was already in shambles. Soldiers were attempting to desert their posts left and right, and the non-commissioned officers cut each one of them down for their treason. For the soldiers, this battlefield was one where both friends and foes could come for their lives.

“Erm, you there! You can speak our language, right?” Stefan said, addressing Sérignan. “Can we not negotiate? Depending on your conditions, we could surrender to your army.”

He was probing to see if it was possible for them to surrender. It was a preferable fate to slaughter, and it would allow him and his soldiers to survive another day.

Yes, Stefan wanted to live. He wanted to make it out of this atrocious battle, marry the beautiful Elizabeta, and get to know her down to her deepest depths.

“Nonsense,” Sérignan scoffed at him. “We are the Arachnea, the Swarm that will cover the world. Your people have harmed our queen's friends, killed our comrades, and planned to kill many more of our kind. And yet *now* you speak of surrender?”

She pointed her blade at Stefan.

“Pick up your sword. If you call yourself a warrior, fight to the bitter end. We will crush your efforts, leaving only despair.”

“Urgh! No choice, then! Men, ready your weapons and get back in there! Mages, fire your spells at full power! Heavy infantry and pikemen, form a circle around the mages!”

The soldiers did as he said, and soon a thick cluster of fireballs rained down upon the Arachnea, setting a great number of Ripper Swarms on fire.

“Keep moving! In Her Majesty's name!” cried Sérignan.

“In Her Majesty's name!” echoed the Swarm.

Sérignan and the Ripper Swarms rushed through the great showers of fire, closing in on Stefan's army. The Ripper Swarms, which were the fastest units in the game, made contact with the military's formation within moments. The heavy infantry's heads were sliced off with their scythes and the pikemen were quickly punctured through the chest with their fangs. Soon the Swarms had eaten entirely through the enemy's living wall.

It was a massacre.

With their protectors gone, the mages were torn to pieces. Afterward, the Swarm turned course and reduced the few remaining soldiers to mincemeat.

“It’s over.”

By the time Sérignan made that proclamation, every single soldier had been eliminated. Their commander, the one called Stefan, was dead. His eviscerated body was mixed with the ravaged remains of the other soldiers, shredded beyond recognition. His limbs had been plucked off as though he were a child’s toy, and his face had caved in from taking a scythe to the head.

“Good job, Sérignan.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Now we can all cross the river.”

By the time everything was over, the Arachnea’s queen, who had been commanding the battle from afar through the collective consciousness, arrived to thank her troops.

“You’ve all done well. This was a difficult battle, but we have emerged victorious. Nothing stands in our way any longer. Next, we’ll regroup with the units from the north and south and march on Siglia. That will spell the end of this country.”

“Glory to our queen!”

“Glory to our queen!”

All the Swarms present bent down and genuflected at once. Their unified posture made it ever more apparent that they had indeed won.

“Still, Sérignan, you have this habit of talking too much. You’ll end up biting your tongue if you chatter too much during battle. Just focus on killing the mooks in front of you.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty.”

And so the battle of the Aryl River ended in victory for the Arachnea. The Kingdom of Maluk was now in a very precarious position. It had lost all its natural defenses, and its remaining defensive lines had been forced to retreat to the capital.

Fall of the Kingdom

The Arachnea crossed the Aryl River to the north and south using the same method, leaving the Kingdom of Maluk without any more major defenses. There were still a few fortresses between us and the capital, but they wouldn't last long. Each of the fortresses was isolated, making some sort of protective circle around Siglia.

“Another one down,” I said as we felled yet another fortress.

The air was thick with the scent of blood. My Ripper Swarms carried off all the corpses, which would soon be made into meatballs and then stored or placed in Fertilization Furnaces.

Watching the soldiers’ remains—clothes, armor, and all—be reduced to mincemeat should have disgusted me or frightened me out of my wits. The stench of death and the smacking sounds of viscous fluid mushing together would be enough to make anyone vomit.

But there I was, watching it all happen while nibbling down on a sandwich.

I’d made them using ingredients the soldiers left behind in the fortress. The fillings were ham and cheese. Lately, all I could get my hands on was dry jerky and hard bread, so getting to eat soft, warm sandwiches full of cheese was quite the treat. I savored each bite as I watched the Worker Swarms make their meatballs.

“Hey, Sérignan.”

“Yes? What is it?”

Sérignan, who was standing at my side, snapped to attention.

“Want a sandwich?”

“No. I could not hope to eat of Your Majesty’s food,” she said, sneaking a glance at my meal.

So knights like toasted sandwiches, too. What a cute little tidbit of lore.

“You can have one. I made too many.”

“You honor me, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan lunged at the sandwiches like a puppy that’d been thrown a bone, chowing down on them with gusto.

The Swarm, Sérignan included, didn’t particularly need to eat. There was no maintenance cost for units, no matter how many were made. No matter how delicious I made these sandwiches look, Sérignan wouldn’t need to eat them.

But I suppose even the Swarm wanted to eat for the sake of pleasure sometimes. Thanks to the collective consciousness, they were able to taste the sandwiches vicariously through Sérignan and myself. That said, Swarms were

born from jerky and raw meat and ate human flesh... it was dubious whether they found a toasted sandwich tasty at all.

“Do not worry, Your Majesty. We are honored to experience the same flavors you do,” piped a Ripper Swarm.

Apparently, even my flicker of doubt had spread through the collective.

“All right. That’s good, then.”

For the time being, they raised no objection to any of my actions. They did as I ordered, accepting my reasons without argument. There was no conflict in the collective consciousness, that much was clear.

Was I becoming more Swarm-like, or was the Swarm being influenced by me? I couldn’t quite tell.

But for now, we had a war to win.

“The northern and southern units are in position.”

As I ate my sandwich, I confirmed that the other units were ready to attack Siglia through the collective. The Kingdom’s resistance on the other fronts had been poor, and all the civilians had been killed. Every living person in both the rural and urban areas had been slaughtered and made into meatballs, leaving their towns bloodied and empty.

I was still fighting this war as though it were part of a game. The game dictated that so long as the enemy had units remaining, I couldn’t claim victory. I stuck to those rules, and exterminated everyone in the Kingdom of Maluk. The Swarm trampled villages, towns, and fortresses alike, savagely and without warning. No one was allowed to live.

The people of this world couldn’t hope to match the Ripper Swarms’ speed. By the time any villagers, townspeople, or soldiers noticed the Swarms approaching, they were already done for. Scythes and fangs were fast upon them, ready to reap them like the crops they were.

My Swarms took no prisoners. They attacked in waves, conquering every settlement and structure in their path. The young, the elderly, the injured, and the sick—all of them were reduced to lumps to be placed in our furnaces and stores.

Even I had to question my capacity for such cold, hard choices. We were killing human beings, after all. My comrades in this world were the Swarm, but biologically speaking, I was human. Yet I spurned the idea of living among mankind, instead siding with the Swarm to slaughter my fellow man.

Was this the right thing to do? Probably.

I had sworn to the Swarm that I would bring about the victory they craved, and I intended to keep that promise. Even if it meant turning against my own species. *I killed plenty of humans in the game; this is basically the same thing. Yeah. It just feels a little more realistic, that’s all.*

“Are you anxious, Your Majesty?” Sérignan asked.

Evidently, she had sensed my inner conflict.

“No, I’m not anxious, Sérignan. I just hate them. I hate the Kingdom of

Maluk for sending the knights that killed Linnet. More than that, I hate them for standing in the way of your victory.”

I stuffed the last piece of the toasted sandwich into my mouth and got up.

“C’mon, Sérignan. Let’s go. We’re one step away from triumph. After this is done, we can figure out what to do next. If any other country messes with us, we’ll just eradicate them too.”

We toppled the four remaining fortresses, leaving no survivors. Soon enough, we were standing before Siglia.

I set up a new FOB just outside the capital and used the gold we had obtained through pillaging to unlock new siege weapons. I aimed my new Carrion Cannons—the upgraded version of Bone Trebuchets—in Siglia’s direction.

The Carrion Cannon launched decayed flesh. It poisoned any units within the impact zone, and caused nearby structures and facilities to decay. Although its firepower was low, those secondary effects were nasty. It was one of my favorite weapons. As for the design, it looked rather like an insect and was adorned with decaying flesh. Like most Arachnea constructions, the thing was pretty grotesque.

Once the Worker Swarms had finished setting up twelve Carrion Cannons, it was time to begin our assault. It was clear that Siglia’s citizens weren’t ready to evacuate. If anything, refugees were probably rushing *into* the capital, assuming they would be safe within its walls.

As I observed the city before us, I thought to myself:

Looks like we’ll have plenty of meat in the near future.

†

“The end times are upon us! These walls will be broken by the distorted legion! Great ruin will befall the world! Praying to the God of Light is pointless, for even He cannot stand in the way of the deformed hellbringers!”

Standing in Siglia’s central square, a middle-aged clergyman was performing an ardent speech. He was one of the scant few who had miraculously escaped a Ripper Swarm rush, so he knew the true terror of the Arachnea. He had decided that their appearance was a sign of the end times.

The Arachnea’s invasion had been so intense that it had sapped a clergyman of his own faith.

“Quiet, you old codger! You don’t have permission to hold assembly here! Go away!”

Cavaliers arrived to put a stop to the man’s ravings and break up the crowd that had formed around him.

“Hey! We’re only getting invaded because you soldiers are too weak to push them back! If you’re gonna complain, do it after you kill those monsters!”

The commoners threw trash and hurled insults at the soldiers.

“How terrifying... What will become of us?” whispered a young mother in her twenties.

Her name was Ludmila. She was in the middle of a shopping trip with her five- and seven-year-old sons. Seeing the soldiers clash with the townsfolk, she was overcome with fear. Siglia’s usual peaceful atmosphere had been tainted with anxiety and terror.

“Mommy, they say monsters are coming.”

“Are they going to eat us?”

Her children looked up at their mother as she ushered them away from the argument in the square.

“You’ll be fine. The city has big walls, right? They won’t break through them that easily. The monsters will just have to give up and go somewhere else.”

“Then we’re safe!”

“Yeah! I’m not scared of the monsters!”

With that said, Ludmila took her children back home.

†

Meanwhile, the palace was filled with an oppressive atmosphere. The Arachnea’s invasion simply couldn’t be stopped. They had conquered the loess mountains, crossed over the Aryl River, and toppled multiple fortresses leading up to the capital. Soon enough, Siglia had only walls left to protect it.

“What are we to do?”

King Ivan II was once again in a difficult council with Prime Minister Slava and Omari, the Minister of Defense.

“We’ve no choice but to resist their siege,” Omari said, his expression severe. “Our granaries have two years’ worth of provisions. We can use those to endure the assault and wait for the enemy to leave.”

“Do we even know when their attack will end?” said Slava. “The enemy might surround Siglia for as long as it takes. This isn’t a human army, but a force of monsters. We can’t assume they’ll retreat for economic reasons. They might hound us like wild animals, waiting for an opening.”

“Can’t we ask our neighboring countries for assistance? The Frantz Popedom or the Schtraut Dukedom might come to our aid,” said the king.

“We’ve already requested their help, but it will take the Frantz Popedom’s reinforcements four months to organize and even longer to reach us. It’s unlikely they’ll make it in time.”

The Frantz Popedom had answered the Kingdom of Maluk’s call to arms, but it would take them months to prepare their army, and a few more months to reach the Kingdom’s capital. It was a despairing turn of events overall.

“Awful... This is just absolutely awful!” King Ivan II bellowed.

“There is only one more order of knights capable of summoning an angel,

and they're the last major asset we have. But one question still stands: where do we engage the enemy? They could invade us from whichever side they'd like."

The king understood that his capital was completely surrounded by insects and that they could strike from any direction.

"Then... should we use the Jewel? With its power, we might be able to turn the situation in our favor."

"The Jewel? You *do* know what became of Maluk's first king when he used it," the king growled, glaring at Omari.

"Yes, milord, I am aware... But our current situation is dire. We've no choice but to use it. If using the Jewel will save hundreds of thousands of lives, then the sacrifice is worth it."

"Mmm... That is true, but is it really impossible to push them back with our army? Will the walls not hold until the Popedom's reinforcements arrive?"

"If you'll excuse me, I don't think it's possible. Those monsters have broken through every obstacle on their way here. I doubt walls will be able to stop them."

"I see. Then when the walls fall, I will unleash the Jewel's power. I can only pray it will save our people," the king said resolutely.

"We respect your decision, milord," said Omari. He and Slava tilted their heads in reverence.

