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Knight's & Magic

2



Knight's & Magic 2

INTRODUCTION

Defying Common Sense

Many have remarked how impressed they are that our hero, **Ernesti**, is not trapped by common sense. In this second volume, Ernie's refusal to consider his circumstances engenders consequences that reach beyond the academy and even the country. All manner of adults are getting dragged into this twelve-year-old's hobby, but not just any hobby leads to an incident of **international proportions**. Just how far will the runaway train that is Ernie go? You won't be able to tear your eyes away! Indeed, his very existence may **defy common sense**.

illustration:
KUROGIN

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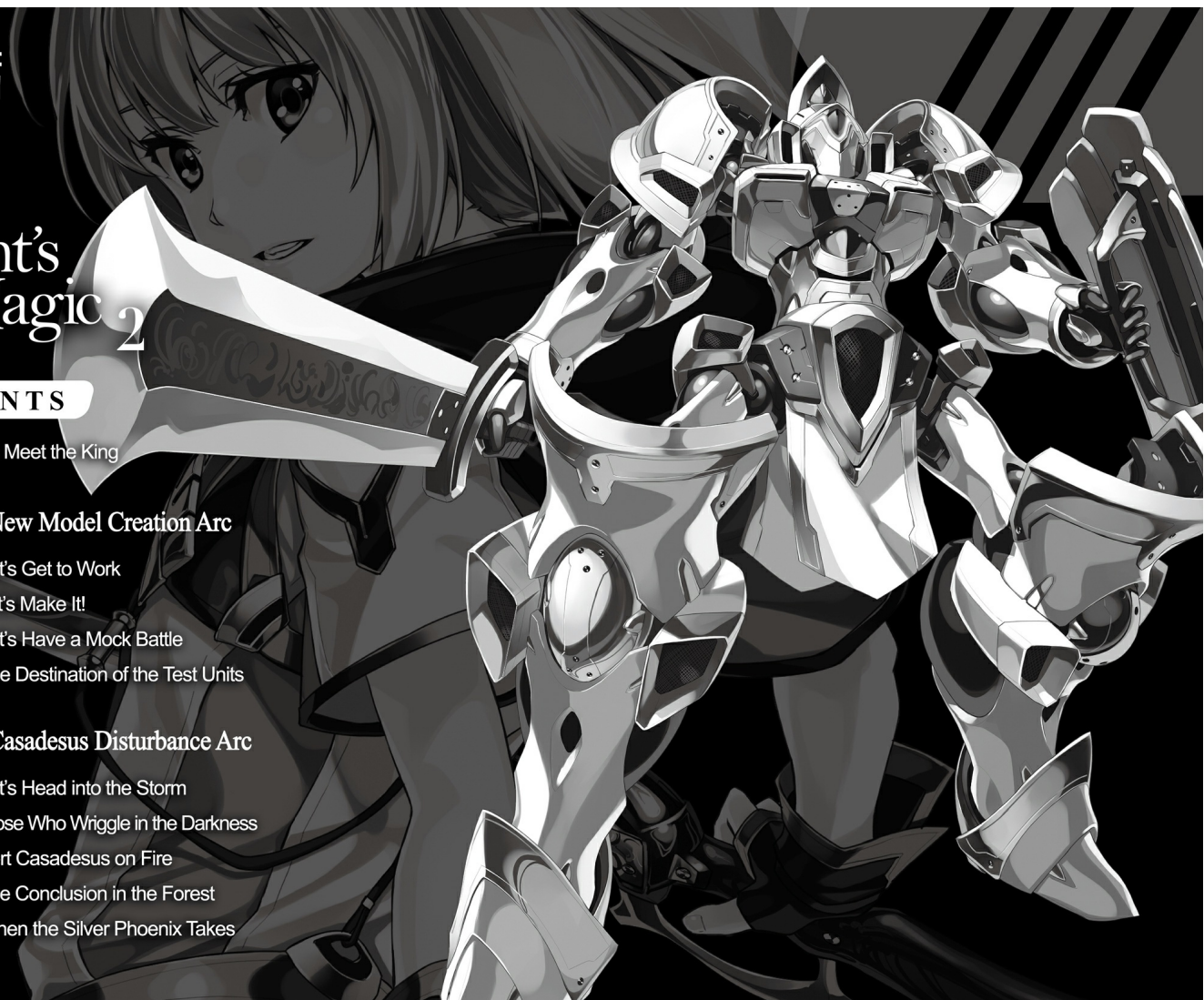
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Prologue: Let's Meet the King

The setting is the kingdom of Fremmevilla, located in the eastern side of the continent of Setterlund. It is located at the foot of the Auvinier mountain range, with its steep peaks, and is labeled a country of knights by the people because it acts as a natural wall against the dreaded Great Bocuse Forest. The forest plays home to many beasts and creatures who in this world naturally hold the power of magic within them, otherwise called monsters.

The year is 1277 O.C. Winter has passed, and it is now spring, the season in which life buds vigorously.

There had been a huge incident in which a division-class monster, a behemoth, penetrated the defensive line at Fremmevilla's borders and invaded its territory. This incident was referred to as the "Disaster of the Emperor-on-Land."

The monster had pressed into the country's territory, as if to utterly destroy its largest roadway, thus becoming a threat to the nation itself. On this occasion, Jantunen's guardian knight order bravely and resolutely stepped up to face this massive monster along with some student knight runners from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. Disregarding the danger they faced, the brave knight runners fought the good fight, eventually coming out on top and killing the behemoth even after a great number of losses, returning peace to the country once more...



They were in Fremmevilla kingdom's capital city, Konkaanen, a city positioned so as to have the austere Auvinier mountains as a backdrop.

The city, which surrounded the royal Schreiber Castle, was currently overflowing with liveliness, energy, and noise. Bards stood here and there, reciting their sonorous tales as men continued to down booze and snacks as they had been since noon. Merchants had brought out all their wares as if there would be no tomorrow, and their voices could be heard overlapping each other

in their attempts to call customers. Everyone was in high spirits, and it showed in their bright smiles.

The reason for all this fuss was the decoration ceremony being held at the royal castle for Jantunen's guardian knight order and the knight runner students from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. Having heard of the great danger approaching them, the citizens had all been fraught with panic, but now that the danger had been defeated, they praised the heroic knights greatly as they themselves indulged in a festival-like atmosphere.

In this din and commotion, a past-middle-age man led a child through the crowded street. The older man was Rowley Echevalier, the headmaster of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and his charge was his grandson, Ernesti Echevalier.

The thoroughfare was overcrowded with people. Rowley had a tight hold on Ernie, so as to not lose the small-statured boy in the crowd. In his other hand, the headmaster was holding a grilled crepe-like dessert filled with fruit.

"What do you think, grandfather?"

"Hm...I'll refrain. You can have it, Ernie."

Ernie nodded in response before taking a bite while skillfully maneuvering through the crowd. The dessert was something they'd bought at one of the many stalls lining the street.

What a crowd... It's rare for my grandfather to invite me out like this, and this is what happens... Ernie thought.

There was a reason the two were walking through this bustling festival crowd in the capital. It was because Rowley had received a summons from the king himself. From what Ernie had heard, Rowley and the king were old friends from their school days. That bond had made Rowley the king's sounding board and unofficial adviser for many years, and even now that Rowley had become the headmaster they had remained friends. And so, when the king found out that the pilot of the crimson knight who played such a huge role in the Disaster of the Emperor-on-Land was named Ernesti Echevalier and that the boy was related to his friend, he had summoned them both.

Having heard all this, Ernie couldn't help but get a bad feeling about the whole thing. After all, the king had sent a personal summons. There was no way this would end with a simple questioning about events. While letting out a sigh into his fruit-filled dessert, the boy made his way toward the royal castle through the congested crowd.



The area before the gates to Schreiber Castle had also been dragged into the festivities and was record-breakingly lively, but the gate itself was relatively devoid of people. After exiting the crowd, the pair finally made it to the gates and were greeted by guards. They guided the two to what seemed like a meeting room inside the castle. The guards then told them to wait a while before leaving, meaning that Rowley and Ernie were now alone in a spacious room. They could hear cheering from off in the distance, probably from the honors ceremony.

"Ernie, child, are you nervous?"

"Of course I am. I never even imagined I would have the opportunity to have an audience with the king himself."

"I thought you would've been fine with something of this level though, Ernie."

"That's kind of harsh, grandfather."

It seemed both of them had nerves of steel, seeing as how they were having such a calm, frivolous conversation even as they were about to meet the king. Eventually, the guards appeared again to announce the arrival of the one they were waiting for.

Both grandfather and grandson fixed their posture and waited politely as the door opened to let in several people. The one at the head of this group was unmistakable as the king of Fremmevilla, Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla. Though he was already getting to be past his prime, he had an imposing and dignified air about him that made his apparent age seem like a lie. Behind the king followed two men who carried themselves like nobles. As the trio entered, Ambrosius locked eyes with Rowley for a moment, and the corners of his mouth turned up into a smile.

“Well met, and it seems I’ve made you two wait. It’s been a long time, Rowley.”

“It has, my liege. And I should be the one thanking you for making the time, even though you must be busy.”

“You need not worry about that. I made this happen to satisfy my own curiosity, after all. So, is he the pilot of that crimson knight?”

Ambrosius’s gaze, as well as those of the nobles behind him, moved to Rowley’s side. All that was written in the reports they’d read was that a mere twelve-year-old had piloted a silhouette knight and fought evenly with a behemoth. So, they had been imagining a really burly and heroic-looking man who no one would believe was twelve.

However, reality was different—they were met with a boy who was even smaller than average for a twelve-year-old boy, with a smooth, round face and large eyes that shined with a strong will. His face was framed by smooth, purplish-silver hair that went down to his jaw, and he gave off such a soft and airy feel that he could be mistaken for a girl. All the men’s expressions, which had been trained relentlessly over years of statecraft, instantly stiffened. Even so, the king showed his resolve by being the quickest to recover. His shocked expression with one eyebrow raised in confusion quickly gave way to an amused one.

“I see... I had assumed the child would be a boy from the reports... To think it was a girl piloting that silhouette knight!”

“No, Your Majesty. Though I look like this, I am undeniably male. My apologies for the late introduction: I am Ernesti, Rowley Echevalier’s grandson, and I am honored to meet you. I am extremely grateful to have this audience with you.”

“Oho, I had heard you were only twelve years old, but it seems you’ve mastered your manners. But being so formal must make it hard to speak; you can feel free to take it easy.”

“Understood, then I will gladly accept.”

Ernie easily accepted the king’s consideration, and the expressions of the

nobles behind Ambrosius changed from shock to exasperation. They were having a hard time figuring out whether the boy was just that big a deal, or if he was simply an ill-mannered brat.

“Now then, I suppose we should just get straight to the point. The reason I called you here today is, of course, about that behemoth incident. I have heard tales of your efforts that day, but I cannot reward you for them openly.”

As Ambrosius spoke, he observed Ernie openly.

“I have heard that you are satisfied with that, but I don’t like the idea of treating a talented knight runner who can fight a behemoth so rudely. So, I’m thinking of rewarding you with something equivalent to the effort you put in, as long as it’s not public. That being said, you are still underage, and I do not know what to give to a child.”

Ambrosius grinned as he explained the purpose of this visit—but from any perspective, it only looked like the grin of someone plotting something bad. A reward that had been canceled was now suddenly back on the table, as if Ernie was being tested. So, without outwardly deviating from his normal attitude, Ernie was growing more and more cautious internally.

“Both making you a knight and giving you social status would raise problems due to your age. Do you understand?”

“I do. I am aware that is too much for a twelve-year-old child.”

“Good, it seems you catch on quickly. Anyway, that’s why we’re here... What do you want? Asking the person directly is the quickest way to learn these things, after all. I will gladly award you anything of equal value to your achievements.”

Ambrosius’s far-too-straightforward explanation had actually taken Ernie by surprise. But, taking that proposal as truth, he started spinning up his mind as fast as it would go.

If this is simply out of the goodness of his heart...no, that’s hard to believe. Is he trying to see if I’m the type of person who can be swayed by physical rewards? Offering a reward at this stage really is just suspicious.

What the king was offering was undoubtedly a windfall; it was easy money,

but nothing's scarier than something being given away for free. That held true for both worlds Ernie knew of.

Still, that doesn't mean I can just turn down the king of this entire country; that hurdle's way too big for me... I need to say something.

But trying to come up with a reward commensurate to slaying a behemoth is hard. How much would it be in cash? Or what's an equivalent good? Am I allowed to ask for something other than social standing? Put simply, Ernie didn't know the worth of things. Eventually, an idea popped up in his head. Let's just take advantage of being a child and ask for something ridiculous. Once that happened, he shook his head to clear away his thoughts. No, that expression isn't something you show to a child.

The expression Ambrosius was making at the moment was one that Ernie could remember from his past life. Though those memories were already starting to fade, the expression of someone appearing happy and benevolent on the surface while trying to find even the slightest opening under that, otherwise known to him as the "salesman's smile," was clear in his mind. And the king's expression was definitely that.

What if I just went all out and asked for a silhouette knight? It might be perfect for judging standard values. I get the feeling that I might actually get one given what I did...heh heh heh heh heh...

Ernie casually lost to his own desires, but when he made to answer, he suddenly got a flash of inspiration.

No, that's wrong. This is a one in a million chance. I don't know if I'll ever get another opportunity to ask this of the king himself. So there is just one thing I want that I can only get from asking him! That's right, the most difficult piece of the puzzle!

As Ernie surfaced from the depths of his thoughts, not much time had actually passed. If this reward didn't work, he could just move on to the next idea, so he decided to act optimistically and made his request in a truly light and carefree tone.

"Then I have something to ask of you, Your Majesty. The thing I want most right now is knowledge...specifically, knowledge of how to create ether

reactors.”

Everyone stopped all of a sudden, as if the entire room had frozen. The wish was so out of left field that even Ambrosius had openly displayed shock on his face. It was understandable though; a child only twelve years of age had asked for something just that odd. The king wasn’t the only one. Even Rowley, who had up until then been rather calm throughout the whole thing, had his expression turn stiff, while the two nobles behind the king looked dazed, like they couldn’t understand what was going on.

Of course, they were talking to a child, and if the boy had merely made an unexpected wish then they would likely not have shown such a reaction. However, what Ernie asked for was something utterly impossible. Ambrosius was a very quick-witted person, but his reaction would still be dulled by something sufficiently unexpected. Because of all this, a strange silence settled on the room, and the first to break it was one of the nobles standing behind the king, Duke Cnut Dixgard.

“Wha— You...do you even know what you’re as—”

“Be quiet.”

Cnut had tried to express indignation and rage because of all the confusion he was feeling, but he was cut off by Ambrosius, who had recovered already. Unlike before, when his air had been somehow lax and carefree, he now had the majesty of the leader of a nation, and so everyone quickly heeded his words and straightened themselves up.

“Ernesti...you asked for the manufacturing method of the ether reactor, I believe. That’s unexpected. True, if you wanted such knowledge, I would be just about the only person who could give it to you. However, no one would normally want such a thing. This is only natural, as what would anyone even do with that knowledge?”

The king’s eyes narrowed. Silently, the pressure coming down on Ernie mounted, and the boy developed a cold sweat down his back. However, he returned the gaze with all his power.

“For now, I will put aside whether I will assent to this... Tell me why. Why do you want such knowledge?”

“Right. I...am studying in Laihiala in order to become a knight, but that is only because I wanted a silhouette knight of my own.”

“I see. A personal silhouette knight, huh? That is quite the grand dream, but that still does not explain it. Why not just ask for a silhouette knight, then? I might have given one to you.”

Ernie slowly shook his head in response to Ambrosius’s question.

“I might have asked for that before, but now things are different. I... I want to make the best, the strongest silhouette knight by myself, for myself. That is my wish.”

The imagination required for such an answer was so above and beyond that even the king was lost for words. In that moment, he was reminded of a single passage in the report he’d read.

“He rewrote and improved the magius engine’s script on his own,” was it? Is he...for real? Is he not actually just spouting nonsense? Does he truly want to do such a thing? Does...that mean he has the ability to do it?

Because Ambrosius had stayed silent, Ernie continued to explain.

“In order to accomplish that, I have pursued many different fields of knowledge in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. I have learned about magic, about the structure of silhouette knights, and how to pilot them. I have already researched all the techniques required to make the body. However, there is one final piece needed to complete a silhouette knight. Yes, exactly, an ether reactor! As you know, its method of manufacture is kept secret from the public, so if I were to ask for a reward, it would have to be to learn how to make one. Once I know, all that’s left is to actually put it into practice.”

Rowley was holding in his breath, worried for his grandson. He had known that Ernie was devoted to silhouette knights, but this was far beyond his expectations. But the die had already been cast. It would be hard for him to save his grandson at this point. So, he glanced at the king. As he did so, Ambrosius, with a stiff expression, opened his mouth and spoke in a grave tone.

“In other words...your reason for all this is?”

“It’s my hobby.”

Everyone there adopted a hard-to-describe expression, as if they were looking at a fearsome, strange thing. As an awkward silence stretched on, suddenly a not-so-completely stifled laugh had everyone looking toward the offender. Ambrosius had held it in for a while, but soon enough his shoulders started shaking, and he just couldn't stop himself as he broke out into a broad smile.

"Wow! Ha ha, how ridiculous! You could have lied, but you chose to say it's for your hobby! Ha ha ha, that's hilarious! You... You want to learn a state secret...for your hobby! And you're seriously only twelve years old? Kha ha ha! This is a masterpiece! I haven't met anyone as interesting as you in who knows how long!"

As the king continued laughing uncontrollably, the two nobles behind him looked at each other in a daze. Thanks to his long relationship with the man, Rowley could tell from the looks of things that the king was truly amused, and he quietly massaged his chest in relief.

"Fair enough, I accept your request!"

"Wha— Your Majesty, you can't! That is not something you should teach a child you don't even know!"

"I know him—he is the grandson of my friend. Still, your misgivings are warranted...say, Ernesti."

Ernie had taken to observing the situation silently after giving his explanation, but he pulled himself together after being addressed by Ambrosius again.

"I will grant your desire. But that knowledge is a national treasure that should normally never be shared with anyone. Defeating *just* a behemoth is not quite enough, I would say."

Ernie's expression filled with doubt and suspicion. The king had already said he had accepted, but now he was claiming Ernie's achievements weren't enough, which had the boy wondering as to his true intent. Ambrosius saw the doubt rise on Ernie's face, and he laughed mirthfully.

"Don't worry. As a king, I do not go back on my word. Simply put, as soon as you pile on enough achievements, your wish will be granted. That is what I am promising."

For a moment, Ambrosius and Ernie locked eyes.

At first glance, that could be taken as him planning to dangle the prize in front of me as bait and have me work for free...but I should still call this an unexpected success. After all, I now have the chance to learn the secrets I have desired, even if there are some conditions attached. To Ernie, that chance was worth more than any monetary reward. A smile slowly blossomed on his face, and his beautiful expression betrayed hints of the blazing desire and passion housed within him. Seeing that expression, Ambrosius reaffirmed that he hadn't been wrong.

"Keh heh, just a verbal promise isn't enough for you, it seems. So I'll tell you exactly what you need to do. You said you wanted to make your own silhouette knight, didn't you? Then show me that you can make use of an ether reactor."

"Show you... What do you mean by that?"

"That should be obvious to you: actually make a silhouette knight, of course. Without producing your own ether reactor, create the best silhouette knight chassis you can. If it satisfies me, then I will fulfill my end of the promise."

After hearing this, Ernie's expression changed to that of a carnivore who had just found its prey. The condition he needed to fulfill to obtain the last piece of the puzzle had been shown to him. On top of that, the condition was something he would have done naturally on his way to his dream. He did not hesitate to accept.

"I accept. I will make sure to prepare a silhouette knight that will satisfy you, Your Majesty."



A little while after the audience with Ernie had ended, Ambrosius was lounging not in the throne room or a meeting room, but his private chambers, and Rowley was there with him.

"Keh heh, this has been the most profitable day in ages. You've got quite the interesting grandson, Rowley."

Ambrosius imbibed some wine, smiling as he thought back to the events from earlier that day.

“It must be because I left his education entirely up to my daughter. I’ve always heard that he liked silhouette knights, but I would have never imagined he liked them that much. That really surprised me.”

“I heard that a twelve-year-old child had fought a behemoth, so I tried calling him for a meeting. Still...I can’t believe it, there’s no way he can be called a *child*.”

“No, my grandson is an honest-to-goodness child who attends my school.”

“They say that children dream big, but who would talk of such an eccentric dream? I have had many an opportunity to listen to people’s wishes, and today’s was really something!”

The two clinked their glasses together as they continued to talk in a good mood.

“He was so much fun I ended up making a rather silly promise.”

“He is my grandson, after all. I will make sure to raise him well, so that he doesn’t disappoint you in the future.”

“Oh, that reminds me. I was worried for his future because he was so talented. But actually meeting him blew all of those worries away.”

Ambrosius broke into another fit of quiet laughter, probably because he’d been reminded of the day’s events again.

“Goodness. To make Your Majesty look forward to his future, my grandson must have quite some grit.”

“Keh heh heh. I am interested, but not because he’s your grandson. I wonder what he’ll accomplish. Even though making a good silhouette knight is already the stuff of dreams, he accepted without hesitation.”

As those words left his lips, Ambrosius felt a sort of certainty in his premonition.

“I’m sure he’ll be bringing me the fruits of his efforts soon.”



“To make such a promise so easily... His Majesty needs to rein in his playful

nature.”

One of the nobles who had been standing behind the king in that audience—Cnut Dixgard, grumbled to the other attendee, Marquis Joachim Serrati.

“You shouldn’t say such things in public.”

“His Majesty isn’t so narrow-minded and petty as to not be able to take a bit of frank opinion. Or do you somehow agree that it is acceptable to teach such a strange and mysterious child one of our nation’s top secrets?”

“I do not, but...that is why he added an extra condition to it. Creating a new silhouette knight is not an easy feat, even for the grandson of Laihiala’s headmaster.”

“It is not a question of the difficulty. He should never have made such a promise in the first place!”

Cnut stomped along the passage, seemingly unable to clear away the irritation he was feeling. Joachim followed after him, but in his mind, he thought of his children. The captain of Jantunen’s guardian knight order, Phillip Halhaagen, had delivered an addendum from Joachim’s daughter Stefania in his report. Her message to her father was that his illegitimate children had been with Ernie. That meant Ernie was not completely unrelated to him.

Joachim was busy with the thought that there might be a need to gather some information or possibly give his illegitimate children some orders.

Meanwhile, Cnut was gradually looking angrier and angrier beside him.

“Though he is a mere child...leaving him be may prove dangerous.”

No one heard him mutter that as the words melted into the surrounding air.

Part 3: New Model Creation Arc

Chapter 10: Let's Get to Work

Laihiala Knight Runner Academy was in possession of the largest academic facility in the entire kingdom of Fremmevilla. As a school with a knight runner course that had fully embraced the use of silhouette knights, the campus came complete with maintenance facilities. These included smithies for the metallic pieces such as the inner skeleton and outer skin, a workshop to connect crystal tissue to the unit's frame, and all kinds of other necessary things to create a general silhouette knight workshop.

Given that they would need to accommodate silhouette knights, humanoid weapons around ten meters tall, the size of this workshop was quite large. There was currently a silhouette knight seated on a maintenance table shaped like a chair located in the back of the facility, and many students were crowded around its feet as a class was being held. The silhouette knight was not currently equipped with its outer skin, and one of its arms had been loaded onto a cart. Next to the cart, a hammer made for creating giant pieces of armor was pounding away, producing a clanking sound. Shouts and yells flew through the room, and there were even some that seemed like they were about to start a fight.

A large, heavysset figure stomped around among the students as they hectically ran around. Actually, the word "large" may be misleading. The owner of the figure was in fact shorter than the average for boys his age. However, he was almost twice as wide as a normal person, which gave him a much stronger presence in the room. It wasn't that he was fat, he was simply more solidly built and packed with dense muscle. His intricately braided hair, which he had hanging down behind him, was accompanied by an impressive beard around his mouth. All that pointed to his race—he was one of the people of iron and steel, a citizen of the smithy, a dwarf.

He approached a pair of students who were arguing, raised his arms that

were thicker than human legs, and silently hit them. Though he held back, a dwarf's punch was still extremely powerful, and so the two victims were sent spinning.

“Damn, why does everyone insist on making more work when we’re already so ridiculously busy?! If you’ve got the time to flap your mouth hole, then move your hands instead!”

“Gwafhh! B-Boss! Sorry, we’ll get back to work right away!”

If a dwarf were to hit something for real and not as a joke, their fists could even bust boulders. The students knew that making the “boss”—whose real name was David Hepken, the leader of the blacksmiths in Laihiala’s knight runner department—angry wouldn’t end well, so they stopped arguing and hurriedly got back to work.

“They’re doing that, even though half our silhouette knights are completely busted... Seriously...”

They had been working on the silhouette knights that had been destroyed during the fight with the behemoth. Normally they would get to repairs right away, but since most of the units only had their skeletons and core pieces still usable, the students had unanimously decided to rebuild them from scratch.

With the skills and knowledge of the maintenance team students, they could certainly rebuild the lost units into entirely new ones. But when the number of units that needed this treatment exceeded one or two, the amount of work would balloon into something unmanageable. Thanks to that, they had borrowed blacksmiths from outside their department and were now in a fight for authority.

Though most of the units were going to be completely remade, the smiths were still prioritizing rebuilding the ones with the most usable parts and leaving the more damaged ones that would need more work for later.

“This one’s...gonna be last.”

The boss was standing in front of a certain unit. The remains that had been brought in were savagely damaged, with the unit’s inner skeleton having been basically dismantled and most of it separated into individual parts. It was in a

terrible state. On the other hand, that also made the fact its ether reactor and magius engine were still fine seem almost like a miracle.

“Still...looking at it again, the way it’s broken is a little too perfect. This one ran out of mana and disintegrated, right? Even the inner skeleton has crumbled.”

The boss’s expression as he looked upon the remains was severe. A student who had heard his mutterings from the side tilted his head in confusion. He couldn’t understand what the boss was so astonished about.

“What? It’s not that rare, is it? Of course this would happen if the ether reactor were to break...huh?”

Noticing something wrong with what he’d said, the student took another look at the remains. The silhouette knight had run out of mana even though the ether reactor was still fine. Recognizing that this situation didn’t make sense, the student understood David’s consternation, but a new question had taken its place.

“Ahhh...I wonder if the silver nerves have snapped? This is a really rare way to break.”

“Yeah, it is. Seriously strange...the way it broke, that is.”

The boss looked closely at what used to be the unit’s legs. Its armor had been stripped off, revealing the crystal tissue inside. It was cracked all over, and was actually coming apart from the middle outward. Those were marks of overuse and fatigue that came with exceeding the material’s durability, something that they—as the people who had performed maintenance on the unit many times over—were familiar with. Silhouette knights were not alive, so they could not heal. As the crystal tissue got used, it would get fatigued and eventually snap from that fatigue. Such a thing wasn’t rare. However...

“We replaced everything so it was new before this one left. And in that amount of time, it’s already broken down from fatigue? What the hell happened? That’s weird... There’s something weird about the way this one went down.”

The boss groaned, his face scrunching up from under his beard. His instinct

was telling him that there was something off about the wreck in front of him. It was saying that the way the unit broke down was something new—a situation that they had never encountered.

The maintenance crew's job wasn't just to perform maintenance on silhouette knights. They were also taught to fix and improve anything structural that came to their attention. In order to do that, they needed to be familiar with any problems that could occur with the unit.

"This one's name is Guaire. Its knight runner is that Dee... What the hell did he do?"

The boss yelled out the knight runner's name, as if he wanted to summon the man here.



There was a district for nobles in Fremmevilla's capital, Konkaanen. Nobles mostly tended to stay in their homes in their own territories, but they would also have villas here in this district. Among such nobles were the Serrati marquis family. The twins, Archid and Adeltrude Alter, had been brought by their half-sister Stefania Serrati to this home. It was the first time in a long while.

A butler nearing old age led the trio to Joachim Serrati's study. The room was furnished in a calm style, but still held a somewhat stiff and stubborn air about it, reflecting its owner's personality.

Though they had many occasions to see Tifa, as Stefania was nicknamed, it had been years since the twins had seen their father, and they were clearly nervous. Joachim continued to clean up his paperwork for a while after the group had entered, but soon enough he opened his mouth.

"Thank you for coming, Tifa. And it's been a while, you two. I'm glad you seem healthy. Does that hold true for your mother, Ilma, as well?"

"Yes, it has been too long, father. Our mother has not even fallen sick once; she is the perfect picture of health."

The conversation was too awkward for one taking place between parent and child. It wasn't just a problem of formality. Because the twins were the marquis's illegitimate children, they had almost no interaction with the main

family due to his legal wife's wishes. Thus, they had very little occasion to speak with their father Joachim, and neither party was used to the other.

"I have brought them both here, father, but what did you want with them?"

Tifa was rather sensitive to the atmosphere between the two parties. They were greatly lacking in time and experience talking to each other. So her goal was to first have them discuss whatever business this meeting was about so as to build that experience.

"Right...this is what I heard from Tifa, but... Archid, Adeltrude, you two know Ernesti Echevalier, right?" The name that came out of Joachim's mouth was completely unexpected to both the twins and Tifa, and it showed on their faces. "What kind of person is he? You can just tell me what you know."

Their father's tone brooked no argument, so Kid and Addy looked at each other, trying to suppress their feelings of consternation. After a moment, they started relaying their own impressions. Basically, he was their childhood friend and teacher, in terms of magic he was probably the best in the country by their estimation, and he was obsessed with silhouette knights.

Halfway through, what they were saying had started to sound like a fantastic tale, but Joachim listened silently instead of denying anything. The twins' confusion grew stronger; they had no idea why their father would be interested in Ernie. Their feelings must have shown on their faces, as Joachim started to explain after some time in thought.

"His name came up as the person who distinguished himself the most in the fight against the behemoth. So nothing is going to happen right now, but it was suggested that he would be rewarded if he were to put some more achievements under his belt in the near future."

"Huh? Then that means Ernie's actually being appreciated?!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself. I told you it isn't going to happen anytime soon. This is just talk of the future, should it happen."

After the Disaster of the Emperor-on-Land, Ernie had been denied any reward, despite how much danger he put himself in to achieve what he had. Ernie himself had assented to this, but the twins were still not satisfied.

This means the right people are paying attention, at least.

Because of that, Kid, who had thought of his father somewhat badly, immediately started to trust the man and open up to him more than before. By his estimation, though Joachim was strict, he wasn't a stubborn person who couldn't see the situation around him.

"But father, even if you say it depends on his future achievements, what do you want us to do about it?"

"Nothing hard. Just report to me first if he manages to accomplish anything from now on. Do you understand?"

"Yes, father!"

The nervousness that Kid and Addy had felt on their way here had melted away, and now they showed truly happy expressions. Given how long they had been friends with Ernie, they knew that he would put forth an "achievement" soon. To them, if reporting that to their father would earn Ernie a proper reward, then it was the least they could do as people who had been relying entirely on him up until now. Tifa also smiled softly. She hadn't been quite satisfied with the arrangement before, either, so she was just as happy about this as they were.

Meanwhile, Joachim's expression didn't budge an inch as he continued to watch his children express their joy.



A week after the Disaster of the Emperor-on-Land, Laihiala Knight Runner Academy temporarily closed its doors.

Before and after the incident, middle school students who had gone on the field exercise had been injured, and actual fatalities had occurred among the high schoolers. The school needed time to properly deal with that.

So, the obvious choice was a temporary shutdown, during which the uninjured students could spend their time as they liked. Some who lived away from home took the chance to see their parents, some stayed and rotted in the dorms with nothing to do, and some committed to playing like there was no tomorrow. Amid all that, Ernesti had decided to...

The Echevalier household was located in a corner of Laihiala's campus town. In one of the rooms of the house, Ernie sat at his desk, writing something down with absolute focus. Gentle afternoon sunlight filtered into the room and the scratching of his pen was the only thing to break the silence.

"Hmmm...this should do it for the most part, I think."

After reaching a good stopping point, he put down his pen, which had been making repeated trips between his notebook and the inkwell. With a satisfied stretch, he teased the stiffness out of his body before leaning back in his chair.

The notebook contained the structural theory he had learned in the classroom, written down in precise, methodical handwriting. More importantly, though, it also contained his impressions from when he actually piloted a silhouette knight, as well as most of his ideas. He had also noted down his memories of his past life, turning his knowledge from another world into a terrifying repository of information. He had just finished the last page of all this: a drawing of a machine that could be said to be the culmination of all his learning.

"With this, I should be able to keep my promise to those two somehow... Now all that's left is my promise with His Majesty."

With that utterance, he quickly crossed his arms and put on his thinking face. What was troubling him was the promise he had exchanged with the king the other day. "Create the best silhouette knight." Such a thing aligned with his ultimate goal, but at the moment there had been no progress.

"There are a mountain of problems. This is going to be hard for a lot of reasons, isn't it? Creating a silhouette knight is...a silhouette knight...silhouette knight..."

The moment he unconsciously relaxed, he was beset by a creeping temptation. This temptation, which had oozed out from a corner of his mind, ate into and took over all his thoughts so quickly it was like pouring ink into clear water. As if he knew that staying silent would just allow his thoughts to keep getting taken over, he reflexively gave voice to the idea.

"Aagghh...I wanna ride a silhouette knight..."

Rashly thinking about something related to silhouette knights had come back to bite him. The more he tried to put the desire out of his mind, the more it clung to him. In the first place, though, having gotten to ride a real silhouette knight had already sealed his fate. He could still recall the sensation clearly just by closing his eyes—the vibrations of the metal legs as they planted themselves powerfully into the ground in response to his commands, the creaking of the arm brought about by swinging a sword that was several meters long, the feeling of inertia every time he ordered the unit forth, and his destructive battle with the giant beast. He had experienced all of that in real life, and all of it had been implanted in his memories like a phantom, assaulting him at every turn.

“Urrghh...I really just want to do a lot more with one. That fight wasn’t enough...not at all...”

Still, a silhouette knight wasn’t something he could just ride around freely. In the end, Ernie was just a middle school student. Having been brought back to reality, he felt all the power drain out of his body as he slumped forward onto the desk.

“It’s no good... I can’t get motivated to do anything as things are. In times like this, the best thing to do is to go outside for a change of pace.”

Pulling himself together, Ernie started to prepare for his outing. And once he was done, he leaped outside.

A little while after, he had brought himself to the Termonen Workshop, a smithy located in Laihiala’s campus town. It was home to a dwarf who was his childhood friend, Batson Termonen, who he had come to visit.

Batson was an ordinary son of a town blacksmith. If things went normally, he would most likely have grown up to succeed the family business. But after finding the strangest of friends in Ernie, a die-hard silhouette knight fanatic, at some point he had been steered onto the track of a silhouette knight maintenance blacksmith—a knightsmith.

Thanks to that, they now shared a common interest.

“Which is why I am now obligated to make a good silhouette knight and show it to the king.”

“Don’t give me that! What do you mean you made a direct appeal to the king himself?! Seriously, you... Aagghh jeez, there’s, like, gotta be a more proper order to things...”

