

"[General], if you don't mind me asking, why are you refusing to field the wyverns? I would think them useful in any army."

Rathos allows his eyes to move away from the enemy army. He looks at the level 121 [Strategist Captain] with a contemplative look.

"It takes a decade for a full-grown Wyvern or Griffin to be armed, armored, and trained for warfare. Too many kingdoms have fielded aerial units in armies, and almost all have been failures."

"Sir?"

"Flying beasts are large targets where one good arrow could end them very easily. Against an army of [Archers], they are nothing, even when heavily armored. To make any true dent into an army requires a rider with skills specialized in keeping the beast safe and alive so they could be useful."

"But still, with enough of them-" Doreson goes silent at Rathos annoyed glare.

"Listen, Doreson. Sending in an untrained wyvern army will indeed give us victory, but many of the wyverns will die. Remember, monsters do not level like us. They eat the flesh of powerful monsters or live long enough to grow powerful."

Doreson sighs.

"I still don't understand."

Maybe in the future, if he is caught fighting a worthy army, then he may need to take the loss. But for now...

**"Half march forward."**

His words travel to all the soldiers, and as one, the army starts to move towards the enemy.

"Why, again, did we wait for them to get into position?" Doreson asks. "Would it not have been better to attack when they aren't prepared?"

Rathos leans on the chariot's rail, his eyes moving left to right as he stares at the very boring enemy formation. [Soldiers] in the front, [Archers] in the back, and [Cavalry] on the left. The right flank is clearly open to a flanking cavalry charge. Then again, it could also be bait. Rathos once placed all his elites on an open flank of his army. He baited the enemy cavalry into attacking that flank and won the battle rather easily afterward.

But, that only works if you have a way to hide levels, which, to Rathos satisfaction, the enemy does not. The enemy army is larger, about twice his own force, but they are less than half his army's average level with, more than likely, inferior equipment.

"It is better for us if we take the time to keep our own forces in good order," Rathos replies.

"But they are stronger if they are prepared," responds Doreson in annoyance. So far, the [Strategist Captain] has not been following along. Everything so far seems like mistakes, obvious mistakes that a [General] as "great" as Rathos should not be making.

"True. However, Doreson, they are not prepared for us.. We have every advantage in this battle, now watch and learn."

Rathos raises his hand and makes several signs. The army's entire formation evolves and shifts as one. Centaur [Archers] take to the front while the [Soldiers] begin to clump up tightly in the center. The [Cavalry] mixes in with the [Archers].

**"Forward March!"**

The army starts to move down the hill and Rathos smiles as he watches the enemy leaders gaze in confusion at the movement. They have never seen such a formation, nor have they ever heard of someone giving up the high ground like that.

"They're just standing there. Why aren't they moving?"

"They are. If you look to the left, the [Cavalry] is inching away from the army. They plan to attack from the rear," Rathos explains.

"Should we intercept?"

"Not yet."

Rathos doesn't say anything more, allowing his own army to move closer and closer. Doreson just watches in anticipation. Looking around, he can see that he isn't the only one. Everyone else seems on edge... except for Darrow. The goofball has a dumb smile on his face.

"They're not moving. Why? Shouldn't they also approach?" Doreson asks.

"They don't need to. We are approaching them. They are waiting for us to get into bow range so they can shower us with arrows."

"That doesn't seem very smart on our part, then."

Rathos smiles, not a cocky smile or an arrogant one, but one born from over a decade of experience, serene, as though he is walking through a field of flowers. He knows the martial skills, at what levels those skills are gained, and how effective said skills are. Today, in this scenario, he applies his knowledge of range. Specifically, the range difference between a longbow or a composite bow and a recurve bow.

**“Quarter march. [Archers], target their rear, fire for effect.”**

The army slows to a quarter of its speed and a third of the [Archers] fire a volley of arrows. As the first salvo ascends, Rathos observes the enemy [Soldiers] raise up their shields and create a textbook shield wall. A very effective countermeasure against swarms of Arrows.

But the [General] had calculated his range.

The arrows pass over the enemy [Soldiers] and instead land upon the lightly armored [Archers].

“You... You knew!” Doreson accuses.

“And no one else seemed to. Amateur mistakes. They shouldn’t have allowed us to get so close.”