"Then let me know if the situation changes. I will be at the treasure vault." With that, King Ivan II stood up and left the war council.

The other men continued to expand upon their strategy even after the king left. Some generals joined in, trying to find ways to keep Siglia's walls intact. They discussed the distribution of rations and whether there were any aisles of escape in the worst-case scenario.

Despite their diligence in planning, the men were well aware that both holding back the siege and trying to escape were reckless choices. Right now, Maluk had no support from its neighbors, and its own army had been greatly diminished.

"I can't believe we've resorted to using the Jewel."

His expression dark, King Ivan II walked down the path to the treasure vault.

"Father? What is the matter?"

"Oh, hello, dear. I was merely wondering what I should do for the sake of our Kingdom."

"You always consider the Kingdom's well-being first and foremost, Father. It's really admirable," said Elizabeta, looking at her father with respect in her eyes.

"Elizabeta, this... this may be the last time we speak. I'll soon be setting out to battle."

"No! Lord Stefan has fallen in battle, and now I must lose you, too? Whatever duty you have, surely someone else can take your place! You are the

king of this country, Father! You cannot put yourself in danger!"

News that Stefan, Elizabeta's betrothed, had died in the battle at the Aryl River had already reached the castle. Upon hearing it, Elizabeta was stricken with grief, and thereafter she struggled to remain optimistic, desperately clinging to life. But now her own father was going to war. The risk of his dying was high, and she despaired at the thought.

"It is precisely because I am king that I must do this. But even if I pass on, you must stay strong, Elizabeta. The Princess of Maluk must live on with pride and dignity. I'm sure that once I am gone, you will lead this Kingdom to prosperity."

"Father..." Elizabeta wiped her tears. "Yes, I understand. I am the second princess of the great Kingdom of Maluk. No matter how difficult it may be, I will rebuild this Kingdom once you rid us of these horrible monsters. But you must hold your life dear to you as well, Father."

"Yes, I will."

King Ivan II omitted the fact that care and caution would do little to change things now. There was no need to tell her that.

"Go hide somewhere safe, love. The cellar should do. Hide there and wait for the monsters to leave."

"Yes, Father." Elizabeta nodded and ran off.

"Pardon my interruption, Your Majesty," said one of the royal guards. "But is it true that the elves summoned those monsters? I've heard tell that the elves offered up sacrifices to bring them here from some other world. People say the elves control them."

"Those are foolish, baseless rumors," Ivan II snapped. "The elves have no such power. If they did, they'd have used it much sooner. It's impossible for those dingy, long-eared heretics to control such monsters to begin with. More importantly, keep Elizabeta safe."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will protect her with my life!"

That said, where did those monsters come from? the king thought. There's no doubt they appeared in the elven forest, but could they really hide such numbers among its trees and brush? Perhaps those monsters really are a product of the elves' black magic. The Church of Holy Light doesn't deny the existence of devils, but unlike our angels, those creatures seem far more sinister and strange.

"The elves must be the source of this catastrophe. If it weren't for them, none of this would have happened. Those despicable barbarians..."

If the elves hadn't existed in the forest, the king would never have had to send forces there in the first place. The Knights of Saint Augustine would not have been defeated. Monsters wouldn't have flooded out from the forest, like wasps from a rattled nest.

In the king's eyes, it was all the elves' fault. They refused to acknowledge the God of Light, and turned toward their woodland gods, offering them

sacrifices and who knew what else. They were the source of all these troubles. He believed it through and through.

While the king brooded over his nation's woes, clergymen were praying to the God of Light outside the castle, imploring Him to banish their unexpected invaders. They prayed that their walls would be stalwart as steel and ward the monsters away.

Some of the clergymen claimed that this was judgment sent down by the God of Light, punishment for the greedy and lustful lives the people were leading. It was not too late to burn one's belongings, they said, and live a modest life subsisting on bread and water. They walked as though they'd been struck by madness, naked from the waist up, exposing their bodies to cold air as they preached honorable poverty.

But whatever they did, their prayers and faith were meaningless. Outside Siglia's walls, 100,000 Ripper Swarms were preparing to attack, readying the Carrion Cannons that would bring down the ramparts. With a single order, the queen of the Arachnea could wipe Siglia off the face of the map.

And still, the people prayed. For their own well-being. For their families' safety. For their friends' survival. For their country to overcome this. For mankind to remain after this catastrophe swept through.

Those who clung to faith rushed to the cathedral, asking the archbishop to prepare a place for them to pray. Nine prayer circles had already been done that day, but people begged to pray more. They chanted their prayers at the top of their lungs, hoping they would reach the heavens. It was so loud that their voices echoed outside the city.

“They’re praying.”

The queen of the Arachnea was sitting on a vantage point overlooking Siglia from afar.

“A meaningless gesture. No amount of prayer will change what’s to come,” said Sérignan.

“True. If praying could fix things, they wouldn’t need the army. But prayer won’t make the situation any better. They’re just indulging in self-satisfaction. They can chant their mantras until their throats dry out, but no one will come to save them.”

The queen rose to her feet.

“Sérignan, it’s time to attack. Take the city of Siglia down.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

At precisely five o’clock in the morning, the Arachnea began their march on Siglia.

†

Our Carrion Cannons heralded the beginning of the battle. They fired projectiles made of rotten flesh, which impacted the walls one after another.

“Ugh, agh... What is this substance?”

“Aah! It’s poison gas!”

To recap, the Carrion Cannons’ secondary effects included poisoning surrounding enemies and causing continual damage to nearby structures. The walls were made brittle and gradually began to collapse. As projectiles continued to land, the soldiers on the ramparts succumbed to the poison, while the walls themselves flaked off and crumbled.

“Man the walls! We need to protect them! The enemy is coming!”

“Why aren’t there ballistas on any of the walls?! They’re the only thing we have that stops those bugs!”

Their minds scrambled by poison, the Kingdom’s men barked out mismatched orders. The soldiers moved to protect the walls, but the Carrion Cannons kept them at bay. Gradually, the soldiers became wracked by fits of coughing and vomited blood, and they dropped to the ground one by one.

“The Carrion Cannon is very user-friendly,” I mused, coolly watching the chaos. “It takes it a while to actually topple the walls, but it whittles down the enemy forces in the meantime. Thanks to that, we’ll have a much easier time once we break through the walls and get inside.”

Everything was going according to plan. The Carrion Cannons were cutting down the enemy’s numbers, and the walls were gradually falling apart. There were even extra Bone Trebuchets firing as well, which helped chip down the walls a bit faster.

“The walls should collapse within one minute. First formation, prepare to attack. Second and third formations, get ready to charge in after the first. Place emphasis on the eastern wall. While you focus most of the attack on the east, send a few troops to other areas to create diversions. Sérignan, you come with me to the eastern side.”

“Your Majesty, it’s far too dangerous! Siege warfare can be chaotic and fierce!”

Thanks to my years of experience, I could tell when a building was about to collapse even without glancing at its life bar. This was assuming structures in this world behaved like they did in the game, of course. Still, looking at how badly damaged the walls were gave me a general idea of when they would collapse. Sérignan, however, was attempting to stop me from going to the battlefield.

“I’m going, Sérignan. This is my war, and I’ll see it through even if I’m useless in battle.”

Yes, I need to see it all. The Kingdom of Maluk is dying, and I must watch every moment until the last.

“Very well. I will protect you with all my might, Your Majesty,” Sérignan said, bringing her fist to her chest in a show of enthusiasm.

“Thank you, Sérignan. You’re such a dependable knight. Now, let’s get moving.”

A minute later, the eastern, southern, and northern walls collapsed all at once. Waves of Ripper Swarms rushed in, while Digger Swarms burst out of the ground and swallowed people alive. Chaos exploded around the broken walls.

“Help! Help mee!”

Any unfortunate soldiers who remained near the walls were devoured by the Swarms. The insects tore everything they laid eyes on to pieces, leaving only corpses in their wake.

It was thorough violation and massacre.

The Swarm spread out across the main street and flooded into the alleyways. They ate the soldiers hiding between the buildings and shredded civilians taking cover in their houses. The Swarms’ keen senses picked up on people hiding in their cellars, who were quickly torn apart by their fangs and scythes. They had nowhere to run.

No mercy. No forgiveness. No pity.

“Mommy, are the monsters here?”

“We’ll be safe so long as we’re here, so shush. Stay quiet, okay?”

Ludmila and her sons were hiding in a cellar. As they whispered to one another, the eerie scuttling of Ripper Swarms crawling above and around them reached their ears. Her children shivered in fright.

The boys’ father had set out as part of the Eastern Garrison and never come back. Ludmila embraced them, and they all held their breaths. The Swarms continued stepping above them, and the sound made their pulses quicken.

“Please... Just go away...”

Ludmila prayed to the God of Light, to her grandparents’ spirits, to everyone and anyone who might heed her call.

But reality was indifferent to her plight.

In a violent twist of irony, the Ripper Swarms tore down the door, ripping through it with their scythes, and discovered Ludmila and her children.

“Aaaaahhh!”

“Mommy...! MOMMY!”

Ludmila and her children were torn apart, their guts splattering all over the cellar. Only once their limbs had been hacked off and their skulls caved in did their bodies fall to the floor. Ludmila, much like her husband, had become food for the Swarm.

Ripper Swarms could pick up all the scents in a house, even the ones in the cellar and attic. No one could escape their clutches. No matter where one might hide, the Swarm would find them, ready to deliver impartial, absolute death.

“Gotta admit, that’s pretty terrible,” I said quietly, standing outside the house.

“The humans deserve no mercy, Your Majesty. Especially not our enemies.”

“Agreed. Mercy wouldn’t help anyone here. We only believe in violence. Lovely, isn’t it? Come on, let’s keep moving. This wouldn’t have ended any other way.” I left Ludmila’s house behind and began walking down the eastern road.

Perhaps I’ll take down their castle and try on the crown? Now that’s a thought.

†

Sérgnan and I moved further into the city, surrounded by an ocean of Ripper Swarms. Despite how densely packed we all were, none of the Ripper Swarms bumped into me. They cautiously avoided getting in my way as they walked. I knew they could knock me away quite easily if they weren’t careful, so I appreciated their consideration.

“The enemy’s defensive forces are divided between the north and the south. I say we push through the center so we can flank both of them. If we do that, the enemy will be routed in no time. Then we’ll just need to force our way into the castle, where we’ll kill the king and any other key figures inside.”

And then, the Kingdom of Maluk will be completely wiped off the face of this world.

“Stop, in the name of the God of Light!”

Just as I was imagining the aftermath, we ran into a group of enemy troops. I’d thought we’d mopped most of them up during the initial attack, but apparently some of them had been positioned away from the walls.

“You will not stop us here. We’ll keep marching until every last one of you is dead.”

“Aren’t you human too?!”

Upon seeing me amid the great cluster of Swarms, the apparent leader of the group eyed me suspiciously. He must have been wondering why a human girl was working alongside these enemies of mankind.

“Human? Not me. I’m just a monster, complete with a monstrous heart... I cast my humanity aside long ago. You could even say I’m mankind’s worst enemy. I’m the one you have to defeat if you want to win; our invasion won’t stop until you do.”

“No... Even if you *do* kill me, our conquest will continue. Our bodies will endlessly quake with the hunger to devour your world. Board your ships and try to sail away if you like; we’ll still hunt you down and finish you off to the last man.”

That’s right; I was no longer human. I was Queen of the Arachnea, the scourge who plagued mankind. My consciousness had been dragged down into the crawling depths of the Swarm collective, and the last light of my humanity was beginning to flicker out.

Curiously, the reverse was also happening. The Swarm’s consciousness

was being blended with my own, so now they were thinking about more than just invading and multiplying. Had this not been the case, they would have indiscriminately attacked the elves I so pitied.

“I see. So you’re the ringleader. Then all we have to do is take you down! Servant of the God of Light who resides in the heavens, I beseech you to descend before us, Haristel the Great!”

As the commander finished his chant, light spilled from the sky, and out from the beams sprung a massive hound. It was three to four times the size of a Ripper Swarm, and it was certainly big enough to swallow me whole.

“*Children of man. Has crisis befallen you?*” The massive hound’s voice was solemn and even.

“Yes, Haristel. These evil beasts have come to destroy our Kingdom. Please, lend us your strength!” implored the man, who was captain of the Knights of Saint Erzsébet.

“So whenever problems pop up, you just fall back to your angels, huh? You really are one-trick ponies.”

“Keep talking, fool. You barbarians who reject the God of Light deserve nothing more than to be struck down by our angel! Begone, vile ones!”