That day as well, Ernie had visited and started a fun and enjoyable conversation which Batson had replied to extremely offhandedly. To him, his friend had gone out on a field exercise and come back having fought a behemoth. And the moment he thought his friend was safe, he made a ridiculous and overbearing promise with the king himself. Most of Ernie’s actions were out of left field, and commenting on every one of them was tiring, which was what Batson wanted to convey as he heaved a huge sigh.

“Well, whatever. It’s you after all, Ernie. So, what’re you gonna do? You want to make a silhouette knight, right? Got any leads?”

“Nope.”

“Hey now.”

Ernie’s crisp denial was so shocking Batson collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. He had been convinced that Ernie had some sort of idea or lead already since he was so full of confidence.

“I have a lot of ideas as to what kind of silhouette knight to make, but that leaves the problem of where I’m making it. Could I do that here at your house, Batson?”

“Of course not!”

Silhouette knights were giant humanoid weapons, lumps of metal, crystal, and magic standing around ten meters tall. He needed the proper facilities to manufacture a silhouette knight; this problem came before even those involving skills or materials. It wasn’t something he could pull off by lightheartedly borrowing a town blacksmith’s shop.

“Can’t you do something about that? Aren’t we comrades?”

“Whether we’re comrades or friends or anything else, what’s impossible is impossible!”

Like that, the two started to argue, when suddenly the door to Batson’s room

was flung open. The pair, surprised, turned their attention toward the entrance in unison to see Batson's father.

As a dwarf and a longtime blacksmith, he displayed the dwarven characteristics of a robust build and splendid slabs of solid muscle. Though his bearded face was already intimidating, it was currently scrunched up in a furious expression. From the ominous aura pouring out of every inch of his body, the children stepped back greatly.

"You guys...I TOLD YOU TO KEEP IT DOWN SO YOU DON'T GET IN THE WAY OF MY WORK! If you're gonna be that loud, then do it outside!"

They didn't need to be told twice—the pair promptly leaped out of the window. Batson's room was on the second floor, but they didn't hesitate. Ernie got out first, landed quickly, and turned back to catch Batson with an Air Suspension spell. His movements seemed strangely practiced, which probably meant this had already happened more than once.

"Mrrgh, we were kicked out. What do we do now, Batson?"

"Dad's strict, so there's nothing we can do. Ah, why not try going to the knight department's workshop?"

Not understanding Batson's idea, Ernie tilted his head in puzzlement.

"A whole bunch of silhouette knights were destroyed in the fight, right? So they should be in the middle of repairing all of them. We can go watch."

"I see, that's a great idea. With that decided, let's go right away!"

Ernie immediately set for the academy, with Batson hurrying after him.

It was now afternoon in Laihiala's campus town. Having reached the academy grounds, the pair were about to walk through the gates when a voice called out to them from behind.

"Look, found them!"

"Ernie, captured!"

Kid and Addy appeared, with Addy immediately grabbing Ernie by his arms. They were both taller than Ernie, so when she did that he was naturally lifted up into the air.

“Uhh, Kid? Addy? What’s this about, all of a sudden?”

“Oh, nothing. Just, like, we kinda thought you’d be here, maybe.”

“And since our feelings were on the mark, I’ve gotta catch you! So, what’re you doing here?”

It seemed that the twins didn’t have any motives other than to catch him, so Ernie simply sighed with a disappointed expression, his legs dangling in the air.

“The broken silhouette knights should be under repair in the Academy’s workshop right now, so we were going to observe.”

“I see. Then let’s go straight there!”

“It’s fine for you two to tag along, but please let me go.”

So, the four of them walked toward the Academy’s workshop together. They were well aware of the high school grounds’ layout even though they were just middle school first years, so they quickly reached their destination.

Quietly, they peeked into the workshop. It was filled with the sounds of pounding hammers, the straining cranes and pulleys, shouting voices, and idling silhouette knights. Ernie wanted to observe all this up close so bad he couldn’t stand it, but he also couldn’t bring himself to potentially get in the way of the knightsmiths when they looked so ghastly due to so much work. Thus, in order to stay out of the way, he moved over gradually to where it was less busy. Naturally, they reached it—the unit that had been left for last because it was so heavily damaged, that is.

The silhouette knight was in the back of the workshop, left on a maintenance station shaped like a chair. It was such a wreck that the only way to describe the lump of metal was as “remains hoisted up by a crane.” This was most likely the silhouette knight’s torso. However, its outer skin was crumpled, and its inner skeleton was warped. Though Ernie and Batson recognized the scene, the twins didn’t know what they were looking at. There were tiny pieces of red-painted armor clinging to the frame as a hint though, and eventually they caught on.

“This is...um...is this Guaire, the one you rode in, Ernie?” Kid asked almost in a whisper, looking at Ernie from the side as he stared up at the remains.

“Yes. The way its armor is damaged is familiar to me. It really did break so flashily... No wonder why they put the repairs off until later.”

“Wow...what did you even do to have it break like this?”

Batson seemed exasperated, and beside him, Addy was silently entranced by how completely it had been destroyed. The object in front of her declared how fierce the fight with the behemoth was more than any number of words ever could. Such a thing was easily imagined by the twins, even though they'd never gotten into a silhouette knight before.

Both Kid and Addy had heard the story from Ernie before, and they thought they knew how much danger he'd put himself in. However, with the reality of that situation staring them in the face, they were lost for words as they realized the battle's ferocity had exceeded their imagination. The giant lump of metal looked as if someone had messed up really badly while trying to shape candy. What kind of power was necessary to pull off such a feat? And how dangerous was it to face down the source of such power?

Kid clenched his fists so hard they grew pale, while Addy started to tear up. If just the smallest thing had gone differently, Ernie might have died in that fight. That sudden realization had chilled them to the bone. More than anything, they felt a crushing anger toward themselves, who had been doing nothing the entire time their friend was facing such danger. It didn't matter if they hadn't known.



“—tiful.”

Just then, as the twins were silently wallowing in their melancholy, Ernie’s voice entered their ears as he quietly muttered something. Surfacing from the sea of their own gloom, they slowly turned toward Ernie.

“Broken mechs are also...beautiful...” Ernie sighed, his face filled with ecstasy. Without realizing that he’d just made the atmosphere around him a lot more awkward, he continued speaking. “That’s right, anything with form will eventually crumble away, leaving only a husk behind. So this is the essence of *wabi-sabi*. The feeling of loneliness and desolation wafting about it, the feelings of the lost... Wow...”

The twins exchanged looks for a moment, and the result of the Official 132nd Alter Siblings Meeting was a unanimous agreement to attack Ernie.

The sudden onslaught prompted Ernie to let out a surprised yelp before he struggled to get out, “O-Ow...ihhurts! Whaf’re you yrwhooping all owfh a suwwen?!”

Ernie had gotten his cheeks pinched from both sides at once, resulting in a rare teary face as he raised his complaint. But even with that, the twins continued to silently pinch his cheeks. There was no mercy.

“No, uhhh...this was the obvious result, Ernie...” Batson, the only person left out, continued to calmly watch over them.



“Hey, who’s in there making a racket?!”

The cheek-pinching continued for a while, but when Ernie was finally released and he was about to protest while rubbing his cheeks, a shout suddenly came from behind them. They turned around, surprised that the voice carried so well in this endlessly noisy workshop, only to find a young dwarf man who was very intimidating. It was the boss, David.

“The hell? If it isn’t that silver kid, Ernesti. You snuck in again? Dang, you must love this stuff. Don’t get in the way of our work, okay?”

Of course the boss had gotten acquainted with Ernie, who spent a lot of his

time mingling with the knight runner department. Though it seemed not even he could hide how amazed and exasperated he was that Ernie would come even at a time like this. However, Ernie's gaze passed by the boss to the person behind him.

There stood a man so pale in the face that he could be described as a ghost, with deep bags under his eyes. His once-blond hair had gone from being well cared for to a scruffy, unrecognizable mess—it was Guaire's knight runner, Dietrich Künitz. Dietrich's current looks were so different from what Ernie remembered that for a moment he couldn't believe what he was seeing, and he rubbed his eyes to make sure. However, no matter how many times he looked away and then back, the Dietrich in front of him was still in tatters. In his current form, there wasn't even a shred of the vigor or the self-confidence so grand it could be called arrogance. All that was there was impatience and irritation.

"U-Uhhh...Dietrich...sir? That's you, right? What happened?" Ernie asked, his smile stiff and his tone strangely lacking in confidence. That showed just how much Dietrich had changed.

Responding to Ernie's question, Dietrich returned an awkward smile and replied with a voice so hoarse it sounded like rust.

"Oh, it's you, Ernesti." Dietrich took a while to get his voice out. "Heh...heh heh...not much. Just something small. I've been having nightmares...ones where I'm being chased by the demon of the infirmary... Thanks to that, I haven't been able to sleep lately. The moment I relax, he...grk...he...with that horrible, repulsive voice...a-acting coquettishly— Blerggh!"

As he talked, memories of the nightmare came back to him and the focus of his eyes gradually went haywire. He was about to reach the shores of the other side when the boss delivered him a karate chop. Dietrich spent the next few moments moaning in agony, but the boss's strike seemed to have worked as he was back to reality.

"Ngroaaghh... *Gasp!* Where did I... *Ahem!* Well, whatever. So, does the fact that you're here mean that you were called for an explanation too, Ernesti? That should save some trouble."

“Huh? What would the boy even explain?”

“What? You wanted to know why Guaire broke, right? Isn’t that why you called the cause himself here?”

For the next while, the boss looked quizzically at Dietrich and Ernie’s faces in turn. But, still unable to figure out what the pilot had meant, the crease between his eyebrows only got deeper.

“Wait, Dee. You sound like you’re claiming that the boy here is the cause of Guaire’s destruction.”

“Huh? That’s exactly what I’m saying... Did you call him here without knowing?”

“No, I didn’t call him in the first place. He just showed up.”

The gears of the conversation didn’t seem to be meshing, so all three participants tilted their heads in confusion. A few moments later, it seemed Dietrich had come to some sort of conclusion, as he rapped his fist into his open hand.

“Ah, does that mean that I ran my mouth and said something seriously unnecessary?”

“I think that’s exactly it.”

The boss stroked his beard, probably out of habit, as he sent a sharp glare at the two.

“Well, whatever. It doesn’t really matter. Since we have the opportunity, I’ll have you tell me everything.”

No one could object to the boss’s orders when he was smiling like that with his muscles flexing full force.



During the time when Ernie had been piloting Guaire to fight the behemoth, Dietrich had been watching from behind the pilot’s seat. But he didn’t understand much about what Ernie had done. In the end, Ernie’s style of control wasn’t something that others could grasp by just looking at it, so he had to explain himself. The fact that he immediately started to do so was fine, but

they quickly ran into problems.

After his audience gave Ernie blank stares, the boss said “Sorry, please say that again?”

“Okay, as I said, I’m not tall enough to reach the stirrups when sitting in the pilot’s seat. So, I connected to the magius engine directly and transcribed its, well, script, and moved it by calculating everything on my own.”

The boss, whose expression normally never shifted from a stern look, showed a rare sight as his eyes popped open wide with shock upon hearing that. It was understandable, as magius engines existed entirely because no normal human was able to process the script necessary to move a silhouette knight by themselves. It would be an understatement to say that Ernie’s claim that he bypassed the engine to do the calculations himself flew against common sense. Though Dietrich, who was actually in Guaire’s cockpit with Ernie, was an exception, the boss seemed to only half-believe what Ernie said, and who could sway him? On the other hand, Dietrich’s expression quietly got a little sharper.

“Say I concede that you’re telling the truth. So what? How does that connect with the way this thing ran out of mana and self-destructed?”

“Being able to stand in for the function of a magius engine means that I am able to manipulate many functions freely. So, in order to deal the finishing blow to the behemoth, I undid all the limiters and used all the mana available in the unit to attack. I expended enough that it was unable to maintain its structural reinforcement.”

“You idiot, how the hell are we supposed to take countermeasures against that?! The safety device was already a countermeasure against running out of mana!”

His way of speaking was rough and angry, and the boss shook his head upon hearing how far Ernie had gone. The sigh he let out was endlessly deep, encompassing so many things, including resignation.

“You’re right about that, but I’m about the only one able to do this, so I believe there’s no need to make such a countermeasure.”

“Of course not! As if such a thing could be done so easily! Agh, whatever. All

that's left is that there. The wear on the crystal tissue in the legs is your fault too, isn't it?"

"You aren't wrong, but...it sounds kind of off now that I'm looking at it directly."

"Shut up. It really is your fault!"

"That's just recoil from using Full Control. Because it was putting more strain on Guaire than it was intended to take, it exceeded its limit and cracked. Thanks to that, I was put in quite a pinch."

"You... Fully replacing these things normally makes them fine for a month, and you broke it in just one sortie..."

Finally, the boss brought his hand to his forehead and looked up to the heavens. At this point the situation was hopeless. That word encompassed all the boss's feelings on the matter. His head was already hurting enough, but then he realized the worst possibility.

"Hey, what did you mean by that? Are you saying that you'll break any unit you pilot if you get serious, kid?"

"The possibility of that is high. A knight order's Kaldatoah would have better quality crystal tissue, so it might last a little longer though." Ernie continued to mutter nonchalantly, "In the end, it's a problem of the physical burden..." which caused the boss to glance askance at him and adopt a sullen look.

"Tch! If I don't make a unit sturdy enough to withstand you, I can't call myself a blacksmith. Still, it's not something I can fix right away."

In the first place, such a reckless knight runner was unprecedented, so it was only natural for there not to be countermeasures in place. Not only that, but it wasn't a problem that some quick emergency measures could solve. There needed to be some fundamental changes put into place. That wasn't something that could be done in a single night.

The boss was about to take the realistic line of just finishing repairs for the moment and thinking of improvements later, but unfortunately there was someone next to him who very much didn't think about things "realistically."

“If that’s the case, then I have the perfect idea! There are no weak points to it. We just need to raise the durability of the crystal tissue.”

It was Ernie. He happily raised his hand as he spoke, using words that would attract the attention of everyone around him.

“Hunh? Raise the durability of the crystal tissue, you say? You make it sound easy, but how long do you think those alchemist bastards have been immersed in research to do just that? I’m not lying—it’s been over a hundred years with no real improvement.”

“Ah, don’t get me wrong. I said to raise the durability, but we won’t actually be changing the crystal tissue itself. I’m not well versed in alchemy myself, after all. What we’ll be doing is changing the way we ‘use’ the crystal tissue.”

Seeing everyone react quizzically to him saying “use,” he quickly started explaining, knowing this was the moment.

“As people have said, ‘One arrow breaks easily, but three will not.’ In other words...”

The solution he was proposing was to form the crystal tissue into fibers, bundle and braid them into a cord, and use that in a silhouette knight. While each individual fiber might be weak, intertwining them like that would in the end make the tissue a lot stronger. Furthermore, the braid or weave would allow them to use longer individual fibers than if they simply grouped them together straight. That would have the secondary effect of increasing output.

“I call this ‘strand crystal tissue.’ What do you think about using it this way?”

With a full-faced smile, Ernie produced actual crystal tissue fibers, braided them together, and made a show of expanding and contracting them. It was as if he was closing a sales pitch.

The twins didn’t seem to understand and just chalked it up to the world working that way somehow, but Batson and the other smiths present reacted excitedly.

The boss took hold of the strand crystal tissue with awfully slow movements. As he inspected it, he repeatedly shook his head as he pondered. He thought to use his experience in trying to improve silhouette knights, small as that might

be, to say something, but he was unable to think of anything appropriate, and so eventually he gave up with a sigh.

“Using crystal tissue as a fiber...I never thought of that.”

He always spoke seriously, but this time his words were truly leaden with the weight of a flood of emotions.

“Really? It was a wonder to me why it hadn’t been done already.”

“It certainly is as you say, kid. Now that I think about it, it’s strange that this doesn’t exist yet...but normally people start with improving the shape of the bones or the way the muscles are anchored and put under tension. There’s also the option to improve the material itself. No one would think of changing the way the muscle is assembled.”

Silhouette knights were giant humanoid weapons modeled after knights. The root idea was to “expand the power of humans,” and so it naturally came to have the shape of a giant. It was perfect for ease of understanding and instinctual use, but at the same time, people lost the ability to imagine anything outside of that original form, creating difficulty in the path to new ideas. While it was completely a machine, it was still somehow stuck being thought of as a living thing. This type of contradiction had long seeped into common practice, and as a result everybody who currently engaged in the design of silhouette knights no longer thought to change anything fundamental.

The only one capable of overcoming that was, in the end, Ernie, because he had knowledge from another world ripe with giant robot culture. His ideas, which busted a huge hole in common sense, had the boss feeling like his eyes had been opened at last. The boss’s expression was hard to read because it was buried in his beard, but this time he showed a rare and impactful smile.

“Ha ha! Now that I understand it, this thing is amazing! This is perfect; let’s try it out right away on the unit we’re repairing right now!”

The gathered students were somewhat creeped out by the boss’s excessively good mood, but his head was full of plans for how they were going to improve silhouette knights from now on, so he didn’t seem to care at all. He was about to hand out orders to work, but—

“Then allow me to add another idea while we’re at it. Why not try changing the human shape a little?”

The whispers of a devil reached the boss’s ear. While chewing on what he heard, he slowly turned around. What greeted him was Ernie’s smile, shining almost too brightly.

“I’m talking about adding some arms *on the back*, boss.”

He was adorable like a girl, and his smile was like a beautiful blooming flower, but the words he was whispering were terrible. They went far beyond a lack or excess of detail and had set foot in the territory of reckless remarks or mad rambling.

The boss, who had clearly heard those words, needed some more time to understand their meaning. Even the twins, who were used to Ernie’s antics, couldn’t hide their doubt and exasperation. Most likely the calmest one there was Batson, who had heard far too much of Ernie’s “incredible” ideas already.

To the smiths, who had until just then never even considered the idea of changing the construction of a silhouette knight, Ernie’s words were inscrutable. Silhouette knights were always meant to be weapons *in the form of humans*. A “human” in this world was commonly known to have two arms and two legs. The only things known to stray from that existed in fairy tales. So no one there could understand why or how such an idea had occurred or even what it meant—other than the one who said it, Ernie.

The boss sighed, letting out large amounts of exasperation before moving to reply. But suddenly, he had a thought. This proposal would just have been some thoughtless rambling if it had come from anybody else, but it was coming from Ernie, who had just brought out the idea for strand crystal tissue. Making an extreme effort to swallow his initial reaction that would have included words that were basically abuse, the boss replied as calmly as he could.

“I suppose I should ask, just in case. Whuh... What for, and how?” Despite his desperate effort, his voice still shook.

“What for? Well, I noticed when I piloted a silhouette knight, but they only have two, don’t they?”

“What? Well, yeah. Of course. That’s only natural. Huh?” Addy blurted out in confusion.

“Now calm down, Addy. First, let’s listen till the end, okay?” Ernie took a breath and started again. “So, the problem I noticed is with the use of silhouette arms. In order for a silhouette knight to attack at range, it needs to use silhouette arms. And in order to use silhouette arms, it needs to hold the weapon in its hand. That’s why there’s a need to switch between a sword and a silhouette arm depending on the distance of the target and the situation.”

Ernie paused and looked around. The faces around him all said, “Of course. What’s the problem?” His smile deepened.

“However, that is very inefficient. Switching weapons creates a huge opening, and of course, a pilot will need to put his silhouette arms away to engage in close combat. That’s why we add extra limbs to use the silhouette arms...or something to that effect. That way, it’s possible to use any weapon at any time without the need to switch.”

Ernie spoke with a smile, but the reaction to his words wasn’t good. Everyone around him was clearly and heavily confused. They all felt that something was wrong, but they didn’t know how to express it—the only one who moved in such an awkward atmosphere was, of course, the leader of the technical support, the boss.

“It’s not that I don’t get what you’re saying. So I’ll set aside your insane argument of adding arms for now. What I’ll ask is: how do you plan on moving those arms even if you do add more for the sole purpose of using silhouette arms? I don’t need to say it out loud, right? People don’t have arms on their backs. How the hell do you move something you don’t have?”

That was the question on everyone’s mind. The fundamental idea of piloting for knight runners was to use their limbs to move the machine. With that type of control, knight runners—humans—could not move anything they didn’t have.

There was no need to use such logic though. Emotionally, they all rejected the idea of adding inhuman parts to a silhouette knight. If possible, everyone wanted to end this strange conversation as a joke and laugh. This idea was

vague and only half-formed, but it was what basically everyone felt.

However, the smile never left Ernie's face. Also, he never stopped moving his feet. This product from another world, separated from this world's common sense, happily laid his hands on the concept of silhouette knights itself.

"Your concerns are very reasonable. But I'm not saying to add fully functional, real arms; there's no need to give them the full range of movement. All that's needed is the ability to hold a silhouette arm and fire it. So..."

While facing the confusion and rejection of the people around him head-on, Ernie spun his words plainly. The clear goal he was striving for and his strength of will drove him forward powerfully. Before anyone noticed, everyone there had been swallowed up by the force of his words.

"At the same time, I will make the specialized script for its automatic usage as well as for the aiming function. Putting all that together, we can add a part specifically for the use of silhouette arms as well as its control mechanism. This is my proposal...the development of the 'back weapon' and 'fire control system.'"



A corner of the workshop was partitioned off, creating a space dubbed "the meeting room." A blackboard and chairs were prepared there, and it was mainly used for meetings between the maintenance team. Ernie's proposal, which was so distant from common sense, wasn't rejected. Instead, everyone had gathered in the meeting room to consider it. Ernie's voice was like the ring of a bell as he continued to explain his proposals, accompanied by the rhythmic clacking of chalk on the blackboard as he drew up his fantastical ideas.

"I called them arms earlier, but what I am envisioning is something much simpler in construction...basically like a fixed implement that can move between a couple of positions."

The extra arms added to the back—which would now be known as sub-arms—need only to be able to withdraw and store themselves when not in use, and to be able to move to a firing position. When deployed, the silhouette arms would swivel over the silhouette knight's shoulders to aim forward.

The fire control system, or FCS, was a script capable of controlling the sub-arm's movement when deploying or storing. There was no need to give these motions too much range of movement because they only needed to deploy and store themselves, so that process could be handled automatically by the system without placing any burden on the knight runner. If that was all, a silhouette knight would only be able to fire the silhouette arms directly forward though, so the FCS's greatest feature was the ability to aim. It would display an aiming reticle on the holomonitor in the cockpit and automatically link the aim of the silhouette arms to the reticle.

Having explained this much, Ernie saw a clear change in the smiths' expressions. A silhouette knight would be able to freely make use of silhouette arms, and would even be able to aim them, while keeping the main hands free. Knight runners were the professional silhouette knight pilots, but it wasn't as if the maintenance team didn't know how to move them around at all. Because of that, they had started to grasp the advantages of the back weapon—increased chances to attack, broadened tactical options, and a simply stronger offensive capacity—though it was still a slow process.

“The actual FCS will go into a spare bit of space in the magius engine. Ah, of course, I will be the one developing this. And what is required of the knight runner when using this function is...”

All that was required of the knight runner was the ability to aim well. After all, the FCS would automatically handle all the sub-arms' functions, from deploying to storage to manipulating the weapon in response to the targeting reticle. Deploying and storing the sub-arms would be very simple from the cockpit, and it basically put no extra burden on the processing unit at all. The fact that all that was required was skill meant that everything depended on the knight runner's training.

“And that is the basic outline of my proposal. I think we will get into the particulars of the construction at a later date, but...what do you all think?”

Though Ernie cutely tilted his head as he asked that question, no one was able to respond. At the moment, the workshop's interior was scarily quiet. The “technology” Ernie was talking about was something that most likely threw common sense completely out the window, such as adding extra parts to the

human form or adding extra functions to a magius engine, something that was up until now perceived as inviolable. Even though they had already accepted the idea of strand crystal tissue, Ernie's ideas were anathema to the students that were listening to him.

Still, Ernie had explained everything logically. The words on the blackboard spoke to truly being "technology" as the engineers understood it, and not some dream logic out of a fairy tale. Technology that seemed too realistic to dismiss with a laugh, and too appealing to ignore.

It's been a while since I've had to give one, but it seems I'm as good at presentations as ever. Now then, it seems I need one more push, Ernie thought as he observed the crowd's response.

As he looked around, it was clear to him that the students of the maintenance team were still on the fence. If Ernie had at least made a vague presentation they would have been able to easily reject the idea. What was most vicious about his proposal was that it seemed so feasible they had to consider it. The common sense they had built up over all their years was protesting greatly, giving them a large sense of unease inside. Even so, the benefits of his proposed ideas were great enough that their logical minds wanted to agree. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place mentally, so Ernie continued talking to give them a push.

"Though silhouette knights are modeled after humans, in the end they are still tools—machines. There's no need to blindly restrict ourselves to just what humans have... If there is a function that is needed, then don't you think it would be best to shape the form to make that a reality?"

If the kinds of demons seen in fairy tales actually existed, they would no doubt be like Ernie. Visually appealing while whispering bewitching temptations, leading their victims unknowingly outside of worldly reason—unexpectedly, just when everyone's thoughts were about to head off above and beyond, the boss made an exaggerated sigh.

"Seriously, just what *are* you? From strand crystal tissue to back weapons, how are you able to think up such things no one has ever even imagined, one after the other?"

“What are you talking about? We’re making it *because* it doesn’t exist. If it did, I wouldn’t bother making it.”

Ernie pouted, causing the boss to spend a moment with his face slack, dumbfounded. But soon enough he broke out into a broad smile. His words, spoken with that hearty grin, blew away the heavy air that had settled on the room along with everyone’s doubts.

“Kkhh...HA HA HA HA! You got me there! You’re right, totally right! So common sense can go take a hike, huh? I don’t hate that. It’s frustrating, but what you’re saying makes sense, kid. I am a blacksmith whose main purpose is to improve silhouette knights, so I’m on board with your proposal!”

With that as the start, the rest of the engineers were able to overcome the wall of their own preconceptions. Everyone united to bring about the existence of strand crystal tissue, back weapons, and the fire control system. They had taken a step toward the future of silhouette knights. It was a small step, but everyone’s minds had definitely been expanded, heading toward a new evolution.



The sun had completely set as a line of four shadows walked through Laihiala’s campus town.

The small-statured person in the middle—Ernie—was still in such a good mood it seemed like he might break out into song. It was only natural: he had by chance gotten the opportunity to fulfill his great dream of improving silhouette knights, after all. And with that, he could think of nothing but the happy days that were sure to follow. On the other hand, Kid and Addy who were walking beside him didn’t seem nearly as happy.

“Hey, Ernie...to tell you the truth, I didn’t understand everything that was talked about today. Will silhouette knights become stronger if we do all that?”

“Yes, of course!”

Kid was about to continue, but he hesitated. “Um...then...Ernie, does that mean...you’re going to go out to fight monsters again in those strengthened silhouette knights, right?”

Kid's question made Ernie blink, his smile freezing on his face. Since he was so preoccupied with the improving-silhouette-knights part, he had completely forgotten what they would be used for. Ernie cleared his throat to give him a second to regroup after the unexpected question and shoo away the panic in his heart as well. Somehow, through all of that, he had managed to keep up his smile.

"Y-Yes, I believe so. After all, we would have finally made silhouette knights stronger. Also, look, if I become a knight runner, I'll have to go out to fight monsters anyway, right?"

"Yeah, you're always gonna end up fighting, aren't you Ernie?" Kid paused, "You're already fighting, aren't you?"

It seemed something was causing him unease, as Kid continued to be vague. However, Ernie didn't have the time to question it, as he was immediately caught within Addy's arms.

"Errnniiieee! You haven't forgotten your promise, right?!"

"Huh? Oh, uhh...yes. Right. You wanted me to teach you guys how to fight in silhouette knights, right?"

"That's right. We can do it if we try! I won't let you fight alone anymore, Ernie!"

Addy thought back to Guaire's wreckage. Even if silhouette knights were humanity's strongest weapon, monsters stronger than that could be anywhere. Ernie might be put in danger in the future, and that thought almost brought her to tears and made her voice shaky.

"Addy? What's wrong? There's no need to worry, I'm definitely making preparations and planning... That's right! If I ask for *that* at the same time, it would solve everything."

Ernie snapped his fingers as he had his great idea, and Addy raised her head slightly to match gazes with Kid and Batson beside them; all three were puzzled.



A few days later, Ernie and the boss had come to visit the headmaster's office

in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

After a restrained knock, they were invited in by the calm voice of the headmaster: Rowley Echevalier. Though Rowley seemed a little surprised by the identity of his visitors, he nevertheless beckoned them in further.

“Oh? If it isn’t Ernie and David. What a rare combination.”

While sitting down in the seat recommended to him, Ernie smilingly brought out some documents. He had spent the past few days working tirelessly to write them up. They were documents pertaining to strand crystal tissue, the back weapon, and the fire control system.

“Headmaster, written here are ideas for some new additions to a silhouette knight by the silver kid, Ernesti. We, the knight runner department’s maintenance team, want to try using these ideas to make a new unit.”

Rowley first reacted by popping his eyes wide at the sudden announcement. He quickly became serious as he looked over the documents with a stern face. After giving the papers a once over, he placed them on his desk and heaved a big sigh. While reflexively looking off into the distance, he finally broke the silence.

“My word... I don’t know if I should call it unexpected or something entirely different, but you’ve really started something absurd, haven’t you?”

“Your grandson’s the one that started it.”

“That’s why it was unexpected... No, should I say ‘more than expected’? I never thought you’d be this fast. After reading through this I can say that your ideas are wild. But, Ernie my boy, can you really make them a reality?”

Ernie’s constant smile never changed as a question was tossed his way—but Rowley knew because he was family. Ernie’s blue eyes housed an even stronger passion and confidence than usual. Rowley could tell that as he was now, the boy had enough momentum to easily be able to bend common sense. Just as he’d expected, Ernie nodded powerfully.

May this find you well, Your Majesty. My grandson has gone on a rampage of greater proportions than expected. Wouldn’t it be impossible to expect me to control him?

The silence had stretched on as Rowley sank in his thoughts, but soon enough Ernie piped up. “Grandfather? So, what do you think? Will you allow it?”

“Headmaster. The construction and customization of the silhouette knights is, to my understanding, left to our discretion. However, this time the changes are quite different from the usual. There might be many problems with it, so I would like your express permission.”

Rowley had been directing his thoughts far into the distance, specifically toward the capital, Konkaanen, but the boss’s words brought him back.

“Uh, right. A lot of our silhouette knights have to be rebuilt thanks to the incident, after all. This is the perfect chance. Don’t be afraid of some failure, experiment to your heart’s content...hm? But...no, that won’t do. There’s no way that they’ll be finished anytime soon, and not having enough units might make the knight runners feel uncomfortable...”

Rowley suddenly slapped his knee. Thanks to the incident in question, roughly half the knight department’s silhouette knights had been destroyed. They only had twenty of them to start with, which wasn’t enough for all the knight department students, so they had to pilot in turns. If that number was halved, then there would be clear problems with training.

“About that, I actually have another idea!”

Without missing a beat, Ernie raised his hand forcefully. He immediately opened the suitcase he brought with him and produced another piece of note paper from within.

“Come on, that wasn’t all? You’re really prepared, kid...”

“It’s actually something I’d thought up a while ago. The only way to train in piloting a silhouette knight is to pilot a silhouette knight. However, we don’t have enough of them, and making them takes too much effort... It’s a never-ending circle.”

Rowley and the boss swallowed their many questions and remarks, opting instead to nod. So, Ernie took out and opened a notebook that was overstuffed with tabs, flipping to the most recent page.

“By the way, what do you think the obstacle is to trying to make more

silhouette knights? The first thing you'd think of is the high cost, the ether reactor, or the magius engine. Next would be the exclusive facilities needed to make such a large object. Then the labor...given all of that, there is only one answer to everything."

While listening to Ernie's explanation, Rowley and the boss brought their heads closer together to get a look at the notebook that had been buried in words. On the open page was a drawing of a strange machine, a melding between skeleton and armor with crystal tissue woven through it, designed to fit a person. There were measurements beside it that said it would be about two and a half meters tall—just a bit bigger than what a normal human could wear. But it was still a fourth the size of a normal silhouette knight.

"That's right, the answer is to just make it smaller! That shortens the building process and reduces the requirements for the manufacturing facility. In other words, it is very easy to mass-produce. Also, the only reason silhouette knights need ether reactors and magius engines is because they're so big that the mana required to move them and the script they need to move is more than a single human can support. If you make the machine smaller, then that makes the burden much smaller too... From my calculations, enough that a single human would be able to make use of them. For that reason, it doesn't need a 'heart,' which will drive the price right down. If you do it now, I can offer you a buy one get one free deal!"

After hearing Ernie's pitch, complete with common lines like he was some kind of salesman, Rowley and the boss each had their own reactions.

"A small silhouette knight? You aren't satisfied with just building an entirely new silhouette knight—now you've thought up something like this too?!"

"I see. Hm...this is also pretty interesting. What do you think, David? If you do it right, it could solve the problem of giving the knight runners too much free time."

In response to Rowley's question, the boss adopted a bewildered attitude, but this time for a completely different reason.

"I don't have any objections to making this in and of itself, headmaster, but we don't have enough manpower to do this and the new model concurrently.

It'd be impossible for us to manage in a short time."

They were going to make an entirely new model of silhouette knight. And since it was already difficult just to think up a new model, creating something entirely different would be too much for the boss and the others. No matter how interesting the idea was, it was like throwing pearls before swine if they didn't have the hands to make it happen.

However, Ernie had expected that as well.

"If that's the case, then there's no need to worry. After all, the selling point of this smaller model is that it's much simpler in construction and thus easier to make than a silhouette knight. Even without the skills of my seniors in high school, I believe we can have this made."

The other two understood what Ernie was trying to say, and their expressions finally went straight past exasperation and frustration, all the way to expressionlessness. The boss also let out a deep sigh.

"Boy, you're surprisingly merciless, aren't you?"

No matter how anyone looked at it, that line wasn't a compliment, but Ernie returned the boss's words with a bright grin.

Chapter 11: Let's Make It!

About half a month had passed since the Academy's maintenance team decided to go way past repairing silhouette knights straight into making a new model. During that time, classes had resumed, and Ernesti and friends had returned to their normal lives as middle school students.

The moment the bell rang at the end of class, the classroom that had been quiet during the class erupted with chatter. Seeing how quickly the students had changed, the teacher let out a small sigh. The day's classes were over, though, and now it was after school. Having been freed from said classes, the students scattered to spend their time as they pleased. It seemed that students didn't change, even in a world where taking just a step out of town could see you attacked by a monster.

Ernie and his friends were no exception, but their case was a little different.

"Ernie! Ernie! Let's go practice! I'm gonna work hard today too!"

"Sure, sure. You don't need to tug on me that hard. I'm coming!"

Addy pulled Ernie along by the hand, clearly not willing to wait as Kid followed behind them. Their recent schedule had seen them taking middle school classes during the day and spending their time after that in the knight runner department's workshop.

The workshop was as noisy as ever, but today the nature of that noise was slightly different from usual. Ernie and friends, who had come in high spirits, were puzzled at the strange atmosphere, so they found the boss, who was sitting down in exhaustion, and talked to him.

"Hello, boss. Why is everyone slumped over like this?"