A second volley rises, then a third, each in turn, blanketing the enemy archers in a continuous rain of arrows.

Doreson looks to the enemy army, watching as the [Archers] are in a panic. They return fire, but their missiles fall short. Their [Captains] yell orders and activate skills, but they have no way to stop arrows that outrange them and are constantly falling into the [Archer] line.

Eventually, the enemy commander orders the [Archers] to back off out of range.

“Doreson, apply your skill to our [Archers].”

Doreson frowns. “That’s one of my best skills. Should we really use it so early?”

Rathos’s smile vanishes as he gives the [Strategist Captain] a very displeased scowl.

“That was an order, Captain.”

Doreson gulps. “[Strategic Angle].”

It is widely known by the military community that similar skills used in succession give fractionally fewer boosts after the first. Five skills doubling the power of a strike may only triple its power when used together. It is why a dozen [Captains] aren’t stronger than a dozen [Knights]. They can stack their skills, but if the skills are similar, then the boosts do not multiply.

There are only two, nay, three exceptions to this rule. The first, as many will know, is a [General]'s skills. Their strongest abilities are able to significantly increase the strength of their army

The second are the skills of royalty and nobles, but those tend to be fickle.

The third exception is [Strategist]'s skills. Though weaker than the skills of a [General], they are able to improve an army by a decent percentage.

Which is exactly what happens here. All of the [Archers] shift their bows to the perfect angle so to maximize their arrows' range. This movement increases the [Archer]'s range by a good twenty percent. Enough that the enemy's retreating [Archers] continue to be peppered by arrows, forcing them farther back.

"I feel as though I've wasted my skill," Doreson says.

Rathos crosses his arms across his chest. So far, he has yet to even activate a single skill.

"It will be wasted if I don't take advantage of the opening."

The [General] takes a breath, right as the arrows are about to no longer be in range.

**"[Soldiers], halt march. [Cavalry], disperse left, circle around. [Archers], disperse right. Line spread towards enemy [Cavalry]."**

Several things happen at once and Doreson is barely able to keep track. Of the fourteen thousand troops that comprise the army, over half leave. Five thousand centaur [Archers] gallop across the path of the 3000 strong enemy cavalry. At the same time, four thousand allied light [cavalry] leave with explosive speed to the right.

"These, Doreson, are skills. Not the kind that you get from leveling up, but from the knowledge of tactics."

Rathos points at the enemy cavalry as it is getting peppered by the centaur [Archers] closing with them.

"With the enemy [Archers] so far back, their [Cavalry] no longer has ranged support, nor do they have the speed to evade our centaurs."

He then points towards the enemy army. Doreson watches as the enemy [Soldiers] start running back to intercept the [Light Cavalry], but the distance between [Soldier] and [Archer] has grown too far. The allied [Light Cavalry] crashes into the undefended and disordered backline with

deadly force. Limbs are severed, bodies are pierced, and the rest of the remaining enemy [Archers] lose their lives. The [Cavalry] quickly retreat as the frontline is about to reach the back.

“Amazing... and without skills.” Doreson shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t understand.”

“I told you, skills aren’t everything. It’s a poor [Strategist] who uses no strategy. Without tactics, you fail to use your power efficiently. But, if you combine the two...”

Without waiting for Doreson to ask another question, Rathos points towards the centaur [Archers].

**“[Guided Aim], [Instant Reload], [Knocked Arrow], [Flash Draw], [Automatic Reload], [Quick Shot].”**

In the span of two seconds and half a dozen skills that would make most people pass out, Doreson watches every [Archers] hand blur, releasing five arrows in quick succession, each one hitting a target. Like puppets with strings cut, the riders fall off their horses. Three thousand riders dead or injured in mere seconds.

“How...?”

Rathos smiles but says nothing else. He instead turns to the main army. The majority of the enemy army still lives. [Soldiers], but enough of them to still pose a threat.

“What next?” Doreson asks after a bit.

Rathos shrugs.

“Simple. We take the horses and retreat.”

“Retreat? I still think we can win. They don’t have any [Archers] or even [Cavalry]. If it’s just [Soldiers], then we can win.”

Rathos shakes his head.

“Dragkenoss took all of the highest leveled heavy [Cavalry Captains] with him. I don’t want to risk these elites without proper leadership.” Rathos glances at his [Archers], “We also need to refill our quivers. The [Archers] have already used most of what they have.”