“Well, geez. Calling us barbarous blasphemers really isn’t necessary, now is it? I mean, you don’t need to go fumbling around for reasons; we’re barbarians through and through. Bona fide savages, the kind who go ’round killing and pillaging and all that. Whether we worship your god or not isn’t relevant. What matters is that our instincts spur us to rob, kill, and multiply.”

I didn’t know anything about this God of Light, but I probably wouldn’t want to worship him anyway.

“*Prepare yourselves, infidels. Your derision of the divine is a grave sin.*”

“Oh, we’ll be as derisive as we want. Not that I know enough about this God of Light to speak of him. But it looks to me like you’re worshipping someone who gets off on punishing the weak and calling it justice. Pathetic.”

“*The penance for your sin is death, foul one.*”

“Do it, Sérignan,” I said as Haristel prepared to pounce.

“Leave everything to me, Your Majesty.”

Sérignan stepped forward. With her corrupted holy sword in hand, she stood poised before Haristel.

“*Steel yourself!*”

“Haaah!”

As Haristel leapt at her, Sérignan fired a strand from her tail and used it to propel herself above the rooftops. Haristel scaled a building in hot pursuit, hopping up to the roof at once by driving its fangs into the wall.

“*Flee not, vile monster!*”

“Keep barking, mutt. I merely moved to avoid involving Her Majesty in this battle.” Sérignan smirked. “Are your claws merely there for decoration? If not, prove it. In turn, I will prove my worth by killing you!”

Sérignan turned her sword in Haristel's direction.

"Fool! A mere insect cannot hope to triumph over an angel!"

"Oh? But I've already slain two of you!"

Haristel rushed forward, and Sérignan ran to meet it. The hound's fangs intersected with the knight's pitch-black blade.

"Ngh!" Sérignan flinched as Haristel's fangs opened a gash in her right cheek. "This is nowhere near enough to stop me!"

Sérignan then stabbed her sword into Haristel's flank.

"Damn you! That's a corrupted holy sword!"

It was only then that Haristel realized it was up against the blade of a paladin who had fallen from grace—a corrupted holy sword, optimal for slaying the sacred.

Took you long enough, I thought dryly.

"Prepare yourself, mutt, for I will sever that head of yours!"

"Do not look down upon me, insect!"

The fight between Sérignan and Haristel was heating up.

"Ungh! Of course a stupid animal would have such... weighted blows!"

"Is this the extent of your power, insect?!"

Haristel assaulted Sérignan with its fangs and claws with startling speed, so the knight could only respond with desperate blocks. The hound's attacks were both heavy and swift, so Sérignan was gradually being pushed back.

"Aim for the eyes, Sérignan!" I called from below. "Take out its sight and smell, and you can handle the rest from there."

"Understood, Your Majesty!"

Sérignan parried the next attack and aimed for Haristel's face as I had instructed. She went for the eyes and nose over and over again in a persistent flurry of swings. Watching her, I felt she was even more animalistic than the hound she was fighting against.

"I'm counting on you. You're the only one I can trust to see this through," I urged her.

"Yes, Your Majesty! Leave everything to me!"

I flooded the collective consciousness with the sheer faith I had in her abilities... and the fight started to tip in Sérignan's favor. My knight regained her footing as if she were reaping the benefits of some sort of spell.

"Haaaaah!"

"Guh! Curse you!"

Haristel probably didn't understand what was happening. Why was Sérignan, who had been standing on the verge of defeat just a moment ago, suddenly gaining the advantage? Why was she filled with fighting spirit, able to counter its blows with renewed vigor? What drove her to fight this desperately?

The answer was simple: Sérignan was a knight, my sword and shield. So long as I trusted her, she would always answer my conviction in kind. This relationship was something Haristel simply couldn't fathom.

Deflecting every attack sent her way, Sérignan switched to the offensive. She slipped between its swipes and snaps and slashed powerfully at the holy beast.

“GaAAaAah!”

The corrupted sword pierced Haristel’s right eye. It staggered, then retreated to another rooftop in pain.

“Curse you, curse you, a thousand curses upon you! How dare you!”

Haristel howled as it bled, its remaining eye glaring at Sérignan more ferociously than before.

“Sérignan, be careful when finishing off an injured animal. They cling to life the hardest when they teeter on death’s door.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan deserved praise for getting this far, but she couldn’t afford to be careless. Animals had powerful survival instincts, and they were purportedly most dangerous when cornered.

Of course, that might not have been the case for an angel. But for beasts, the primal drive to live flooded their bodies with adrenaline, quickened their beating hearts, and pushed them to cling to life with all their might. No matter what it took, they had to *live*, even if it meant lashing out with fangs or claws or any other means of stopping their untimely demise. This beast masquerading as an angel was likely the same.

“The wicked deserve no mercy! I shall tear you limb from limb!”

Indeed, Haristel’s movements were much faster now that it was in peril. Would Sérignan be able to defeat it?

“The only one who will be torn apart here is you, mutt!”

Yes, she could. And she did.

“Aaaagh...”

Sérignan slipped past Haristel’s blind spot—its crushed right eye—and swung her sword at the beast’s thick neck, cutting straight through. Its neck attached by only a thin flap of flesh, Haristel slipped off the building and tumbled down to the ground. And like its predecessors, it dissolved into particles of light and disappeared.

“It can’t be! Haristel the Great... was destroyed?!”

“No! Not our angel!”

Apparently, the knights had had high expectations for their dog. After all, it was the guardian angel of the knights protecting the capital. With their angel defeated, there was nothing more they could do. They had lost all hope.

“Kill, kill, kill them all,” I chanted, as if in song. “Slaughter them, and when they fall, slice them up and make meatballs!”

“All hail the queen.”

The Swarms moved in at once.

“Help! Help me!”

“Fight back! If they get past us, everyone in the city will die!”

Some of the knights fled in fear, while others stood up to the terror of death with their weapons at the ready. Even as the Ripper Swarms lopped off their limbs, crushed their heads, and tore into their bowels, they bravely fought back. They hacked at the Swarms with their blades, even knowing how pointless it would be.

And indeed, it was all in vain.

“It’s over.”

All that remained of the Knights of Saint Erzsébet was a messy pile of a gruesome remains. They had only succeeded in taking down two or three Ripper Swarms.

“Shall we march onward, Your Majesty?” one of the Ripper Swarms asked me through the collective.

“Of course. March. Today, we coat Siglia in a layer of death. Glory to the Arachnea.”

“March, march for Her Majesty.”

“March, march for Her Majesty.”

The Ripper Swarms overran everything, just as I knew they would.

†

Infringement, violation, and ravishment; this was our way.

The Ripper Swarms and I trampled over all who stood in our path. Once we made it to the capital’s center, we invaded a cathedral full of terrified citizens and killed them all. Each and every one of them became an ingredient for our meatballs. Among the victims were pregnant women and crying infants, but my Swarms slaughtered them all the same.

It’s fine, I thought. All of this is necessary.

Our enemy had to be annihilated to secure our victory. I was merely acting in accordance with the game’s rules, and there was nothing wrong with that. The game might have been a bit more realistic now, but the rules remained the same: wipe out every last enemy in order to win. Had I decided to spare even one child, it was possible they would have come after me for revenge many years down the line.

“Onward, my Swarms. Kill everyone you find.”

As soon as the Ripper Swarms snuck behind the northern and southern troops, the soldiers’ fate was sealed. Taking them out was a breeze; the Swarms trapped them in a pincer attack and handily disposed of them thereafter.

The ballistas and heavy infantry posed somewhat of a threat, but the latter were few in number. Only two or three Ripper Swarms were lost in the battle. By now, the Ripper Swarms had learned how to fight these soldiers, so they were able to finish them off with fewer casualties.

All hail the collective consciousness, I suppose.

All it took was for a single Swarm to study the enemy’s fighting style, and

that knowledge instantly circulated to the rest. Now that the Ripper Swarms were adopting new methods of dealing with these adversaries, they were no match for us.

Thus, we put an end to Maluk's northern and southern troops—without mercy, pity, or even a sliver of sympathy. With them gone, the city of Siglia was ours. All that remained was the castle. Once we took down the king, the Kingdom of Maluk would be completely eradicated.

"It doesn't look like capturing the castle will be easy, though."

Siglia's castle was built on top of a cliff extending like a wing from the city. This structure made it so that even if the city itself fell, the castle would still be standing. It was a stronghold solely for those in power.

"How shall we conquer it?" Sérignan asked. "It seems the nobles have barricaded themselves inside the castle."

"We're going in the old-fashioned way. At least there aren't any more walls to take down. Get ready, Ripper Swarms; we're about to storm the castle."

I made my orders through the collective consciousness. Countless Ripper Swarms were standing on the path that led to the castle.

"Onward! Attack, attack, attack! Trample over everything in your path."

With that, my army of Ripper Swarms charged the enemy castle. Soon enough, we would collect the heads of the king, the princess, and the nobles. Those highborn scum would all be reduced to meatballs.

Surprisingly, however, someone would soon stand in our way.

†

"Your Majesty, our walls have fallen."

"The eastern, northern, and southern gates have been destroyed. Siglia is now under the monsters' control."

The king had little time to digest the dismal reports. All contact with the gates had been lost, and their great capital had become a den of monsters. Additionally, every last one of their soldiers had fallen, meaning there were no shields left to protect them.

"Your Majesty, the enemy will come to take this castle as well. We've closed the gates, but I've no doubt they will force them open and break through," said Slava, looking grim.

"We haven't much time left," added Omari. "You must come to a decision, milord. Will you use the Jewel? Or will you give in and surrender us to the slaughter?"

King Ivan II stood up and looked around the room. Only once he had confirmed that Elizabeta was not present did he fix his gaze on the men before him. The first prince had died during the conflict in the loess mountains, while the second had fallen at the Aryl River. The first princess had long been

married off to the Schtraut Dukedom, which left only Elizabeta, who had no place in the war council.

“I’ll do it,” the king declared, his voice full of resolve. “I will use the Jewel and fend off those monsters.”

“Are you certain, Your Majesty?” one of his generals asked quietly. “Once you use it, there will be no going back.”

“We’ve no choice, given the situation. Is there any other way to save Siglia, to save this castle? Our soldiers, our knights... they’re all gone. The Jewel is our only hope.”

Indeed, they had no other way. There were only a thousand or so men left in the castle; all the rest had been killed. The tens of thousands of soldiers and the order of knights had been defeated by the insectile scourge.

Based on the current state of affairs, how could they save Siglia, which had been reduced to a pile of corpses clambered over by monsters?

“The Jewel is already prepared.” The king held up an amber-colored gemstone about the size of his fist. “Once I pass through the front gate, close it immediately behind me. As we all know, those who use the Jewel lose their sense of reason.”

“By your will, Your Majesty.”

“I greatly respect your decision, milord.” Omari offered his monarch a deep salute.

“Make Elizabeta queen after my passing. Understood?”

“Understood, Your Majesty. Her Highness Elizabeta will be Maluk’s next queen.”

The generals among them watched him with solemn eyes.

“Now, I must be off. Should those fiends have hearts at all, I will surely strike fear into each and every one of them.” Ivan II headed for the castle’s entrance. “I will show them that the Kingdom of Maluk will not be ruined so easily. Just you wait, monsters...”

†

I watched as the castle gates opened.

“Are they thinking of surrendering?” I asked. There were no enemy forces in sight.

“You wouldn’t accept their surrender, would you, Your Majesty?”

“Of course not, Sérgnan. Not after we’ve come this far. The rules don’t allow for that.”

As far as I understood, the game didn’t permit surrendering or peace pacts. You either fought until you destroyed the enemy, or you forfeited mid-game, in which case your faction would be wiped out. In this world, which didn’t permit forfeiture, I had absolutely no intention of accepting surrender.

Letting them live at this point would just come back to bite me. That was

why I'd stuck to killing everyone so far. I murdered the tailor, whom I knew. I killed women, children, and the elderly. Nothing was sacred anymore. All I had was a craving for victory. I couldn't tell if it came from me or from the Swarm, but I could not deny this hunger.

"Sérignan, be careful. The enemy might have some kind of trick up their sleeve."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

If this wasn't a surrender, then the enemy was sending something from within the castle. I had no clue what it might be, but it would likely be a considerable threat.

"Your Majesty, be careful! Something dangerous is coming!"

A row of Ripper Swarms lined up in front of me, forming a living wall. I felt grateful for their protection.