"Hmna? Oh, it's you, Ernesti... Oh, it's nothing. We were just making strand crystal tissue."

"The thing Ernie thought up before?"

“You got it. But...none of us ever expected to be working a thread spooler after entering the knight runner department. The clothing department’s truly merciless, saying that if we’re gonna do it we better be serious.”

The boss had a far-off look in his eyes—a mix of accomplishment and something else indescribable. The three children imagined muscle-bound dwarves spinning a giant thread spooler, and nearly burst into laughter. It was a surreal scene.

“Well...how should I put it...? Good work, boss.”

“Thanks. But it was worth doing. Look at this.”

The document that the boss had tossed to Ernie was riddled with numbers of all kinds. It was a summary of the changes and differences in output between normal crystal tissue and strand type tissue when used in a silhouette knight.

What followed that were measurements on braiding the strands into rope and what the changes in output were when using different ways of braiding. In the process of making strand type crystal tissue, they had discovered that more complicated braids exhibited stronger effects than simple braids.

“I almost had the doctor called on me when I asked the clothing department students to show me different kinds of braids and plaits.”

“You push yourself quite a bit, don’t you boss?”

The information they had managed to obtain through noble sacrifice was truly priceless. Using the most effective braid pattern, it was possible to increase output by around fifty percent. And the solidly woven strands proved to be almost ten times as tough against fatigue.

“This is more than expected. I predicted only around a twenty percent increase in output with at best twice as much shelf life...”

“Hah! Sure, you were the one who came up with the idea, but I can’t let you go thinking we wouldn’t do anything with it! Well, I won’t deny that we basically got more and more carried away as we discovered it was actually having an effect. This was something I only realized once I started, but things change a lot depending on how you use them. At this rate, we’ll have to take a second look at all the other parts we’ve just been using thoughtlessly to see if

they can be improved.”

The boss laughed innocently as he spoke. Ernie returned a quiet smile, and the contrast made it hard to tell who was the child of the two. As the pair continued talking about the results of their experiments, a huge stir came from the maintenance area, followed by someone calling out in a loud voice for the boss.

“Boossss! We finished changing out the muscles in the arm!”

“Good! I’m coming now!” The boss turned back to Ernie. “Okay kid, the timing is perfect to try out your new invention. Come with me.”

“Of course. I would love to see it!”

The rear of the workshop was currently host to a silhouette knight with the outer skin of its right arm stripped away, leaving the crystal tissue exposed. The fibers of the muscles had become thicker, making it clear that it was now using strand type crystal tissue.

If it had happened to be the same color as real muscle, then it might have been quite bad for an onlooker’s mental health, but luckily the crystal tissue was a dull white color. Coupled with the silhouette knight’s size, it seemed like a statue’s musculature.

“Awwright, all of you make some room! We’re starting movement tests!” The boss paused, turning to the silhouette knight. “Okay, we’re countin’ on ya, Helvi!”

“Understood. Then I’m starting!”

The students that had been working in the area scattered like spiderlings. In exchange, the knight runner Helvi Olbarri stepped into the silhouette knight that was seated on the chair-shaped worktable. With the sound of pressurized air, the front torso armor closed, ensconcing her inside.

Though they had measured the outputs of individual strand type crystal tissue samples already, this was the first movement test they were doing on an actual silhouette knight. The eyes of the surrounding students were shining with expectation as they gulped and watched on. The right arm, which was the one outfitted with the new strand type crystal tissue, was holding on to a large lump

of metal. At a signal, the silhouette knight raised the arm. The crystal tissue in the underarm contracted, its bunching visible from under a thin layer of primal skin.

“Ooh...this thing’s amazing...”

“Hmm, so this is really strong?”

The lump of metal being lifted up by the silhouette knight was so heavy it would have taken a normal unit both arms to just barely lift it off the ground. It was a thing of wonder that the object was currently being easily held up by a single arm using strand crystal tissue. At the same time, whether it was because it had no outer skin or due to a special property of strand crystal tissue, the tissue was making a persistent creaking noise.

“Both the output and durability have been raised. Looks like this will turn out well.”

“Yeah. With this, we’ll be able to make a unit that not even you’ll find easy to die in, kid.”

While Ernie and the boss discussed the results of the test passionately, the groaning sound was gradually getting louder. It was already at the point where it was quite strange to be coming out of crystal tissue.

“By the way boss, do you hear something? It’s like this...creaking sound?”

“That’s a coincidence. So you hear it too, huh? Then it isn’t just my own ears acting up... The hell?”

They looked at each other before turning to the silhouette knight. At that moment, with a sudden dry bursting sound the unit’s right arm ruptured. With the crystal tissue now separated from the arm, it lost power and the lump of metal dropped from its hands, but at that point no one cared about that. After all, the crystal tissue that had come off had been sent flying, scattering the primal skin all through the area. This scattering of silhouette knight armor couldn’t be shrugged off if it hit anyone, and in an instant the workshop had been changed into a hellscape.

“Wooooaarrghhh?! Gah, it’s coming this way—!”

In a stroke of bad luck, one of the pieces flew straight at the boss. Just in time, Ernie intervened, intercepting the flying chunk of armor with his Winchester. From a low stance, he shot forth a mass of compressed Air Bullets and used their bursts to force the chunk into a different trajectory. Leaving behind a dull tearing sound, the offending piece drew an arc above them before slamming into the wall behind.

Though he belonged to the knight runner department, the boss's profession was blacksmith. On top of that, dwarves were never known for their speed, so quick reactions weren't in his wheelhouse either. For a while after, he stayed in a balled-up, protective position, but soon enough he uncurled and looked at the fragment of armor stuck in the back wall with a stiff expression. It had buried itself deep in the wall, and upon seeing that, even the boss was lost for words. Kid and Addy meanwhile stood with their gunstaves at the ready, awkwardly silent.

Eventually, the boss came back to his senses and started to inspect the unit for the reason it had burst. The right arm was now in a sorry state. The crystal tissue that came off was scattered in all directions, leaving the inner skeleton visible.

Seeing the boss enthusiastically checking the condition of the right arm, Ernie timidly raised his voice.

"Please, boss, your observations?"

"Ah...this is, you know, *that* sort of thing. The crystal tissue itself is fine, but the connectors have all been blown to smithereens. The muscle's output was so high that all the other parts weren't able to withstand the strain. I see... Man, this sure is a setback."

The boss gave a dry laugh, but quickly stopped and lapsed into silence. He locked eyes with Ernie, and both of them heaved deep sighs.

"We can't just use any normal solution. Actually, this at least is going to need us to look over the entire design again," the boss stated.

Though there was some damage to the surrounding machines, because the workers had all gotten some distance beforehand, there miraculously weren't any human casualties. The students fearfully crawled out from where they were

hiding, looking up in grief at the broken right arm.

There were still many hurdles to overcome in order to make strand crystal tissue viable. The highest priority, in any case, was the revision of the structure and makeup of the connectors used to fix the tissue to the inner skeleton. Of course, a rework of such a fundamental design aspect would take time. The designers would surely be busy for a while yet.

“So, boss, I’ll leave everything here to you... We’ll be going off to train.”

“Don’t worry, feel free to keep working on ‘that’ for a while longer... Hey, don’t just stand there gawping! We’re going to start revising the fixtures!”

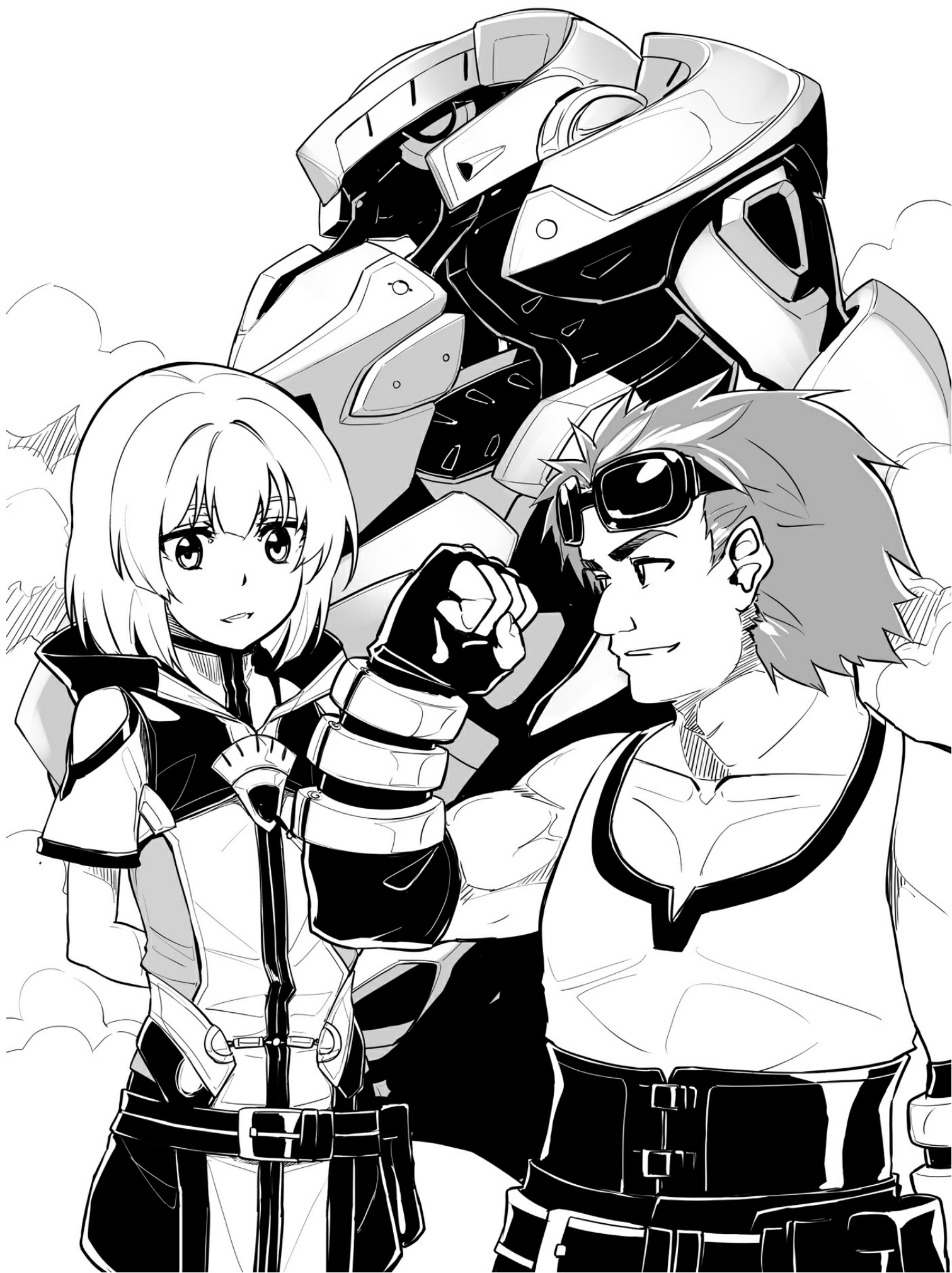
Though the other team members seemed somewhat lifeless, they heeded the boss’s shout and started working once more.



Ernie, Kid, and Addy left as the workshop started to become more lively, making for a different corner of the building. There waited not the form of a silhouette knight, but some strangely shaped “full suits of armor.” They were a little big to be worn by a person, but they were only about two and a half meters tall, unlike a silhouette knight. Though the head and torso were shaped like a normal set of full plate armor, the limbs were strangely long, making for an odd body shape.

“Hello, Batson. How is it today?”

“Oh, Ernie. No problems to speak of. The silhouette gears are in perfect shape today as well, I guarantee it.” Batson said, flexing as a show of confidence. The official name of these full suits of armor was “silhouette gear.” They were made as substitutes for real silhouette knights by Ernie’s suggestion, and were basically miniature silhouette knights.



There were students other than Batson that were working on maintaining the silhouette gears. It was clear to see from their statures that they were not high school students, but middle school students. The design philosophy of the silhouette gear was “a miniature, simplified silhouette knight.” So, its structure had been extremely simplified, making it possible for even the middle school students aiming to become knightsmiths to build them. Batson served as a good example, though in his case he was an acquaintance of Ernie’s, so he’d already had the experience of making many strange things over a long time.

“Then let’s put our all into today’s training!” Ernie declared, and the twins repeated after him energetically.

The silhouette gear was something Ernie had originally thought up to help teach students to operate a silhouette knight’s controls, and now it was also being used to make up for the knight runner department’s lack of silhouette knights. Kid and Addy were in great spirits, and so was Ernie. Though it was a little different, to him he was still controlling a humanoid machine, after all.

Just like a real set of armor, the silhouette gear was controlled by having its user wear it and move. So, to a certain extent, there was a need to tailor the machine to its user, and the twins were on the large side.

Ernie stood in front of a silhouette gear, which was positioned on its knees with its front completely open. However, instead of quickly getting in, he hugged the body tightly. The feel of the cool metal brought a grin to his face.

Kid saw that and once again was exasperated. “I get that you love it, but I don’t think there’s any point in doting on a silhouette gear like that.”

“Of course there is. The more love you put into it, the better it’ll move.”

Kid gave his own silhouette gear an unfathomable look. His mind was aflame with a complex conflict. *Could it really be? No, no way.*

“Naw,” he eventually said out loud, “there’s no way!”

He had managed to come back to his senses from a worrying state.

“Gnrrr...all Ernie cares about is his silhouette gear. Aghhh, what’re you getting so worked up for, Kid? Come on, get in already! We’re gonna train!”

“Huh? Oh...sure...I’m the one at fault here...?”

Having been hurried along by Addy, who had already climbed in, Kid got into one of the silhouette gears as well, still with a somewhat unsatisfied expression. After the sound of metal fitting together came the sound of air leaving the suit, signifying that the armor was now fixed closed. He then extended his arm to grab the control yoke situated on the inside of the silhouette gear’s arm. Silhouette gears were controlled by directly moving one’s arms and legs while running the script in parallel. As intended, their controls were similar to those of silhouette knights.

“Okay then, boot up...”

With that, Ernie used his organ that was unique to this world, the magius circuit, to start compiling the magic script. The flow of mana obeyed the script, and the crystal tissue embedded in each part of the silhouette gear started to move. The armor shook, and then stood up after a beat. In the case of a silhouette gear, both the mana needed to move and the control of it was supplied by the wearer, so it could also be said to be a machine that converted magic directly into physical power.



The three donned their silhouette gears and clanked out of the workshop. As they entered the training area behind the building, they saw that they weren’t the first ones there.

“Hello, Sir Edgar. How does it feel?”

“Ah, if it isn’t Ernesti!” Edgar reacted happily. “Hup! There we go! You can see for yourself, can’t you?”

The large man, a squire and student in the knight runner department, Edgar C. Blanche, was wearing a silhouette gear fitted to him. When Ernie called out to him, he raised his legs and stepped forward toward his junior powerfully and with large strides. His movements were awkward, so it was clear he was having trouble. He couldn’t be compared to Ernie, who was moving around in his silhouette gear without much trouble, but unfortunately Edgar himself was very serious.

“I see. Seems very fun!”

Seeing how Edgar was doing, Ernie only nodded. Edgar’s normally stern expression stiffened even further as he looked up a little. Ernie knew that he was having trouble, but Ernie recognized any trouble or hardship in making a robot move as something fun. The fact that he thought so wholeheartedly made it even more nasty. Edgar knew this and had given up on convincing him otherwise, but in exchange he crossed his arms and started speaking.

“Hey, Ernesti...I’ve thought this for a while now, but these silhouette gear things aren’t bad. I even think they’re pretty amazing, but...they’re way too hard to move!”

The reason he was having so much trouble moving his machine was because of the control scheme of the silhouette gear. The act of actually moving one’s own limbs in concert with a script was in itself fine, but the magic used was a problem. What was needed was the advanced spell, Physical Boost. It was too large a burden to expect from a normal student. Even the knight runner students, who were a cut above the rest, were clearly only barely able to use the spell, if that.

“In the end, the controls are too complicated. After all, the burden on the knight runner from the control script in a silhouette knight is actually quite low... This... I won’t say this absolutely, but it won’t work as a training tool for silhouette knight control. In fact, everyone else has already given up.”

Edgar swept his eyes across the training area. There were several other figures there, but almost all the students had given up after having managed to move a couple times.

“Hmmm...you may be right. I suppose I may have been a little naive in that regard.” Ernie admitted.

“You should just compensate with effort! I mean, look, we’re able to move them like this,” Addy chimed in.

Edgar gave Ernie a look, then Kid, then Addy, before letting out a small sigh. After glancing at the struggling high school knight runners from the corner of their eyes, Kid and Addy started to move, easily manipulating their silhouette gears from the get-go. It must’ve been a boon from having learned Ernie’s

brand of magic and having trained with him for a long time, as they had started to separate themselves from the pack as well.

“You shouldn’t expect so much. This isn’t something you can get the hang of in a single day, right? Jeez...for now I’ve at least learned that you guys are all plenty strange. I won’t say anything about it at this point, but at least don’t expect what you do out of normal people.”

“Mnmmrrrr...that’s unfortunate. So that means these things are useless.” Ernie groaned.

“As they are, yes. This is just a miniaturized silhouette knight, right? Then just slap in a magius engine. With that, the burden of control will be greatly alleviated.”

Edgar shared the idea he had with Ernie. It was a good point. As things stood, while Ernie and his friends might have been able to use silhouette gears, they were useless to those in the high school.

“Hmm...that sounds like the only option...but if we do that, then the cost of manufacture will rise accordingly. But if it’s absolutely necessary...”

However, there was a problem with that solution. The silhouette gears, with their smaller housing, couldn’t fit a silhouette knight-sized magius engine. There was a need to miniaturize the engine as well, but Ernie, despite all his enthusiasm, didn’t know the makeup of a magius engine. In the end, the problem wouldn’t be fixed quickly.

“Heh, that’s pathetic of you, Edgar! How can you, the best of us in the knight runner department, give up so easily?!”

A voice called out from behind Edgar, causing him to turn back. The owner of the voice was Dietrich, slowly walking in a silhouette gear. He was moving somewhat more smoothly than Edgar had been.

“Dee...you’re really motivated for once, aren’t you?”

Surprisingly, Dietrich had been quite earnest about learning how to control a silhouette gear. Currently, he was more skilled than even Edgar, who was somewhat frustrated at having been overtaken. Dietrich had let that get to his head, as he took a larger, more forceful step—immediately resulting in disaster.

“Hmph! This much is easy...huh? Oh crap, what is this? Crap, I can’t stooooop?!”

Though he was able to move better than Edgar, Dietrich was still in training. He had put too much momentum into the movement and thus made a mistake, causing his upper half to suddenly turn face the wrong direction with an alarming dull sound. Everyone who saw that had their expressions dyed with panic.

“Sir Dee? Whoa, this might be bad. Hurry, we need to get our senior to the infirmary...”

The moment Ernie panicked and accidentally touched on Dietrich’s source of trauma, the older boy stood with incredible force. In fact, Dee turned around with strong momentum into a beautiful spin before striking an indecipherable pose, saying, “I-I don’t need to go to the infirmary! Th-This is nothing! Not nearly enough to warrant that!”

He was sweating an awful lot down his forehead as he struck that skillful pose, but whether that was from physical damage or mental damage was unclear. Everyone around was astonished as he continued to laugh imperiously and stride off to the workshop. Edgar then regrouped and hurriedly followed after his friend.

“Uhhh...well, he seems fine, so I guess we can just go back to training.”

After seeing off their upperclassmen in a daze, Ernie and the twins regrouped, finally getting to their own training. That Ernie could use a silhouette gear was a matter of course, but the twins had also already gotten to the point where they could move with no problems. Because of that, the details of the training had started to shift into tougher subjects, becoming basically combat training.

“Control of a silhouette gear is similar to that of a silhouette knight, especially while using Full Control. You direct the movement of the crystal tissue, feel the flowing mana, and control the script. Both of you should be able to move faster!”

“Ha! You always ask for way too much!”

Their training was a match—two-on-one with the twins vs. Ernie. Even so, the

twins had never won. The two of them were fired up about making today their first victory, and so they attacked with exquisite teamwork.

Kid, with his huge sword, charged at Ernie. He wanted to use the extra range on his weapon to control the pace of the fight, but Ernie turned it around and stepped in to throw off his sense of distance. The difference in speed was overwhelming, and Kid was quickly forced on the defensive.

“Crap! Ernie’s getting on a roll. Addy!”

“Leave it to me! I’ll disrupt his stance!”

Kid attempted an attack on Ernie as he called out, and Addy came rushing in from the side. Just like the pilot herself, Addy’s silhouette gear used twin swords, swinging them like a storm in a combo. But Ernie dodged every last one of them. Addy couldn’t keep up. Even so, Ernie was outnumbered. Right after dodging, Ernie showed an opening, which Kid took the opportunity to exploit. He swung his giant sword with fearsome speed, and the attack seemed about to connect.

“That’s good teamwork...but!”

Ernie had adopted an extremely low stance, and suddenly, the sound of something bursting rang out as he accelerated dramatically. While controlling a silhouette gear, he had added his own Aero Thrust spell to put on speed. Ernie jumped, still in a stance so low as to scrape the ground, getting around Addy as she tried to change her position. In a panic, she tried to escape, but before she could, Ernie caught her and threw her at Kid, who had just finished swinging his sword.

“Nmoggwagh!”

Unable to withstand the force as they clashed face-first, the pair fell to the ground and Ernie nodded, satisfied.

“Even though it’s on the small side, humanoid weapons truly are wonderful. I can’t help but overflow with strength and motivation. Now then, you two, this is no time to be lying down. Let’s continue!”

While Ernie seemed in high spirits, the twins were quite a bit less happy.

“Hey, don’t you get the feeling that Ernie’s even stricter than when he was teaching us magic?”

“It’s not just you. Ernie never holds back when stuff like this is involved... Nothing for it, awwright! Let’s go another round!”

Kid psyched himself up and stood before they challenged Ernie once again.

“Training’s all well and good guys, but I’m the one that has to fix those things, so don’t break them too hard please...”

That was Batson’s heartfelt gripe, one that slipped out his mouth as he watched.



The weather was getting cooler every day as the season changed from summer to fall.

Everyone’s days were jam-packed. Finally, several months after Ernie had proposed the strand crystal tissue and back weapon, thanks to the tireless and unyielding efforts of the knight runner department’s maintenance team, one test unit had been completed.

“Finally, we’ve gotten off the starting line...” David grumbled, shades of the exhaustion he was feeling leaking out.

Some of the students in the area had bags under their eyes, while others were tapping their shoulders, trying to tease out knots in their muscles. All of them seemed very exhausted. These last few months spent putting together a test unit had been utter carnage.

The design team had drawn up many various patterns, and the manufacturing team had brought every one of them into reality for testing. They repeated this process many times before settling on a final blueprint, overcoming all failures and accidents so it could take shape. It was natural for them to be tired.

Though they were students, they were all said to be as good as active knightsmiths, and this work was challenging in the extreme. It was a wonder in a variety of ways that nobody had died; that was how grueling their days had been. Even so, the reason they were able to come this far without losing their

morale was the absolute joy they felt as engineers bringing about new technology. As proof, their eyes were filled with fiery passion that even their exhaustion could not overtake.

“Awwright, let’s start bringing this thing out! Do it slowly—if we break it now, I’ll break you!”

The finished test unit was moved onto a cart and carefully wheeled out of the workshop. Its form was unconventional, and it was almost entirely covered only by primal skin, the bare minimum of armor necessary to protect the inner machinery, and in some spots the crystal tissue was actually exposed. The way it looked, with only parts of its limbs and chest having outer skin attached, brought one word to mind: unfinished.

The test unit was carried as-is to the circular arena that served as the knight runner department’s training area. Once it reached the center of the area, the chest hatch opened up while it was still horizontal to allow the test runner, Helvi, to climb inside.

The audience seating at the periphery of the arena was now host to the maintenance team as they watched over the testing. Before them was a lineup of giant shields, capable of hiding them completely. It was a lesson they’d learned from all the accidents that had happened up until now. Their caution was a matter of course, since even though they may have tested individual parts many times, this was their first time testing the fully assembled unit. In order to ensure success, they had exercised caution and removed anything bulky from the silhouette knight.

“Okay, Helvi, you ready?!” The boss paused for a moment before announcing, “Let’s start then; first, stand up!”

With a megaphone in one hand, the boss raised his voice and at his call, the test unit got up. While sheltering in the cover of the shields, the maintenance team’s gaze was nailed to the product of all their work. While emitting grating sounds of metal on metal, the test unit gradually raised its upper half. Its movements were more awkward than that of a mass-produced unit as it got up extremely slowly. The arms supported the body as the legs bent. The thighs swelled as power was put into them, and the swelling was visible even from far

away. After taking loads of time, the test unit finally stood up properly.

“It’s up!” someone cried amid the hush.

The milestone of having it stand brought back memories of all the effort and labor they had invested in the unit, the hardships they’d overcome, and the sacrifices they’d made. The voice that had spoken up was shaky. That movement had required enough power to prove that, once it was complete, the unit was able to withstand the output of strand crystal tissue at its lowest setting.

“Not yet, don’t let your guard down... There! Don’t bend forward! It’s dangerous! Okay...calm down... Helvi, just start walking as you are. Slowly... I said slowly!”

The test unit nodded its head deliberately to show understanding. After that, it paused as the pilot plucked up her courage, and eventually it started to walk. Though it was walking on paved stone, the way the test unit strode so carefully made it seem like it was on a suspension bridge that could snap at any moment. It was walking at a snail’s pace. Taking a long time, its heavy footfalls and sounds of moving musculature reverberated through the area as the test unit made a half-lap around the arena.

“The fixings haven’t gone yet. Seems like it’ll work out, somehow.”

Because the unit wasn’t yet equipped with outer skin, they couldn’t let their guards down, but at the very least the unit didn’t seem in danger of breaking. Just like that, the test machine returned to where the maintenance students were before getting down on one knee slowly and coming to rest in what was called the parked position for silhouette knights. Next, Helvi completely shut the unit down. Only then did the maintenance team finally heave a huge sigh of relief. Still, the silence lasted only a moment. Quickly, they raised a cheer so loud it shook the ground. Their movement test had succeeded; it was the moment all their trial and error had been rewarded.

The torso armor of the test unit opened up, revealing Helvi, who stood on top of the armor. She must have been really nervous, as she let out a huge sigh as she wiped sweat from her body.

“Yo, how do you feel after moving it, Helvi?”

The joy the boss felt at the success of the test seeped into his voice as he talked to Helvi, who replied with a somber expression.

“The textbook definition of a wild, stubborn horse. There’s too much power, so it’s actually tough to walk.”

“That much?”

“Yes, it’s a totally different beast from the units I’ve been using. To be honest, with how different the feeling is, we might need to start everyone’s training over from the beginning.”

“Yeah, well...your being able to walk is a huge accomplishment, but we haven’t been able to fine-tune the controls yet. We’ll have to adjust that later... Now then, this doesn’t extend to jumping around, but at least walking is fine, so we’ll get on to checking what’s left to check.”

Helvi nodded and returned to the pilot’s seat. Having confirmed that the unit was safe, the members of the maintenance team cleaned up the shields they’d been hiding behind and got to work. Unmodified silhouette knights brought in some large targets and set them up. While leaving the arena, the boss shouted out his orders to the other students around him.

“Okay, bring over some silhouette arms. The training ones, got it? Put the targets up at the edge of the arena! Also, someone go find that silver kid, Ernesti! I’m sure he’s messing around with his silhouette gear somewhere, so just search with that in mind and it should be easy!”



The area surrounding Laihiala Knight Runner Academy was full of businesses aimed toward students, from stores selling daily supplies to restaurants offering light snacks and meals. The students were far from having great economic leeway, but there were so many of them that collectively they still ended up spending quite a lot of money. With that force at work, many stores had popped up in the area to match the students’ lifestyles.

When the period after school rolled around, the academy’s surroundings would suddenly be populated by stalls. Most of these sold snacks or candies. At this time, students who had been freed from studying could be seen assembling

at these stores like butterflies gathering to suck on nectar—a fitting simile since they could indeed be seen snacking. One of these stores sold pancakes filled with jam. As the owner of this place was cooking his usual pancakes, a female student made what seemed like an order.

“Three pancakes please, and make the jam mandarina!”

“Sure thing! Just wait a little bit, it’ll be do—”

The owner replied in a friendly manner as he turned around, but he trailed off quickly and left the sentence unfinished. Why? Because the one ordering was, rather than a typical student, a knight wearing a huge full set of plate armor. Of course, it wasn’t as big as a silhouette knight, but the knight was still big enough to be taller than the stall’s tent covering, forcing the person to hunch over to look inside and making the place seem cramped. The owner was astonished, but the knight seemed puzzled by the look and tilted its head. For a while after, an awkward, indescribable air settled in the room, but then a voice came from one of two more similarly statured knights standing behind the first, scolding the first one.

“Hey now, Addy, who would call out like that while in one of these?”

“Hm? Oh, no wonder! Sorry, you must’ve been surprised!”

The young male and female voices that seemed to be coming from such heavy knights seemed strange and unnatural, and the owner of the stall had yet to overcome his shock, but suddenly the armor opened up to reveal that there really was a female student inside, and the owner was finally done in.

“WH-WH-WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!”

“Ah, hey, the pancakes are burning!”

That warning knocked the owner back to his senses, and he pulled out the pancakes in a panic, but several of them had already been ruined.

The female student seemed somewhat apologetic. “Ahh, sorry. It’s because I shocked you, isn’t it? We can have those burnt ones.”

“Oh, no...sure, I was surprised, but it’s still my mistake that burnt these. Customers shouldn’t worry about things like that.”

The owner spread jam between the remaining salvaged pancakes and exchanged them for coin. The female student thanked him as she once again got in her suit of armor and walked back to the other knights.

“Man, the academy’s using some crazy suits these days...”

The owner watched the students walk off, unable to shake his astonishment as he clutched his copper coins.



“Mmm, so goood!” Addy rejoiced. “Mandarina jam is great, isn’t it?”

“I prefer pumila jam, myself,” Kid noted.

“I’m good with whatever,” Ernie declared, “as long as it’s sweet.”

Ernie, Kid, and Addy were holding their pancakes in one hand as they ate and piloted their silhouette gears at the same time. The strange sight of knights in heavy armor walking around with sweets in one hand surprised the townsfolk and other students, who hurriedly got out of the way as they strode past.

Recently, Ernie, Kid, and Addy had started to use their silhouette gears not just for training, but in their daily lives as well. Clearly, the armor suits caused such a big fuss everywhere that they actually got in the way, but the trio weren’t using the machines for convenience. As previously stated, piloting them required use of the advanced spell, Physical Boost, which consumed quite a lot of mana. Fundamentally, the only way to grow one’s magical prowess was to use magic, so for efficiency’s sake using a spell that put a high burden on the caster was the best way to train.

In other words, just like when they had been jogging while using Physical Boost, they were polishing their own abilities. By the way, Ernie was the only one who was simply using the silhouette gear because he found it fun.

So, as they walked while making loud footsteps, some knight runner department students came chasing after them. They were there on behalf of the boss.

“Right, the movement test for the prototype unit, is it? I would love to, nay, *have* to see that!”

Having heard what they had to say, Ernie of course made an immediate decision. As if saying that their previous slow pace would not cut it, he picked up the students that had brought the message with his silhouette gear. After all, a silhouette gear piloted using Full Control would be much faster than moving around unassisted. Desiring to go see the silhouette knight as fast as possible, he ignored the screams of the students and the foaming of their mouths as he tore off toward the academy with explosive speed.



The closer they got to the training arena, the more knight runner department students there were. Unmodified silhouette knights were carrying over spare parts and tools for repair while knightsmiths and knight runners were all attending to their own work. When Ernie and the twins reached the training area, they saw a silhouette knight standing in the middle not equipped with outer skin. It was the test unit that had finished its ambulation trial.

“So it moved properly, right?” Ernie asked. “I’m glad it didn’t explode just trying to walk or something.”

Kid shook his head. “The thing you’re worried about is way too fundamental... Is the prototype really going to be okay? I guess I should stay in my silhouette gear just in case the test gets out of control, so I can run away.”

After letting go of the students, who then slumped to the ground, Ernie disembarked from his silhouette gear to stand next to the boss.

“Oh, so you’re here, kid. Then let’s get this thing started!”

“Please and thank you.”

The strand crystal tissue they had just used in the ambulation test had been put together using trial and error by the knightsmiths, with the boss in the lead, but the back weapons they were now testing had all been handled by Ernie, from the basic theory to the actual design. That was why he’d been called over to be able to witness it.

“Just from the looks there doesn’t seem to be any problems, but...the question is how complete it is.”

“Before we put it all together, the linkage and aiming functions were working

as expected. The only remaining concern is the optimization of its position and the accuracy of the aiming.”

“Aim...what do you mean by accuracy?”

“Ahh, uhh...it’s about how well you can hit a target using the aim function... Do you get it?” Having disembarked from his silhouette gear, Ernie replied to the boss’s questions in a somewhat rushed manner as he approached.

“Oh ho...that’s an important one then. At any rate, we’ll just have to see in the test.”

The twins, in the end, stayed in their silhouette gears, unconcernedly allowing their huge forms to get in the way.

“Okay! Once we mount the silhouette arms, we’re starting!”

At the boss’s signal, the student units approached the test unit. On its back there were two mechanisms that had never before been seen on a silhouette knight. These new appendages, which looked like unrefined arms, were mounted to what would be the shoulder blades of a human. They were currently folded in half, but at their tips were simplified hands. Though there was a complete lack of polish, they were modeled after industrial robot arms on Earth, and in terms of function they were quite close to what they were modeled after. These limbs were the mechanism that could be considered the real form of the back weapon: the sub-arms.

The test started with the attachment of silhouette arms. For the weapons in question, preexisting ones would be used. The sub-arms had been fitted with a “hand” in order to accommodate all sorts of silhouette arms, which was one of the main selling points.

The student units stood behind the test unit and handed over the silhouette arms they were holding to the sub-arms. The sub-arms’ hands had been simplified because they were not expected to be able to handle complicated tasks; they had been specialized to hold silhouette arms, which was exactly what was needed. Both sub-arms grabbed onto the silhouette arms, holding them fixed facing upward.

“Good, the sub-arms seem to be working okay.”

Though the prototype needed help from other units to change silhouette arms, that wasn't considered a strike against the sub-arms' function. Helvi, from her pilot's seat, could feel a slight vibration coming from behind her as she confirmed the display on her holomonitor.

She nodded with a grunt of approval. "Installation of silhouette arms complete. Next is the deployment test. I'm doing it."

Before she was the knight runner pilot of the test unit, she had participated in checking the function of the back weapons while they were still in development. She had received a briefing on their method of control and functions back then, so she understood well how to use them.

"Deploying silhouette arms, displaying aiming reticle."

She pulled on a lever that had been installed next to one of her control yokes. The magius engine received her order and told the muscles inside the sub-arms to raise the appendages, causing a slight vibration in the cockpit as the sub-arms deployed, bringing the silhouette arms into firing position. They had basically rotated ninety degrees from a standing position, so they were now horizontal, and the silhouette arms were now positioned over the test unit's shoulders pointing forward. The sub-arms' movements were smoother than expected, eliciting a low murmur of surprise from the maintenance team students. They had tried operating the sub-arms more than once while putting together the test unit, but this was their first time seeing it in action while fully assembled, and it was a moving sight.