“But-”

“We would win, Doreson, but not without unacceptable loss of life. For now, we have dealt a major blow without any major losses. They will need time to organize and tend to their wounded and dead. We have bought time to prepare for a new offensive.

Doreson quickly shuts up as Rathos gives him another glare.

**“All units, fall back to the hill. [Tactical Retreat].”**

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A gentle knock sounds on the carriage door, which brings to me a smile. I feel at peace when subjects clean their attitudes, especially when those subjects are my [Knights]. They must uphold and protect my virtues at all times, just as they defend my person, even when faced with imminent death. Cleanliness is a sign of Kingliness, as my mother used to say.

“Come in Ferrante,” I say aloud as I sense the [Knight] at the door. Not exactly a new skill, but more of a strengthening of my new class. For some odd reason, I can sense any nearby elites. I wonder if this is that Aura thing that Joseph has been talking about.

The door opens slowly and I find the sight beyond appalling.

“[Knight] Ester, you are filthy... and is that blood I see?”

By the door, my subject dares to present a dirty face with... three specs of dust and a half trail of blood on his neck.

Ester lowers his head quickly. “My liege, I beg your forgiveness, but I must report the results of the battle posthaste.”

I frown at the [Knight], but his urgency moves me to postpone my reprimands until later.

“Speak. What of the battle? Have we won?”

Ester gulps. “Th-” he cuts himself off with a shuddering breath. “The enemy has retreated.”

“What? Why??” I ask, clearly sensing a half truth within his words.

“Our [Cavalry] is wiped out and most of our [Archers] have been eliminated. A quarter of our forces are dead.”

My lips seal tightly as I sense no false statements.

“What of Ferrante?”

Ester lowers his head, now hiding his disgustingly dirty face. “Ferrante is dead. The enemy [Cavalry] ran him down alongside our [Archers].”

Killed? Damn. He was leading my armies. Finding someone with his expertise and skills will be difficult. I may need to grab some of Gravitus's [Tacticians] and see if they will swear loyalty.

"He died in service to the crown. Few men have such an honor." I lean back on my couch, relaxing despite my annoyance. "How many of the enemy died for this minor victory of theirs?" I ask.

"Twelve."

I perk up with a smile. If I remember correctly, the enemy army numbered just slightly more.

"Twelve thousand killed. Hmm, so Ferrante did not waste my [Soldiers]. Impressive."

My [Knight] quickly shakes his head. "Twelve sir. Not twelve thousand, but twelve. We were only able to kill twelve of those... horse-men when they charged into the [Archers]. The enemy only lost twelve."

My mouth gapes wide open at his words, all true. How could this...?

**"GET ME JOSEPH!"** I scream.

Ester's eyes pop out in fear.

"Yes sire!"

Without even closing the carriage door, he runs from my carriage while I grab for my wine.

How! We had more than double their number? How do we lose a quarter and they only lose twelve. This... Madness!

I uncork the bottle and drink straight from its lips. Only after a long swig do I finally set it aside. The burn of the liquor as it slips down my throat distracts me from my anger long enough for me to regain a semblance of composure.

I wait for several minutes, attempting to piece together how such a result is possible, but without having seen the battle, then I am merely grasping at thin air. My only thought is of this Rathos character using overwhelmingly powerful skills... but even then. There are limits!

Joseph enters the carriage without knocking or fanfare. His expression is abnormally subdued.

"Who exactly is Rathos?" I ask slowly.

The [Inquisitor] sits. "Rathos is a [General] who, during the last five years of his service, had not been defeated once. He is considered a prodigy, someone that even the [Grand Chancellor] of Odin acknowledges as a threat."

Joseph then sighs. "I warned you that it would be dangerous... but it seems even I am surprised by the results. The monsters he leads... Some of them outlevel me. I... I don't believe you stand a chance of winning. To continue on would be a death sentence."

I control my composure and keep my anger reigned. Without the wine, I may have lost myself to rage right then and there.

But no. I sigh. "Fine. I will call for a retreat. It seems I will have to forgo war for a time."

Joseph frowns. He scratches the side of his short beard and looks at the carriage window. After a moment, he finally replies.

"I don't believe he will allow that."