"Show yourself!" Sérignan called out to our unknown enemy, approaching the gate with her sword drawn.

"So you're the invaders... The ones who have penetrated and violated our Kingdom."

The one who appeared before Sérignan was an elderly man. Judging by the clothes he was wearing, he was of high status—nobility, or perhaps even royalty. Regardless of who he was, we wouldn't bother letting him live.

"Yes, that's us," I said. "You attacked the elves' village, and you killed a friend of mine. As retribution, and to feed our desire to stain the world with our darkness, we have invaded your country to its very core, massacring all those who stood in our way."

"That's it...? *That* is why you slaughtered millions of our people, defiled our holy land, and have come to destroy our castle?"

"That's right. All this was born from our instincts and our need for revenge. We need no other reasons."

We were the Arachnea, a faction of vicious insects. We killed, we multiplied, we conquered. These drives were hardwired into the collective consciousness. They spurred me to action, as did my personal promise to lead the Swarm to victory.

"You vile creatures are an insult to the God of Light. You were never supposed to be born into this world. You should have never existed. Your being here drove countless people to despair... You are but harbingers of ruin and misfortune."

"Call us what you want. We'll continue to obey our instincts. If we're attacked, we'll strike back, thoroughly and with unshakable bloodlust. We kill and multiply; that's what makes us the Arachnea. I'm proud to be in charge."

Retaliating against an attack was only natural, as was lashing out after being provoked. I was merely stating the obvious. If the Swarm were acting solely according to their nature, they wouldn't need reasons to justify their assault on the world.

“Prattle on with your nonsense. I will end you right here... by the power of our Jewel of Evolution!”

As though triggered by the man’s words, a large, amber stone in his hand began to shine. Within moments, his muscles rapidly swelled several—no, dozens of times their normal size. Coarse black hair burst out from his pores and covered his body from head to toe.

I was initially taken aback by the transformation, but I quickly snapped back to my senses and focused on what had to be done—removing the obstacle before us.

“Sérignan, keep this thing pinned down! Ripper Swarms, cover for her! Go!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Sérignan stepped forward to subdue the man, who was attacking everything around him in a wild rage. Ripper Swarms pounced on him from both sides. I assumed that so long as we attacked him from three directions, even if he was some unknown monster, he wouldn’t have been able to shake them all off. However...

“RaaAaAAagh!”

The hulking man roared and swept away the Ripper Swarms moving in. Their scythes lodged into his arm and their fangs cut into his flesh, but he kept swinging at them as though he didn’t feel any of it.

My Ripper Swarms, which until now had only been defeated by claymores, halberds, or ballistas, were being torn apart. Their limbs were ripped off, their fangs broken, and some of them were even torn in half. They were dropping to the ground in droves.

“This is just... How are we to handle this?!”

Sérignan was unsure how to deal with the berserker before us, dodging his frenzied fists as she racked her brains for a solution. The angels had been powerful, but this man was even more dangerous.

“Sérignan, have the Ripper Swarms attack in coordinated groups. The moment he shifts his focus to the Ripper Swarms, close in on him and swing. He may have gotten bigger, but he still only has two arms. If waves of Ripper Swarms attack him from both sides to keep his arms busy, it should give you an opening.”

I knew my instructions were somewhat difficult. While the enemy would be occupied, that didn’t necessarily ensure an opening Sérignan could exploit.

“I’ll do it!”

Ripper Swarms lunged at him in groups, baring their natural weapons. At the same time, Sérignan charged him from the front, swinging her corrupted holy sword.

However, her attack didn’t meet its mark.

“Ugh...!”

He sank a kick into Sérignan’s stomach, sending her flying to the side.

Sérignan struggled to fix her posture before she stood up to our enemy once more. Just watching her was painful.

“Sérignan, are you all right?!” I cried.

“Do not worry, Your Majesty! I can still fight!”

Sérignan sprang at him a second time, but was kicked away yet again. I tried using the Swarms’ strings to bind the man and inhibit his movements, but he tore them off easily. It was pointless.

There has to be a way we can win this. Some method that will give Sérignan a chance to land her attacks. Something I can use besides the Ripper Swarms. How will we beat this man? Is there still some card in my hand I haven’t used? Something that will save Sérignan?

Then it dawned on me.

“Oh, that’s right. I do have one more thing! Sérignan! Get ready to attack again in five seconds! Ripper Swarms, you attack at the same time!”

“Understood!”

I played the card that would break this stalemate.

“Digger Swarms!”

A split second later, Digger Swarms burst out from the ground. They grabbed hold of the man’s legs in their sharp fangs, rendering him immobile.

Right, the Digger Swarms. I brought them to this battle. He can’t move, and the Ripper Swarms are coming at him from behind. Now’s our chance to strike.

“Haaaah!”

Sérignan sprinted forward and swung her sword at the man’s head with full power. The blade slashed into his meaty neck, severing his head and scattering fresh blood into the air. The man’s body convulsed, and it appeared as though he was about to fall to the ground...

Except he didn’t.

Even without his head, the man warded off the Ripper Swarms’ attacks and grabbed Sérignan between his two giant arms. She writhed and tried to shake him off, but his grip was like iron.

“Sting his arms, Ripper Swarms!” I ordered. We needed to rescue Sérignan.

The Ripper Swarms closed in and injected their paralyzing venom into the man’s flesh. His hold around her slackened, and Sérignan was freed.

“Gah... Urk!” Sérignan coughed and staggered to her feet.

She was in pain, but there was still some fight left in her.

“Sérignan, finish him!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Despite the damage she’d taken, her movements were swift. She took aim and thrust her sword right into the enemy’s heart. This time the man fell to his knees and collapsed, then shrunk down to his original size. We were finally victorious.

“Sérignan, are you all right?” I rushed over to her side.

“Yes, I am fine, Your Majesty.” She looked like she was on the verge of tears. “I apologize for worrying you.”

“Oh, don’t cry. You won. You’re a wonderful knight, and your skill is unmatched. You won this battle for me.”

“Forgive me... Thinking that I have caused you distress makes me feel utterly miserable.”

With that, our battle for the castle came to a close. All that remained was to finish off the people taking cover inside. They had forced so much trouble upon us, we had to pay it back in kind.

†

As the Worker Swarms carried off the man’s body, I picked up the amber gem he left behind.

“What is this?” I asked as I looked at it.

“I do not know, but it seems dangerous,” Sérignan said cautiously.

I feel like I’ve seen this thing somewhere before.

I couldn’t remember when or where, but I definitely remembered it. My recollection was hazy and just out of reach.

“Well, whatever. We can just ask the people in the castle about it.” I picked it up just as the Ripper Swarms were forcing the gate open.

“They’re here! The enemy is breaking into the castle!”

“What?! But His Majesty set out to defeat them!”

The soldiers within the castle had completely lost their fighting spirit.

Cowards.

“Sérignan, Ripper Swarms, and Digger Swarms... Sweep the castle. Oh, and one more order: find several people of high social standing, and bring them to me alive.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”

“Kill everyone else, though. There’s no point in leaving them alive.”

I needed someone who knew about this strange jewel. Normal soldiers wouldn’t be of any value for that. They were only good for one thing, and that was making meatballs.

The Swarm moved according to my orders, tearing the soldiers, servants, and chamberlains to shreds. Every room in the castle was stained with the colors of slaughter. Blood pooled over the floors, the tattered remains of the dead floating on the surface. The stench of death and viscera hung heavy in the air.

“Help! Save me! Please, don’t kill me!” A maid’s screams echoed throughout the stone halls.

Naturally, however, Ripper Swarms soon caught up to her; they stabbed her through the back of the head and tore open her belly. An escaping soldier

caught by the Ripper Swarms was beheaded and slashed over and over in the chest.

“Are things going well?” I wondered aloud.

The castle was surprisingly big, but I had deployed countless Ripper Swarms inside. They rummaged through the cellars, guest rooms, and the king’s study, sniffing out any survivors like tenacious hunting dogs. The soldiers were eliminated, the castle servants killed. Mountains of corpses piled up in the building, and only a scant few survived.

Yes, there were survivors, as I had requested. My Ripper Swarms rounded them up, bound them with strings, and dragged them before me. They were all people of high social standing, clad in expensive clothing. All told, there were twenty or so of them, both men and women.

“So, who is the most significant noble out of all of you?” Upon hearing my question, everyone’s eyes whipped over to a single girl, then hastily averted themselves.

Idiots.

“You there, girl. Do you know what this is?” I presented the jewel in front of her.

She gave a small, terrified nod.

“Tell me what it is.”

“That is the Jewel of Evolution. It’s a royal treasure. They say the God of Light gave it to mankind to grant us great power. Anyone who receives power from the Jewel keeps it until they pass on. Wait...” Suddenly, she looked aghast. “No... Could Father have used it?!”

Oh, so that was the king. I suspected as much. But hearing that it granted power felt off to me. The king hadn’t looked powered-up so much as driven mad. Sure, he was stronger, but it made him a rampaging monster.

Then it hit me.

The so-called Jewel of Evolution was originally an item the good-aligned faction Marianne could produce called “God’s Tear.” It granted whichever unit held it divine protection, temporarily buffing them. In the game, Marianne’s units consisted of fanatics, paladins, and angels... Maybe that was why it didn’t drive them mad? When normal humans used it, however, it turned them into raging beasts.

But to begin with, if this wasn’t the game world, what was this item doing here? Had I been mistaken, and we really were in the game world? There was too much I didn’t know, and I had no answers with my current array of knowledge. I could only rack my brains as I considered the facts.

“What have you done to Father?!” the girl screamed.

“If he’s not here, he’s dead. Though I don’t know who your father is.” I was feeling too weary to put up with her whining.

“No...” she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks.

When Sérgnan cried, I thought it was cute, but seeing this pretty

adolescent break down didn't pull at my heartstrings in the slightest. I merely found her sobs grating. I briefly thought to order one of the Ripper Swarms to lop off her head, then reconsidered.

I didn't feel our actions had been cruel enough to fulfill our need for revenge. There hadn't been enough tragedy to call this a war. We had earned too little to call this an invasion. *Shouldn't we be doing more?*

And then an idea occurred to me.

"Parasite Swarm." I pulled a Parasite Swarm out of my pocket and held it in front of me.

Our noble captives shrieked at its grotesque appearance.

"From now on, you'll be my toys."

"Wait! I'll do anything you say, so—gurk!"

I ordered Sérignan to hold down one man's head as I pushed the Parasite Swarm into his mouth.

"Aaaah, aah, gah, aah...!"

The Parasite Swarm slithered into the man's throat, fixing itself in place and extending its tentacles toward his brain. The man twitched a few times and breathed a few odd moans before his eyes turned hollow, informing me that the Parasite Swarm had successfully taken over.

"You're next."

"Don't! Father, save me! Help me!"

Ugh, what a noisy girl.

Sérignan pinned the girl's head to the ground and kept her mouth open as I forced her to swallow the Parasite Swarm. The small insect pushed its way into her slender throat before clamping down on her flesh.

"Aah... guh, Fath...er... Aaah..."

The girl's gaze went blank; the takeover was complete. *See? She used to be a real nuisance, but now she's a sweet, quiet, obedient little thing.*

"Infect the others with Parasite Swarms, too."

"By your will, Your Majesty."

I left the rest of the work to Sérignan and walked through the now-empty castle alone. There were still pools of blood here and there, but no corpses in sight.

They say Japanese and Germans are diligent workers, but even they don't hold a candle to the Swarm. My Swarms carry out my orders swiftly and efficiently; that's why I love them so much.

"So this is the throne room, huh?"

I found a place in the castle with the fewest signs of bloodshed: the throne room. It was designed around a golden throne with a red carpet leading toward it. The owner of this room had died outside the castle gates, so there had been little blood here to spill. And besides, the blood didn't really appear against the red carpet.

I leisurely walked toward the throne and sat on the lofty seat adorned with

gold and gemstones.

“The Queen of the Arachnea...”

The Arachnea was an evil faction that used the Swarm to devour everything in its path. The Swarm wished for victory and prosperity; in that regard, they were scarcely different from mankind. Humans desired the same things, after all, and they came up with all sorts of slogans and greater causes to justify their wars and bloodshed. The stench of blood hanging over the Swarm just happened to be a bit thicker, that’s all. They really weren’t all that different from everyone else, right?

No... Wrong.

The Swarm wished to cover the whole world with their kind. The word “compromise” didn’t exist in their dictionary. Humans, on the other hand, could compromise, negotiate, and make strides to avoid their own demise.