A change occurred in the cockpit's holomonitor. Up until now, all it had done was display the view outside, but now a mark was added to the image to represent the aim of the weapon. It was a very simple reticle, round and fitted with gradations for distance, but it was still a big step up considering there had been nothing before.

"Calibrating the aim... I'm going to fire."

Helvi moved the reticle over one of the targets; to the audience, it looked like the head was moving in sync with the direction of the silhouette arms. Nervous, she gulped down a breath as she carefully depressed the trigger on her control yoke. The silhouette arms, receiving their orders, fired. The test unit had been

equipped with the standard fire bullet silhouette arms used in training. The shining red magic projectile flew forth, hitting the target as if it had been sucked into it. This weapon was weaker than the ones used in field exercises, so the target retained its shape, but the charring from the impact of the bullet was clear. Even though they had started this test before making sure everything was perfect, she had still managed to hit the target.

“I thought that it’d need more adjustment, but I guess not.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? Ah, it hit again.”

The test unit continued, firing several more rounds. Some of them missed, but the test ended with the back weapon achieving around sixty percent accuracy. After it was finished shooting, the test unit once again stowed its silhouette arms. Opposite of when it deployed, the sub-arms folded, returning the silhouette arms to a vertical alignment parallel to the unit’s back.

The main purpose of this test was to check the sub-arms’ deployment and stowage functions, and the actual aim was really just icing on top, so the results this time were more than good enough.

“I see...so that’s what the back weapon is like... It might be an even bigger thing than expected.” With the results right in front of him, the boss groaned while stroking his beard.

The test unit had put out nearly perfect results across the board for the tests today, and observing students were joyful in the extreme. The completion of pretty much all the new functions—strand crystal tissue, back weapons, and the fire control system—looked to be just over the horizon. Their goal was now taking shape, which was the moment that brought the most joy to engineers.

“Why are they all so happy?” Addy wondered aloud.

The twins, who were not actual knight runners or smiths, couldn’t quite understand the amount of delight being displayed by everyone around them. Compared to their surroundings, they stood out as strange.

Having heard Addy’s question coming from above his head, Ernie replied with a wry smile. “It’s because we’ve taken the first step toward a new form of silhouette knight. Everyone’s overjoyed because we’ve cut open a new path

with our own hands.”

Addy skillfully manipulated her silhouette gear to cross its arms as she pondered that for a while. It didn’t take long for her to finish and raise her head.

“Hmmm, I don’t really get it, but since it worked, I guess congratulations are in order!”

“You’re not wrong, Addy, but...”

Ernie had no idea how to explain the concept to her.



While surrounded by the joy of the maintenance students who had just had all their effort and pain rewarded, there were some who looked at the test unit from a different perspective.

“What do you think of that, Dee?”

Edgar and Dietrich were knight runners—people who piloted silhouette knights. They watched the tests while giving their impressions.

“Hm, well...first we’d have a lot of trouble in a long-range fight against the test unit. While we would need to devote an arm to using silhouette arms, that one can defend itself using a shield or something while firing. It could even wield a huge two-handed shield.”

“Yeah. Not only that, but it can use two silhouette arms at once. After all, up until now it’d been common sense to only use one at a time in order to make up for the opening created when switching equipment. It’s simply a doubling in firepower. I don’t even want to consider a shoot-out.”

“That’s good. We’ll be able to shoot down opponents much more safely than with a standard design. I think it’s a wonderful thing.”

“You... It’s true this is very heartening against monsters, but we might have to fight against this thing ourselves, you know?”

Edgar seemed somewhat exasperated as he argued with Dietrich, but that was when a voice came in from beside them.

“He’s right. Should I take you two on first?”

The two of them turned to see the test unit’s knight runner, Helvi. The tests had finished while they were talking.

“I won’t go as far as to say that’s impossible, but that unit isn’t finished yet, right?”

“For now. But this test has allowed us to check pretty much everything, so apparently it won’t be long until it’s done.”

Its frame had already been completed, so they were on the cusp of completion. Helvi had on a confident smile, and her gaze was sharp.

“Then don’t you think there’s something you should do first? For example, testing to see how far you can get against the academy’s strongest knight who survived the behemoth.” Dietrich interjected.

Edgar’s eyes widened a little. All three of them were survivors of the behemoth incident. But each one of them had differing opinions and thoughts on the matter.

“Well, it’s true that there’ll need to be a mock battle of some sort... Were you talking about me? If that’s the case, then Helvi also survived.”

“Somehow. But in my case, it was just luck. It’s because *he* made it in time.”

“No way, do you regret that?”

“What do you mean? I couldn’t be more grateful it happened. In fact...that’s why I was interested in the silhouette knight that kid made.”

All three of their gazes went toward the test unit that was being carried away.

“I know because I’ve been involved from the start. With this baby and its new sort of strength, I can beat you.”

“That’s frightening.”

Seeing that Edgar wasn’t even a little bit scared, but rather somewhat uncomfortable, Helvi let out a small sigh.

“That’s why, when it’s finished...I might be able to fight that big lug to the end.”

“Helvi...was that why you became the test pilot?”

“Either way, silhouette knights getting stronger is just good. It’ll make fighting monsters easier.”

Instantly, Helvi grinned, which made Edgar feel like he’d been completely seen through.

“Just you wait, Edgar. I’ll start by beating you black and blue.”

Helvi walked off while waving goodbye as Edgar saw her off with a small sigh. Then, Dietrich patted him on the shoulder.

“I’m jealous, Edgar. You get to fight that new model right away.”

“I’d love to switch if you want. I mean it.”

“You know who’ll bear a grudge if you refuse her nomination, don’t you? I’ll take the opportunity to learn from your fight first.”

While Edgar did seem somewhat unhappy, he also couldn’t hide his curiosity and spirit of defiance. It made for a complex expression.



In practical terms, thanks to the completion of the hardest piece that was the strand crystal tissue, everything else went swimmingly for the new silhouette knight. The next test saw the unit equipped with outer skin, and it stepped closer and closer to completion as the back weapons were fine-tuned to fire while moving. Another month after the ambulatory test, they finally got out of the testing phase, and the test unit was given a proper designation. The former “Engineering Test Prototype No. 1” was given the model name Tellestarle.



The lighting inside the workshop slowly illuminated the form of Tellestarle. It didn’t look much different from the other units the students were using. In fact, because it was assumed that there would be more adjustments and remodels, it could even be said that it was more roughly made than the others. The only clear outward difference was the two silhouette arms attached to its back. The Tellestarle proceeded as it was to the training area. Compared to past tests, it was now moving much more smoothly, but it still looked somewhat awkward.

As it passed through the gate to the training arena, there was already a silhouette knight waiting for it. It was the knight in pure white armor, Earlcumber—a unit with even fewer decorations than the Tellestarle and wielding a standard straight sword and shield set. However, it was piloted by the knight runner currently considered the strongest in the department, Edgar.

“Okay, it looks like you’re ready too, Helvi. Then we will now commence a mock battle between Tellestarle and Earlcumber to commemorate the completion of the new model’s testing phase!”

In response to the referee student’s statement, the knight runner department students that had gathered to observe all cheered. It was a mock battle between the strongest existing silhouette knight and a new model packed with innovative new mechanisms. Their expectations would of course be heightened accordingly.

While sitting in the pilot’s seat of the Tellestarle and looking at Earlcumber through the holomonitor, Helvi felt fulfilled. But no matter how powerful the new unit was, she couldn’t let her guard down. After all, Edgar in Earlcumber had faced off against a behemoth, and though he couldn’t beat it, he was strong enough to stay in the fight until the end.

On the other hand, Helvi and her partner, Trandorquess, had been defeated. As she had said herself, the only reason she wasn’t dead was luck. Both of their units, Earlcumber and Trandorquess, were in the end student machines. There was no real difference between them. In other words, any perceivable difference was most likely due to the knight runner’s skill.

Then what about the Tellestarle? It was a rowdy young buck, but the power hidden within it was first class. As its test pilot, Helvi had been with the unit since its birth, and she knew it well.

First, she looked around the cockpit. There were the control yokes she was used to, new meters and gauges that nevertheless seemed familiar, and a seat that fit her well. Each of these elements made her feel at home. The Tellestarle was a unit that had been reborn after being destroyed by the behemoth. Among all those destroyed units, this one used to be her partner, Trandorquess. Of course, the Tellestarle was now different from the old unit; there probably

wasn't even twenty percent of Trandorquess's original parts left. Even so, to her it was her partner that she was so familiar with.

"We can fight together again... Now, let's go Tellestarle!"

While calling out the name of her partner that had gained a new form, she pressed her stirrups. The unit's strong response once again led her to the battlefield.

Chapter 12: Let's Have a Mock Battle

Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's training arena, paved with stone, was currently playing host to giants that faced off against each other with swords at the ready. The giants were covered in metal armor that shined with a dull luster as the sound of creaking from their crystalline muscles filled the area.

They were about to participate in a mock battle—a type of training. However, to the people who were facing each other in silhouette knights, humanity's most powerful weapons, this was a real fight. The mood floating about the arena was the opposite of loose and easy, and the knight runners in their cockpits silently burned with fighting spirit, their fangs bared and nerves taut.

“Awwright, you two ready? Then let's start! Under the rules of mock combat, both sides must bow! Then get ready...start!!!”

At the referee's signal, both of the steel giants unleashed war cries as they ran forth.

The basic principle of combat between silhouette knights was to bombard with spell fire from silhouette arms when at a distance, and use melee weapons when closer. Silhouette arms weren't very durable because they were designed using emblem graphs. There was a very high chance of the weapons breaking if they were used in close quarters, making it easy to end up losing an attack option.

Edgar grasped the function of the Tellestarle's back weapon as well as its pilot. Since it was able to use two silhouette arms at once, its long-range attack capabilities were a threat. Because of that, Edgar decided to forgo trying to compete at range. Instead, right after the match started he attempted to bring the fight into close quarters.

However, it didn't go as he expected. The Tellestarle also charged forward to close the distance as soon as the match started.

What's she planning? She isn't trying to use her unit's advantage in long-

range battle at all? Fine with me; this is my chance! Edgar thought.

In an attempt to use its momentum to aid in its opening slash, Earlcumber stepped in aggressively. Right after raising its sword, Edgar realized he had been completely mistaken about the back weapon's function. Right as the two combatants were about to clash, the Tellestarle suddenly deployed its back weapons. While glaring through the reticle on her holomonitor, Helvi smiled.

"I'll start with a greeting. The true worth of the back weapons lies in being able to bombard your enemy at point-blank range!"

Fire simultaneously erupted from both the Tellestarle's back weapons. Not even Earlcumber could dodge a magic bombardment like that when it was just about to clash with its sword. Though one of the attacks was blocked by Earlcumber's shield, the other hit the right shoulder, where the shield didn't cover. Since the Tellestarle was equipped with training-use silhouette arms, the blow didn't have enough power to blow the arm away. But it was still enough to break Earlcumber's stance, ruining the momentum it had built up.

"It's not over yet!"

The Tellestarle swung its sword, even though it was still in the process of stowing away its back weapons. The strike relied entirely on momentum, and was completely without any artifice or cunning. Still, the blow used its attacker's speed, and with the target currently off-balance, it was much more fearsome than any attack using a half-baked plan.

Having been knocked off-balance, Edgar made sure to roll with it. He allowed the right half of his unit to fall backward as he stuck the shield in his left hand outward to intercept the Tellestarle's attack. Though this resulted in Earlcumber barely managing to stop the attack from doing damage, it was flung backwards almost bodily. This meant it was unable to try to brace itself and stop its stance from crumbling any further. But more than that, the strength of his opponent's swordplay was far more than Edgar had expected.

Edgar sucked in a breath of astonishment. "What power. So this is the result of using the strand type?!"

Edgar backed away, groaning as he tried to open up some distance between them. Not only did the back weapon make possible the use of silhouette arms

at timings that defied common sense, but the strand crystal tissue also put out overwhelming power. While he regrouped, the first thing Edgar did was wipe standard battle patterns from his mind.

“Aaggggh, I hate how used to throwing away common sense I’ve gotten!”

Through his holomonitor, Edgar could see the Tellestarle advance once more, clearly intending to continue attacking Earlcumber. It seemed that it no longer intended to try for any surprises, as it had already deployed its back weapons over both shoulders.

“Too bad, I’m also pretty stubborn!”

Attacking in a straight line would just make him a target for the Tellestarle’s back weapons. So Earlcumber braced with its shield as it tried to move aside and avoid his opponent’s line of sight.



The excitement of the audience boiled over after the mock battle turned out to be way more heated than expected. Each time the steel giants’ swords clashed, the crowd erupted into cheers. But while the spectator seating was crazed with excitement, the maintenance team’s space was quiet as they analyzed the fight.

“Should have expected this out of Edgar. The fight would’ve been over in one shot if it had been any normal pilot.”

“Miss Helvi’s also acquitting herself very nicely.”

“Of course, she wasn’t our test runner for nothing.”

Ernie was speaking with the boss, David. To the two of them, being able to see Tellestarle moving around in a nearly battle-ready state was more precious than gold. They observed each and every action carefully, analyzing it.

As they watched, the two combatants clashed again. They thought the clash of swords would turn into another sword-locked pushing battle, but Tellestarle let its pure power do the talking, driving Earlcumber back. But Earlcumber wasn’t one to be taken lightly. It created some distance as if it expected to lose in pure power, not allowing any follow-up attacks.

“Helvi looks like she’s really relying on brute force,” the boss commented.

“It’s because the difference in their output is so obvious. I think she’s trying to use that advantage to its fullest. Also, to be honest, the controls haven’t been fully calibrated, so she’ll lose if she tries to make the match about techniques and skilled piloting.”

Ernie’s words convinced the boss. With all the flaws remaining in its control system, the Tellestarle’s overflowing power meant that while it was well capable of putting out explosive power, it wasn’t great at finer movements. This resulted in many rougher, sloppier attacks. Edgar wouldn’t allow a direct hit so easily. Still, the Tellestarle had been able to maintain its advantageous position by integrating its back weapons into its attack pattern.

“Those’re far too troublesome! I need to suppress those silhouette arms or I don’t stand a chance!”

While Edgar was clearly feeling this was a hard fight, he was still able to analyze the situation calmly. His opponent, Helvi, had done an exceptional job at understanding her Tellestarle’s quirks. She was making up for her unit’s shortcomings and making the best of what it had an advantage in. Edgar had also noticed how rough the Tellestarle’s movements were, but he couldn’t make use of it. Up until now, against any other silhouette knight, he would have been able to use his skills to bait an attack and counter. But against the Tellestarle, things were different.

The biggest cause of all that was the breadth of moves the back weapons afforded it. Even if he were to avoid any close combat, follow-ups would come at a timing that he never had to worry about before. Simply put, he was losing badly in the number of moves he could make and the options he had. And if he tried to go for an extended clash, the fact that he would lose in power was set in stone. The gap in the performances of their units was wide enough that the difference in skill couldn’t make up for it.

The students who were watching the two silhouette knights go at it knew that Earlcumber had not made a mistake, nor was it going easy on its opponent. That was why they were so excited; they were seeing a new model of silhouette knight absolutely overwhelm the strongest pillar of the department even

despite its rough movements.



Slowly but surely, Earlcumber was cornered. If he wasn't able to silence the back weapons, even if he had to be a little reckless, Edgar would have no shot at winning.

"I'm not a big fan of gambling, but...it'd be a dull fight if I just allowed myself to continue getting pushed around like this."

Seeing Earlcumber stand still through her holomonitor, Helvi muttered, "Did he just get impatient? Looks like he's going to take a gamble, that Edgar..."

She knew that she was less skilled than Edgar. That was why she had been fighting while making sure to put her machine's abilities at the forefront. That was also why she was naturally able to guess at what he was aiming for.

"He can't overturn the power difference the strand type gives me. Since that's the case...he's most likely aiming for my back weapons."

If her back weapons were to no longer function, no matter how wide the difference in power there was between them, with how rough her unit moved, Edgar would be able to flip the situation on its head with just his piloting skill. Both knight runners knew their opponent, and because they also knew themselves their thoughts had synced. The dance of attack and defense naturally converged on a single point.



Both combatants paused, their swords still pointing at each other. During this period of calm that followed the white-hot battle that had been happening before, both sides had their nerves drawn tight like a bowstring. At some point, the spectators had followed suit, falling into silence with the premonition that a conclusion would soon be reached. Many of them swallowed their saliva nervously.

Suddenly, the arena was filled with a loud, shrill inhalation noise. It was the sound of an ether reactor operating at max capacity, and it was coming from Earlcumber. It sounded like the silhouette knight itself was raising a war cry, and with that as the signal, the mood which had been drawn taut like a

bowstring was broken by Earlcumber's charge. From among a large number of potential choices, Edgar decided on a frontal charge. With a heavy sound that made it seem like it was trying to crush the pavement underneath, the steel knight ran forth.

"Attacking straightforwardly in times like this is just like you! Fine, I'll face you with everything at my disposal!"

Even with the power advantage, she wouldn't be able to absorb the impact of an attack if her opponent were to gain enough momentum first. So, Helvi had her Tellestarle advance. Like a mirror of how the match first started, both sides ran toward each other until they clashed.

Of course, Tellestarle took the initiative, launching an attack that would leave it in an advantageous position. The silhouette arms poking over both its shoulders spewed fire. The magic assaulted Earlcumber, but it blocked one of the bullets with its shield while slashing the other apart with its sword. The fact that it managed a feat such as cutting apart an overspell was laudable, but swinging its sword just before the two units were about to collide looked to everyone like a mistake. After all, Tellestarle was right in front of Earlcumber already, with its sword at the ready to make full use of its power. Wouldn't it be anticlimactic for them to collide but for only one of them to be able to make an attack? Everyone, even Helvi, thought so.

That being said, Edgar hadn't made a mistake. He had planned from the start to use his sword as a defensive tool. He fixed his grip on his real plan, the shield, locking it in place. Earlcumber then lowered its stance and charged forward, trying to thrust his left side into its opponent.

"I was wrong?! It's a shield bash!!! He's seriously trying to brute force even further?!"

Having realized what Earlcumber was doing just before it was too late, Helvi hurriedly pulled back her sword. If she tried to attack Earlcumber with her sword as the enemy unit was presenting its shield forward, it would only make any damage she took worse.

Edgar's goal was simple. He was losing in both attack options and pure power, but there was something Earlcumber could match the Tellestarle at: mass. He

planned to make up for lack of power with momentum as he turned Earlcumber itself into a bullet, launching its entire body in a single strike at the Tellestarle.

With any piloting skill removed as a factor, the Tellestarle had an absolute advantage in a simple contest of strength thanks to its better output. Because she was so confident of this, Helvi chose to take the attack head-on. By the time she'd noticed Edgar's plan, it was already too late to avoid it, so the only choice she had was to attempt the same action since she had also built up some momentum.

The Tellestarle braced with its shield as well, and soon after both silhouette knights crashed into each other.

Instantly, a sound like the collision itself was crying out rang through the area. Having hit each other squarely, both units' shields warped and crystal tissue was sent flying from both sides' left arms, since they had taken the brunt of the impact. From here, the small gap until the next attack clearly separated each side into attacker and defender.

While Helvi had taken an unexpected attack and flinched, Edgar had been intending this collision from the beginning. His plan from the start was to bring the fight into close quarters. In order to do that, he had put his silhouette knight's entire body into it. A small opening was born from the great sacrifice he'd made: Earlcumber swung its intact right arm, aiming a sharp thrust at the silhouette arms on the Tellestarle's shoulders.

"You've done it now! But I won't allow you to go any further!"

Earlcumber's left arm had taken serious damage and could no longer move properly. However, astoundingly, the Tellestarle's left arm was still functional even after taking such an impact. Though naturally it wasn't unharmed, its remaining strand crystal tissue allowed it to exhibit its characteristic power, allowing the Tellestarle to lift its warped shield to push Earlcumber away.

"Incredible! So it not only boasts better output, but more durability too?! But this is my chance to—" Edgar was cut off.

"Put your soul into it, Tellestarle!" Helvi shouted.

Coming in just a beat faster, Earlcumber's fist crushed one of the Tellestarle's

back weapons. But that was as far as its all-or-nothing counterattack went. The Tellestarle used its overwhelming might to push Earlcumber back, completely staggering it as it was already somewhat off-balance after its attack.

“Grk! So I pushed it too far!”

“I’ve got you now, Edgar!”

With that war cry, the Tellestarle slashed at Earlcumber. Earlcumber had no way of avoiding it, as staggered as it was, and it had no means of defense since its shield had been destroyed. Having exhausted all options, Earlcumber could only watch as its opponent’s sword was raised over its head, and—



The sword never came down. Instead, the Tellestarle fell to its knees before tumbling over completely.



It was hard to describe the mood of the arena at that moment. Shock or astonishment might have been most accurate. Why did the Tellestarle, the one who was about to deal the finishing blow, fall? It was clear to see from the fact that Earlcumber was likewise shocked that this miraculous outcome wasn't some sort of strategy or due to some counter. The fight had reached its climax, and just as it was about to conclude, the ending turned out to be something no one had expected. Unsure of how to react to the situation in front of them, a strange silence settled over the entire arena.

Suddenly, someone realized what had happened. "Ah! It ran out of mana!" Ernie's hysterical voice reverberated through the otherwise quiet surroundings.



"Now then, let us convene the first maintenance team's extra super large postmortem meeting."

Ernie quietly, solemnly announced the start of the meeting. In the workshop were Ernie, the boss, and their various friends, and all of them wore awkward and uncomfortable expressions. Even Ernie, who usually did not mind others, had his eyes swimming all over. After some hesitation, he looked over at the source of such awkwardness. His gaze was pointed toward Helvi, who was sitting in a corner of the workshop clutching her knees to her chest, clearly moping.

She was putting out such a horrendous aura that you could practically see the word "awkward" floating around her. It wasn't entirely her fault, but she had made a big show of things only to end up running out of mana, resulting in a very anticlimactic finish. She probably would have felt better if she'd fought and lost, so her depression was understandable.

The test unit Tellestarle's defects were well within expectations, but everyone's feelings were united in thinking that it didn't have to pop up right then. To be fair, it could be argued that it happened entirely because both sides had gone all out with the end of the match in front of them, but that fact wouldn't make anyone feel better.

"Uh...please, Sir Edgar, cheer up Miss Helvi?" Naturally unable to stand it, Ernie pushed Edgar toward the cause.

“Come on, why me?!” Edgar shouted, but then after a short pause, “Urgh...nrrgghh...I’ll do my best.”

Ernie saw him off, waving pleasantly as he walked away, prepared for death.

“Whew, that should fix it. Let’s get to work figuring out a solution for our problems.”

“Live strong, Edgar...” the boss intoned. “Anyway, all the problems turned out to be simple. Since the output of the muscles is higher, its fuel efficiency has gotten worse. That should have been obvious.”

All the people gathered in front of the maintenance cradle that currently held the Tellestarle were deeply troubled. Because the output of strand crystal tissue was higher, the mana it required to operate was also higher. That meant the unit’s mana pool would drain faster.

On top of that, because silhouette arms had become easier to use, the mana taken up by them ended up increasing too. Meanwhile, use of the strand type didn’t mean there was much more crystal tissue in the unit, so the unit’s total mana pool only increased a little bit. As a result, the Tellestarle’s operational limit had shortened greatly. Setting aside the terrible timing of the shortcoming rearing its head during the mock battle, if one thought about it calmly they would have realized that this problem was obvious.

“Taking everything into account, I’d say the unit’s operational time is about halved. That’s...bad, isn’t it?”

“More than bad. Way too bad to allow; it’s basically fatal...”

Their modifications had added extra crystal tissue output and made it much easier to fire silhouette arms, all things that increased expenditure of mana. The terrible balance of their changes had now become undeniable. In the first place, silhouette knights had gotten to where they were through many years of revisions, and the use of what mana capacity they had had already been planned to death. The lack of excess in the accepted design was almost artistic, making it conversely hard to make any reckless changes to it.

Still, just sitting around lamenting decisions wouldn’t change anything. They needed to come up with a countermeasure for this shortcoming, or Helvi’s

heroic sacrifice would have been for nothing.

“In regard to consumption, more than anything we just don’t have enough supply... Modifying the ether reactor which is the source of mana is difficult. Rather, it’s impossible.”

Not even Ernie could do anything about the mysterious ether reactor. What he just said, however, caused the students around him to privately let out sighs of relief. If he had easily modified that as well then they knew they wouldn’t be able to regroup so easily.

“Then maybe we could somehow keep the mana consumption down? But if the method we use to do that requires too much mana as well then there won’t be any point. And limiting its mobility is like putting the cart before the horse.”

“The only other option is to increase storage... How is that done?” Ernie asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? The only way is to add more crystal tissue.”

“So would it be possible to add more for a larger mana pool then?”

“But won’t adding more muscle raise mana consumption as well?”

They were going around in circles.

“So there was a pitfall to the braiding style. Because the amount of muscle has barely changed at all, the unit’s output and capacity have become completely unbalanced.”

The seriousness of the discovered flaw had everyone at their wit’s end. They knew that such a problem wouldn’t be so simply solved, but a ray of hope came to them from an unexpected source.

“Then why not do that thing? The thing you’re so good at?”

The person who spoke while everyone else had fallen into silence, wallowing in their worries, was Addy, who had up until then been utterly silent. Since this occurrence was so rare in a development setting, Ernie reflexively parroted the line back to her.

“The thing...I’m so good at?”

“Yeah! You know, you don’t have to make it shaped like a human, remember? You can add more muscle, but you don’t have to make it human-shaped, right?”

“Human shaped...not necessary...” Ernie thought it over for a moment. “I see, you’re absolutely right.”

That line was something she’d gotten directly from Ernie. However, it still made the person himself widen his eyes in surprise before gradually narrowing them again.

“Urghh, that’s totally right. But having that pointed out to me by Addy...makes me so frustrated.”

“That’s so mean! Why?!” Addy shouted, immediately starting to rage against Ernie, who of course ran away.

Watching them out of the corner of his eye, the boss thought over her words and had come to the same idea. Not being tied down by the human shape didn’t just mean making something inhuman.

“I see! Even if we add more crystal tissue, there’s no need to have that tissue move. In other words, we can add some in some open space we have and connect it with silver nerves, thereby only adding to the amount of crystal tissue!”

“Hup! Come on, I said I was sor— Hup, whoop!” Ernie had to stop talking for a moment as he dodged about. “Sorry! There, I apologized, okay?” He then turned to the boss, “If that’s the case boss, then we just have to fill as much space as we can, right? So instead of fibers, we need lumps. Actually, if possible, boards. I believe that would be best.”

Having heard Ernie’s idea, the boss immediately brightened up, lifting his head.

“Okay! With that decided, all that’s left is to negotiate with the alchemy department and have them make it for us. I’ll get that going on my end, you can leave it to me!”

Having thought of a way to fix their machine’s fatal flaw, a wave of relief flowed through the entire maintenance team. Beside them, Ernie continued to be hard-pressed to comfort Addy, who was still pouting.



The steel giant stood up, the creaking sound of its operation mixing with the shrill sound of it sucking in air. The giant stood at around ten meters tall, five times larger than the people around it. It was colored plainly, its metal left unpainted so it shined with a dull luster in the sun. Every time it moved, metal plates clanked together, adding to the noise.

The now upright giant twisted and flexed nimbly, checking its condition before nodding to the people at its feet. Then, once it had confirmed that the people had evacuated the area around it, the giant quickly started to move around according to the orders given to it.

The crystal muscle woven throughout the giant's arms contracted in reaction to the mana passing through them. Its entire body tensed this way, and its arms rose forcefully, the elbows jutting out. The giant flexed its arms, moved the joints, puffed out its chest, and stretched its back before stomping on the ground with both legs to pull off the pose officially known as "front double biceps." From there, it stuck a leg out, lowered its arms, and brought its fists together in front of where its stomach would be. This pose had it bending slightly forward as it flexed its arm and chest muscles as hard as it could in what was considered the most powerful-looking pose, "most muscular." The steel giant continued to powerfully flow from pose to pose.

"What the heck? What kind of joke—no—test is that?"

The prototype—the Tellestarle—continued making pose after pose, following the orders prescribed by the test designed by a certain silver-haired boy.

While watching this, Edgar complained exasperatedly.

Helvi replied, "Hm? According to this briefing, it moves normally unused crystal tissue."

"Who the hell set this up?"

"Ah, don't get me wrong, it's all good if this is a serious test but...is it really? I guess it is..."

"Is that so? Anyway, how're Unit 2's tests going?"

“Ah, I just switched off, but it seems like it’s assimilating well.”

Edgar looked toward another Tellestarle, dubbed No. 2, that was currently undergoing different tests. There were also more Tellestarles than just the two in the training area, each performing different tests.

This situation was one brought about by the discovery of the new unit’s major defect: its severe lack of operational time. This discovery had closed the curtains on the mock battle, and setting aside the defect’s existence, the entirely too dramatic way in which it was discovered had raised doubts about whether other defects had lain undiscovered. In order to make sure that wasn’t the case, a massive number of tests had been planned that went into the minutest of details. Thanks to that, the maintenance team had to be mobilized at full force even after the mock battle; at this point, there was real concern that some of the students would be worked to death.

Due to circumstances, a total of five Tellestarles were made. Instead of having a small number of knight runners piloting the prototypes, a large group of them were switching off in shifts as they single-mindedly went through test after test. Whether it paid off or not, at this point no new defects had been discovered. In the meanwhile, the prototypes were also being fine-tuned, bringing them ever closer to completion.

Edgar and Helvi had just happened to be on break together. They had naturally started a wandering conversation on how the prototypes felt to pilot, among other things. Recently any conversations between the two always ended up about the new model.

“We’d need to consult Ernesti for something like that, I think. Hm? That reminds me, I haven’t seen him lately.”

Edgar had recalled something as he talked. They hadn’t seen Ernie for a while now, so Helvi tilted her head in puzzlement as well.

“That kid wouldn’t miss the tests for anything. I wonder what happened?”

“I hope he hasn’t started another mess...has he?” Edgar’s expression was somewhat stiff as he looked out into the wide blue sky.



“You know, I’m not always free.”

“Really now? Then what is this?”

Addy was currently attached to Ernie and leaning in to look over his shoulder. In front of them was a blue-painted silhouette gear and a variety of equipment.

Exactly at the time Edgar and Helvi were talking about Ernie at the academy, he and his friends were gathered at Termonen Workshop. Thanks to the efforts of the high school students, the Tellestarle’s development had reached a climax. Because of that, recently Ernie had found himself with an abundance of free time; there just wasn’t anything huge to work on. So, what he had found himself hooked on was developing equipment for the silhouette gear.

“Yes, really. I’m not free; there’s a mountain of things I want to test.”

“I know you’re free, but all you do is play with Batty! And you basically only pay attention to Kid in training too. We don’t go out to play much—it’s boring!”

Ernie had been the one to design all the equipment in front of them, while Batson was the main hand in actually manufacturing it. Because it was smaller, silhouette gear equipment had to be different from that of silhouette knights, so the new venture of developing them had the two of them very excited—enough to seemingly abandon Addy and make her sulk.

While Ernie and Addy argued, Batson had skillfully opened up the blue silhouette gear’s armor and had attached a machine inside as Kid watched at his side.

“I don’t really care about any of that, but you’ve made a lot, haven’t you? So, what’s this one?”

“You should ask Ernie for details, but it’s called the Wire Anchor. It...well, you can see for yourself later.”

The initial model of silhouette gear they were using had seen a total of ten made, but because they were so hard to control they’d been essentially shelved. At best, they were only used as toys—or rather, training tools—by Ernie and friends. Sometimes, Edgar and Dietrich also trained in them. So, looking at that positively, they had decided to mess with the insides from time to time.

“Oh, right. Edgar was complaining the other day about how changing to the strand type made the silhouette knight even harder to control.”

Of course, these Tellestarles were complete with the new connecting method for strand crystal tissue. They were able to exhibit more power, but that also made them harder to handle, so much so that even Edgar had almost given up.

“That reminds me, just calling them silhouette gears even after all this time is a little sad. Why don’t we give them a proper name now?” Ernie suggested. “Let’s see, how about ‘Jugemu Jugemu Gokou-no-Surikire Kaijarisuigyo-no Suigyoumatsu’?”

“That’s so long!” Batty grumbled. “Make it easier to understand!”

Ernie tried again. “Then we can shorten it to ‘Motor Beat.’”

“Come on, not even one letter remained the same!”

“Then Motor Beat it is... I suppose I should say nice to meet you, again?” Kid spoke to his Motor Beat, but once he realized what he’d done his expression immediately stiffened. *Crap. I think Ernie’s rubbing off on me*, he thought, putting his hand to his forehead and shaking his head.

“Now then, with the name settled, let’s get to the presentation of these new completed pieces of equipment. You can’t keep pouting forever, Addy. Come on, why don’t you help me, okay?”

Ernie somehow managed to settle Addy down before happily getting into the blue Motor Beat that had been adjusted for him. He then headed for the workshop’s yard, where instead of a shooting target there was a wall that stood high above the surrounding residences. Ernie lifted his arm and pointed it toward the wall of the workshop.

“Okay then, please watch... Wire Anchor, launch!”

With that excited shout, the sound of what looked like an arrowhead shooting out from his extended wrist could be heard. The arrowhead was attached to a wire, and as it flew it pulled the wire along with it, causing it to unspool audibly. Heedless of the pull of gravity, the arrowhead went over the workshop’s roof without losing any momentum before suddenly changing directions sharply and stabbing into the roof itself. At that moment, an internal mechanism within the

arrowhead triggered, changing it into an anchor-like form. Ernie pulled on the wire, checking that it was secured.

“And once it’s dug in...off we go!”

Gears inside the Motor Beat’s arm spun audibly as they reeled in the wire. Since the wire was attached to the arrowhead, it pulled on the Motor Beat which had run toward the workshop’s wall, making it fly upward greatly. Ernie proceeded to ‘land’ on the wall and kick off it several times to keep up momentum until the Motor Beat launched itself over the roof. In midair, Ernie twisted around and cast Air Suspension at the moment of landing to soften the impact.

Ernie and his Motor Beat slowly stood, sending mana to activate a script in the arrowhead that was still anchored to the roof. There were silver nerves inside the wire that connected the arrowhead to the Motor Beat, through which commands could be sent to the crystal tissue inside the arrowhead. This tissue followed what the script said to do, changing it from its anchored shape back to an arrowhead as it returned to the Motor Beat’s arm.

The arrowhead’s propulsion worked by using the internal crystal tissue as a medium to intermittently cast Aero Thrust. By changing the direction of the jet, it was possible to control its flight path to an extent.

“Amazing. The gear...no, the Motor Beat...it got up on the roof in an instant!”

Addy, Kid, and Batson had seen the entire thing, and they were looking up in awe. Even using Physical Boost, getting up to the roof so fast in a suit of armor was a hard thing to do. And to do it in a silhouette gear, which was even larger than a suit of armor, was truly astonishing.

“Oohh, looks like it went well this time Ernie!”

“Who can count the number of times I fell in the middle, after all! Right then, let’s move on to the next one!”