Like moths drawn to flame, the Swarm actively sought to annihilate their enemies, even if it might result in their own eventual destruction. Their urge to propagate and overrun the world spurred them forward. It was their most basic instinct, the wish that bubbled up from the bottom of their hearts, echoing through the collective consciousness.

You really are monsters. But I don’t mind.

If they wished for such a victory, I would do everything in my power to give it to them. Even if they wanted to conquer every corner of this world, I would comply. I had sworn to lead them to victory, and I would fulfill that promise, no matter how many lives it cost.

But I only did this because I didn’t want them to kill me. I was a coward, when all was said and done. If I didn’t make all these excuses, I would fear myself for having ordered all these massacres.

“Your Majesty.”

As I pondered all this from atop the throne, Sérgnan entered the room. She bowed before me, and the twenty nobles we had enslaved walked in after her. They followed Sérgnan with hollow eyes, tottering unsteadily as they walked.

They were like zombies. Eventually they would be able to walk normally, but since the Parasite Swarms had only just been planted, they weren’t yet functioning effectively. I’d need to keep that in mind the next time I used them. If our enemies could tell what had happened to victims of the Parasite Swarms, the unit would go to waste.

“Sérgnan, are the preparations complete?”

“Yes, they’ve all been planted with Parasite Swarms. They’re completely under your control, Your Majesty.”

The nobles fell to their hands and knees in a show of fealty.

“Good work, Sérgnan.”

As we spoke, Swarms that had finished their tasks began to gather in the throne room. There were no other living humans left in the castle... no, in all of

Siglia. This city had housed hundreds of thousands of people, and every single one of them but our pets had been eradicated. It really was moving, in its own way.

“Well done, my Swarms.”

“We are honored, Your Majesty.” In response to my praise, they assumed an obedient posture.

“All right then, my friends. Our loathsome foes have been defeated. The Kingdom of Maluk has been wiped off the face of the world. This has been an impeccable victory.

“But the battle doesn’t end here. We can’t afford to get drunk off our triumphs and rest on our laurels now. What is our next objective?”

“To spread our control even further. To unify the world under the Arachnea’s rule,” Sérignan said.

“That’s right. But the time isn’t right yet. First we need to take over what was once the Kingdom of Maluk. We need time to develop this land. My friends, you must build Power Organs. You must build Fertilization Furnaces, Flesh Depositories, and Massive Fertilization Furnaces. You must build Airborne Flesh Dens.”

The 4 Xs dictated that I had to develop the land I stole from my foes. I needed to make use of what I’d already developed to build what I lacked, and we had to repair what had been destroyed. Developing one’s faction in this way was the true thrill of the game.

I couldn’t cultivate much since I had slaughtered all the humans, but the Ripper Swarm rush hadn’t consumed all the livestock. We could breed those to make an environment suitable for producing new units. Additionally, we’d need money to unlock new structures. From what I heard, there was a gold mine in the north, so we could send the Worker Swarms to mine it.

Phew.

Normally, pillaging and robbing the enemy until there was nothing left to take before moving on would be quicker. But right now, we didn’t want to needlessly provoke our enemies or make new ones, and I didn’t think we had enough resources to fight against the rest of the world with just what we took from the Kingdom of Maluk.

Recklessly starting wars when we didn’t know how large the enemies’ forces were compared to our own would be foolish and lead us to defeat. I had no desire to be a fool, so I opted for us to focus on development for now.

“We’ll have to decide on our internal policy. It might be boring, but please bear with it; it’s absolutely necessary. We also can’t neglect to tighten our borders’ defenses. The Kingdom of Maluk wasn’t our only enemy. There are others out there, and they might come for this land.”

If nothing else, we knew the Schtraut Dukedom was to the north, the Empire of Nyrnal was to the south, and the Frantz Popedom was to the east. Those countries were mostly made up of humans, and they likely wouldn’t

react favorably to the rise of a Swarm nation. At worst, the three of them might band together to attack us.

“Protect our holy territory. Our empire will flourish—not with blood, but with our sweat and our efforts. This is the duty of all Swarms, and it will serve as our foothold to world domination. You mustn’t neglect that, no matter what.”

My speech was most unfitting for the Swarm. A fitting speech for them would emphasize stealing, killing, pillaging, and multiplying. They needed nothing else, after all. But countless online matches had taught me that this wasn’t always enough to win. Sometimes you needed to hang back and manage your internal affairs, taking the time to unlock higher-tier units and structures, and build up your army. Otherwise, we would face nearly one-sided battles and eventual defeat.

“Please understand. This is what’s best for us in the long run.” I was asking them not as a queen, but as a player.

“All shall be as you wish, Your Majesty. You need only order us, and we will obey,” Sérignan said as she and the rest of the Swarm bowed in acquiescence.

“All hail the queen.”

“All hail the queen.”

Their reverence was loud and strong.

“Thank you, everyone. I will lead all of you to victory, I promise.”

Now more than ever, I felt the Swarm was very precious.

†

Beneath the Kingdom of Maluk’s castle was a treasure vault. The treasures within had been sent by their ally, the Frantz Popedom, and it was used as a space for paladins’ baptisms. By rinsing themselves in the holy water that bubbled up from one smooth, marble pedestal, they could gain the ability to summon angels.

However, not everyone who was baptized in these waters developed the summoning ability. Some people remained unchanged, while others would suddenly bleed from every orifice and fall dead in the middle of the ceremony. Only a handful of chosen paladins were granted the ability to summon angels, it seemed. These select few alone could obtain this supernatural power.

Had the Arachnea’s queen seen this baptismal pedestal, she surely would have made another great discovery. It was yet another in-game item possessed by the Marianne, same as the “God’s Tear.” The official name for this artifact was the “Holy Fountain of the Chosen.”

Using it enabled the Marianne to sacrifice the hit points of a non-spirit unit—or rather, a human unit—in exchange for summoning an angel. The Marianne could use its fanatic units, who were only good for running amok through enemy bases, or its paladins, cavalry units who swore fealty to their

god. Sacrificing either one of them could summon an angel in return.

It was only a probability, however; there was no guarantee. Should the summoning fail, the unit would be lost, and the faction would have nothing to show for it. Additionally, units with low hit points were more likely to die during the summoning, which could also cause it to fail. But while the angels' appearances were random, angels themselves were universally strong, and they could withstand the attacks of most units while striking back with impunity. This made attempting the summoning worth it in the end.

“Completely and utterly useless,” someone scoffed down in the treasury.

The voice had come from a girl with black hair and crimson eyes. She was wearing a black, rococo-inspired dress with a gothic flair and laden with lace and frills. The girl stared down at the Holy Fountain, twiddling her fingers in the water.

“I thought these would end up shaking up the game a bit, but they didn’t do much. There are so few heritages left, but all the people who use them are dummies. And they call this a thinking game? Good grief.”

She leaned against the pedestal.

“How long will she play, I wonder? How high can she climb in this world filled with malice? How long will she stick around in this ruthless game played in the depths of purgatory?

“Well, if she finds out, whatever. She’ll probably suspect something’s up once she sees the Empire of Nyrnal. But if I’m going to make this game more exciting, these things are going to have to go poof. Let’s get to it, then.”

The girl’s grip on the pedestal tightened slightly, and the next moment, the Holy Fountain of the Chosen crumbled to the ground. What little holy water remained seeped down into the floor, and the item was rendered unusable. In its current state, one wouldn’t have been able to guess at what it was once used for.

“This game is super-duper fun... and I’ve finally found someone to play with! I’ll continue to let her amuse me. Playing against girls like her is always a blast, after all. Isn’t that right, _____?”

The girl chuckled and danced around the underground chamber with light, airy steps.

“A game, a game, a fun, fun game! All work and no play makes me a dull girl. So let’s play, shall we, Miss Queen of the Arachnea?”

As the girl spoke, all the things hidden in the treasury crumbled into dust. The Mysticism Furnace, capable of converting faith and producing angels. The Baptism Rite Tool capable of turning men into holy beings. The Massive Mysticism Furnace, capable of summoning giant angels.

Each and every one of them was destroyed by the girl’s hands. From the looks of it, none of them had ever been used, but with only the gentlest touch, they all crumbled away.

She didn’t know why the Kingdom of Maluk had never used any of these devices. If anything, they likely didn’t know how to operate them. If they had,

they'd have used them to summon angels and deal with the Arachnea's attacks. Their ignorance had caused them to make a fatal mistake.

The girl hummed pleasantly as she destroyed the Marianne's items, twirling around in place.

“Well then, the stage is set for our cold-blooded, heartless, massacre drama. Sit back and enjoy, everyone. This is a world where gods may exist, but they never extend their hand in salvation. Aah, let us all dance here under deceptive peace like the sinners we are. For we have been granted this fabricated paradise the false prophets sing of.”

The girl cackled and melted into the shadows. All that remained in the room was the rubble that had once been an array of holy artifacts.

A single Ripper Swarm descended into the underground chamber and discovered the entrance to the treasury. It looked around the room, and while it detected traces of something having been there, it couldn't tell what. Neither it nor the collective had knowledge of the objects the girl had destroyed moments before.

“Your Majesty, I've discovered a basement, but it seems to have already been ransacked by a third party. What should I do?”

“Hmm. It looks like nothing but junk. If there's no one there, just head back. Our work is finished here. All that's left is for us to return to base. We need to make this place livable for us, and let the elves know about this, too.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. Your wish is my command.”

The Ripper Swarm concluded its report and went back the way it came, eventually joining the ranks of the Arachnea leaving Siglia's ruins behind them. Had the queen discovered these Marianne heritages, perhaps the situation would have ended differently.

However, the queen did not yet know this game's rules. On top of that, she was still ignorant as to why this world existed. Only once she found this out would the *real* war begin...

The Smoldering Flames

At Saania, capital of the Popedom of Frantz...

“You’re saying the Kingdom of Maluk has fallen?”

Pope Benedictus III, leader of the Popedom and head of the Church of Holy Light, received this troubling news in his office.

The aging clergyman represented the nation’s conservative faction, and he had been elected just a few years ago. Despite being ravaged by fits of illness, he had kept belief in the God of Light strong during his tenure. The Church of Holy Light advocated honorable frugality under the belief that a life of luxury was in opposition to God’s teachings.

Of course, the same clergymen who preached these sorts of beliefs would often receive monetary bribes from the nobility, who prompted them to bend the tenets in their favor. Divorce, adultery, and exploitation of the masses took place in the church behind the scenes.

The aging pope lacked the power to force his beliefs onto every member of the clergy—not because he didn’t have the authority, but because he didn’t have the resilience to withstand opposition. Illness and old age had weakened him, so he couldn’t rule over the church with the same iron fist as his predecessors. The corrupt priests knew this, so they obeyed the church’s doctrine on the surface while fashioning more wicked tenets in the shadows.

“Aye, Your Holiness,” answered the Pope’s right-hand man, Cardinal Paris Pamphilj. “Judging by the information we’ve received, a caravan tried to enter the Kingdom of Maluk three weeks ago, but the migrants aboard were attacked by monsters during their border inspection. Fortunately, they escaped with their lives. After that, they hired adventurers to investigate Maluk’s trade town of Leen, and it was found to be completely overrun by the same mysterious creatures.”

The cardinal was a truly corrupt man. He had once been part of the reformist faction, which aimed to make the teachings of the church more flexible. When he changed his stance to conservative, he had asked everyone to recall and retain the teachings of the past. With the help of Schraut bankers from the Eastern Trade Union, he had climbed to the position of cardinal.

Following that, he went on to behave as if he’d always been part of the conservative party, skillfully and eloquently moving up the ranks until he became the right hand of the pope. Much like the other crooked members of the church, he accepted bribes and preached whatever his noble backers wanted the citizens to hear. Pope Benedictus III knew nothing of this, however, and still had a great deal of trust in the man.

Still, Paris had yet to return the funds he had borrowed from the Dukedom of Schtraut's bankers. The same held true for the pope, who had accepted a loan from them upon his nomination.

"What of their capital, Siglia? Has it fallen as well?" asked the pope.

"We don't yet know for sure, but the situation seems dismal. We're unable to contact our ambassador there, and I'm afraid the lack of liberation efforts on behalf of a large city like Leen can only mean one thing."

"If that is true, we should have sent them a relief party sooner. We assumed mere monsters wouldn't topple a strong country like Maluk... a grave mistake on our part. Oh, God of Light in the heavens, protect us all."

The Kingdom of Maluk had sent a request for military aid to the Popedom, and the latter had promptly begun preparing its army. The nation had hired mercenaries, prepared a supply train, and said its prayers. In fact, the reinforcements' preparations had been progressing smoothly.

However, it had all turned out to be for naught. While the Popedom of Frantz was slowly preparing to set out, the Kingdom of Maluk had been destroyed by the army of monsters. From an outside perspective, it had all happened in the blink of an eye.

So the Popedom had intended to send out forces, but with what degree of urgency? Corrupt dignitaries like Paris were embezzling the expedition funds, and the pope himself hadn't thought the situation was all that serious.

Monster attacks happened fairly often, after all, and the Kingdom of Maluk had brave paladins blessed by the God of Light who were more than capable of dispatching any unruly beasts. Everyone had faith in their abilities, including Paris and Benedictus III.

Reality, however, proved otherwise. The army of monsters had swallowed up the Kingdom of Maluk. Now the Popedom was faced with not just preventing the Empire of Nyrnal's expansion in the south, but facing the creatures as well.

"How should we respond to this?" asked the pope, still reeling.

"First we must get a handle on the current state of the Kingdom. Sending an army when we know so little of the enemy—that is, the mysterious beasts that attacked Maluk—would be reckless. Let us have the adventurers scout for us."

"Right... There may be some survivors. Increase the adventurers' reward and have them thoroughly investigate the Kingdom. Tell them to find out what happened, and who—or what—was behind the attack."

An adventurer was something of a half-mercenary. Unlike mercenaries, however, adventurers didn't form large groups, preferring to operate in parties of sixteen at most. They were survival specialists, capable of exploring and infiltrating areas off-limits for most mercenaries. Their primary job was to slay monsters.

Monster hunting was a profession monopolized by the adventurers' guild,

and mercenaries were forbidden from partaking. As such, when it came to fighting monsters, adventurers had the most experience, knowledge, and skill.

“We must also summon the International Council. We may not yet know who attacked the Kingdom of Maluk, but whoever they are, they have enough might to defeat a very powerful nation. We would be reckless to face them alone.”

“Be that as it may, I do not like the idea of asking the Empire of Nyrnal for help. The Empire has continuously ignored our requests to mediate peace and instead continued their aggression, and now the entirety of the south is in their grasp. I can only see them sowing conflict in the International Council.”

The Nyrnal Empire was the strongest force on the continent, and while it worshipped the God of Light, it often spurned the church standing at the center of the religion. Time and time again, the pope had attempted to negotiate with the Empire in order to protect the smaller southern nations, but each time the Empire had instead pushed onward to conquer its opponents altogether.

As far as the Popedom of Frantz was concerned, the Empire was a land of faithless infidels who only worshipped the God of Light on the surface. It was a nation of haughty militarism that was fond of committing all kinds of atrocities in order to expand. The people of the Popedom looked down upon the Empire with scorn, even though the Popedom itself had offered aid to the assailed southern nations only to abandon them in the end.

No, the truth was even crueler than that: Paris had tried to take advantage of those countries’ plight to extort them for money, claiming the God of Light would grant them His protection in exchange for donations... and the sum he requested was always quite vast. In a sense, the Popedom had eaten away at the southern countries.

“The Empire of Nyrnal also shares a border with the Kingdom of Maluk. Their neighboring country was conquered by an unknown force, and so they should strive to action and stand alongside us. If they don’t, they might be next in line for invasion,” said Paris.

“True. It is time they acknowledge our authority. We are all one under the God of Light.”

The pope made a mental note to press the Empire to agree to form a unified front during the council. Its military power couldn’t be denied, of course; the Empire held the unified south under its control, and it was vigilantly eyeing the north for a chance to invade.

“Incidentally, what of the elves? Our report says the monsters originated from the center of the elves’ forest.”

“As far as we know, they still follow the path of heretics. They have not accepted the God of Light into their hearts, and instead look up to their savage forest gods and offer them frequent sacrifices. There is no hope of saving them with our teachings. Those sheep, if you can even call them that, will remain lost.”

Like many other humans, those in the Popedom saw the elves as savages. In fact, they were actually the source of the many unfounded rumors about elves, which had been spread as propaganda to reinforce the God of Light as the one true deity.

Of course, not everyone believed them. Some elves were able to live in the Empire of Nyrnal, however poorly, through trading. They also had citizens' rights in the Dukedom of Schtraut, even if they were part of the lowest social class. Only the Popedom and the Kingdom of Maluk completely denied the elves of all rights.

“When should we hold the International Council, then?”

“After we finish making the proper arrangements with the Empire, I’d say. We need to arrange things properly so they don’t cause a ruckus. We may have to give them some... *incentive* to do so, though. Do you approve, Your Holiness?”

“Yes, that is fine. Money is a given in negotiations.”

Words alone would not convince the Empire, so a great deal of money would be needed in times like these. If given enough, Nyrnal’s ambassador would allow the council to proceed undisturbed, at the very least.

“I’ll get right to it, then.”

“Wait. Deploying adventurers is fine, but shouldn’t we conduct our own investigation as well?”

“Are you referring to the Fourth Mystical Research Section?”

“Yes. We should have them look into the Empire of Nyrnal, the elves, and the Kingdom of Maluk.”

The Mystical Research Division was in charge of the Popedom’s intelligence. It was split into sections, with the fourth handling undercover, top-secret intelligence. They dealt in so-called “dirty work,” which at times even included assassination.

“Understood. I will have them hold a covert investigation, then.”

“Please do.”

And so, the Popedom of Frantz began operating in secret... but they were not the only ones making preparations.

†

Word of the Kingdom of Maluk’s tragic fate had also reached Doris, capital of the prosperous, gold-mining nation known as the Schtraut Dukedom.

“The Kingdom of Maluk... was destroyed?!” Caesar de Sharon, the thirteenth Duke of Schtraut, couldn’t contain his shock.

The middle-aged man’s expression was contorted in sorrow and disbelief. He looked as if he had just been notified of the end of the world. Only news this grave could elicit such a reaction from the leader of the Dukedom.

“I’m afraid so, milord,” said his prime minister, Cardinal Charon Colbert.

"It seems they were attacked by mysterious creatures, and even their capital of Siglia was toppled. We cannot currently enter the country. Those monsters are also prowling along the borders, and they attack any invaders on sight."

The prime minister was Caesar's most trusted subordinate. He was a cardinal in the Church of Holy Light and also knowledgeable in matters of state. His vast experience in both politics and diplomacy greatly supported Caesar's administration.

Caesar was grateful that Charon was distant from the Popedom, the center of their religion, because he could state his opinions with relative neutrality. Most of the other cardinals were too deeply rooted in the Popedom to be so frank.

"Aaah, how dreadful," Caesar lamented. "To think we'd lose the Kingdom of Maluk to something so... inexplicable. I had hoped their military might would act as a deterrent to the Nyrnal Empire, but alas."

"Yes. As you know, our army is mostly there for show." Charon shrugged and heaved a sigh. "I was hoping the Empire wouldn't attack us so long as we clung to Maluk."

"Quite so. Do you know how much we've supported Maluk's army? We may be affluent at the moment, but who can say when we might find ourselves on the wane. The value of money might suddenly fall, or the Empire might attack us. We supported them in order to prepare for times like that."

The Schtraut Dukedom had flourished financially and formed a union of guilds which effectively made up the country. Many nations owed the Eastern Trade Union a considerable debt, and its total sum of foreign currency reserves was the greatest on the continent.

The trade union had given a great many loans to the Popedom of Frantz in particular. Everyone, from the pope down to the deacons, had a debt of some sort to repay to the Eastern Trade Union, which was practically its own self-operating territory. But it wasn't just the Popedom; many other countries, and even the Dukedom itself, owed money to the bankers. Even the Empire of Nyrnal had non-negligible debt with them.

The Dukedom's leadership was decided by election, and Caesar had been elected to his post a few years back. While he was a duke in title, his riches matched those of the Emperor of Nyrnal. In terms of resources, he was effectively a king.

This election-based method of government was also practiced in the Eastern Trade Union, located in the southeast corner of the continent. It was a limited form of democracy in which chosen guild masters, nobles, and affluent citizens were given the right to vote. Real democracy wasn't a part of this world as of yet, as it wasn't needed.

The Schtraut Dukedom had a strong enough population to maintain their domestic demands and a great many debts to collect from other countries; so long as it remained standing, this nation would likely never suffer economic

collapse.

But affluent as it was, the Dukedom of Schtraut faced a single problem: Its army was weak. *Extremely* weak. The heads of the merchant guilds, who held the right to vote, were adamant about investing in trade—where the monetary returns were great—rather than the money-sucking organization that was the military.

Thanks to that, the Dukedom of Schtraut effectively had no military to call its own. It did have a naval fleet, which aimed to snuff out pirate activity stemming from a cove on the legendary island of Atlantica, but its ground forces were a laughingstock.

Things weren't all that bad, however. They did have a strike force that made use of the mountainous terrain along the Dukedom's borders. They also had money to spare, which meant they could hire another country's military or groups of mercenaries if need be.

But that would only be possible when they were definitely in times of war, as the bankers and guild masters were opposed to maintaining a large army during peacetime. Should the Nyrnal Empire launch a surprise attack, the only thing protecting the country's fortune would be the mountain strike force, its troops skilled but few in number.

To that end, the Dukedom of Schtraut had fashioned friendly relations with the Kingdom of Maluk and intended to create a military alliance with them. Maluk's military was one of the most prominent on the continent in terms of size, and striking an alliance with them would make even the Empire of Nyrnal hesitant to attack the Dukedom.

Safety in numbers, as they say.

This was the policy Caesar had promoted, and he had tempted the Kingdom of Maluk with large amounts of money. They had *just* been on the cusp of forming the alliance, too. His plan of many years had been a mere step away from coming to fruition.

But the monsters' attack on Maluk had reduced it all to nothing.

The bankers and guild masters had been opposed to his alliance with the Kingdom of Maluk; some preferred an alliance with the Popedom, and others argued that there was no threat to be concerned with in the first place. Now they would likely double down on his other policies to tarnish his reputation.

It was possible that his position as Duke of Schtraut would come to an end before his term was up. Such was the authority of the bankers and guild masters, even if they were traitors to the country, seduced by lucrative business opportunities from the Popedom and the Empire.

"Would allying with the Popedom of Frantz be impossible at this juncture?" Caesar murmured. "I believe we've discussed it once before."

Charon shook his head. "I'm afraid the Popedom's religious atmosphere is simply too strong. The guild masters will probably object to it. They're interested in money, but they care little for God. Besides, forming an alliance

with the Popedom would require us to once again open our coffers. That country is the seat of the pope, after all, who speaks in the name of the God of Light... and they require a great many donations. They use their religious authority as a bargaining chip in order to obtain money, much like the Empire uses its wyverns."

"So the guild masters and bankers wouldn't finance an alliance with them?"

"They'd likely be opposed to it, yes."

"They'd object to anything we might come up with, the bastards. It's as though their only role in the world is to stand in opposition. Whatever the case, we absolutely need a country to ally with. We need an army to deter the Empire of Nyrnal. And what's more..."

"There's no telling when the mysterious creatures that attacked Maluk might come after us. Right, milord?"

That was exactly it. The Kingdom of Maluk was their neighbor, so it was only natural to suspect the Dukedom itself might be next in line. The Dukedom currently had its strike force deployed along the border zones, and they anxiously looked for monsters to appear from the west. The soldiers had sworn to protect the country with their lives, and they remained vigilant despite fearing the monsters' arrival.

"Precisely. Eating monsters is one thing, but I wouldn't want to meet my death being eaten *by* them." Caesar picked up some documents regarding the defense of their border with Maluk. "We should swiftly reinforce the Schtraut-Maluk border and have our men stand on alert. Hire mercenaries and adventurers too, if necessary. The funds that would've gone to our alliance with Maluk should cover the costs."

"Am I to ensure the guild masters understand the severity of this situation?"

"Yes. If need be, we can have the elves join in as well. The Nyrnals are a threat, but monsters capable of bringing down a nation are just as frightening."

Caesar and Charon's discussion continued as the two of them decided the Dukedom's course of action.

†

The Empire of Nyrnal ruled over the southern regions, and as the imperial capital of the largest nation on the continent, Vejya was appropriately maintained. The streets were quite wide, with guild offices on either side, the striking of anvils ringing out incessantly. The city's walls were the largest on the continent, and atop them flapped the Empire's banner: a red dragon brandishing a sword.