“Ah, so he failed some... Uh, should I just bring ‘that’?”

Ernie quickly hopped off the roof. Though he was in a Motor Beat, jumping down from that height would normally have injured him. But he cast Aero Thrust midway through to kill his momentum before layering on a cast of Aero

Suspension to land. He and his Motor Beat landed amid a huge dust cloud as Kid and Addy appeared out of the workshop.

Each of them was carrying something different. Kid had a giant crossbow. Most of it was wooden, with parts that were reinforced with metal. The base of the bowstring was attached to gears, and had several mechanisms added. Kid was looking at what he brought.

“Hey, this crossbow is crazy big... Is this a siege weapon or something?”

“Yes, no doubt about it. More specifically, it’s a siege ballista that’s been miniaturized.”

As Ernie said, the crossbow was big enough that even when equipped by a silhouette gear, it looked large. Of course, it was so heavy that without a silhouette gear it would prove exceedingly hard to operate.

“Why’ve you got such a huge thing... Ohhh, I see. You were trying to make a mobile ballista using the silhouette gear as a platform, I take it?”

“That is an option, but... Hey, Addy? You have the magazine with you, don’t you? Then please attach it to the crossbow.”

Addy had brought a package of several boxlike objects called magazines. It was wide enough for a normal person to carry in both arms, which would slightly stick out of a silhouette gear’s hand.

“Put simply, this weapon is called the Portable Ballista Scorpius. The bowstring and winding mechanism use strand crystal tissue, allowing the expanding and contracting of the crystal tissue to automatically fire bolts.”

“I see. So what’s with this magazine thing?”

“It holds bolts inside, allowing the Scorpius to load a bolt each time the bowstring is pulled back. From here, it would be faster to just show you rather than try to explain with words.”

Following Ernie’s explanation, Kid attached the magazine to the ballista a little forward of halfway along its length. Once it was slotted in, the locking lever shot up as the sound of the internal machinery engaging with the magazine was heard.

After confirming that the magazine was attached, Kid got into a Motor Beat and sent script commands and mana to the weapon. The strand crystal tissue flexed as far as it would go, producing the unique sound of a bending bow. At the same time, the gears from the cranking mechanism spun, retrieving a bolt from the magazine and loading it into the firing slot of the weapon. From this point, the controls proved to be a little special. Because it used crystal tissue as a bowstring, there was no trigger like on a regular ballista. Instead, it fired by manipulating the tissue to flex.

Kid built up as much power as he could before commanding the stretched crystal tissue to release the bolt. Though he wasn't far from the target, he still hit the log accurately, the bolt sinking into the wood. Crossbow bolts tended to be shorter and fatter than the arrows used by their bow counterparts. But when it came to ballistas, even miniaturized ones, it was less an arrow and more a spear with fletching. Though the weapon did not exhibit as much power as a normal ballista, with the strand crystal tissue having flexed to its limit combined with the natural pliability of the weapon, it had enough power to do its job. Basically, the test resulted in the bolt piercing through and completely destroying half the log that was its target.

"Uh...there's no way this is okay to shoot in the middle of town. No way."

"It's fine; that's why we prepared a thick earthen wall behind the target. That thing won't break as long as you don't shoot an overspell at it."

Kid had frozen, still in the stance he'd taken to shoot the weapon. Beside him, Ernie and Batson were talking nonchalantly. Meanwhile, Addy, who had been holding the magazines, was staring at the bolt that had gone through the log, intensely interested.

"Ah, and you can use the crystal tissue to quickly rewind it, so to an extent you can fire rapidly. It would depend on how used to it you are, but at the fastest I believe you can shoot once every five seconds. Each magazine holds ten bolts, so each one should provide about a minute of fire."

Kid did a spit take. "Seriously?" He paused, thinking about it. "I gotta try that out."

Kid nervously took up a stance with the ballista once again. After letting out a

breath and calming down, he attempted to rapidly fire the weapon. What followed was a rhythmical interchange of bolts cutting through the air and the sound of the ballista firing. Each successive bolt hit the target, and after five shots the log finally broke down completely, so the remaining bolts hit the earthen wall directly.

“A portable siege weapon that can fire rapidly? That’s brutal.”

“But it’s just barely light enough to be carried around. Actually handling is really hard. It’s a pretty brute-force weapon, so it’s also not very accurate. In fact, I would say it’s at least partially making up for its lack of precision with sheer numbers.”

“I mean...why did you even make this, Ernie? What were you planning on using it for?”

Ernie paused to think of the answer. “Don’t you think that creating something...that challenging yourself is always a wonderful thing?”

“So you just didn’t think about its purpose *again*...”

Ernie averted his gaze awkwardly at Kid’s question as he flashed a uselessly bright smile. So, unbeknownst to anyone, a truly vicious weapon for the silhouette gear had been born.

By the time word arrived that the alchemy department had completed the order, the Tellestarle’s tests had just about finished. The crystal tissue had been delivered to the workshop still as a cast lump. From there, it would be processed into the new crystal plates.

Up until now, all research efforts had gone toward improving the output of crystal tissue by improving its ability to expand and contract, while its contribution to the mana pool had been looked on more as a secondary benefit. However, with the development of crystal plates, the alchemists had developed a new type that had been specialized to add to the mana pool. The alchemists had shown a lot of motivation, given that this was a new avenue for research that called for a completely different point of view. It probably wouldn’t be long before another form of crystal tissue was developed that would be able to add even more mana.

As for the results of the massive number of trials that the test units had gone through, no other defects had been found aside from their limited operational time. So, the crystal plates would serve as the final piece to solve that problem. With completion finally in front of them, the knightsmiths started work on the silhouette knights in an attempt to improve their mana pools.

“So, well...we were enthusiastic about it, but this isn’t looking good.”

At first, the idea was to add the crystal plates to the inside of the armor, where there was open space. However, after some examination, it was revealed that there was less room than expected. The extra room was to give the crystal tissue room to generate motive force, so it couldn’t be thoughtlessly filled.

So, the team removed a test unit’s outer skin temporarily so that they could form an outer layer with the crystal plates before covering that to create a multilayered outer armor. This was so that it wouldn’t interfere with the crystal tissue’s movements. The entire frame had been boosted in volume, which increased the unit’s mana pool, but everyone still groaned while standing in front of the modified Tellestarle.

“It’s so thick, it just looks uncool!”

Even when they set their aesthetic sense aside for a moment, there were many problems with the multilayered method. The weight had increased so much that the improved output from the strand crystal tissue wasn’t enough to make up for the decrease in mobility. The increased thickness of the armor also got in the way of movement, giving it a huge disadvantage in close combat. The unit had gained a little more defense thanks to the crystal plates also acting as armor, but the problems outweighed that one benefit, so the method was rejected.

“First of all, it’s way too heavy! We need to put this thing on a diet somehow.”

The next idea was to simply limit the spots with multiple layers so as to limit the weight as well. Considering the effects of close combat, places that wouldn’t interfere with the joints were chosen to have multiple layers. While this certainly kept the weight increase down, it also didn’t make much difference to the mana pool.

However, the method of multilayering itself was accepted for use later on, when it would be officially named “capacity frame.”

“I guess this is the limit for increasing the crystal tissue inside...”

“Any more than this would make it too heavy on top of making the armor get in the way.”

The only method left was what gave the crystal plate its name. In order to avoid the problem of weight that was constantly hounding them, they decided to wrap the plate up in cloth and bind it with steel wire instead of covering it with armor. With that, it was only barely not exposed to the world. As for where it would be attached, places where people would normally carry baggage were considered, meaning basically the back or possibly the waist. Of the options, the back was most likely the best location to place luggage. The team thought so as well, so they tried adding a good amount of weight in crystal plates to the Tellestarle’s back.

However, that method came with its own set of problems.

“Damn, they just come one after the other. What a selfish machine this is turning out to be! Learn to hold back a little, come on!”

They had gone so far as to remove the back weapon in order to attach more crystal plates, but because so much weight was now concentrated on the back, the unit’s center of gravity had shifted backward, which would have a great—and bad—effect on close combat and general piloting. The silhouette knight’s main duty was close combat, so of course knight runners would call this current iteration hard to use. So, the team reluctantly looked for other ideas.

“Seriously, what do we do?”

“It looks like, at this point, the only thing we can do is try everything.”

In the end, the solution they settled on was to use capacity frame and attach extra crystal plates to the outside. An amount carefully selected so as to not get in the way of the back weapons and also not create undue burden on the unit was attached to the back, with more shaped like pouches attached along the waist. The team decided to think of alternative placements if and/or when it ever came up that a sword needed to be sheathed at the waist. From this, the

unit's mana pool had increased, solving the unit's defect at least somewhat, but the final operational time of the unit was still rather unsatisfactory.

And so the knightsmiths finally gave up on arriving at a perfect, complete solution. Adding enough crystal tissue for the unit to gain an acceptable mana pool would make it too heavy. The only choice was to wait for a more fundamental fix from the alchemists in the form of a more specialized crystal tissue. That was the unanimous opinion of the entire team.



The Tellestarle series, having finished receiving their modifications, were lined up in front of the workshop in parked position. Including the units that had been made for the tests, all five units had ended up being much heavier thanks to their armor. Their appearance, with crystal plates attached to their back and around their waists, actually made them seem more human rather than mechanical.

“And so, though there are still some unsatisfactory parts, there's nothing else we can do! That means it's finished!”

Though they couldn't help but feel like they'd rushed through construction, the knightsmiths nevertheless changed their thinking. The Tellestarle series had been modified enough to somewhat make up for their damning defect, which meant they'd achieved the most they could hope for at the present time. These five units, which hid power exceeding that of conventional silhouette knights even in their current state, could be called the model of a new generation of silhouette knights.

Seeing the units lined up, the maintenance team and knight runners alike started to really feel like they had reached their goal. The people had many different reactions to seeing the Tellestarle series. There were those that basked in their sense of accomplishment, those that were relieved because they were finally free from work, and those that were already thinking of ways to improve the final product. However, everyone's expressions shined with pride at the knowledge they'd overcome a large hurdle.

The boss wore a similar expression as he turned around to face everyone, his smile deepening so as to show his teeth.

“Well done, you bastards! In fact, you all probably worked yourselves too hard! It’s still got problems, but for now let’s focus on celebrating its completion! Now then, for a job this big, you all know what to do, don’tcha?”

Everyone present raised their hands, giving a cheer as they raised an ardent cry. With everyone’s agreement, that day the knight runner department mobilized all its resources and partied through the night.



The sun had fully set, wrapping the party in darkness like a welcoming underworld. By the way, the legal drinking age in Fremmevilla, or the age you were considered an adult, was fifteen years old. Of course, Ernie wasn’t old enough to participate, especially since the party was for the knight runner department students.

Meanwhile, in all this crazed festival-like fuss, a shadow darted away from the crowd. The owner of the shadow, who had blended into the tumult to move undetected, headed straight out of the workshop that had been turned into a hell called a party and to his own room in the dorm.

Night had fallen, and the dorm was quiet as a lamp in a single room was lit. Having returned to his room, he shook his head restlessly, trying to lessen the intensity of his drunken state by also drinking some water. His roommate was probably still drinking in the workshop. Once he calmed down, he took a sheaf of papers from inside his desk. These papers had information on silhouette knight technology, starting with strand crystal tissue and ending with the Tellestarles written on it.

He added info on the crystal plates and capacity frame. There wasn’t enough to really call them details, but it was enough as a summary of what was going on with the test unit. As he could feel himself sobering up, he shut the papers in his desk once again, satisfied.

Chapter 13: The Destination of the Test Units

Noticing the shadow that had suddenly cut off his sunlight, Ernie looked up out of the window. A cloud was encroaching on his view of the clear blue sky, its white gradually gradating into gray. Ernie turned to the notebook he had on hand as he tried to work out both his physical and mental knots, which had built up from exhaustion. Then he looked back at the endlessly wide sky, which was occupied by a dark, thick cloud. The cloud, which was like gauze covering what was beyond, didn't seem like it would need much time to grow even darker. That was what Ernie absentmindedly thought as he looked out at it.

"I can't say I approve of you clearly not paying attention to the class like that, Ernesti."

A voice called out to Ernie, bringing him back to reality as he sunk into the vast recesses of his mind, probably because he'd lost interest in the lesson. Ernie immediately apologized to the somewhat stiff-faced teacher before turning back to the blackboard. The teacher then resumed the lesson, jotting down words with chalk as he lectured on Fremmevilla's history. The surrounding students shot Ernie a look as if they'd just seen something unusual, but they quickly returned their attention to the lesson.

Oh shoot, that was close. I shouldn't relax just because I'm tired. Let's get back to the class... Ernie chided himself before looking down at his notes. Sadly, while the other students were taking the class seriously, Ernie's notebook was filled with notes on things other than what was going on in the classroom—specifically, there was a strangely shaped silhouette knight drawn on the page along with many lines of description on it.

With the Tellestarle done, I've finally solidified my base. Now, in order to add to that and totally blow the king away, I need one more surprise at the very least... For now I'll just keep making plans.

Ernie was thinking of things clearly unrelated to the class he was taking, but since he periodically looked at the blackboard and was writing things in his

notebook, no one suspected a thing. In the first place, no normal twelve-year-old would be able to put up such a convincing act, so in a bad sense this was a product of his unusually abundant experience. No one was suspicious of his conduct in class, and so the lesson proceeded without incident. Well, actually, there were people who could have figured out what was going on.

Hmm...the Wire Anchor was fun. I should try it next time too. He said operating it was a pain, but well, it'll probably work out.

Oh I know! I should take Ernie out to eat today! Training too much will just have the opposite effect, after all.

However, both of them were also not paying attention to class, so it didn't become a problem. As an aside, all three of them put out decent grades even outside of magic and martial arts lessons.



The ground gradually got darker as it was shaded by clouds. The boss, David, who was resting at the front of the knight runner department's workshop, saw this and made an annoyed groan.

"Arrghh, seems like it's gonna rain."

"We should just be glad it didn't do so while the Tellestarle's tests were still going on."

Beside him, Edgar sat at a table as he replied absentmindedly. Dietrich, who was sitting along with Edgar, put on a difficult expression as he looked down at his hands while Helvi watched with a thin smile on her face.

"Rain is annoying, isn't it? Well, to be fair, we'll need to do endurance tests in strange conditions, but... Ah, that's a set. One more and I win." As she spoke, Helvi revealed a card in her hand along with the card she took from Dietrich that had the same art. With that, she only had one card left in her hand. The other players in the game immediately scrunched up their faces.

Considering the busy, tempestuous days they'd been leading up until just the other day, it was strange to see them with enough free time to indulge in a card game, but there was a reason for that. The knight runner department students had made a full-on sprint to finish the Tellestarle, but as a result most of the

knightsmiths had collapsed afterward and were forced to take a break. Without the people who had made the unit around to perform maintenance on it, there was no way the knight runners would be allowed to operate them, and so the knight runners found themselves bored. The dwarves among the knightsmiths, or rather, the boss, was still fine, but there was a limit to what he could accomplish alone.

“So we’ve done great and managed to finish five Tellestarles, but at this rate I have no idea when we’ll be finished with the rest.”

“Hunh? We’ll finish when we do. We’re resting right now.”

The boss replied to Edgar’s musings offhandedly. Meanwhile, Helvi finished ahead of the other two, leaving Edgar and Dietrich to face off for second place.

“By the way, boss, I can’t help but notice that my Guaire is still a pile of scrap iron.”

“Ohhh, yeah...well, come over once we resume operations.”

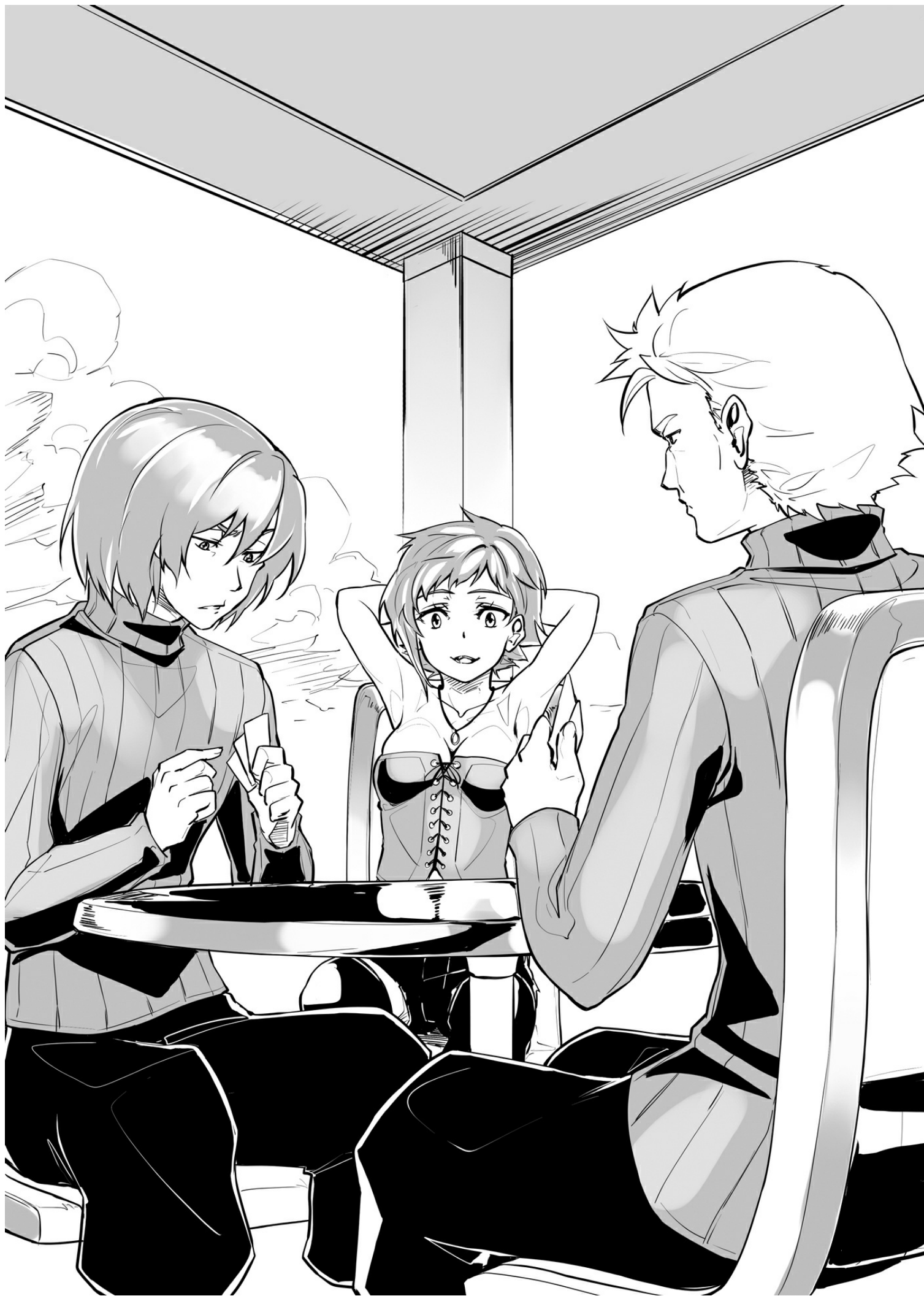
Having been reminded of his own machine, Dietrich raised a question, which the boss dealt with in the same noncommittal manner. It was true that with the knightsmiths out of commission there was nothing to be done, and with that in mind, Edgar claimed victory over Dietrich, who slumped to the table.

“For now, you should go buy food for the winners, Dee.”

“Yeah. Let’s go with some cheap pie.”

“I want to snack on some meat. Get one with meat inside.”

“Gghh, fine. Just wait a little... Wait, you weren’t in the game, boss!”



“Oh, don’t be such a tight-ass. Call it gratitude for all we do for you every day.”

Dietrich’s expression changed thrice at dizzying speed until it finally settled on capitulation, and he wordlessly trudged off to the cafeteria while the other three watched him go, shrouded in the air of victory. Once his melancholic form disappeared from sight, the boss seemed to think of something.

“I know it wasn’t much, but he’s definitely mellowed out, hasn’t he? Before he would’ve gone to pieces the moment he lost, so you wouldn’t have even invited him to play cards, right?”

As always, it was difficult to tell what kind of face he was making behind all his facial hair, but the boss seemed to be smiling wryly. Dietrich’s high-strung, difficult nature was famous among not only the knight runners but the maintenance team too. He had the ability to make up for it, but he wasn’t an easy person to get along with. Now, though, the people he spent the most time with had a lot of opportunity to see that those tendencies were disappearing.

“It started after the behemoth incident. Dee changed, and in a mostly good direction too.”

“Hey...he was actually the one most passionate about the Tellestarle’s testing, wasn’t he?”

Helvi had reason to think that. Being the designated test knight runner, she had the most experience in piloting the new model, but Dietrich had been so enthusiastic he managed to pile up the most experience after her. So, Edgar nodded quietly in agreement.

“Yeah. Most likely...it’s because of Ernesti. Dee was the only one who saw what he did during that incident up close,” Edgar replied while reining in his expression.

His pride and passion as a knight runner was definitely showing itself in that statement. Even though it was a coincidence, his friend was able to see the skills of someone able to fight evenly with a division-class monster up close, and a slight hint of jealousy was also showing through. There was also a hint of honest praise because his friend had clearly improved his skills since then.

Edgar's disposition was always straightforward, for good and for bad. Having known him for a fair amount of time, Helvi knew that Edgar would not allow himself to stay in this position after seeing such effort being put in right in front of him.

"Hmm, that kid, huh? He's small and fast, so if you don't try hard you lose sight of him immediately," Helvi teased Edgar, her eyes narrowing in mirth under her somewhat unruly short hair. For a moment, Edgar seemed bewildered, but he quickly returned a bold smile.

"I don't intend to lose him so easily."

"Oh, hearing that reminded me, there's something I want to consult with that silver kid, Ernesti, about."

The boss suddenly clapped his hands. Then he noticed the puzzled looks of the other two.

"You know what it is. It's cool that he came up with a new model, but what do we do next?"

"Aren't we going to continue upgrading the remaining school units?"

"Well sure, especially since we have the headmaster's permission, but...there's no way this is all there is for the new unit." The boss muttered, his eyes chasing the clouds as they gradually got darker. Seeing that, Edgar and Helvi spoke up as they shot each other looks.



With the chiming of the bell signaling the end of classes ringing behind them, stalls started to open up around Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. Most likely, there would be students that had been released from classes flying out of the school soon enough.

"Ho there, lass. You aren't wearing that giant suit of armor today?"

"Nope! Today I'll just be eating this while walking. So, gimme three, please!"

"Sure thing! What should I put inside?"

"Ummm..."

At this point, the sky was completely covered by clouds, as if it were angry. It would most likely rain if nothing changed. Ernie looked between Addy, who was ordering from the stall owner with her excitement at the max, and the sky. *I hope she at least feels better with this*, he thought out of nowhere.

“I think if we keep dawdling, we’ll get rained on...” Kid observed.

“Probably. But how should I put it...if we don’t indulge Addy as much as we can today, we’ll be the ones facing cloudy days.”

“You’re right. Well, if it rains we can just deal with it then.”

With a wide smile and a bounce in her step, the girl in question turned around with freshly cooked and fluffy pancakes in her hands. *The timing is about perfect for a snack anyway*, Ernie thought, his head filled with trivial worries about whether to prioritize the impending rain or his friend’s feelings.



After that, the group toured the stalls, and once their bellies were finally satisfied they stopped by the workshop. There wasn’t any special reason for this, but they did happen upon a rare sight.

“What’re you doing?”

“Hm? As you can see, it’s krkellen. My word though, David is quite the deft hand at it.”

Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s headmaster, Rowley, was in the middle of playing a chess-like game with the boss. The board was overwhelmingly in favor of Rowley. So much so it looked like the boss was getting bullied.

“I’m actually wondering how I could even claw this back, or if I even can, because I’ve got nothing... You could afford to take it a little easier on me, you know?”

“Ho! Ho! Ho! As a teacher, even if only sort of, I have to say that elders shouldn’t do that.”

“But this is just a game...”

While Rowley was smiling and laughing, the boss was resting his chin in his hands and looked about to fall over at any moment. A mix of frustration and

weariness oozed out of him as he tapped one of the pieces that had been removed from the board on the table.

“No, I wasn’t asking about the game. Why are you here, grandfather?”

“Hm? Ah, there was something I wanted to talk to you and David about. I could have called you to my office, but I figured you two would already be here anyway.”

After hearing his grandfather’s surprisingly thoughtless answer, Ernie almost fell over on the spot. Then, after completely wiping out the boss’s pieces, Rowley proclaimed checkmate with great delight before turning to the subject he wanted to broach. Meanwhile, having been made to help the headmaster kill time, the boss heaved a deep sigh as he allowed the small stuff to flow off his back.

“Now then, what I wanted to talk to you about seems to be something that David here is also worrying about...the future of the new model, the Tellestarle.”

Ernie and the twins, who took the closest seats available, tilted their heads in confusion.

“To be honest, I figured that even if the changes you made were drastic, you would stop at the level of modification. Also, I thought even that much would take much more time...but when I checked in, I found out the project had already bloomed into something entirely different.”

“It is a truly new model, after all.”

Though Ernie replied in a good mood, Rowley’s eyebrows drooped, showing he was troubled.

“You actually making a new model right from the start was completely unexpected. With how complete it is, may I assume you plan to show it to the king?”

Rowley sounded like he was confirming something already established rather than asking a real question. After all, from Rowley’s perspective the new model far surpassed the current one, so it fulfilled the king’s condition. Thus it was natural for him to expect Ernie to report the unit to the king and receive the

reward he was promised.

However, contrary to that assumption, Ernie shook his head without a moment's hesitation.

"Really? I thought that was what you were putting in all this effort for... Was I wrong?" Rowley's eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced over at the Tellestarles that rested deep in the darkness of the workshop.

"I think what I want to show the king is a little different... I believe the true purpose of that request is for something that has meaning. Also, the king asked for the best, so I have to give him that."

"You mean the Tellestarle *isn't* your best?!"

The boss reacted to Ernie's words with such a dramatic retort that it seemed like he might fall over along with his chair. After all, who could even imagine that after all the common-sense-busting things he'd done, it was only the start? At the very least, it had exceeded Rowley and the boss's imaginations.

"Yes, you could call the Tellestarle a base, or a jumping-off point...since we've laid the foundation so well, we need to build a magnificent castle on top. That would be the best way to blow the king away."

"You'll blow us to smithereens before that!"

"It's scarier because the kid is always serious..."

Rowley shifted between shock, being impressed, and exasperation. And it wasn't only him; everyone else present couldn't hide that they felt the same. After taking a breath, Rowley changed tacks and crossed his arms before speaking.

"If that's what you're saying, Ernie, then fine. At any rate, you did manage to finish a new model of silhouette knight, some sort of report to the country is necessary."

"Of course. So we will be reporting to His Majesty anyway?"

This time, Rowley was the one to shake his head in response to Ernie's question.

"His Majesty is a busy man. He may be the only one able to judge whether his

request has been fulfilled, but this doesn't seem to be your attempt to do so. So, we'll follow proper procedure in our report."

"By proper procedure, you mean the national lab..."

The National Silhouette Knight Laboratory—otherwise known as the national lab, was as its name implied, a state-sponsored organization to manage silhouette knight technology. They worked to develop new models of silhouette knights as well as gather newly invented technologies and improvements in one place before spreading them throughout the country. The academy had always reported new improvements in technology this way, and the boss was familiar with the process as a knightsmith.

"Hrm...still, it would be a bit of a problem to bring in a complete, entirely new model."

"Mm? Why would there be a problem, Grandpa Rowley?" Kid asked. "You said that it was strong, right? If we make a bunch of Tellestarles, then the knights will have it easier, and the towns will be safer too. And look how far it's been polished—wouldn't they be happy?"

Kid tilted his head in confusion. He wasn't wrong either. Having powerful silhouette knights spread throughout the country would be an effective way of securing public safety. Even now, monsters larger than duel-class were causing damage somewhere in the country, and that would require silhouette knights to solve. Having stronger silhouette knights meant shortening the amount of time needed to solve such problems, which in turn meant less damage and fewer casualties. To the kingdom of Fremmevilla, which basically bordered the monsters' territory, this would be the most prized thing. So why hesitate to report the Tellestarle? Such a simple question had Rowley adopting a bitter smile as he replied.

"It's not bad, per se...but making a new silhouette knight normally starts with someone making a small improvement, and then many people gather to build on that and shape it into something larger. Repeating that cycle is how silhouette knights are strengthened."

Creation of new silhouette knights was the national lab's job, because the scope of the task was something only possible for them. With that in his mind,

Rowley continued to speak.

“Creating a new silhouette knight is normally a national endeavor. I would never have imagined that a new model could be made with an academy’s resources. In the first place, no one person would be able to think up enough new ideas for an entirely new model on their own...”

Rowley’s accusatory gaze got Ernie and the boss to look away, trying to avoid it. They both had memories of going hog wild because they were so caught up in the dream of making a new model.

“Well anyway,” Rowley continued, “the problem is that we’re not introducing some small improvements, but an entirely new model, which is something unprecedented. I have no idea how we’ll be treated if we just walk in with an entirely new silhouette knight.”

Ernie’s gaze returned from wherever he had looked away to, along with a full-faced smile. Seeing that, Rowley let out a small sigh.

“There’s no point in bemoaning something we’ve already done. We can all be happy here, so let’s take a step toward the future!”

“I agree completely. An engineer not trying to create new technology isn’t an engineer at all. We can think of what comes next after!”

“Wow, he’s completely turned around on that...”

Ernie and the boss, both smiling unnaturally with their arms crossed, had Rowley nearly on the horizon of enlightenment. Still, despite all the jokes, it wasn’t like they weren’t thinking about it seriously.

Then, the boss’s attitude changed. “As a knightsmith, it’s an honor to have your new technology be useful. And there’s a reward for it too, so my wallet would also be happy. So it would be best to get moving on the Tellestarle and go straight to the lab, but, well, unfortunately there’s another problem to address.” The boss spoke as if he was joking, complete with exaggerated movements. Nevertheless, he continued, “There are a lot of people involved in the making of the Tellestarle. Most of the knight runner department, in fact. The reward for a new model is huge, sure, but wouldn’t it cause a fight if we tried to divide it among everyone involved in its development?”

The boss had made a good point. Those that brought in new technology to the national lab would receive generous compensation. Of course, that compensation would be split among those involved with its development. As the boss had said, there were many people involved in the completion of the Tellestarle. With the originator being Ernie, there were also the knightsmiths who actually made it, the knight runners who helped with tests, and even some alchemists who helped create the necessary materials. It was practically impossible to get an accurate grasp on how much each person contributed. The problems, which clearly didn't just end with how the Tellestarle was brought in, made those present want to throw their hands up in capitulation.

"Can I speak? I have an idea..."

As if to cut through the air that was heavy with tension and devolving into chaos, Edgar raised his hand slightly. Ignoring the two who pretended to clap as if welcoming the entrance of a hero, Rowley returned to his headmaster mode from the faraway place he'd taken off to in his head.

"Yes, if you have an idea or opinion then please, give it. It doesn't matter what it is."

"Thank you for the kind words. First, our treatment aside, there are parts of the Tellestarle that are still incomplete, but its abilities are all higher than the current models. If the technologies incorporated in the test units are spread, then it would be a great boon to national safety. In other words, it's already decided that we will report to the country in the end... Is that right?"

"It is, of course."

Everyone agreed with that. No one wanted to make the new model a specialty of the academy alone. Having confirmed that, Edgar looked down, taking some time to gather his thoughts.

"Then...while the reward is certainly a problem, it would be best to think about what to do when we hand the Tellestarle over. Not *how* we do it, but... I don't believe handing it over will be the end."

"Are you saying there's something wrong?"

"Think back to when Ernie first proposed this, boss. We're used to it now, but

the shape of the Tellestarle is quite bizarre.”

That reminded the others of something they’d long forgotten, and they went silent. It was doubtful whether they’d have accepted these new inventions if it hadn’t been for Ernie’s explanations. It was easy to forget, given the strength and functionality of the inventions, but the Tellestarle would still be considered a bizarre specimen. Having remembered that, the boss clapped his hands together, causing a raspy sound.

“Oh, right. Didn’t we all doubt the kid’s sanity at least once?”

“Did we do that?”

Edgar waited for everyone to pursue the truth of that question for a little while before continuing. “In other words, even if we hand over the Tellestarle, would there be any point? It might be as simple as copying its form, but with just that, it would be doubtful whether the ideas behind it would be transmitted properly.”

Unexpectedly, everyone’s gazes settled on Ernie. As one might expect, he was a little taken aback by the pressure of it all.

“Now that you mention it...” the boss started, “it might be a good idea for the national lab people to hear the ‘whispers of the devil.’”

“What do all of you think I am...?!”

“A servant of the devil, basically?”

Ernie was silent for a while, since he was too busy pouting. “I’m going to cry, is that okay?”

Ahhh, Ernie’s upset. That’s a little cute. Seeing Ernie glare up at the boss, Addy was strangely excited, while the boss simply let it slide off his back.

Ignoring them, Rowley turned to Edgar. The student knight runner was looking up at nothing, still trying to gather his thoughts. Seeing that he most likely had some sort of conclusion or proposed solution to the problem in mind, Rowley nodded for him to continue.

“Rather than a...solution...I believe it would be necessary for the knightsmiths to explain things directly to the national lab people somewhere. Since that’s the

case, wouldn't just having the national lab hire the knighthsmiths be a valid choice?"

Rowley reflexively went wide-eyed. Edgar's idea was, in short, to employ the people in question in exchange for the monetary reward. When thinking about the fact that the knighthsmiths would eventually graduate from the academy and spread out across the land to swing their hammers, it wasn't a bad option.

"So that's your idea... It's a bold one for sure," Rowley muttered.

"They have the completion of a new unit under their belts. Of course, their knowledge of existent techniques needn't be questioned. If they're going to continue developing new models, then I believe they might be the ideal people to hire."

Rowley hemmed and hawed over the proposal. It was one that brought benefit to both sides, since it helped the students and properly transmitted the new technologies involved, but it was most beneficial to the academy. In other words, there would be a need to negotiate with the national lab, which was a daunting task. Furthermore, it was only natural for that negotiation to fall to Rowley or one of several other teachers. However, they were educators, not negotiators, so the headmaster predicted it would be hard, to say the least.

"It's an attractive idea, for sure, but as for whether or not it'll go well... I'll try my best to make it so, but...in the end, I believe it'll be up to the national lab."

Since the right to decide was completely with the country's side, Rowley couldn't guarantee more than that. However, it was still great that they had at least decided on a direction. Predicting the harsh negotiations that lay ahead, Rowley burned with a teacher's passion to do his best for his students. At the same time, he adopted a somewhat strained smile.



By the time the group seemed to finally have settled on a direction to go in, some of the group—specifically, Kid and Addy—seemed locked in thought with difficult expressions on their faces. Though they understood what was being said, it was all they could do to keep up. Unlike Ernie, whose outer looks and inner mental age were very different, they were truly twelve-year-old children, and so it was a bit much to ask them to participate.

“Hrrm...can we be of help too, in some way?” Addy asked her twin.

“From what I hear, it sounds like that would be difficult. It’s too bad, but let’s just sit tight for now.”