But that wasn't just the Empire's symbol; it was the symbol of its might over the other countries. The red dragon was a wyvern, a scaled beast capable

of soaring freely through the skies, dealing death to its enemies. It was also like a crimson vulture, devouring the flesh of the fallen on the battlefield.

Using its wyverns, the Empire of Nyrnal invaded the southern countries one after another, gobbling them up to mature into a grand empire. Only four years ago, the Empire of Nyrnal was merely one of many countries in the south, but the sudden appearance of the wyverns had allowed it to rise as a major power.

The other nations all eyed the Empire as a suspicious newcomer, believing it was still hungry for more territory. The Kingdom of Maluk had built a great fortress near the banks of the Themel River, though it had been destroyed during a recent attack. The Dukedom of Schtraut had swiftly approached Maluk in hopes of forming an alliance that would deter the Empire. As for the Popedom of Frantz, it had appealed to the Empire in the name of the God of Light, pressuring the larger nation to contain its hostilities.

But this grand country had ignored them all. The Empire swelled with dignity and pride as the greatest force on the continent... and it intended to go further still. The Nyrnal Empire's inflated ambition was to rule over the entirety of the continent, uniting all its territories under the banner of the red dragon.

As the mightiest player, the Empire, too, had heard of the Kingdom of Maluk's fate.

“According to the information we received from the Third Imperial Secretariat, the monsters have completely conquered the Kingdom of Maluk,” reported Bertholdt von Bülow, a man of about thirty years old. “We’ve lost contact with the embassy in Siglia, and Maluk’s other cities all seem to be overrun with monsters.”

This hook-nosed fellow was the Chief Cabinet Secretary, and he managed all of the emperor’s tasks and obligations. Having only come into his position during the previous emperor’s reign, the man was shrouded in mystery, leading many organizations to investigate his background.

Some of the people who looked into him were spies employed by nobles in the Empire; others were from the Dukedom of Schtraut’s Office of External Affairs and the Popedom of Frantz’s Fourth Mystical Research Section. The Eastern Trade Union had also done their own prying into his past. All of these groups had sought to find out how this man had pushed his way up to the position of the emperor’s right hand, but their attempts were unsuccessful.

All they knew was that just after this man appeared, the Empire of Nyrnal began spreading the fires of war in the south.

“I see. The grand Kingdom of Maluk was brought down by mysterious monsters... What a pathetic excuse for a country. It seems their militarism was just for show. If that was the case, then we should have attacked them sooner.”

These disdainful words came from Maximillian von Leuchtenberg. This middle-aged man had unified the south and made the Empire of Nyrnal into a nation feared by the rest of the world. Five years ago, Maximillian had

inherited the throne from the former emperor, Friedrich III. And with his rise to power, he began the unification war, during which Nyrnal had devoured the countries of the south under his command.

The other major powers despised this man, and his existence was especially loathed by the Popedom of Frantz, which declared him akin to a devil. He was infamous in the Dukedom of Schtraut as well, where people whispered that he had been born in the pits of hell, like a demon, and had climbed to the surface world to conquer it. Bankers of the Dukedom had even offered to back dissidents within the Empire, hoping to drag him down from his throne.

Both countries failed to usurp Emperor Maximillian, however, and his appetite for conquest was more voracious than ever. Using the wyverns that formed the backbone of his military, and the countless crafty plots concocted by Bertholdt, he had conquered the south with ease. The Empire's citizens revered him as a hero, while the other major powers and the nobles who'd had to flee their southern homelands abhorred him as a vile creature who relied on scaly vultures to succeed.

Why did Maximillian begin his war, indeed? Few knew the answer to that question. Was it purely out of ambition? Did he start the war over some childish hero complex? Or had these invasions been meticulously planned movements that carved out Nyrnal's future? Whatever the reason, there was a sense of impatience to his actions. The man who could be called the greatest ruler on the continent was being spurred by *something*, though no one knew what.

Only one thing was certain: Maximillian wasn't satisfied with his absorption of the southern countries, so he would eventually extend his reach to the north. His hundreds of thousands of troops carried their red dragon banner high, waiting for their chance to strike.

At present, Emperor Maximillian was still digesting news of the Arachnea's destruction of Maluk. It was only natural that he would, as Maluk had been his next target for conquest.

"Nay, Your Majesty," Bertholdt said. "Apparently, these monsters possess terrifying strength. Our scouts engaged the creatures near the border, and their attacks were mostly ineffective. The enemy was so unnaturally fast that our men were forced to retreat."

"Hmm." Maximillian rubbed his chin. "So we cannot underestimate the enemy... Clearly they are more than mere monsters."

A few armed scouts had crossed the Themel River on Bertholdt's orders and attempted to fight the Arachnea's defensive forces. It was only a small skirmish, but it had still been a one-sided fight in the Arachnea's favor.

"We need more information on these monsters. Analyze all the intelligence we've gathered so far, and find out more if you can. We need to learn about these creatures faster than any of the other countries. I can see these monsters shaking up the entire political balance of the continent."

Maximillian could sense that this was more than a handful of monsters running around on a rampage... that this would become a dispute that embroiled the entirety of the continent.

“By your will, my liege,” Bertholdt said, inclining his head. “I will have the Third Imperial Secretariat gather information.”

The Third Imperial Secretariat was a department that dealt in both covert operations of a diplomatic nature and the gathering of intelligence; it was comparable to the Popedom’s Fourth Mystical Research Section. During the unification of the south, its members manipulated information to prevent various countries from forming a rebel front against Nyrnal, dissolving their relations by spreading rumors and mistrust.

“As for your report on the Popedom, they obviously intend to use this situation to unite everyone in the name of the God of Light. Furthermore, I have no doubt they will take advantage of the current tumult to snatch up every military on the continent. We cannot allow it.”

Maximillian had already learned that the Popedom of Frantz intended to gather the International Council, and he suspected it was planning to force all the other major powers to relinquish their armed forces under some ridiculous pretense.

“We haven’t received word from the Popedom yet, but do you suspect they might be plotting something?”

“I do. They have repeatedly complained about our unification of the south. It’s unlikely they’ll sit quietly while this monster business is afoot. They’ll spout their nonsense about the God of Light and move about as it suits their ends.”

“I adamantly agree. For so-called holy men, they are hardly trustworthy.”

The Popedom was indeed trying to gather the International Council, though as of yet there was no telling if it was to seize control of the other military powers.

“Also, the Popedom is likely trying to bribe our diplomats. Make it known that anyone found to have taken a bribe will be hanged.”

“As you wish, my liege.”

Evidently, Maximillian had seen through an attempt from the Popedom to bribe his men.

“Officers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs might not be the only ones; their servants may be bribed for information, too. Hang everyone who has accepted a bribe, regardless of where it came from. We cannot be too cautious, so make no exceptions. Anyone who tries to fool the Empire of Nyrnal must be met with a swift death. Only in so doing can we maintain our integrity.”

“Understood.”

Like Maximillian had said, there was no telling who might have been trying to bribe their citizens for information. When it came to crucial discussions of the state, there was no telling how many people might have been

involved. Even those of the lowest social status might happen to hear something crucial or stumble upon some important document.

If the contents of any such document or conversation were to leak to another country, it would leave the Empire with one card less in its hand in the game of diplomacy. The Empire of Nyrnal had little in terms of soft power, so it needed every advantage it could get. Losing even a single edge could be deadly.

“What of the Themel River?”

“Construct a fortress there and station some of our troops. Withdraw a few units from the forces we sent north and have them head for the Themel to begin construction. For all we know, those monsters can cross the river. We must prepare for every possible contingency. We cannot allow ourselves to fall prey to them, too.”

The Themel River was a natural obstacle, but it wasn’t impassable. Over the course of history, the Kingdom of Maluk had crossed it four times, while the southern countries had crossed it three times, leading to invasions of the south and north respectively. Eventually, the Kingdom of Maluk had managed to draw its southernmost border at the Themel River.

“What will we do regarding the Schtraut Dukedom, then?”

“Right. Offer generous military support to that pitiful little country. Should they refuse, tell them we won’t come to their aid even if the monsters cross their borders. If the monsters are mighty enough to stomp out Maluk, the Schtrauts are likely shaking in their boots and preparing to flee the continent as we speak. In the end, they’re the same as the Eastern Trade Union—fools who think of nothing but money.”

If the Dukedom agreed to their military aid, then the Empire’s forces would be stationed and then normalized in their territory; it would effectively be a military occupation. The Empire had used such methods during the unification of the south. It would force neutral countries into a pincer between enemy countries, then station its army in the middle under the pretense of assistance. The Empire would then use this army to seize power from within. It was a truly vile method of conquest.

It was because the Empire of Nyrnal preferred using such methods that the Dukedom of Schtraut feared it so much. This quasi-democratic country knew that the Empire would easily occupy its land, extort its citizens, and snatch away its independence in the blink of an eye.

“You believe they would flee the continent?” Bertholdt asked. “Fleeing would be easy. If you’ll excuse me, my liege, I say let the wealthy merchants become poor migrants if they want to.”

“The taste of despair will hit them soon, for they will be faced with the simple truth that there is nowhere to run. But for the time being, we must first make sure the Popedom dances for us. And dance they will.”

First, the Empire of Nyrnal would press its demands in the International

Council. Ideally, it would grasp control of the newly formed allied forces. To take full advantage of that, the Empire would then send its army into each of the other major powers. Even if it couldn't seize control right away, the Empire would be able to use the allied army's dispatch as a bargaining chip and increase its influence over the continent.

"And we can use this monster uproar to take control of more territory—the Dukedom, the Eastern Trade Union, and the Popedom... It is imperative that we unify the entire continent under our control, and soon. We must spare all who live here the fate that befell the Kingdom of Maluk."

After all, what could be more awful than a war... or those monsters?

"Incidentally, what of Georgius?" Maximillian abruptly changed the subject.

"He still lies dormant. Should we wake him?"

"Depending on the situation, that may be necessary," Maximillian said, leaning back against his throne's backrest. "In times like these, the lands of dragons may need their hero—both the Empire and Gregoria."

Gregoria was another faction from the game, same as Marianne... and it was a land of dragons.

Alteration

“The Kingdom of Maluk has been reduced to ruins,” I declared to the residents of Baumfetter.

Scars from the knights’ attack on their village were still visible everywhere. I was standing in the village’s assembly area, which was near the newly erected graves of the fallen. To supplement my declaration, I presented the nobles I had taken captive.

“Isn’t that Princess Elizabeta?”

“Did you really destroy the Kingdom of Maluk?”

The elves looked over the prisoners with disbelief. Their skepticism didn’t surprise me; from what I could tell, the Kingdom had been persecuting them for a long time. But with reality thrust before their eyes, the elves were bound to understand that the Kingdom of Maluk had met its doom, and that the Arachnea was terribly powerful.

“I’ll say it again: all that remains of the Kingdom of Maluk is rubble; there’s no one left to threaten you now. Additionally, the Arachnea is in control of the Kingdom’s former land. But don’t worry, we intend to allow you to freely live in this forest. It will be your own autonomous territory, and you will be free to govern it as you wish. We *will* have to supervise your diplomacy, though.”

“We’re quite grateful, but are you sure this is all right?” asked the village elder.

“Sure, I don’t mind. We’ll have to keep an army stationed here, and we’ll hold absolute jurisdiction over your military. From what I’ve seen, the area around this forest is a crossroads, with the Schtraut Dukedom to the north, the Frantz Popedom to the east, and the Empire of Nyrnal to the south. If anyone tries to take military action against you or the Arachnea, this place will become a battlefield.”

“A battlefield?!”

Elves were such a complacent race. A good look at the map would have made it clear this area was in the middle of an intersection between the four greatest countries on the continent.

True, there was no highway running through here, and there were no fields either. This world depended on feet and carriages to ferry goods, so maintaining an army’s line of supply would be difficult... but not impossible. Countless victories against the odds had taught me that any challenge could be overcome with enough motivation.

“Don’t worry about it. You’re under the Arachnea’s protection. We’ll

dispose of any country that tries to harm you. Or would you rather be under another country's protection instead?"

"No, not at all! It's only thanks to you that we're safe right now... and that the loved ones we lost have been avenged. We're lucky to be in your care."

Naturally, I thought. As far as I had found, all the most powerful nations on this continent worshipped the God of Light. *Uncouth monotheistic zealots, the lot of them*. The elves wanted to practice their own religion in peace, but those countries had tried to force them into abandoning it to instead worship the God of Light.

But now that they were under our protection, they didn't need to worry about that. If nothing else, I had no intention of infringing on the elves' beliefs. Gods didn't exist either way, so they could believe whatever they wanted.

If there were gods out there, they'd have heard Lysa's prayers and saved Linnet, and they'd have punished me for slaying so many people; I knew this because I had experienced modern faiths back in my own world. But neither of those things had taken place. According to myth and legend, gods loved to force mortals to partake in all sorts of trials. They tested people to see if they could prove themselves to be pure and noble.

In that regard, I was a complete and total failure. I had no way of knowing if there was a god out there, but if there was, I had no doubt he or she hated me. I would no doubt be cast down to hell for my actions, and I would have no choice but to obey. Yes, if God was real, I was destined for the netherworld.

"I hope we continue to be on good terms going forward, then. In fact, I've got the contract right here." I spread out a diplomatic paper detailing our relationship on the table. "This document states that so long as you stay under the Arachnea's protection, you retain your autonomy in the forest. Could a representative of yours sign it?"

If they signed, the elves would receive our protection, have a right to self-government in the forest, and retain diplomatic relations with us. I didn't know how to write in this world's language, so I had Elizabeta write it for me.

I'd have to learn how to read and write at some point, but thankfully the Swarm's collective consciousness made studying much easier. If one of them learned a bit of grammar, it would transmit to the rest, enabling them to learn it too. When it came to vocabulary, if one individual learned to separate terms into categories like military, cooking, weather, and so on, the others would learn it in no time. I could use Elizabeta and the other captives to learn how to write.

"I will handle it." As could be expected, the elder nominated himself.

"Then just write your name here, as the representative of Baumfetter."

"Here, yes?" The elder delicately wrote down his name, though I couldn't read the elven language, either.

Honestly, he could have written "nincompoop" instead, and I wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. Despite that, I chose to trust him. The

elves had witnessed the overwhelming power of the Arachnea, and they knew they'd gain little by opposing us. Well, if they didn't realize it now, we'd just have to drive the point home later on.

“Then I'll put my name right here...”

But just as the words left my lips, a cold shock came over me.

What was my name?

I definitely had a name back when I lived in Japan, but right now, I couldn't recall it. I was drawing a blank about this key part of my identity. My name was completely gone from my memory, as though it had never existed.

“Is something the matter?”

I, on the other hand, was on the verge of throwing up. Had my consciousness been completely consumed by the Swarm's, leading me to forget myself? It was certainly possible.

“Your Majesty...?” Sérignan asked worriedly.

Right, Sérignan has a name, and she's connected to the collective consciousness just like I am... so that's out.

“Sérignan,” I whispered.

“What is it, Your Majesty?”

“Sérignan... give me a name.” I was clinging to her for support. “Anything will do. I need a name.”

“A name?” Sérignan knitted her brow. “How about Grevillea?”

“Grevillea? What does it mean?”

“It is the name of a plant, also known as the spider flower.”

It was the name of a fair flower... and one fitting for the leader of the Swarm.

“All right. Thank you, Sérignan. From today on, my name is Grevillea. Grevillea, Queen of the Arachnea.”

Having gained a name, I felt like I had grown a bit more distant from the collective consciousness. I didn't know if that was for better or worse, but I was relieved to be able to affirm my individuality. It meant I was still distinct from the nameless Swarms.

“I'll sign, then.” I wrote my name and title on the document. “With this, we've sealed our agreement. I hope our good relationship extends far into the future.”

And so the forest elves officially entered the Arachnea's protection. Some among them were opposed to the decision, but upon learning that we had defeated the Kingdom of Maluk, and that they were now being threatened by the strongest nations on the continent, they quickly changed their minds.

†

“Now the elves should have some peace. Even if we're faced with the largest, strongest army on this continent, we still have a fair chance,” I said.

I was back at the original Arachnea base. It hadn't been used in some time, but it was a functional base all the same. It still had a working power plant, a Fertilization Furnace, and a flesh depository. I had even built some of our newly unlocked structures and facilities here, but I didn't plan to use them until later down the line. At the moment, we didn't have enough resources for them to start producing units.

"I had lunch at Baumfetter today, so I'll skip my next meal. Thank goodness I can kiss that hard bread and jerky from our long marches goodbye. Time to have a nice, warm bath and sleep in my soft bed."

The new facilities hadn't come with a bath, by the way. I'd had the Worker Swarms build it a while ago, when I complained that I wanted a proper place to wash off.

"Care to join me, Sérignan?" I asked her on my way there.

"May I?" She blinked in surprise. "But I can't remove my armor, so I'll surely get in the way..."

"Oh, right, you can't take that off. Couldn't you use your Mimesis, though?"

Sérignan's armor wasn't a piece of equipment, but part of her body, so she couldn't take it on and off... in her present form, anyway.

"I could try, I suppose."

"Mmm. We'll have to get ourselves a large hot spring or something."

Taking a bath with Sérignan was turning out to be a bit more problematic than I thought. As I was trying to come up with more ways to do so, a voice called out behind me.

"Your Majesty, may I have a moment?"

The Arachnea base was protected by Ripper Swarms, so it wouldn't be easily infiltrated. The only people the Swarms would let through were the elves who came to offer us food, the elder, or the few elves I had a personal connection to. When I turned around, I came face to face with someone awfully familiar.

"Lysa? What are you doing here?" I asked. "Do you need something from us?"

"Yes. Umm..." Lysa fidgeted in place. "I want you to let me join the Arachnea's army."

"You want to join my army? Why?"

"I've been thinking that I'm not good enough as I am now. If only I were stronger back then, I could have saved Linnet."

Lysa had had to watch her childhood friend, whom she loved, die right in front of her eyes. Naturally, it was still on her mind even now. It would have been strange if she *hadn't* been hung up over the death of the person she had grown up with and promised to marry.

"I'm sorry, but I don't need elves in my army. I understand your reasons, but I can't allow you to join us."

“Please! I want to be as strong as Sérignan!”

I held the elves’ skill with a bow in high regard, but it didn’t suit my fighting style. The Arachnea was a threat bound together by the collective consciousness, capable of attacking the enemy with overwhelming numbers and unparalleled solidarity. A single elf in my army wouldn’t really contribute anything. If she were a unit capable of evolving like Sérignan, it would be a different story, but even then, only Sérignan was connected to the collective consciousness.

“Hmm... In that case, would you be willing to give up on being an elf?” I asked quietly.

“What do you mean?”

“If you’re truly willing to shed your race and become part of our ranks, there’s a very simple way of doing so.”

Yes, it was almost too easy.

“This is a Converter Furnace,” I said, walking over to a nearby structure. “It turns other living beings into Swarms. I built it thinking we could capture wild animals like bears or wolves, or even monsters, and forcibly turn them into Swarms. But it should work on elves, too.”

This was one of the new structures I’d asked the Worker Swarms to build. Its primary function was transforming non-Arachnea units into Swarms. If I were to use it on bears, for instance, they would become Swarms that had bear-like traits; if I used it on wolves, I would end up with Swarms that had an especially keen sense of smell. The transformed units would also be loyal to me, since becoming a Swarm linked them to the collective consciousness.

I didn’t know what would happen if I were to put an elf inside it... but when I had captured human units in the game and used the Conversion Cauldron on them, it resulted in human-like Swarms. In fact, in Sérignan’s own backstory, she swore fealty to the Arachnea’s queen and stepped into a Conversion Cauldron of her own will. I figured it would probably work the same way for an elf, but I had my doubts.

“I’ll warn you ahead of time, though: the Swarm has a collective consciousness. If you become a Swarm, you’ll be swallowed up by it. At worst, you might end up losing your individual will.”

Lysa wasn’t a Swarm. She had her own personality and free will. I couldn’t imagine what would become of her if she was integrated into the collective consciousness. She might end up forgetting her beloved Linnet, or she could retain her individuality even within the collective, like I had.

“Please, let me do it. I want to be stronger so I can protect the people I love. I’ve already lost Linnet... I won’t lose anyone else.”

Lysa was determined to do this, and she didn’t really seem to mind my warning. She would not allow herself to forget Linnet; that much was clear. The memory of his death was still deeply ingrained in the Arachnea’s collective consciousness as well. After all, that was the moment we had decided to

declare war on the Kingdom of Maluk.

“All right. I can see you’ve made your decision. Go ahead inside the Conversion Cauldron, then. It’ll all be over before you know it.”

I opened the doors to the Conversion Cauldron, which was eerily similar to an iron maiden, and gestured for Lysa to enter.

“Here I go...” Lysa took a deep breath and walked inside.

I closed the doors on her, and then...

“Aaah, aaahhh, aaAaAHhh!”

Her piercing scream rang out from inside the device.

“Lysa?! Lysa, are you all right?!” I felt panic rising up inside me.

But soon the screaming died down, and the Conversion Cauldron opened back up again.

“So this is what being a Swarm is like...”

Lysa’s appearance had changed drastically. Like Sérignan, she had insectile legs sprouting from her new body—eight legs, to be precise—and a scorpion-like tail. She seemed quite baffled by her new form, inspecting her arms and tail curiously.

“Well, are you still... you?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

Her consciousness hadn’t been consumed by the collective. When I considered her, Sérignan, and myself, maybe it wasn’t actually all that easy to lose oneself to the Swarm.

“Can you use Mimesis, Lysa?” I asked enthusiastically,

“Mimesis?”

“Try imagining your old body. Concentrate on it, hard.”

“My old body...”

Lysa hummed as she imagined her elven form, and after a moment, her chestnut hair twirled into a pair of twintails, and her body was once again lithe and small, clad in pants and a tunic.

“I’m back to the way I was?”

“Not exactly. Mimesis is kind of like a disguise. If you lose focus, you’ll go back to your Swarm form.”

Upon seeing Lysa’s eyes dart around in surprise, I had to suppress a giggle.

“Anyway, I hope to see you do good work, Lysa. Welcome to the Arachnea. We’re glad to have you.”

Thus, I turned Lysa the elf into one of us.

What a pleasant surprise this was, I thought. Having two units capable of using Mimesis should increase my range of strategies.

†

War had begun. This terrible conflict would surely consume everything. Yes, the hounds of war had been let slip, their howls as sharp and shrill as the

screams that would ring out during the inevitable massacre.

It was the Arachnea that had started this war. This fearsome nation had appeared out of nowhere, baring its fangs against the world. Its grotesque insects had crawled out from a pitch-black womb and consumed the Kingdom of Maluk. Now they stood primed for their next assault, with their queen there to guide them.

This conflict would soon be called the Arachnea Campaign. Cries of war echoed through cities, villages, fortresses, affluent neighborhoods, guild streets, and slums. Soldiers and generals alike called out, with voices crying out for blood around them.

The emperor, the king, and the duke all convened, gathering mercenary groups and ordering their combat engineers to fortify the walls. Walls that had not seen a single scratch for many peaceful years were soon guarded by soldiers wearing brand-new uniforms, vigilantly keeping their gazes fixed westward.

They believed that the enemy—the insects—would surge in from the west. *Keep your eyes on the west*, their superiors said. *Be wary of the west. Should the enemy come, raise your voice. Blow the horn of war, and cry out, even if you are driven mad.* Such was the soldiers' duty, even if it meant wearing out their throats in the process. As servicemen, they were willing to sacrifice themselves even if they were up against nightmarish, many-legged horrors.

Were they ready for the insects' arrival? If they were not, then it was far too late for them. Their land would be devoured by an army of bugs, and their citizens would be made into meatballs. If they did not take every measure possible to stop the wicked tidal wave, they would never survive.

It was as if the gates of hell were on the verge of swinging open into this world. Yes... The tyranny of the Arachnea was upon them. Even the haughty Emperor of Nyrnal held his breath as he awaited the creatures' impending march. The Arachnea cast a shadow over the Popedom of Frantz, one their faith in God could not illuminate. All the other countries could only quiver in terror.

Where would this flood of insects reach next? Everyone waited with bated breath, doing their best to prepare for the worst—the Schtraut Dukedom, the Frantz Popedom, the Empire of Nyrnal, and all the other small countries in between. They dreaded the coming of that flood, and so they prepared.

“We go northeast,” the Queen of the Arachnea declared.

Her order coursed through the collective consciousness, and every single Swarm under her command turned its compound eyes to the northeast... to the next country that would taste devastation.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Her Majesty's Swarm: Volume 1
by 616th Special Information Battalion

Translated by ZackZeal
Edited by Taylor Fonzone

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 616th Special Information Battalion
Cover by Eiri Iwamoto

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2018 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.
Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd.,
Tokyo.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976,
the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without
the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's
intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not
owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: January 2020