The twins were present in conversations like this relatively often, since they spent so much time with an unusual child like Ernie. So they were always thinking of how they could help.

Basically what they’re saying is the usual, right? That since the boss and everyone else did their best to build the Tellestarle, they should keep doing that?

Something that was said stuck with Addy. *New, silhouette knight, make, result...* These words kick-started a vague memory in her brain, one from several months ago where similar words had been said to her. She was bothered by the fact that she couldn’t quite remember, but suddenly with a flash of inspiration, she jumped up.

“Hey, by country, you basically mean asking someone important, right? Then shouldn’t we make use of that promise?”

“Hm? Yeah, you’re right, but...promise?”

Kid saw the nuance in Addy’s use of promise, but didn’t fully get what she meant until he also managed to plumb the recesses of his memory for the right answer.

“Ah!” Kid exclaimed. “Right, since this would be included in the list of Ernie’s achievements.”

The solution lay in the memory of their previous conversation with their father, the marquis Joachim Serrati. He had asked them to tell him if Ernie achieved something. The twins believed their father could be of help here.

“Hey, Grandpa Rowley, we have an idea.”

“Really, Kid? What is it?”

Though he asked, Rowley never expected an idea to come from the twins, and his surprise was clear, no matter how slight it was. Rather than happiness at that, Kid seemed more like someone plotting intrigue when he talked about the idea.

“You’d find it hard to negotiate, wouldn’t you, grandpa? Then what if we got another important person to negotiate for us?”

“Oh? An important ally...who do you have in mind?”

“Marquis Serrati.”

Kid didn’t hesitate to name the person, causing Ernie and Rowley to show even stronger surprise while the rest just seemed puzzled. The twins’ lineage had become more widely known thanks to several incidents, but it still wasn’t a famous topic. Most people present simply tilted their heads in befuddlement that such a powerful noble’s name had been brought up.

But Rowley sucked in a breath before speaking, “I see. Well...Marquis Serrati certainly was in that room. So it would be easier to explain the situation to him than most, and it would be possible to ask him to help. But...is it really all right?”

Rowley implied his question about the twins’ home life. They were nothing more than illegitimate children, and they should have not had more than the minimum necessary amount of communication with the rest of their family. So the twins understood his silent look that asked whether it was okay to rely on their father in this.

“He told us before that if Ernie managed something, we should tell him.”

I see, so it was a reaction to that deal. Then it would be best to talk to him first. Rowley considered the matter. “I see. If that’s what you two say, then I have no objections. What about all of you?”

The rest of the group seemed surprised, and they looked at each other when Rowley pointed the question at them. Marquis Serrati was one of the few nobles in the kingdom, and because the Serrati territory bordered the Great Bocuse Forest, he had a great understanding of the improvement of silhouette knights. Regardless of how the name came up in conversation, his help would be very valuable in this instance, of that the rest of the group had no doubt. With the glance they gave each other the only confirmation needed, they all turned back and nodded emphatically.

“We have no objections either.”

“Then since bringing in the Tellestarle directly wouldn’t be a good idea, let’s contact the marquis and show him some documents. How’s that?”

“Well, that method should be fine. Okay then, can I count on David to make those documents? Our turn is after that, Kid, Addy.”

“Leave it to us! We’ll make sure it gets to him!”

The two puffed out their chests confidently as they accepted the task. Everyone else also started to smile and laugh, possibly out of relief that they had found a solution. Meanwhile, the Tellestarles watched on silently from the rear of the workshop.



Time passed, and it was now evening. As the sun started to set, stores started to close up all over town. On the other hand, bars were just getting into the swing of things. The town’s residents went out in order to secure food and recharge their batteries after a day’s hard work. A certain bar in Laihiala’s campus town was overflowing with customers as usual. Most of the people who came to this bar were men of fair age, but there was one customer sitting in the corner that was of a different disposition. The customer was clearly young—it was hard to believe he was over twenty—and he looked like a student. Though, given that he had come to the bar, he was probably an adult—someone at least fifteen years of age.

The young man seemed used to the place, as he blended in seamlessly. He sipped on his ale alone, and by the time he’d nearly finished his first one, someone sat across from him. The fact that the seat had remained empty when the bar had been fairly crowded signaled that the young man was probably waiting for this person. In fact, the man that came—a solidly built fellow that seemed to do hard labor for a living—smiled at the younger man after ordering his own ale as soon as he sat down.

“It’s rare for you to invite me out for drinks. What’s up, are your studies too hard or something?”

The man’s ale came, and after taking a gulp, he let out an exaggerated, satisfied sigh. It seemed the student that had started drinking beforehand was already tipsy, and he replied excitedly.

“Yeah, it is. Things’ve been so busy lately!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! That’s just how studying is. Once you get over that hurdle, you’ll finally be a fully-fledged adult!”

“Still though, it’s been especially bad recently.”

Both parties drank, jovially exchanging complaints. Among the noise of the bar, their conversation blended seamlessly into the background hustle and bustle.

“The moment I finally thought things were settling down, there was a problem...”

“Ha ha, students have it rough too, I see!”

Even though they were speaking loudly, no one was paying attention. That was just how bars were; no one could bother with the noise of every single drunkard, otherwise there’d be no end to it. In the first place, the whole bar was filled with similarly drunk people living it up. At that point, one more noisy conversation wouldn’t affect much. The young man figured that their conversation was also one among the crowd, but he still checked his surroundings, and after confirming that no one was paying attention to them, he still suddenly dropped his voice into a whisper.

“That’s right! Seriously!” He paused, hesitating to go further. “*That* thing’s pretty much completed.”

“I see. The students are more excellent than expected, then.”

In the din of the bar, one whisper wouldn’t reach anyone else’s ears. The student’s face was still red from the alcohol, and with an ale in one hand he just seemed like another drunkard. However, the way he talked clearly showed that he was calm as he spun his words.

“You can’t underestimate those with passion. From what I can see, though, the technology itself was already finished, which was why they pulled it all together.”

“What’re the details? And you’re not seriously planning to just tell me verbally, right?”

The student shook his head, as if saying there was no way he'd do that, before he eagerly produced a sheaf of paper from his bag. It was impossible to tell what was written down on the bound paper, but it was information on the Tellestarle. The man took the papers without making any overt nods to subtlety or stealth, and he casually shoved them into his pocket without even looking at them.

"That's why I'm telling you, I need booze every once in a while!"

"It's only natural! Okay, today is my treat, mister tired student!"

"That's the spirit!"

There was no trace of their earlier conduct as the pair returned to being a couple drunk customers pouring drinks for each other. No one paid any attention to them, and as time passed the bar got even noisier, with no one being any the wiser about the meaning of the words that had been exchanged in secret.

Droplets of rain fell like lead balls, pounding the capital of Konkaanen's stone pavement. It was early in the morning, and the rain had come suddenly, completely enveloping the entire city.

The rain was coming down harder than expected, and the usually active citizens didn't want to head out in the midst of this weather, so the city was feeling completely abandoned. The clouds that blotted out the sky connected with the solid stone structures of the city, creating a united monochrome palate for the scenery.

Marquis Joachim Serrati was in his family's estate in the noble district, looking through a certain document as he was surrounded by the pattering of heavy rain. What was detailed on it was a knight of aberrant form that could completely change the world. Regardless of the knight's true nature, which could be described as a vanguard from another world, the marquis could feel a premonition that its impact would be huge, whether he liked it or not. What he was looking at was most likely a sign of a coming storm, a huge one that would proceed to swallow up the entire city, nay, country. That was the feeling he got, and it seemed to him that the very air itself was astir.

He reached to the corner of his desk for a small bell and rang it. The sound

produced was rough and almost violent, as if it were reflecting the state of his heart. It was rare for the marquis, as he was usually very calm, but the butler who had served him for many years did not break his calm, professional attitude as he entered the office faster than usual.

“Did you call, master?”

“This is urgent: send this document to Duke Dixgard’s residence. Make sure you hand it to the duke himself, and no one else.”

“Understood. I will make arrangements right away.”

Joachim handed over the paper, and as the butler left, he muttered, “Duke Dixgard, this is going to be more troublesome than expected, I think.”

His utterance was blocked by the door of his office and the rain that was growing ever fiercer, erasing it before anyone else could hear.

Part 4: Casadesus Disturbance Arc

Chapter 14: Let's Head into the Storm

The raging wind howled loudly.

Amid the violent wind slamming into them from the side, bringing with it fierce rain that lent substance to the assault, several carriages hastened down the West Fremmevilla Highway. If the weather was clear, the sound of the horse's hooves on pavement would have carried through to the surroundings, but that was overridden by the noise of the storm. The look of the sky, which had worsened starting at nightfall, had quickly graduated to a great storm, with rainfall heavy enough that it threatened to strip away the earth itself. The West Fremmevilla Highway, which was paved with stone, was already at the limit of its drainage capability, and water had started to pool in places along its length, becoming obstacles.

In the midst of this terrible weather, which was clearly not conducive to any outdoor activity, the carriages raced with all their heart and soul. On their course, the sight of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy and its associated campus town gradually became vaguely visible.



"My word, is it raining."

While looking out the window at the never-ending downpour, the headmaster of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, Rowley Echevalier, furrowed his brow and stroked his beard in worry. The recent, uncommonly long rain had started to affect classes and had become a headache for him. Lost in such thoughts, Rowley suddenly heard a knock at his door.

"Hm, who is it?"

He returned to his seat at the old and worn headmaster's desk as he responded to the knock. An academy custodian hesitantly announced the

existence of a visitor from beyond the door. Rowley understood, but couldn't recall any plans for a meeting today.

Though his title was the headmaster, really his job was just to wrangle the teachers together, so it wasn't like he had all that much power. Even so, it was rare for him to receive a visitor that warranted being shown directly to his office. It wasn't as if such visitors never came, even without warning, but almost all of them were those with high standing who were very busy. Most times such people made plans in advance so as not to waste time.

Still... Rowley thought as he looked toward the window again. Outside, rain continued to pound against the window with no sign of stopping, occasionally broken up by powerful wind rattling the frame. *I suppose it's reasonable that this weather has caused some mistakes in communication. In fact, it must be quite the emergency for them to come in this weather,* Rowley thought. And with that in mind, he called for the visitor to enter the headmaster's office.

It seemed the visitor was waiting nearby, as they soon entered. Seeing the visitor, who was clanking noisily, Rowley narrowed his eyes, the wrinkles on his face deepening.

"That crest... I see you're knights serving under Duke Dixgard. What brings you to this academy through such unfavorable weather, I wonder?"

Three knights had filed into Rowley's office. They were all clad in armor, with mantles fluttering over their plate and their helmets held under one arm. There was no mistaking them. Rowley had identified their allegiance from the crest sewn into their mantles, but that didn't tell him why they were here.

While exuding a unique sense of pressure and seriousness, the knights snapped off a perfect bow toward Rowley.

"Yes, we are servants of Duke Dixgard, belonging to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit."

Out of the three, the one in the middle started speaking. It seemed he was the leader of the group, and so would be the one talking, mainly.

"We have come today under an order from his lordship, the duke. First, we have a letter entrusted to us by him. Please, read it."

The knight produced a package wrapped in oiled paper and took an envelope out from inside it. Rowley could see the wax seal of the Dixgard ducal house on it clearly, and it needn't be said that Duke Dixgard was the only one allowed to use it. Having once again confirmed that it was definitely an official letter from the duke, Rowley was getting nervous.

He silently perused the letter. Its contents had him opening his eyes wide with shock. Eventually, he finished reading, but when he was about to open his mouth to say something, a white flash of lightning illuminated the room from outside the window. The peal of thunder followed after a slight delay, violently vibrating everyone's eardrums. The silence that followed, pregnant with many emotions, was swallowed by the continuous pattering of rain.



Inside the classroom, the silence was suffocating, but soon it gave way to the faint sound of muttering and hushed conversation.

The thunderclap that had just occurred had been an especially large one. Because of the terrible weather, it was dark out even though it was the middle of the day. The students in their lamplit classroom had started whispering to their neighbors about how shocked they were by the thunder. The teacher on the podium looked out the window, but only muttered a short, "That was surprising," to himself before resuming the lesson.

Soon enough, the classroom was filled with the sound of rain. The teacher spoke in a louder voice so as not to be drowned out by it, but he was almost powerless in the face of unrelenting nature. Whether it was because of the unsettling atmosphere or their shock from the lightning earlier, the students couldn't seem to concentrate. Still, the teacher continued to write on the blackboard. In fact, because it was so hard for them to listen, the blackboard became the lifeline of the lesson.

While still amid that delicate balance, morning classes ended, giving way to the more noisy lunch period. Most of Laihiala's students lived in dorms, so they used the school's cafeteria. If the weather had been more favorable, some students would have also gone out to the surrounding eateries or gone home for lunch, but of course it wasn't. Ernesti and the twins left their seats to head

for the cafeteria, but that was when a surprising guest entered the classroom in a panic.

The guest, Matthias Echevalier, the combat skills instructor, whispered something in the teacher's ear, and after they seemed to come to some sort of understanding, Matthias approached Ernie.

"Fa— Instructor Echevalier...has something happened?" Ernie asked his approaching father as he tilted his head, puzzled. Matthias mainly taught knight runner students in the high school, so pretty much the only reason he would have to be in the middle school section was Ernie.

"I'll tell you about it later. For now, you need to come with me, Ernie."

Matthias nodded but hurried him along anyway. Ernie tilted his head even further, puzzled at Matthias's unusual manner, but then he seemed to think of something and he turned around. Reacting to that, Matthias also turned around to talk to the twins, who seemed lost.

"Ah, sorry Kid, Addy. I'll be borrowing Ernie for a while."

Still confused as to what was going on, the twins nodded anyway. And so, leaving only a small bow in response, the parent and child of the Echevalier house left the classroom.

"What was up with old man Matthias? That was weird..."

"I have a bad feeling about this."

For a while after they left, Kid and Addy continued staring dazedly at the door, but once they remembered how crowded the cafeteria would be, they hurried and left. They had figured that they could just ask what was up later, but it would turn out that they wouldn't get the chance for a long time.

Ernie did not return, even after afternoon classes had started.



Ernesti and Matthias quietly walked alongside each other down the hallway.

One, the combat skills instructor, had a brawny build and short blond hair that he continued to pat down. The other was a small-statured boy with longish silver hair. Ernie was on the extreme side of taking after his mother, and even

leaving aside the difference in age, the father and son were so different the word “contrasting” seemed inadequate. Still, there was something similar in their auras, so they still certainly felt like father and son.

They walked slowly, as if to defy the hurry that the lunch period engendered. The cafeteria was in the opposite direction, and once they left the school building, their feet took them to the area for practical lessons. They were headed for the high school section, and as they walked, Ernie tried to deduce their destination. The suddenness of this callout had given Ernie some ideas as to what it was about. However, while Ernie was content to walk quietly without asking any questions, Matthias was a little different. Worried about his surroundings, he led Ernie on a relatively unpopulated route once they were out of the school building before he opened his mouth.

“Just a little bit ago, servants of Duke Dixgard came to see father-in-law.”

It took a beat for Ernie to react.

“‘Duke’? Not Marquis Serrati?”

The other day, Ernie and the others had taken up Kid and Addy’s suggestion of seeking Marquis Serrati’s help with introducing the new model, and they had immediately sent a message. Ernie had expected someone of that house to come in response, but what Matthias had said was completely unexpected. Though it didn’t make much sense to Ernie, for the moment he set his questions aside to take stock of the situation.

“So what was the purpose of these servants’ visit?”

“It seems it was about that new silhouette knight you guys made. I haven’t heard any details yet either. For now, I’ve been told that those involved are gathering at the workshop for an explanation.”

The matter itself was exactly what Ernie had suspected, but that only made him even more puzzled. *We did contact Marquis Serrati, there’s no doubt about that, so why did the duke appear? Is it a problem that can’t be solved by someone of the marquis rank or something?*

Ernie figured that either there were some difficulties with what they needed help with or that it was just that difficult to properly handle a new model. He

started to sink into thought, but then he suddenly realized that there was no point in pondering it now, so he shook his head a little to rid himself of his thoughts. Once Ernie looked up from his reverie, he met eyes with Matthias. His gaze, which was usually sharp, radiated kindness this time, which was reinforced by his lowered brows.

“You really have loved silhouette knights for so long, Ernie.”

With that line that seemed to come out of nowhere, Matthias slowly raised his hand to stroke his son’s head. The boy only came up to below his chest, and while Ernie thought his father’s attitude strange, he accepted the affection and replied.

“I have. As you know, father, that’s why I’ve come this far. I never thought I’d have a chance to touch one this early, though.”

“I know. It’s the reason you’ve learned so much, Ernie, and the reason you’ve been working so hard.”

Matthias was about to continue, preparing to add a, “But,” before hesitating, his face scrunching up. From his attitude, Ernie realized that this was what his father really wanted to talk about.

“The new silhouette knight you made, Ernie...it’s gonna make some big waves.” Matthias phrased it like a prediction, but he was talking at least half out of conviction. Just the fact that servants of someone as high-standing as a duke had come was enough to confirm his feelings.

“It won’t all be good. I’m almost sure that it’ll come with hardships too.”

Ernie realized the nature of Matthias’s doubts, and some bitterness showed on his adorable face. Ernie was prepared to face hardships, and the students of the knight department were comrades prepared to fight with him, so it was fine for some of the sparks to fall on them as well. However, the thought that it might affect his family caused Ernie to feel no small amount of guilt.

Ernie’s actions and their consequences were all brought on by his pure selfishness. A normal child’s selfishness usually wasn’t such a big deal; most likely it would result in a prank in the worst case. However, this situation was already far beyond that of a prank.

“If it’s you, Ernie...you might be able to solve any problem by yourself.”

While Ernie was reflecting seriously on the inside, Matthias continued to walk while facing forward. His muttered words resonated in Ernie’s ears as strongly as the rain outside the window. Ernie had to jog to keep up with Matthias, and as he looked up at his father, he realized he couldn’t tell what kind of expression his father was making as the man spoke up again.

“But just because you might be able to doesn’t mean you should. There’s no need for you to take on everything alone.” Matthias turned back to look Ernie in the eye. Once again, Matthias’s large hand reached up to stroke Ernie’s head.

“Follow your heart and your thoughts to the very end, Ernie. Tina and I believe in you, and we’re cheering you on. Of course, father-in-law is as well. And when you’re troubled, rely on us. There’s no need to hold back—you can depend on us for anything.”

“Yes, father. If I’m ever in need of help, I will borrow everyone’s strength!”

They could now see the entrance to the workshop in front of them. Ernie usually walked through its doors filled with happiness and excitement, but today those doors seemed like the entrance to a battlefield.



The first thing the pair saw after entering the workshop was the usual scene of maintenance tables lined up along the wall, filled with silhouette knights. But unlike usual, none of the knightsmiths were working.

Normally they would be hurrying to and fro, busy with all sorts of tasks to help maintain the silhouette knights on the cradles. But now, with the sudden gathering, everyone was talking to each other agitatedly. Upon closer inspection, Ernie could see that there weren’t just knightsmiths in the crowd, but knight runners as well, meaning that most everyone involved really had been gathered.

An air of expectation and worry filled the workshop since the details of the gathering hadn’t been announced. Most students didn’t have any contact with the duke; Ernie was an exception to end all exceptions. He had attended the awards ceremony that had been held in the capital, Konkaanen, to celebrate

the defeat of the behemoth and those who contributed to it, but that was as close as anyone else had ever gotten. In other words, Duke Dixgard's name was that of someone above the clouds to these people, and mention of it put a lot of pressure on them.

Taking advantage of his small body, Ernie slipped between the gathered students to head toward someone he recognized. "Boss!" Ernie called out, causing the boss, David, who was talking to Edgar, to turn around, his beard swaying.

"Oh, if it isn't the silver kid! Have you heard, Ernesti? Looks like word's gone 'round. After all, someone even bigger than I remember asking for seems to have come."

"Doesn't that just show how much they value our work?"

Because it had been closed up to stop the wind and rain that was almost coming at them sideways, the inside of the workshop was more hot and humid than anyone could have imagined. While using a staff to create a lukewarm wind for himself, the boss, David, deftly shrugged his shoulders. Meanwhile, Edgar worked on loosening his leather armor.

"This was faster than we expected."

"We should praise 'em for doing all this in the rain."

"Don't say that to their face. Seriously, boss."

While the three continued their silly conversation, the commotion around them, which had been somewhat quiet and restrained, suddenly got louder. Wondering what was going on, they looked around to see an unfamiliar group entering the workshop. The group was clearly not dressed for laboring in the workshop, as they had on armor that fully covered their entire bodies, complete with mantles with crests sewn into them. The student knight runners mainly wore leather armor to emphasize ease of movement, though there were some that preferred metal armor. Still, the only ones who would wear armor like the ones who just walked in were undoubtedly true knights. A total of twenty people filed in, all of them wearing the same armor. It was an entire knight order, albeit a relatively small one.

With every step accompanied by the sound of clanging armor, the noise they made competed well with the sound of the rain. Once they stopped, the students noticed the imposing feeling they gave off and reflexively stepped back. Though not in response to that, one of the knights did step forward out of the pack. It seemed he would be representing the knight order.

“Are these all of the students who worked on the new silhouette knight, as contacted by the academy?”

The knight’s question prompted all the students to exchange glances, bewildered. They were up against someone who seemed to be the representative of a knight order, so was there even a student with the standing to answer him? The students’ gazes bounced around each other until soon enough, they all focused on one person. The boss and Edgar, with gazes stabbing into their backs, sighed in lament as they stepped forward to take the reins. Since he was talking with them, Ernie, seeming like he just got caught up in it, also followed them forward.

“It’s not everyone. If I had to go into details, there were many alchemists involved too. Though if you’re just talking about the knightsmiths who made the new model, the testers who piloted it, and the original inventor then yes, we’re here.”

The boss replied, making a gesture with his chin to point to the crowd behind him. This caused Edgar to clutch at his head and Ernie to make a pratfall. In a sense, the fact that the boss wouldn’t change how he acted even in front of knights made him a big deal. The knight who asked for confirmation seemed like he’d just eaten something sour for a moment. In the end he decided that it was hopeless to try and teach manners and decorum to a dwarf, a fundamentally rugged race, and so he simply moved on.

“Very well. That is enough. So, I understand why you students of the knight runner department are here, but what about the child?”

As one might expect, the knight questioned Ernie’s presence and shot him a doubtful look. Edgar and the boss were about to introduce Ernie, but then they suddenly realized how hard that would be, and so they closed their mouths. Their gazes unconsciously went to Ernie, who smiled in response.

The knight runner department students were already used to Ernie being around, but if they thought back with a clear and calm mind, they would remember that he was still a middle school student. Having been reminded so late in the game, the boss's expression was stiff as he realized how strange it was for Ernie to be here. Seeing the duo so lost for a response, Ernie decided to introduce himself after giving some thought as to why they were so troubled.

"I am the inventor of the new technologies used in the new model of silhouette knight and the one responsible for its original design."

The knight took a long moment to formulate a response: "That's a bit much for a child's prank."

"Ngruh," the boss started, having been pulled back to reality. "No, it's the truth. Everyone here and the headmaster himself will say the same thing."

Even after hearing what the boss had to say, the knight didn't seem convinced. The surrounding students all shot the knight seemingly sympathetic looks, and even Ernie thought it understandable. Still, as things stood they were getting nowhere.

"You can confirm my standing later. For now, there's no doubt that everyone involved is here."

After another beat to consider that, the knight responded, "Fair enough. Now then, students, I am a knight of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit. I have come under the order of Duke Dixgard."

Once again, a stir ran through the students. This knight order answered to the person with the most authority in the kingdom after the king himself. They knew this already, but hearing it out loud carried a whole new wave of impact.

"His lordship is interested in the new silhouette knight, and wants to see it in action. So, we would ask you to transport the new models to Fort Casadesus in the duke's territory as soon as possible. They should also be accompanied by the necessary personnel to perform maintenance."

The knights were met with utter silence as a response. The excitement that had ruled the students before had entirely receded, leaving them in a state close to bewilderment. In the midst of such an awkward mood, the boss

hesitantly raised his hand.

“Uhh...may I ask a question?”

The representative knight signaled with his eyes to go ahead, so the boss asked his question while stroking his abundant beard.

“I get that he wants to see the new model in action as soon as possible, but look at the weather. There’s no world where that’s decent weather to move a silhouette knight in... Does he want us to go right now anyway?”

“Of course. It is a direct order from the duke himself. Having gotten into the knight runner course, you all must have had training to march in bad weather, so don’t let rain stop you. Make your preparations immediately.”

The knight’s expression gradually got more stern. The boss couldn’t tell what their aim was, but the knight order behind the knight was putting a lot of pressure on the students. The atmosphere suddenly became sticky, as the air in the workshop felt much more oppressive. However, the boss exaggeratedly waved his head and arms before speaking in as carefree a tone as always.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t want you to misunderstand. It’s true that the weather is harsh, but I’m more scared of the burden it’ll place on the new model. Even with training, marching in the rain is a hard task. And this isn’t just rain, it’s a full-blown storm! The new model is far from a fragile little thing, but it’s still too rough around the edges to be put through such paces. To be honest, we’d love to show off our new silhouette knight, but I believe waiting would be in both our best interests.”

What the boss said showed that he wasn’t just afraid of the weather, so the knight captain was forced to agree with his point, though his stiff and formal attitude never wavered.

“That does make sense. But his lordship’s order is to bring you lot as soon as possible. It would turn into a forced march anyway, and that might cause problems, but that just means you may need time to make repairs at our destination. That is why we are having you come as well.”

With that, the students had no choice. They could have refused if the order was clearly impossible, but this request was merely difficult. In the first place, it

was impossible for a student to refuse the order of a duke. So, their only choice was to do their best. Though they could only agree, thinking about the amount of work that would need to be done to carry out the order, the boss couldn't help but heave a heavy sigh, his beard swaying as he did so.

“Okay, I get it. Let's just hurry up and get to it.”

This time, the knight turned on his heel and left. The boss couldn't quite hide how fed up he was with the knight as he shot orders to the maintenance team. Just like a human, the similarly bipedal silhouette knight was greatly affected by ground conditions. With how long the rain had been going, the ground would be muddy and slippery, meaning knight runners would need to make appropriate preparations. The team added equipment to the feet, as well as a cover to stop water from getting inside the joints. Given how practiced the maintenance team was, it was only a matter of time until the prep work was finished.

While the maintenance team was working, Matthias talked to the knights.

“Are only the maintenance team and knight runners allowed to come with you? I believe they're all that's needed to move the silhouette knights.” Matthias asked, mindful of Ernie who was listening beside him. Having realized what he was getting at, the knight replied in no uncertain terms.

“No, we will have the inventor accompany us as well. I'm surprised that such a small child made this, but...it's the truth, isn't it?” The knight paused for confirmation. “I see, it really is. Then I am under strict orders to bring you as well so that his lordship may talk to you. Not being in high school shouldn't exempt you from this, so you'll come with us.”

The knight expected that the child would be a central figure in the development of the new unit, as he was the original inventor, but it seemed he still only half-believed that what was being told to him was the truth. *I'm sure there's no reason for the teachers and the students to all lie about this...but really? This small child?* Were the knight's honest thoughts. Ernie didn't seem bothered by it, and he let the knight's doubtful gaze slide off him with a smile.

The situation was shaping up to be more troublesome than expected. Ernie was feeling bothered by it, but he simply shook off those feelings, trying to

psyche himself up at the same time. Whatever Duke Dixgard's intention, it wouldn't change Ernie's own goals. It was time to show off the new unit, and he was determined to make it a success along with the high school students that were his comrades.



Luckily, the rain let up a little by the time preparations were finished, and the raging storm had become less so when they were about to depart. The sky remained covered in thick clouds, and it was still raining, but it was much better than the prospect of having to march through violent winds as well as pelting rain.

A caravan of carriages left Laihiala's campus town. The carriages of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit were in front, with the students' carriages following behind. In between these carriages walked the silhouette knights of the Tellestarle series. There weren't many options when it came to transporting the ten-meter-tall giant humanoid weapons that were silhouette knights. There were specialized wagons for transporting broken units, but those were made with the assumption that it was possible to break down the silhouette knight into parts to spread the weight evenly. Since silhouette knights were able to move by themselves, they usually just had to walk from one place to another. This time wasn't an exception, even if they were a new model that was the star of the show.

In front of the lead Tellestarle and behind the entire caravan were Kaldatoahs belonging to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit. There was a chance they could be attacked by monsters on the way, and because they couldn't force the new model to fight, the Kaldatoahs had been brought along as escorts.

Their destination, Fort Casadesus, was in Duke Dixgard's territory in the northern part of the kingdom of Fremmevilla. For the moment, they were traveling along the West Fremmevilla Highway, though the plan was to turn north partway through. Most of the road they would be traveling would be paved with stone, so even with the bad weather it was easy to travel. This was especially true for the silhouette knights, which given their weight would have found it incredibly hard to traverse muddy, slippery ground. Of course, the knight runners had been trained to move during rainy weather, but that didn't

mean anyone relished the opportunity.

Rain fell on the silhouette knights as they traveled with the carriages, the heat from their activity causing the water droplets to evaporate into mist. With these thin trails of steam coming up here and there, the steel knights silently continued to walk forward.



The caravan's journey was going well, with the first change coming a little while after they left the main highway to enter the road leading to the fort. This road cut through a forest, and they were traveling through it when they heard a sound that was clearly neither a carriage nor a silhouette knight.

"This sound is... Tch! Monsters in a place like this?! Everyone, be ready! Get in defensive formation!"

The sound was a low, heavy, and intermittent rumbling sound. There were only two things in Fremmevilla that made a sound like this. It was either a silhouette knight or a monster. If it was a silhouette knight, then it should have been accompanied by the sound of the machine's intake and exhaust. Even without that missing piece, though, most times when something appeared suddenly like this, it was a monster.

The source of the noise was obviously closing in on them. Judging from the scale of the noise, the source of it was at least a duel-class monster—one that would require at least one silhouette knight to kill. On top of that, it was possible that there were multiple of them. The knights who had received combat training aside, the horses that were pulling the carriages were just normal horses, and they were close to a panic at the clearly unusual situation. The drivers desperately gripped their reins, trying to stop the horses from running wild, but the horses' pace was still disturbed, causing the entire procession to slow down.

The silhouette knights formed a defensive cordon around the carriages and watched out for the coming monsters. Given how much noise was being made, their approach had to affect the forest somehow, and the knight runners acted based on that assumption. However, even though the sound was getting closer nothing was changing with the forest.

“No...it isn’t coming from around us...from below?! Dammit, seriously?!”

One of the knights realized where the rumbling was coming from pretty much at the same time as the source of the sound appeared. The ground suddenly erupted behind where the silhouette knights had set up their defensive cordon, and a thin and very long figure emerged.

With the momentum of its emergence, the monster described an arc through the air before coming down, pulverizing the stone pavement before disappearing back into the ground. The way it moved made it seem like there was no resistance at all from the stone pavement or the ground which should have been stamped and packed together so it was hard. In fact, it resembled a fish diving into water. However, for the brief moment that the monster was visible, the knights caught sight of what seemed like a piece of string, only it was a meter in diameter and twenty meters long.

After the first one, other similar monsters started to burst out of the ground one after the other, making it obvious they were a herd, destroying the ground as they ran alongside the caravan. There were about ten monsters, all leaving the stone-paved road behind them in a miserable state.

“In a place like this?! This is bad, if we clump up they’ll get us from below!”

“Silhouette knight squad, change your formation—”

Having been attacked from an unexpected angle, the knight order was put on the back foot. The monsters, which had split into two groups on their left and right sides, drew closer, forming arcs in the air as if they were dancing. The tips of the monsters, which were able to even crush solid rock, would easily pulverize a wooden carriage or a knight’s armor. Several monsters dove right into some carriages, while others attacked the horses and made mincemeat out of them before disappearing into the ground. Having lost their motive force, those carriages meandered along before toppling over, becoming obstacles for the rest of the caravan behind them.

Suddenly thrown into confusion, the entire column had no choice but to stop.

“If we clump up we’ll all be killed in one swoop! Get out of the carriages for —”

Even in the confusion, the knights of the order tried to implement countermeasures against their foe. However, as if to laugh at their struggle, another change occurred. A Kaldatoah attempted to come to the carriage's aid while drawing its sword, but a sudden disturbance under its feet forced it to stop. The ground swelled under the unit's feet at a rate incomparable to before, revealing a much larger monster than all the others.

“Wh-What the hell...is that?!”

Anyone who saw it couldn't help but be stupefied for a moment, even though they were in danger. Just as the thing that seemed to be a monster appeared from under the Kaldatoah's feet, a sound like two hard objects scraping each other and rock being crushed could be heard in the area.

Though this new monster was the same shape as the ones before, it was about six meters in diameter—over half a silhouette knight's height. Its front end was also covered in layers of hard shell which overlapped each other and rotated around each other at high speed. It looked a lot like a tunnel shield machine on Earth, with its continuously rotating shell threatening to crush everything in its path and throw it into its waiting maw. It didn't matter whether it was dirt, stone pavement, or a silhouette knight; they were all the same to it.

The newly appeared monster pulverized the Kaldatoah's legs in an instant, making it look as if the poor machine had been sucked into a muddy backflow. With its lower half completely lost, the remaining upper half of the Kaldatoah helplessly flew through the air, bouncing along the ground. Meanwhile, the gigantic monster used its momentum to draw a nice parabola through the air, just like the smaller members of the herd, before touching back down and sending copious amounts of mud flying as it once again burrowed into the ground.

Both the knights and the students received a huge shock from seeing a silhouette knight be destroyed so easily. But, unfortunately, they didn't have the leeway to remain frozen.

“Abandon the carriages! MOVE! You'll just be eaten if you stay still!”

As the people crawled out of the carriages, trying to carry the wounded along

with them, the rumbling closed in mercilessly. With their enemies underground, even knights with all their combat training found it hard to formulate a response. The knights and knight runners all gnashed their teeth instinctively, but all it did was increase their sense of panic instead of helping their situation in any way.

While paying attention to their feet, the knights runners adopted an aggressive formation. Their plan was to counterattack when the monsters next poked their heads up to attack. As the group gulped nervously, a small figure belonging to a student with strange weapons in both hands showed himself. It was Ernesti.

“Shaker worms... What a troublesome enemy to have appeared.”

Shaker worms were basically giant earthworm monsters. Their tips were stuffed full with tiny carapace teeth all lined up and rotating in different directions in order to chew up the earth and throw everything into its body. It was a lot like a living excavator. Any creatures in the earth it swallowed would travel through its long digestive tract that went through the entire length of its body, being broken down and turned into nutrition along the way. Any waste was expelled out the other end to help with its propulsion, allowing it to move through the ground with great speed. More than that, the attacks these monsters made from underground were hard to defend against, making them extremely annoying to deal with—that was all the information on the monster that Ernie remembered, but that gave rise to a question within him, and he tilted his head, puzzled.

“But shaker worms shouldn’t get any larger than two meters in diameter... What is that big one, then? Some sort of lord or something?”

“How should I know?! Actually, how are you so damn calm?!”

“Now, now, you shouldn’t yell like that, boss. They’re annoying monsters that burrow underground. But that means that it’s very loud when they move, so if you listen you can figure out where they are to an extent.”

The boss clamped his mouth shut, gnashing his teeth so hard it was almost audible. His expression was completely dyed with anger, and he seemed liable to start swinging his hammer at any time. He wanted to be able to smash those

monsters' heads in with his own hands already.

"So that's why, boss, please back off a little. They're coming."

Having heard Ernie utter that as he looked down, the boss ran away as fast as possible without even saying a word. As he did so, the rumbling in the ground accelerated and approached until the puddles around Ernie almost seemed like they were jumping up. Still running, the boss turned around, but before he could say anything a great spout of earth erupted under Ernie's feet, revealing a shaker worm. Even the boss was terrified at such a sight. Though he figured there was no way Ernie would be eaten so easily when he knew that the shaker worm was closing in, seeing it come up from right under the kid was still bad for his heart.

While the boss was worried, Ernie had cast Aero Thrust the moment the shaker worm revealed itself, rising up into the air as if shot out of a cannon. Seemingly chasing Ernie, the shaker worm stretched up into the air. Though it had significant momentum, Ernie accelerated further in the air, escaping its jaws. While still in the air, he took aim with both his Winchesters.

"Welcome, please take this!"

While shaker worms could move freely in the ground, they lost all mobility in the air. Ernie aimed at the tip of the monster, so packed with carapace it looked like a rotating grater, and fired off his spells vigorously. Two instances of Piercing Lance shot out of his Winchesters, stabbing into the shaker worm and exploding one after the other.

The shaker worm's carapace held within it the power to crush boulders, but it was unable to withstand the combo of spells that flew at it. The directed explosions gouged out a large hole in the monster, into which more spells flew and exploded, causing its flesh to fly everywhere. The long and thin shaker worm's body split into two pieces and flew through the air. A beat later, the monster's body lost all signs of life as the bits of flesh hit the ground.

"And that's one."

Having confirmed his kill, Ernie fell forward and touched back down on the ground. His Air Suspension spell sent some water and mud flying, but it still absorbed all the impact of his landing. Right after that, he ran off to reinforce

the other knights and students that were being attacked by shaker worms.



In order to properly combat monsters that traveled underground, the knight order and students chose to spread out. The scariest aspect of a shaker worm attack was being assaulted suddenly from underneath. The group put their all into trying to sense signs of an impending attack.

“Be alert for any rumbling! If you think one is close, run immediately!”

“One’s here, on the right! Watch out!”

One after the other, shaker worms breached the surface, grazing their targets. The shaker worms were a huge threat underground, but they had to leave in order to attack their prey. When that happened, their movement speed would come back to bite them, as they were flung into the air, helpless for a moment. That was where the group’s chance to strike lay.

“You damn worm bastard! Don’t get so full of yourself!”

The knights and students had flinched because of the surprise attack, but now that they’d regrouped they were capable of a fierce counterattack. Fireballs flew with every swing of a staff, and red flowers bloomed even in the rain. Thanks to the impact of some of the explosions, the shaker worms were thrown off-balance while in the air, causing them to slam into the ground hard. Some of the spells also hit the monsters directly while they were in the air, and both knight and student alike worked to quickly finish off the shaker worms before they could get away.

A shaker worm’s hide was tough so as to resist the friction caused by their movement underground, but it was still much softer than its carapace at the front. David, the boss, ran for one of the shaker worms that had fallen to the ground due to the impact of a fireball and swung his hammer with all his might at it.

“How dare you attack us!”



The hammer strike, with the full force of a dwarf's might behind it, slammed into flesh that wasn't protected by carapace. The worm's hide was unable to withstand the destructive force behind such a huge swing and it broke, allowing the hammerhead to bury itself inside the monster. The impact permeated and spread throughout the worm's body, ripping apart its innards with enough extra momentum to also split the monster's body in half. Even though shaker worms had no vocal organs, it still convulsed greatly as if letting out a death cry before losing power and flopping to the ground.

After confirming it was dead, the boss forcefully ripped his hammer out of the monster's body, giving it a light swing to get rid of some of the inner juices that were clinging to it before readying it for more action.

"Come oonnn! Next! Bring 'em all on! I'll send 'em all flying!"

His fierce and imposing form, filled with spirit, scared his fellow students more than the monsters.

The smaller shaker worms were being cleaned up by the knights and students' counterattack. The reason they'd been able to calm down and deal with the smaller monsters was in large part thanks to the great effort put in by the silhouette knights to fight their part.

A little ways away, the large shaker worm that had been dubbed the "lord" was rampaging, trying to get at Ernie.

The silhouette knight squad had realized that the lord would target the larger silhouette knights more readily than it would small humans, so they immediately separated themselves from the students and knights. Shaker worms didn't really have much intelligence to speak of, and so the lord was easily led away into the forest.

The lord, being a little more than half a silhouette knight's height in diameter, proceeded heedlessly, pulverizing the ground and any trees as it went. Given that even silhouette knights found it hard to fight in the forest due to the trees obstructing movement, the lord was in no way something a bare human would be able to do something about. The knight runners knew that, which was why they separated themselves to fight in a different place.

“YOOUUUUUUUU!”

Helvi charged in with her Tellestarle No. 1, bellowing a war cry all the way. Her back weapons that had deployed over her silhouette knight’s shoulders roared, magic cannon fire spewing out of them in rapid succession and leaving trails of light as they flew through the air. Her aim was on point, and the overspells impacted directly on the lord’s body. But, as one might expect from a body threatening to stretch past a hundred meters in length, the lord boasted commensurate toughness, and it didn’t seem as if the long-range attacks were having much of an effect.

“What the heck is up with that thing! I hit it, and it doesn’t care! Isn’t that just unfair?!”

Since the lord was constantly wriggling and swimming through the ground with its huge, long body, the silhouette knights could only attack it sporadically. And because their opponent boasted so much mass, simple spell fire was not having much of an effect. Usually, if silhouette arms fire wasn’t doing much, the go-to alternative was to simply use a sword, which was exactly what the Kaldatoahs did. However, even that could not deal much damage to the lord.

While the silhouette knights were at a loss on how to attack their enemy, every one of the lord’s attacks were lethal. One Kaldatoah was about to be hit by the lord’s charge, and managed to raise its shield just in time. A shrill sound like a piercing scream spread through the area as the lord made contact with the silhouette knight’s shield, scattering sparks everywhere. The surface of the shield was shaved away, the rapidly spinning carapace of the lord acting like an especially effective file, before the shield itself was smashed through like a piece of paper tearing.

Luckily, the Kaldatoah was blown away by the lord’s charge, so in exchange for the loss of its shield and left arm, the unit’s torso was safe. One of the Kaldatoah’s squadmates ran to it.

“You okay?!”

“Gnrrghh...I lost my shield and left arm, but I can still move. I can swing a sword, at least!” The Kaldatoah stood up, though it was unsteady on its feet. The expression of the knight runner inside was full of shock, with some anguish

at the situation starting to seep through.

“Tellestarles—everyone, gather at my side!”

The lord let out a thunderous roar that threatened to destroy everything around it as Edgar used his unit’s loudspeaker to shout to his comrades. The Tellestarle squad responded, weaving through the raging lord’s squirming body to gather around Edgar’s Unit No. 2.

“What are you planning? Did you come up with a good idea?”

“Yeah. There isn’t much effect with us attacking separately, so we just need to concentrate our fire. We’re all going to adopt quadruple turret form and hit it from the front. We need to stop it from moving.”

Edgar was proposing attacking it head-on. Though this was in order to allow them to concentrate their fire, the knight runners in the Kaldatoahs would have doubted his sanity had they heard him, as they would never have suggested such a thing. However, the students knew their new Tellestarles had something that would make such a plan viable. The Tellestarle pilots all flashed smiles in their cockpits as they nodded firmly in agreement to the plan.

“Awwright, let’s do this thing! Let’s give ’em an eyeful of the Tellestarle’s power!”

All the Tellestarles stowed the close combat weapons they had in their hands and threw away their shields. Then, they retrieved the silhouette arms that were stored on their waists while deploying their back weapons. This state, where they were wielding a total of four silhouette arms, had been named the “quadruple turret form,” and allowed Tellestarles to exhibit a part of their true worth by emphasizing their ability to fire multiple silhouette arms at once.

Since there were many silhouette knights gathered in one spot, the lord was drawn to them and charged straight at their position. Their knight runner allies saw the lord’s wriggling form move toward the gathering of Tellestarles and wasted no time in warning them about it.

“What’re you kids doing?! That’s dangerous—spread out!”

“We’re going to concentrate our fire! Once it flinches, please attack it!”

The Tellestarle squad formed a line to meet the lord's charge with all the reticles on their holomonitors aimed squarely at the lord's mouth. At this point, the lord was so close they could no longer take any other action.

"FIIIREEEEEEE!" Edgar shouted, signaling all the Tellestarles to fire their total of twenty silhouette arms in unison, something which would normally need at least ten silhouette knights to pull off. This incredible curtain of fire, supported by the massive mana pool afforded to the units by a combination of their capacity frame and crystal plates, flooded toward the monster like rain.

The overspells left glittering trails in their wake as they rushed toward the lord. Having been aimed well, the attacks all hit their target: the lord's mouth. Shaker worms were known to be able to eat anything, but not even the lord could eat that many overspells all at once. After a beat, flowers of flame erupted around the lord's tip. The unrelenting storm of fire put out by the Tellestarles had succeeded in stopping the lord, who had up until now proved implacable. The bombardment had even scattered the lord's teeth-like carapace all over the place.

The lord, in pain, naturally twisted its body around, trying to escape the source of its suffering. It tried to use the impacts from the explosions to help it as it pointed its tip down at the ground and started digging in its escape attempt. However, the bombardment that had caused it so much pain had also heavily damaged the part of it that it used to pulverize and grind its way through the earth. Having lost much of what it needed to do what it had planned, the lord found it couldn't dig as it was used to, causing it to simply wriggle while still pointed at the ground, fully exposed.

"Now, attack it! Don't let it get away, we need to finish it here and noooww!"

No one present was fool enough to let such a perfect opening go. The Kaldatoahs raised their swords, hefted their spears, and charged. Meanwhile, the Tellestarle squad, having already used up quite a lot of mana, knew that this would be the deciding moment and so squeezed out all they had left to run in and engage in close combat. Many swords and spears were thrust repeatedly into the wounds the lord had sustained thanks to the earlier bombardment. It continued to attempt to escape into the ground but was clearly getting more and more ragged.

One of the Tellestarles swung the halberd it was holding in both hands as hard as it could. The strand crystal tissue running throughout its body stretched taut and rang out like a note from a stringed instrument as it exhibited the unrivaled power it was known for. The halberd, having been imbued with fierce momentum and centrifugal force, made an audible noise as it slammed into the monster. Bodily fluids poured out ceaselessly from the wound the halberd had inflicted, mixing in with the rain-soaked, muddy ground below.

Finally, the lord reached the limit of its endurance, and its body split in two with a loud, wet sound. Being bisected would be fatal to any monster, even the lord. So, having lost all vitality, the lord's gigantic body fell to the ground, never to rise again.

Seeing that they had finally felled the massive monster, the knight runners raised the arms of their silhouette knights and cheered. However, they only allowed themselves to revel in victory for a moment, as they knew they needed to reinforce the regular knights and students. So, they quickly headed back to the site of their attack, only to find upon leaving the forest that most of the shaker worms had already been destroyed by their compatriots' fierce counterattack. As one might expect, the lord had been the far more threatening enemy.

Things continued without change, and before long the situation on the road had quieted down.



“Good grief... Damn these worms for making so much trouble.”

Once the convoy had beaten all the worms and had some time to take a breath and compose themselves, the boss made time to grouse out loud. He was looking at a ruined carriage that was paired with a horse carcass that had been mostly eaten.

“Will we be able to salvage enough of the carriages to transport everyone to our destination?”

“There's no way; none of these are in a state where emergency repairs will help. If we tried our best, it'd be amazing if we could get half of these into working shape. In the first place, we're knightsmiths, not woodworkers or any

other specialist you'd need for this sort of thing."

The knight that asked that question, having heard the answer that was pretty much exactly what he expected, crossed his arms together uneasily. It was clear that the most painful loss to result from the monster attack was the destruction of most of their carriages.

"There's nothing else for it, we'll just have to prioritize transporting the wounded. Put them on the carriages that can still move and send those off to Fort Casadesus first. What? There's not enough horses left to pull them? Then have some silhouette knights drag the carriages along. There'll be a village a little way further along this road, so we're going to head there first. It would be nice if we could get some replacements there, but..."

Everyone took action under the knight's orders. The boss got in one last spiteful kick on a shaker worm's corpse, but of course that didn't change anything for the better. The one silver lining on this whole ordeal was that the rain had lightened up considerably, allowing them to travel on foot.



In the end, the convoy was unable to secure more methods of transport in the village, but the problem was solved by having Fort Casadesus send out more carriages to meet them and bring them back. During the remainder of their trip, the convoy encountered monsters several more times, but none of them were as threatening as the lord worm, and were thus easily beaten back by the might of their escorting silhouette knights. So, though their arrival had been delayed a few days, the students and Tellestarles finally arrived at Fort Casadesus.

"Okay, we're going to start inspecting the Tellestarles right away! Make sure to pay special attention to the back weapons and associate systems!"

The boss and the other knightsmiths brought the Tellestarles into the fort's workshop and immediately started inspecting the state of their units. The Tellestarles, having had to participate in an unexpected battle against a huge foe, greatly needed maintenance. After all, the original purpose in bringing the Tellestarles all the way here was to show them off. The boss and his maintenance team worked on their charges thoroughly.

The knightsmiths and knights attached to the fort watched them with

interest. They knew the basics of what was going on, but until they actually saw the Tellestarles being moved inside, they still only half-believed that students could develop a new model of silhouette knight. But now they had to change their evaluation of the students in a big way. This was especially true for the escorting knights who had actually seen the Tellestarles in action, and the number of people who wanted the units to be mass-produced were not few and were still growing. At the very least, they wanted a unit that used the same technologies that the Tellestarle had, and in anticipation of such a day, they watched over the work being done in front of them.



As expected of a fort, Casadesus’s workshop was far larger than the one in the academy. It was lined with Kaldatoahs belonging to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, and now it was playing host to the Tellestarles as well, which made for a magnificent sight.

Something ran in between the packed silhouette knights, leaving behind silver afterimages. It was Ernesti, displaying some fancy footwork even as he looked about to break out into dance. Because he wasn’t a knightsmith, he had no maintenance work to do, and so he was exploring the workshop. The space was far more spacious than the one at the academy, and as he looked at all the lined up silhouette knights, his smile was about ten percent wider than normal.

“Hangars really are so wonderful! And this one’s even more so since there are so many silhouette knights...”

A single knight approached Ernie as he was enjoying the springtime of his youth in a way that was completely different from normal. From a bystander’s point of view, Ernie just seemed like a child enjoying looking at silhouette knights, so the knight spoke with a smile like he was seeing something heartwarming.

“You’re being summoned by the duke. Can you come with me?”

Once Ernie turned around, he no longer seemed like a child. Instead, he seemed like a team leader about to report to a department chief, his expression was a mix of confidence, anxiousness, passion, and annoyance.



Turning back time to just after the students departed Laihiala Knight Runner Academy...

Laihiala's campus town was built around Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and included residences and commercial buildings. Its townscape was fairly orderly, with neatly lined up buildings, and there was one particular man walking briskly through it. Though the storm was starting to abate, the rain was still pouring heavily, making it hard for the man to make his way to his destination: a certain building. This totally normal-looking building, which stood inside the town, seemed more like a residence by process of elimination, as what it definitely did not look like was a store. With practiced ease, the man unlocked the door with a key and ran inside before finally breathing a sigh of relief.

After taking off his rain gear, he continued further inside while leaving on his rain-soaked clothes. Waiting for him were several more men and women, who were in the midst of a conversation. They didn't seem all that surprised by the man's sudden appearance, but they *were* more flustered than usual, causing them to give him suspicious looks.

"What happened? What did I need to hurry through all this rain for?" the woman furthest in the back of the group asked the newcomer doubtfully.

The man replied without any pretense, "There's been an emergency report from our 'hidden mouse.'"

The woman's naturally narrow eyes, which gave off a harsh impression already, narrowed even further, seeming more and more like a sharp, drawn blade. The man who faced her as well as all the other subordinates around him suddenly found it harder to breathe.

"What's wrong? Did the students revolt or something?"

"Duke Dixgard has his eyes on *that* thing, it seems. The report I got said that he had them move to his side in a hurry."

An expression like she'd just swallowed something disgusting flashed across the woman's face. She showed no further expression than that as she leaned deeper into her chair and crossed her arms, clearly sinking into thought.

"Looks like they made the first move. Sitting back and observing because we

heard that parts of it were still unfinished has come back to bite us.”

“*That* has already left along with some of the students for the duke’s territory. We’ve been had, haven’t we?”

The woman’s features, which had started to become wrinkled, saw those wrinkles deepen as she flipped through the documents on her desk with an irritated expression. After a quick search, she roughly threw a sheaf of documents to her subordinate.

“Hmph, we won’t accomplish anything by sitting around complaining. Hurry and send this report to headquarters. Make sure they send it up to *His Majesty* as fast as possible; it’s the top priority.”

This seemed to be a common occurrence, as the subordinate caught the documents with practiced ease, leaving behind a snappy salute before taking off.

“Now then, we don’t have much time to sit around anymore, it seems. Depending on His Majesty’s decision, we might need to take action ourselves.”

“Ourselves?” one of her men repeated. “His Majesty...he would go that far?”

“Get ready. We’ll need to prepare just in case, so call everyone in,” the woman replied with a strong gaze.

The man who spoke up nodded silently and left. Before long, only the woman was left in the room. She crossed her arms, sinking into thought. Who knew what kind of predictions she was making in her mind? Though from her harsh expression, it probably wasn’t anything nice.

“Right...seems like we’re going to be busy.”

Surprisingly, in contrast to her actual words, her tone made it sound as if she was having fun.



More than a week had passed in a flash since Ernesti and the knight runner department students left for Fort Casadesus.

Many children wrapped in rain gear walked down Laihiala campus town’s main thoroughfare, navigating through the rain that made it hard to see. It was

morning, a little before classes were due to start, just around the time that students would usually make their way to school.

Among the students were Batson, Archid, and Adeltrude. They exchanged greetings before walking together and making peaceful small talk, but the twins still stood out because they were spreading their unhappy aura all over the place.

“Jeez, that Ernie! When will he be back?! From what I heard, he should have returned by now!”

“I know! Urghh...at this rate I’ll suffer a critical shortage of Ernie nutrients.”

“The heck is that...?”

From what the twins had heard, it took around a week to make a round trip to Fort Casadesus and back, but there were no signs of Ernie returning yet. The main reason for this was the massive delay the convoy had suffered at the hands of the shaker worm encounter, but they had no way of knowing that. In this age, with no method of long-distance communication, all the twins could do was wait.

“Still, how should I put it? Ernie’s pretty cold, leaving us behind like that.”

“I know! We helped to make Tellie too!” Addy shouted. But then she calmed down and added, “We really just watched from the side, though.”

“Seriously, how long are you guys planning to complain for?”

The twins had heard of Ernie’s departure for Fort Casadesus after he had already gone, and had no outlet to resolve all the anger they felt at being left behind again after the behemoth incident. Unlike last time, though, the whole thing happened very suddenly, so it wasn’t all Ernie’s fault. Still, it was a bit much to expect the twins to be understanding. That being said, they weren’t high school students and so really had nothing to do with the new unit’s development and no way to involve themselves with what had happened this time. And while the twins were complaining, Batson was getting more and more disappointed in them.

“Come on, how many times do I have to remind you guys that there’s nothing you can do now since he’s already gone?”

Batson had repeated that reminder over and over this past week, but Kid still crossed his arms glumly. Next to him, Addy was pouting with her cheeks puffed out, but after seeming to have come to a decision on something, she turned back around with a clenched fist.

“No, we can’t just give up! Since it’s come to this, we need to go to *him*! We’re not the same people we were before—we have silhouette gears now!”

“So...where would you even go?” This surprisingly levelheaded response came from Kid instead of Batson.

“Huh? Uhhh...well he’s supposed to be in Duke Dixgard’s territory.”

“So...where in his territory, then? It’s gotta be huge. Not only that, but we have no idea how we’re going to travel there.”

“Grkkhh.” Addy made an unintelligible groan, no longer having a response even as she held the fist-out, totally motivated pose she had adopted when she made the proposal. Even though they could move faster than a normal horse using a silhouette gear, that wouldn’t matter if they didn’t know where they were going.

“I’m not happy about it either, but he should be back soon, so the only thing we can do is wait.” Kid still sounded like he was sulking as he drove his point home, and Addy closed her mouth, her cheeks still puffed out in displeasure.

After a small while, Addy spoke up again. “Ernie’s getting the hugging pillow punishment for a while when he gets back.”

Having heard Addy’s utterance, Kid immediately forgot the anger he was feeling toward Ernie and faced up to the heavens, praying for him as he thought of how much effort his friend would have to put in to calm his little sister down. At that moment, Ernie, still in Fort Casadesus, got the shivers, but let’s leave that aside for now.



Like that, while not quite resolving the feelings within them, the children continued to spend their days. The story only started to progress a few days later, when finally, the knight runner department students returned to Laihiala.

The line of carriages passed through Laihiala's gates, after which they parted with the Kaldatoahs that were probably sent as their escorts. The silhouette knights entered a workshop near the gates, while the carriages continued through the main thoroughfare and into Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

"Hey there, familiar old workshop of mine."

"It's only been a little more than a week, boss."

"It's all about the feeling, you dunce."

While stretching their limbs that had grown cramped over the course of their long journey, all the knight runner department students followed the boss and got off the carriages. The workshop had been left quiet and empty, but in an instant it regained its usual liveliness.

However, they were still missing some presences who had been with them since the start of the journey. First off, all of the Tellestarles that had accompanied them to Fort Casadesus were gone. They had been escorted back by Kaldatoahs belonging to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, and all of them parted ways with the group at the gates. So, they had come back completely empty-handed. And that wasn't all: the only ones present were students of the knight runner department.

Which meant that a certain small-statured boy that had departed with them was not around.



As classes ended for the day, time smoothly transitioned to the "after school" period. Evening was rolling around, and the sun was sinking below the Auvinier Mountains. In a certain room in the middle school student dorms, Stefania Serrati was doing her homework. Every once in a while, her long blonde hair, which seemed like a magnificent annoyance, would fall over her face and get in the way, forcing her to sweep it back before continuing her studies.

After a while, she took a break after finishing most of her work. It was then, with perfect timing, that guests appeared. She first thought that a friend had come, but the frantic knocking eliminated that possibility. Turning to face the door, she showed a small amount of hesitation. She *was* the student council

president, but she shouldn't have had any work to do relating to that at the moment. She tilted her head, puzzled and wondering if some sort of emergency had occurred as she opened the door.

"Big sis! Please, help me!"

Seeing her twin little siblings looking so desperate, Stefania made the rare move of widening her eyes and freezing.



Tifa invited her half-siblings in. Their visit was sudden, but she did not want to treat them harshly. Behind her outward smile, she thought, *Unusual occurrences really do happen*. Recently, they seemed to have been able to resolve any ill feelings from before and were getting along well, but this was still the first time they had ever visited her in her room.

But it didn't seem they were here to play. Her little brother still seemed somehow like he couldn't be bothered, but unlike him her little sister was an open book, and she seemed to have some sort of huge favor to ask. After watching her worry about it for a moment, Tifa decided to bring out some refreshments to make it easier for them to talk. But, before she could act on that decision, Addy excitedly jumped forward to speak.

"Big sis, you're the only one I can ask now!"

"Okay, and I'll hear what you have to say. But first, please calm down. Let's see, I'll get us something to drink. Just wait a second, will you?"

While Kid helped to calm Addy down, Tifa brewed some tea and returned. After drinking some, the twins seemed to have calmed down somewhat, but they still talked a little fast as they broached the main purpose of their visit.

"So even though the boss and the others are back from the fortress, Ernie, he...*he* isn't!"

Up until halfway through that story, Tifa was all smiles, but as things went on her expression turned more and more serious. It had started from the completion of the Tellestarle, to them contacting their father Marquis Joachim Serrati, and further to their summons by Duke Dixgard, until they finished with the return of the students. Tifa looked down as she pondered the story.

“I see... So what happened back then is now...”

Stefania had no idea what her father was thinking, but it was clear to her that Ernie had become embroiled in some sort of plot. Before, during the behemoth incident, Tifa and the others had been saved thanks to Ernie’s actions. So it only followed that it was their turn to help him. With strong resolve in her heart, she stood.

“I understand. Let’s go.”

“Big sis?” Addy looked up at her, surprised.

“We’re going to see our father. Right now he should be in his villa in Konkaanen... We need to at least ask him why.”

Kid and Addy nodded emphatically, and they too stood up.

With their course decided, Tifa acted quickly. She started the very next day, abusing—or rather using, her authority as the student council president to its fullest along with emphasizing the circumstances of her family to trample over all the teachers and other student council member’s laments and tears and allow her to take the twins with her to Konkaanen posthaste. Later, her sister would describe her with the words, “Back then was the first time I thought I shouldn’t make an enemy of my big sister.”



That day, the Serrati villa in Konkaanen was thrown into confusion by the return of the storm that should have already receded. The first daughter of the family could not be stopped as she pushed forward through the house. The servants, panicked, moved about in a hurry in an attempt to go through proper channels and alert the master of the house of his imposing daughter’s presence. Whether it was lucky or unlucky, Joachim was in his villa, and it didn’t take long for his daughter to be brought to meet him.

“What is it all of a sudden, Tifa? You should have classes today, so why are you here?”

Joachim Serrati greeted his daughter unhappily, as she had been rampaging through his house faster than anything in his memory. Furthermore, he then noticed she had brought Kid and Addy with her, causing him to deeply furrow

his brows.

“You...”

“You should know from seeing them what we are here for, father.”

Tifa, unflinching in the face of her father’s displeasure, continued to elegantly give her greetings to her father with a smile. Her quiet but intensely impactful attitude refused to crumble. She had not become Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s student council president for nothing. On top of that, since she’d encountered a division-class monster she had developed an outstanding mental fortitude and force of will, even for a student council president.

That didn’t mean Joachim would shrink back instead. Still, he had no choice but to give up on being able to order her to go back one-sidedly. Just barely managing to hold back a sigh of lament, he cleaned up the documents on his desk before leaning back in his chair and facing his children.

“You mean about the new model of silhouette knight?”

“Not just that. It’s about the person in the center of its development, and the friend to these two: Ernesti Echevalier.”

Joachim was about to say something, but Tifa stopped him by continuing.

“In the behemoth incident, many students, starting with us, were saved thanks to his actions. However, now, he is the only one that hasn’t returned from the duke’s territory. I cannot fathom what you and he are thinking, but I will not forgive you for harming our savior.” With Kid and Addy to either side of her, Stefania stared down her father. “I would have you explain yourself in a way that satisfies us, father.”

Stefania would not allow any lies or evasion of the question. Much like a person marching off for a duel, she started her advance.



“And that is everything I’ve been told by my subordinates.”

The captain of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit that made Fort Casadesus their home, Morten Fredholme, read the report out loud while standing at attention. He was currently in the officers’ strategy room in Fort Casadesus—it wasn’t

usually used, but it also doubled as a reception room when higher-ranked nobility visited. There was a table at the center of the room with chairs surrounding it. Duke Cnut Dixgard, the lord of Fort Casadesus as well as the rest of the Dixgard house's territory, was sitting in one of the chairs.

Cnut closed his eyes as he listened to Morten's report, and a little while after it was done, he expelled the air from his lungs with a heavy breath.

"I see. I understand the abilities of the new model now. So, what do the knights think of it?"

Morten had reported on the combat capabilities of the new model—the Tellestarle. The report had been written based on what had been shown by their encounter with the shaker worms and some interviews.

"Honestly, I have to admit that the knights have got a very high opinion of them. It would be extremely difficult to obtain the same results in combat using the same number of Kaldatoahs. Pretty much all the knights who fought with the new units want to pilot one themselves."

Cnut furrowed his brows slightly and gave a short groan as he leaned back in his chair. With his well-kept hair that led down to a sharp, hooked nose, he gave off a very sharp impression. This was only further enhanced when he sunk into speculation, and his features reflected that shift.

"The new model will be beneficial to our country. I suppose we can't just throw that away."

Morten nodded in response to Cnut's quiet muttering.

"Morten, the students who made the new model are trying to go through the formalities of registering their new technology with the national lab. They asked me to mediate for them should any trouble rear its head."

Cnut picked up a different document than the report he was looking at previously. It was a report as well as a written request from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy that had been delivered to him through Marquis Serrati.

"Not only that, they intend to go to the national lab themselves to promote their work."

“Oh? So it’s not just about the technology?”

“This says: ‘We are the ones who understand the skills required to move the new model and the philosophy behind it. If we can use that understanding in future development efforts, it would lead to even greater contributions.’”

After hearing Cnut read out the contents of the document, Morten stroked his well-kept beard and let out a hearty laugh.

“Hah! Hah! Hah! Students these days sure are greedy! I suppose this means they’re proud of their invention, in their own way. Why not then? It seems okay to let them do what they want. Those that graduate Laihiala are plenty skilled. On top of that, they’ve already developed a new model of silhouette knight. Excellent youngsters should be welcomed.”

Of course, Morten wasn’t just saying that for no reason. He understood that if the new model were to be accepted and mass-produced, then naturally more personnel would be needed. Having more skilled staff could never hurt, and if that aligned with the wishes of the people in question as well, then all the better.

“So the question is, how much of it is their own ability?”

However, Cnut’s thoughts on the matter were slightly different. He was fixated on a certain entry in the report in front of him. Specifically, the one that said, “Inventor: Ernesti Echevalier.” He recalled the image of that boy who shone with silver.

“Continue to deal with the students, Morten. We need to do research on the new unit.”

“Yes, sir! And what will you be doing, Your Grace?”

“There is...someone I must meet and talk to directly.”

Those words were, unusually, pregnant with all the pain of a national leader. With a splendid salute and bow, Morten left the room to carry out his orders.



While staring at the door Morten exited out of, Cnut gradually breathed outwards. Having received a report from Marquis Serrati beforehand, he knew

that the development of the new model was not solely due to the students.

Should I not have underestimated him? Still... He thought.

He chased those intrusive regrets, which threatened to worry his head clean off, out of his mind. Those regrets were entirely due to his own past laxness, all stemming from back when the king had promised Ernie the knowledge to make an ether reactor with the simple condition of, “Make a silhouette knight.”

At that time, the center of all Cnut’s problems lay with how much the king liked to indulge in his own amusement. The one he exchanged that promise with, Ernie, needed to be treated with caution, but that in itself wasn’t terribly important. At his age, Ernie was a brilliant child, but no matter how grand his talents were, there was a limit to all things. This was why the king, though he gave the child an opening, did not directly promise any support.

In the first place, designing a silhouette knight was not a realistic feat for a mere student. The current model of silhouette knight adopted for use in the kingdom of Fremmevilla, the Kaldatoah, had been designed around a hundred years prior. The accumulation of new technology, which took many years, had needed the efforts of all the best knightsmiths at the time to aggregate and implement.

And considering that the model before the Kaldatoah, the Solodreah, had been developed two centuries before, it should give anyone an idea of how difficult such a feat was. Even taking into account Cnut’s own experiences, the chances of such a promise being fulfilled were so low they didn’t bear considering.

Or at least, that’s how it should have been.

But not even a year later, a disturbing report that made him doubt his own ears reached him. It said, “The students have succeeded in developing a new model of silhouette knight.” That in itself was wholly unprecedented. On top of that, once Cnut saw who was credited as the inventor, he almost fainted. It was Ernesti Echevalier—suddenly, the king’s promise in his memories got a whole lot more real, and Cnut could feel, *and even hear*, his own common sense crumbling around him.

In truth, when Cnut had been young, he had attempted to improve the

Kaldatoah himself. The silhouette knight's combat capabilities are directly tied to the country's stability and power. As the head of the Dixgard ducal house, nobles of the highest rank with ties to the royal family, he wanted to further develop the country. So, seeking to improve the power of silhouette knights was a natural result of that.

His huge project, with the blessing of the king, saw him team up with the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory. However, it ultimately ended with no real results to speak of. This was because the past hundred years of technological improvement had been slow, taken only in small steps which would accumulate over time. There were no large revolutions that could become the core of his desired improvement. Though he had managed to improve things somewhat, it was nowhere near what he had desired. With such painful memories as experience under his belt, he finally understood just how hard creating a new model of silhouette knight was. To him, creating a new model without the benefit of many years of accumulated advancement, no massive team full of abundant talents, and no money even, but just a bunch of students was so idiotically far-fetched that it couldn't even be called a pipe dream.

So Cnut changed tacks. The boy named Ernesti had to have *something* special. Something that would make it possible to achieve such a miraculous "dream," that was subject to an entirely different type of common sense and reason. Whatever it was, Cnut knew it would bring him and the whole kingdom of Fremmevilla great benefit.

Having thought that far, he finally realized how dangerous his past decision had been, and a shiver ran up his spine. If it weren't for Marquis Serrati, who had obtained a lot of information on Ernie earlier than he had and had acted on it, Cnut might simply have learned this by word of mouth after the fact. While thanking Marquis Serrati in his heart for the information, he moved to take advantage of the chance that was given to him. Though there were many unexpected happenings in between, the new model had shown its power, and had received rave reviews from the knights. He had no doubt that it would eventually be adopted for mass production and be spread throughout the kingdom.

So, there was something he had to learn. What was the boy named Ernesti thinking, and what did he want? To Cnut, Ernie was still an unknown quantity, like a dark and squirming shadow. He could not allow such a person to affect the country he loved so much without taking his true measure.

At some point during all his pondering, Cnut had closed his eyes. But, suddenly he heard a restrained knock. The time he had been waiting for had come. With a quick but deep breath, he calmed himself down and gave permission for the guest outside to enter.



A couple figures walked down Fort Casadesus's long stone hallways. The one in front was an armored knight, followed by a small boy, looking so young he could be mistaken for being far younger than he was. The leading knight held a lamp, and its swaying coupled with the clank of the knight's armor as he walked were the only sounds made in this quiet corridor.

Eventually, the hallway ended, and they stood at a heavy door lit by a small light. There were detailed decorations on the door, which made it stand out from its surroundings by how remarkably different the atmosphere it presented was compared to the rest of the fort. The knight knocked on the door. Then, after being allowed in, the knight opened the door without a sound to allow the boy—Ernesti—inside.

Once Ernie entered, he saw a very fine room that was clearly different from the brusque decoration of the rest of the fort. The room was furnished with a soft carpet that would not have suited the environs of a fortress, and as the soldier who led him here walked to the center of the room, he did so with slow and careful steps, as if to check his footing. A table had been prepared in the center of the room, on the other side of which sat a man in the prime of his life. The man was the master of this fortress, Duke Cnut Dixgard. He bade Ernie to sit with a magnanimous attitude, so Ernie gave some simple pleasantries and a bow before plopping down in a seat.

At the same time, a waiter stepped forward to pour the boy a drink before stepping back again. The drink was a very high-quality tea from the Occidents, and its fragrance tickled the noses of the two it was poured for. So, with tea in

one hand and a peaceful mood in the room, they started their verbal battle.



To Cnut, what was about to happen was something like a duel with real swords. He needed to expose Ernie's nature and his desires, which would show him how to take control of his opponent. As if judging the spacing between them in a sword duel, he figured it would be a quiet, but heated affair.

Instead, though, as the conversation started, he found himself baffled.

“—Like this, and it's all thanks to the knight runner department's knighthsmiths that we were able to develop strand crystal tissue and use it throughout the new Tellestarle's entire body. This new tissue gives it fifty percent greater output...”

Ernie was sitting across the table from him, eloquently explaining his new model. Cnut had adopted a wait-and-see approach, and so opted to start with asking about the new model. But that question had resulted in an endless stream of words, and it was like Ernie was giving a speech on a pulpit now instead of being in a conversation. He had even prepared greatly detailed documents as if it were only natural.

“Please look at the documents you have in front of you. As you can see, the above-mentioned new model boasts much more muscle strength and abundant equipment options over the current mass-produced model, but in exchange there are still some problems with stamina...”

It was even harder for Cnut to stop this because he kind of wanted to keep listening. Though he wanted to take control of the conversation, his ears wouldn't stop picking up Ernie's words, his eyes reflexively read the documents, and his brain was working full-blast, organizing all the information on the new unit he was receiving. There were alarms going off in a small corner of his mind, but he continued to greedily absorb all this information.

“As for expenses, I'm sorry to say I cannot make a solid projection at the moment. It will most likely change as we optimize our workflow and productivity. However, we have existing ether reactors, the most expensive part, to serve as the silhouette knight's heart, and by enacting changes based on relatively cheaper sections, I believe the price won't be significantly

higher...”

Ernie continued his presentation without hesitation. He had been working on it since he had been called to Fort Casadesus, and in terms of explaining the subject it could be considered perfect. In the end, Ernie spent three straight hours going through everything. The reason he was able to go for that long, even with all his knowledge, was entirely due to his love for robots.

While Ernie sipped on his cooled tea with an expression of true satisfaction, Cnut organized his thoughts in his head, considered plans for mass production, and was about to ask about that subject when he suddenly remembered his original objective.

He was shocked that even with all the negotiating prowess he’d trained in the course of his duties as a duke, he was unable to exercise any of it so far. The fact that he was supremely interested in the new model had been perfectly taken advantage of, and if the child had planned that, then he had failed in his duties. However, the effect of such a powerful move had lessened temporarily now that the presentation had ended. *Now’s my only chance if I’m going to counter*—Cnut thought, feeling inexplicably rushed as he decided to wield his own trump card.

“I see. I have several questions about the new unit, but before that...I would like to hear about how it will be used, Ernesti.”

As one might expect, the duke hadn’t been given his job for no reason. The atmosphere he gave off changed, and from the sheath that was his blank expression came the sharpness of a blade personified.

“I have been given permission from the king. Everything, from the new unit’s assessment to its future use will be determined by me.”

The fact that a duke—nobility of the highest rank—had been given the reins by the king meant that for all intents and purposes, he held the same authority as the king himself. At least, as far as this subject went, whatever he said could be taken to be the words of the king himself.

“I will be managing everything in regards to the new unit. That goes for any news or information about it as well. I will be reporting this directly to His Majesty.”

To Cnut, this was both a trump card and a last resort. He was wresting all rights and authority from his opponent. While it would have tremendous effect, it could also easily provoke his opponent—which was a downside he could do nothing about.

Cnut couldn't afford to make an enemy out of Ernie, so it wasn't a great choice to have to make, but he felt it was too dangerous to allow Ernie to continue controlling the pace of the conversation. In the first place, so far he had only been taken on a thorough walk-through of the new model. Ernie would have to give a big reaction to his play, which would surely provide Cnut an important clue to follow. The recoil of such a move might also be heavy, but the conversation that would follow would be his chance to show his stuff.

Cnut pushed down the swirl of emotions happening within him, only allowing his eyes to narrow slightly as he awaited a response. What came easily upended all his expectations, though.

"That's great. Then I won't have to repeat this for His Majesty later. I will rely on you to take care of everything. Also, please feel free to ask me if you have any questions." Ernie nodded, accompanied with a small bow.

By some sort of miracle, Cnut was able to keep down the deep groan that welled up from within him. His trump card, which should have been effective against everyone, had been absolutely fruitless against the boy. In fact, he had acted as if this had saved him a lot of trouble; a reaction the duke would never have been able to predict. While he stood there, frozen and unable to respond, Ernie naturally retook control of the conversation.

"Given that you now have all authority in this matter, Your Grace, I would like to confirm one thing."

It took a while for Cnut to work up a response. "E-Erm, yes. What is it?"

"I believe you received a request from the knight runner department's students along with the report on the new unit..."

After hearing that, Cnut cleared his throat and managed to restart his brain.

"Yes, I've seen it. They want to be hired as personnel in the development of a new model. I have no objections to that, as once things begin in earnest there's

no way there'll be enough manpower to go around. In fact, I would probably have forced them into the positions even if they were to refuse."

Ernie smiled and breathed a small sigh of relief. It was only natural, as he'd just achieved almost all of his objectives. However, that only raised questions in Cnut. Specifically, "What was your intention in asking that?"

"I've managed to give a lecture explaining the new model, and confirmed that my seniors will be hired as they wished."

Ernie's answer was supremely honest, but it only solidified the sense of discomfort Cnut was feeling inside. He worried about it for a while before finally discovering the source of the feeling.

"What will you do? Selling me on your new model and the students is fine, but you seem totally satisfied even though you are nowhere in the picture. You invented the new model, didn't you? You should have something you want to use that achievement for."

In the end, Cnut still knew absolutely nothing about Ernie. On top of that, the boy had yet to show or reveal any personal desires of his. At this point, Cnut's words were direct, and no longer had a hint of strategy in them; possibly because he was tired.

"Me? What do you mean? I'm still in middle school. I'm going to keep going to school until I graduate."

Oh, right. He's only twelve. Cnut was immediately convinced. But then, right on the brink of letting it all go, he remembered that wasn't the problem.

"What— After all you've done, *that's* what you're concerned with?!"

Cnut completely ceased all consideration he had for the fact that he was talking to a child. Instead, he simply slammed all his confusion at his opponent.

"You say, 'after all I've done,' but...even if I were to be hired by the national lab, it would be on my record that I dropped out of middle school. That would make my parents sad."

There were parts of the way Ernie thought in his past life that he still couldn't let go of. In fact, such a *lukewarm* response only served to make Cnut *snap*.

“Do... Do you even realize what you’ve done?”

“I merely proposed a new model of silhouette knight?”

“You... You say that like it’s so easy! As if it’s only natural! Explaining it would just make me sad, but I’ll do it anyway, okay? Since the founding of this country...no, in the entirety of human history, no single person has ever proposed a new model on their own!”

Having said that, Cnut tasted the most bitter feeling of futility in his life. *Why do I have to explain such common sense?* If it weren’t for his long years of experience as a noble, he would probably have broken out into tears.

“It needn’t be said that the development of a silhouette knight is a huge undertaking that requires entire crowds of people! So while it’s been done by large teams before, no individual has ever managed such a feat! Never!!!”

Cnut was getting more and more heated and naturally, Ernie was starting to get *concerned* by his interlocutor’s emotional state.

“The condition His Majesty put forth in order for you to learn how to make an ether reactor...there was no doubt that such a thing should have been impossible to fulfill. And you not only achieved the most absurd thing ever, but you’re going to present it to him so nonchalantly as well. How *dare* you pretend like you’re a normal child *now!*”

Ernie actually was a child...more or less...so the duke’s anger was rather misguided, but no one was around to point out such a thing. Instead, considering that he was facing someone who would shake the foundations of his country on a whim at a mere twelve years of age, Cnut might simply have been out of luck. He had likely been avoiding thinking about it as a method of self-defense, but Ernie mercilessly poured gas into his flames.

“No, I don’t intend to present the Tellestarle to His Majesty. That will be something else.”

Cnut needed a moment to process what was just said. “Still? You intend to *continue?*”

There was no longer even a shadow of the composure he started off with as a vein visibly bulged on Cnut’s temple. That was when Ernie hit him with his best

smile.

“Yes, of course! Because making silhouette knights is my hobby.”

Cnut went eerily silent, as if the blazing anger he had been displaying had all been a lie. In his mind, a scene from the past was playing. *It's my hobby*. It had been Ernie's answer to the king, and Cnut had just realized deep in his soul that his answer then had been the bare, honest truth.

The duke also realized that he was currently talking to a genius that would undoubtedly have his name recorded in history. One so great that in his particular field, no one else would ever come close. At the same time, Cnut saw that the child was like a sort of calamity that would follow his own path regardless of any troubles or extenuating circumstances around him.

No wonder he hit it off with His Majesty, Cnut thought as a calm part of his mind became certain of a fearsome future. In his youth, he'd been made to accompany Ambrosius as he did idiotic things with his genius-level skills. The man had taken to scheming as a pastime, and while Ambrosius was now worthy of being called a great ruler—*No, he's still unable to contain himself when it comes to his own amusement*—at the time he was a menace. Cnut did not know that back then, he had been known in the royal palace as The Animal Tamer.

The boy in front of him was of the same ilk as the king. The duke had been forced to realize that. Though it was in a way that he hadn't intended, Cnut had succeeded in learning how Ernie thought. With a thump, he surrendered his body to gravity's embrace as he fell back into his seat.

“I see.”

After letting out such weighted words, he ended the conversation. The meeting had been long, but the exhaustion Cnut felt was clearly stronger than normal, as Morten would later attest.

Roughly a week had passed since the dogfight between Ernie and Cnut. Now, the scene has changed to the Serrati family's villa in Konkaanen.

“—is what I heard.”

Marquis Joachim Serrati had already reread the document in his hands many times over, but he read it once again out loud anyway. It was a summary of

Ernie and Cnut's conversation, and had been delivered to him shortly after said conversation had concluded. While he finished his explanation with no change to his expression, the children he was facing seemed to have been lost for words. The fists they'd raised excitedly suddenly had nowhere to go; instead, their expressions were filled with insensate awkwardness as their mouths shut and refused to open. If he had to give words to what he thought was in their hearts, it would probably go something like this: "Ah, yeah. That's right. Ernie's just that sort of guy." Even so, Tifa somehow made use of her trained force of will and regrouped to stand again.

"I...see. I guess for now...it's great that it sounds like he's having fun."

Her words seemed a little begrudging, but it was to be expected. Suddenly Kid, still seemingly groggy, raised his head. He understood what Ernie had done thanks to Joachim's explanation, but he still had one question left to ask.

"Then why won't Ernie come back?"

"I don't know. Didn't you ask the ones that came back from Casadesus?"

"Ah..." Kid started awkwardly. "We came...here, before we could..."

The three children, having realized that in their excited state they had forgotten a very important information source in the boss and the others, sunk to terribly low spirits.

"My word, to panic like that...this Ernesti boy really must mean that much to you all."

The trio had completely lost all the momentum and fire that they'd entered the room with, and had even seemed to wither slightly. Joachim did not blame them for their actions; instead, he called out to the twins with a serious expression.

"If that's the case, Archid, Adeltrude, you two should stay with him from now on."

"Y-Yes! Uh, huh?"

The twins had totally thought they would get chewed out for being too rash, which was reflected in their reaction.

“Duke Dixgard has come to the conclusion that for the moment, he is not a threat, and I am of the same mind. His actions from now on will, to this country... No, he might have an even wider effect than that. He will make many friends, and just as many enemies. No matter how talented he is, overcoming those turbulent waves will probably be difficult alone. You two have stayed close to him and gotten instruction from him as well, right? Then from now on, become his strength.”

Kid and Addy listened to their father’s speech, flabbergasted, but then they clenched their fists and straightened themselves up, replying to their father as strongly and emphatically as they could.

“Of course, you didn’t even need to say it.”

“Yeah! Even if you didn’t, I’d have stayed with Ernie!”

Having reaffirmed their determination to do so, the twins nodded and Tifa embraced them from behind. While watching them, Joachim ran his eyes over a part of the document that he hadn’t conveyed to his children.

The duke said that he has a child’s disposition and an elder’s way of thinking. Then having his childhood friends stay at his side will surely be of use. Hopefully he will continue to be of help to this country instead of drowning in his power, he thought as he read.

While watching his children, Joachim’s gaze was surprisingly soft, but they didn’t notice that.

“Well, leaving that aside...” Joachim’s tone turned right around back to being formal, and his children stopped on the spot when they heard it.

“You all forcibly slipped out of school, right? Then it seems you need a talking to.”

All three of their faces gradually changed from a full smile to a tearful one. Let it only be said that the last lightning strike of the storm was the largest.



Duke Cnut Dixgard was at his wit’s end. The cause was standing in front of him, holding both a smile and a bunch of documents.

“You seriously plan to...make this?”

“Yes. I believe this will be worthy of me learning how to make an ether reactor.”

Cnut’s voice seemed like it was being squeezed out of him, while Ernie replied with a bouncy, enthusiastic tone. At that moment, the duke wanted to praise himself from the bottom of his heart for his decision to have everything pass through him before reaching the king.

The documents Ernie had turned in were designs for a silhouette knight he claimed to want to show the king. The designs, which had blasted common sense all the way to the other end of the world, were in no way something that could be shown to the king as-is. This was something the duke had realized immediately, and he sighed. It seemed he would have to take the reins and put all his skill toward controlling the outside-of-common-sense existence that was Ernesti.

“Excuse me for interrupting!”

A third party shouted into the room, interrupting the duke’s worries with his voice. Without waiting for an answer, Morten of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit nearly punched through the door as he almost flew inside.

Even if he were the captain of the knight order, he would not be able to avoid censure for his rudeness in interrupting the duke as he was talking to his guest. However, before Cnut could rebuke him for this behavior, he realized from Morten’s state that quite the emergency had just happened.

“What is it? What happened?”

“We have received confirmation of a monster attack on Darier village through smoke signals. The color is...red. We believe it is a group of monsters of duel-class or higher.”

Not only were the monsters duel-class or higher, the village had encountered a group of them. To a village that did not boast strong defenses, such a thing was basically a sentence of destruction in itself. Cnut’s decision was swift.

“I take it you’ve already gathered all the knight runners who can deploy on short notice, Morten? We will need to send at least one company. Have them

march for Darier village at full speed and protect it!”

“Yes sir! I have already made preparations. As soon as we are done forming up, we—the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit—will deploy!”

Morten snapped off a salute before leaving the room with the same force he came in.

“It seems we don’t have the leeway to relax and talk. I will take charge of the fort. You... I can’t just leave you. Come with me.”

Ernie nodded and followed Cnut’s instructions, leaving the room with him.

Chapter 15: Those Who Wriggle in the Darkness

Some figures were making their way through a corner of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy with unsteady steps under a peaceful clear blue sky. They were the twins, Kid and Addy. After being wrung out along with their older sister by their father, Joachim, they had returned to the academy only to also receive a talking to by their teachers as well, and by now they were basically covered in mental and spiritual wounds. They walked along the school's excessively large hallways dejectedly.

The two of them were in the mood to go out and blow off some steam or even just go to bed in a huff, but they felt they needed to confirm something, so they walked on. After squeezing out as much willpower as they had, the pair made it to the knight runner department's workshop, and they launched into their questions as soon as they saw the boss, David.

"You wanna know about the silver kid, Ernesti? He's still over at the duke's place lecturing...*ahem*, explaining stuff."

There was a long pause, and then, "Eeerrnnii..." Addy groaned.

Their willpower had reached its limit, and the twins fell to their knees. The boss gave them a strange look, one that was not quite pity or sympathy. The twins—reflecting on how if they had just talked to the boss first, there would have been no need for all the fuss they caused—couldn't stop a dry laugh from coming out of their mouths.

"Well, that's that, so the kid won't be coming back for a while. Still though, it was something to see. The duke even cried a little at the end..."

The boss stroked his beard as he spoke, which the twins responded to with an offhand comment from their position on the floor. The boss didn't seem to mind their comment as he nodded with a grunt and decided to explain what was negotiated in Casadesus. The boss considered them part of the development team as well, so he figured he needed to tell them.

“Sure, I guess. You can stay there; just listen. The new unit, the Tellestarle, is going to be controlled by the duke for the foreseeable future. That means that the duke is going to take the reins on further development. So, depending on how preparations go over there, we knightsmiths are going to graduate and go straight to the national lab to help with the new unit’s development.”

Surprised, Kid, who had been slumped on the floor, raised his head. “Then does that mean you guys will disappear soon?”

He couldn’t stop a little sadness and loneliness from seeping into his voice. To Kid and Addy, their knight runner department seniors were friends and comrades—older sibling-like presences that they got along with outside of their childhood friends and classmates. Hearing that they would leave made a not-insignificant impact on them.

“To be fair, I was always going to graduate next year. So don’t make that face.”

The boss poked at Kid’s head in an attempt to dispel the sad mood they were unconsciously putting out. However, he had underestimated a dwarf’s relative power, and pushed Kid into a somersault.

Addy slowly backed away from the boss, who cleared his throat and tried to continue, “Ah...and there’s something else I need to tell you two. The reason the kid won’t come back is because of something you probably know already. Most likely they’re over there arguing about how to treat him.”

“How to treat...Ernie?” Addy asked.

“Yeah. Apparently he said that he’d continue going to this academy until he graduates, but to be honest, considering the position he’s in, that won’t be allowed. We all put in a lot of effort to develop that new unit, but in the end, we don’t hold a candle to that kid. As things stand, there’s no way he’s coming back.”

It took some time for the boss’s words to make their way into the twins’ heads. The weight of what he had just said was far more than the previous announcement that the boss and the others would soon be leaving the academy, and the twins’ faces went pale.

“Huh?!” Kid reacted. “H-Hey, boss, doesn’t that mean that Ernie is headed straight for the national lab?!”

“Ernie...is going to leave?!” Addy screamed.

They had never even imagined such a future coming to pass. Given the case of the new model, the twins had wavered over their original plan to become knights, but even so they had always thought they would be able to stay with Ernie until they graduated as a matter of course. Normally that would be a very reasonable thing to assume, since they were classmates who were walking the same path. However, the situation was changing rapidly, and even walking the path to that assumed future was getting difficult. The two of them were struck speechless after hearing such a shocking line, but when the boss was about to try to comfort them after seeing them hang their heads depressively...

Kid raised his head fiercely and with a resolute air about him. “I’ve decided. I’m going to where Ernie is. Right now.”

He had muttered those words quietly, but Addy and the boss still caught them and reacted with shock on their faces as they turned to face him.

“You idiot,” the boss countered. “Do you have any idea how hard that will be? There’s no way you’d be able to go like it’s a simple trip. Not to mention, the kid’s going to come back eventually. There’s no need to—”

“That doesn’t matter! I’m going to see him *right now*! And I’m going to talk to him! I won’t allow things to stay as they are!”

Kid normally made no effort to hide his listless attitude, and his sudden change to an angry, threatening stance showed everyone how determined he was. The boss panicked a little, still trying to find a way to convince Kid to stop.

“Calm down. How do you even plan to get to somewhere so far away?”

“We have our silhouette gears! We can run faster than horses with them!” Addy raised her fist also, driving the boss to his wit’s end. It was because he thought that it was possible they, as Ernie’s direct disciples, would actually do such a thing.

Still, it was much easier to talk about going to Fort Casadesus than actually getting there. In the first place, when considering moving between cities in the

kingdom of Fremmevilla, one must take into account the existence of monsters, so such a trip couldn't be undertaken casually. It was only possible for the experienced after careful preparation. No matter how skilled the twins were, such a plan could only be described as reckless, and so the boss was doing his best to talk them down.

However, the one to actually succeed in calming down the excited twins was a composed voice coming from behind them.

"There's no way you'd be allowed to."

Edgar immediately grabbed onto their arms, forcefully stopping them.

"Edgar?! Let me go!"

"No. Listen carefully, you two. The road to Casadesus is dangerous! Even with silhouette gears and considering the fact that you two are uncommonly skilled at using them, there's no way such a thing would be allowed. I...understand your feelings, but wait for now."

Even the twins weren't so far gone as to try to draw their staves. Edgar did not let go of their arms, and as long as they didn't use strengthening magic, the twins would not be able to free themselves. Helvi and Dietrich came up behind Edgar, and they couldn't hide the troubled looks on their faces as they watched on.

The group continued to argue back and forth with raised voices, causing the atmosphere of the workshop to get ever more awkward. Suddenly, though, the boss said something that resonated in everyone's ears, as it was spoken with such an easygoing attitude that it seemed out of place. "That reminds me, Dee. *That* thing's repairs aren't done yet, are they?"

Everyone's gaze gathered to him, and he smiled like a child who just thought up a prank as he made a motion with his chin toward a spot behind him. With suspicious expressions brought about by this sudden change in topic, everyone looked over to where the boss had pointed.

Their gazes were directed to the area furthest to the back of the workshop, where a silhouette knight still sat on its service table half-assembled. The unit, furnished with strand crystal tissue but only covered with primal skin, was

surrounded by its prospective outer skin, suspended in the air. The armor was painted a deep crimson, and one person displayed a strong reaction seeing it.

“So you mean Guaire! You’re right, we were made to go to Casadesus while still in the middle of putting it together. Oh man, we were so close to finishing... Wait, boss, if the new units are going to be under his excellency the duke’s control, then don’t we have to stop this project for the time being? What’re you planning?” The unit’s knight runner, Dietrich, went through a myriad of expressions from happy to confused.

“Yer right, it means we can’t make any new ones. But, with how far we’ve gotten with this thing, letting it stay unfinished would just leave a bad taste in my mouth. So, we’ll just have to finish it, won’t we?”

The boss repeatedly nodded as he spoke, and Dietrich agreed heartily. Though the two of them seemed in harmony, the rest of the group simply became more confused.

“But when we do, there’s no way we can keep it at Laihiala: the new model’s under the management of the duke. And we can’t bother the duke to come over just to pick up one silhouette knight, so we’ll have to bring it over ourselves, won’t we?”

Dietrich’s smile froze on his face. Meanwhile, Edgar and Helvi, who had gradually cottoned on to what the boss had been implying, also adopted much more difficult-to-describe expressions.

“But having the Guaire walk there by itself would just be careless. Edgar, you should keep it company in your Earlcumber. And I guess I’ll prepare a carriage too. It might need emergency repairs on the way, after all. And if some unnecessary personnel were to sneak onto that carriage, well...”

Kid and Addy had also by now realized what he was implying, and they were looking at him with their eyes wide. The boss’s face was buried under his beard, but that didn’t stop him from deftly showing a smile.

“Hey come on, boss. Even if it’s for these two, we can’t go along with such selfishness.”

“You can’t, you say? It’s not really just for their sakes. We just happen to have

business over there. Though something strange might happen.”

With that, Edgar exasperatedly shrugged. The boss was totally just resorting to sophistry. He wanted to ask how this was different from listening to the twins’ selfishness, but he stopped himself with a strained smile. “I see...” Edgar moved to tease him instead. “You’re surprisingly soft on children, aren’t you, boss? Or should I say, David?”

“Hmph! Anyone who has swung a hammer with me is a brother. Dwarven people will not turn their brothers away when they’re in dire straits... The kid is their friend, right? What would we do if we didn’t let them talk to him now?”

Instead of expressing guilt, the boss puffed out his chest, prompting the rest to return more awkward chuckles. Though Edgar had forcefully stopped the twins, he understood how they felt being suddenly forced to say goodbye to their friend, and part of him wanted to help. The proposed plan was very forced, but sometimes having a pretense was important, so he let the twins go.

Other maintenance team members, who had come after hearing the fuss that was kicked up by their arguing, saw the boss’s big fist bump the twins’ smaller fists in a heartwarming display. From there, they rolled up their sleeves and resolutely got to work.

“We’re about eighty percent finished with the outer skin! Almost there.”

“I think we can reuse spares for the more detailed parts. Bring the crane this way, I’m going to hurry and install it!”

The loose and heartwarming mood from just before disappeared into thin air as the entire workshop lit up in a flurry of fire and iron, becoming even more active than usual. With the sounds of pulleys as the backdrop, the clear sound of hammer strikes overlapped with each other. Under the ministrations of the maintenance team, who trained their skills with a variety of different tasks, the crimson silhouette knight neared completion before their very eyes.

“Urghh,” Dietrich whined, “will you really take Guaire away? Even though it’s finally being fixed... Maybe I should just attach myself to Casadesus along with it.”

“Dee, uhh...you know...cheer up.”

In the heat of the workshop, only Dietrich seemed to be in...complicated spirits watching his crimson unit slowly being put together.



Having noticed the smoke signal indicating a monster attack, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit marched off in the direction of Darier village. A company (nine units) of Kaldatoahs was sent, as well as one Kaldiaria serving as the leader, for a total of ten silhouette knights. Because the location of the attack was relatively close, they saw fit to run fairly fast in their silhouette knights.

Villages in Fremmevilla kingdom tended to be walled in consideration of monster attacks. However, for many reasons, most villages were also unable to construct walls that completely surrounded them. Because of that, they tended to make an especially sturdy wall only around the most central parts of their community, such as their food stores, creating a very small-scale fortress in its own right. In the event the people there were to encounter monsters too strong or large for them to defeat, they would retreat and send up a smoke signal for the nearest knight order to come and save them.

Though they were small, the forts that served as the villagers' last line of defense were solidly built. However, the smoke signal that had gone up this time was red—a signal warning of monsters duel-class or above. Faced with power that could only be contested by humanity's strongest weapon—the silhouette knight—no fort no matter how sturdy could hold out for long. The knight order tried to keep down their anxiousness as they hurried along the road to Darier village.

There were quite a few duel-class monsters in the country, and the amount of damage they caused was endless. That was why being attacked by some wasn't a strange occurrence. However, by the time the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit arrived in Darier village, they found more than just one or two monsters. There were at least ten duel-class monsters in and around the village. On top of that, there were quite a lot of midsize and lower monsters present as well, making the village seem like a paradise of monsters had manifested.

The cavalry unit that had been sent ahead as scouts shivered upon seeing this scene, but they also tilted their heads in confusion. They saw a wide variety of

monsters, including armored bears, blunt dragons, and firedancer tigers. Each one of these lived in their own little territories, scattered around this region, and weren't the type to band together. So, seeing them moving in concert like this was strange and unsettling. Not only that, but the monsters all seemed to be rather excited, and some were even fighting among themselves.

As the scout unit made their way forward with all the care they could muster, they discovered something bone-chilling, something that never should have been allowed to happen. The tough walls that should have protected the village's citizens had been mercilessly ripped apart, and a single armored bear was sticking its head inside and feasting on *something*. The moment the knights received that report from their scout unit, the company commander in his Kaldiaria didn't hesitate to give his orders.

"All units, advance at full speed to the center of the village. Take a wedge formation, and eliminate all obstructing monsters as you advance. Once we reach the objective, we will proceed to defend the fort with all our might!"

Wading headfirst into the middle of all those monsters was basically committing suicide, but none of the knight runners objected. In fact, their voices as they affirmed their orders were vigorous. With frightening speed, they took the prescribed formation, put away their shields, and equipped their silhouette arms and swords. What the charge needed was attack power instead of defensive power, and with their commander's order, the company started their advance.

The sound of metal giants running resounded thunderously through the surroundings. The monsters noticed the obvious noise and ran over to investigate, but the Culverin silhouette arms held by the Kaldatoahs sparkled as they fired their overspells without question. The bombardment of spell fire that greeted the monsters blew them away, and it was quickly followed up by the silhouette knights' charge as they forced their way into the center of the village by taking the shortest possible route.

The monsters outnumbered them, but they were also spread throughout the area. The company of silhouette knights had concentrated their forces in one spot, and so were able to overwhelm the monsters that they'd encountered, reaching the fort in one go.

After hearing a rumbling explosion in its vicinity, the armored bear finally realized that it needed to be more wary, and it sluggishly raised its head. The bear seemed unhappy at having been interrupted in the middle of its meal, but because it had been lax, it had reacted far too late. Having just turned around, the bear was immediately swarmed by giants charging in like the wind with lances of fire spitting out before them, all accompanied by a thunderous roar.

“Disappear, you damned beast!”

The Kaldiaria, which had been at the head of the wedge formation, readied its lance, planning to use the momentum it had built up from running this far. Kaldiaria boasted higher strength than Kaldatoahs, and it unleashed a piercing thrust using all its charging momentum along with a loud shout.

Armored bears were equipped with a solid hide much like a shell, but the Kaldiaria with its overwhelming momentum could almost entirely ignore such defenses. The tip of the lance slid cleanly into the armored bear’s head. It split the monster’s hide, meat, and bone as it stabbed deep. That single strike ended the armored bear’s life. Having not even tried to kill its momentum, the Kaldiaria proceeded to collide with the monster’s carcass.

In order to protect their commander who had so splendidly destroyed their hated foe, the remaining Kaldatoahs quickly changed their formation into a semicircle that plugged the hole in the fort’s defensive wall. It was a formation that showed their ironclad determination to allow nothing past them. Drunk on the smell of the bear’s blood, more ferocious monsters started to gather around them. The Kaldatoah company was going to face this atrocious tsunami from the front.



Thanks to them taking the initiative and charging in, they had successfully thinned the herd of monsters. Now, in terms of numbers the company of Kaldatoahs and the monsters were about equal. However, because they had forced themselves right into the midst of all the monsters, they were in a perilous situation. The charge from earlier had drained their mana pools something fierce, and had taken from them the option of proactively attacking. The noise of their ether reactors rose, sounding like screams as they took in the atmosphere around them and spat it back out after creating mana. Still, the reactors couldn't keep up with the pace that the silhouette knights were expending the mana in order to fend off the monsters' fierce attacks.

They blocked the fire breathed by the firedancer tigers with their shields, staved off strong swipes from the sharply spiked tails of blunt dragons, and caught tackles from armored bears. They managed this even though they themselves weren't monsters by making full use of human skills and knowledge in the form of teamwork, but the situation they were in was still a lot like walking on a tightrope.

"We can't afford to fall back! Damn monsters...die!"

The one to break through this situation was the Kaldiaria controlled by the company commander. The unit, made for leaders, sported higher specs, and though it was a little worn from its clash with the first armored bear, it was still fine enough to defeat the monsters it faced. He continued to counterattack and kill monsters as much as his mana pool would allow.

From there, it wasn't long until the battle's victor was decided. Having gained the advantage in numbers, the knight runners of the order pressed the monsters all at once and claimed the win. Once the last duel-class was killed, the remaining midsize monsters were quickly dealt with.

None of the silhouette knights were completely intact after the conclusion of the battle. They were all at the very least slightly damaged, with three units taking moderate damage and two being essentially destroyed and unable to take part in further battle. It was a hard-won victory, but they had splendidly achieved their objective.



With the long battle over, by the time the company secured the area, the sun had already completely set. The support squad that had traveled with them and waited outside the sphere of battle proceeded into the village to render aid to the surviving villagers. A bonfire was built near the fort, and a simple tent was put up to house the wounded. The inside of the fort was a disaster. Thanks to the armored bear that broke through the wall and got inside, about half the villagers living in Darier had died.

The surviving villagers were extremely grateful that the knight order had made it just in time. They had been close to being wiped out though, and they probably hid feelings of grief for their neighbors inside; they also no doubt were wondering what would have happened if the knights had just been a little faster. Still, more than anything, they were happy that at least they survived. It was a rather unique way of thinking, only held by the people of this country that needed to live alongside the huge threats of monsters every day. In a sense, this extreme positivity could be considered cold, but it was one of the things supporting them as they lived in such harsh conditions.

Besides the human losses, the damage to the village's buildings and fields was also extensive. The job of the knight order didn't just end at destroying monsters. Among their duties was staying for a while in places that had suffered heavy losses from monsters in order to secure the area, as well as help the settlement recover. The knights normally didn't opt to do this because it wasn't worth the cost and effort, but in emergencies such as this one, silhouette knights could serve as especially powerful construction machines. The sight of ten-meter-tall giants fixing and building structures would probably be a common sight in this village for a while.

While the knights put their efforts into rebuilding the village, two of the Kaldatoahs that were still capable of walking by themselves returned to Fort Casadesus to report their success and the fact that they would stay to help rebuild the village. There was also a need to send a team to the village to retrieve the destroyed units, so they needed to submit a request for that as well.

The knight runners, whose units had only received emergency repairs, tried to comfort and calm their charges as they made strange movements along the

way back. The journey was uneventful, and before long they reached the vicinity of Fort Casadesus. They continued to chat as they walked along the road.



While the company dispatched by the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit were destroying the monsters, there was a shadow observing them, one that didn't belong to the accompanying support squad. This person wore clothing colored so as to blend in with the backdrop of the forest, and given how hard the person was to spot, they were truly worthy of being called a shadow.

Once most of the duel-class monsters had been defeated, the shadow left, getting on a horse that had been stationed nearby. They made their way through the forest quietly and at a modest pace for a while until they came upon a shack in the forest.

The shack was originally used by a hunter during his hunting sessions. It was made with thick and sturdy logs, probably out of consideration for any occasion where monsters might chase the hunter. So, though it was small, it was far more durable than it looked. The shadow dismounted the horse and approached the door to knock on it with a certain rhythm. Immediately, there was the sound of the door being unlocked, and then it opened.

The inside of the shack contained a surprising number of people, given the building's size. Each one of them were wearing darkly colored leather armor, and they were talking about something while gathered around a central table. There was a map detailing the surrounding terrain on the table, with arrows pointing to locations and notes written on it. Having been let inside the shack, the shadow deliberately started to take off the cloth that he had wrapped over his whole body—revealing that the one underneath all of it was the man who had received the documents on the new silhouette knight model from the Laihialan student.

“As you expected, boss, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit has defeated the monsters.”

“Thought so. That's why those knights are around, after all. So, how many were there?”

“One company.”

The woman the man called boss listened to his report and crossed her arms. The information she had on hand told her that there were a total of three companies stationed in the fortress. That meant that there should be two companies and the new models left inside.

“Okay, call back the guys who’re out scouting, we’ll go as planned. It’ll be our first battle in a while, so let’s have it go well.”

After that, the woman turned to look out the window. She was gazing at some gigantic humanoid figures covered in cloth, woven together vines, and other plants to help them blend into the forest. They completely occupied the somewhat open space around the shack. The figures under the covers seemed like they were saying that the time of their activation could not come fast enough.



As always, the knighthsmiths in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s knight runner department swung their hammers in the department’s workshop. Above their restless comings and goings, a pulley system could be heard moving, but a shouting voice rang out above all of that, announcing the end of the team’s final checks.

There was a single silhouette knight on the seat-shaped maintenance table. Its torso armor moved into a position to allow someone to get inside its cockpit. As the knighthsmiths who had been working on it until just a little before scattered and took their distance, one person was going the opposite way of the crowd. He was the unit’s knight runner—one with the skills to pilot a silhouette knight, and considered a knight on top of being a knight runner department student. He entered his charge, and after taking his seat he undid the lock on the lever at his feet and pulled on it hard. There was a sound of gears meshing together and compressed air being released as the unit’s torso armor closed.

“It’s been a while since I felt this. The Tellestarles weren’t bad, but as expected, this is much more calming.”

Finally back in the seat of his beloved partner Guaire, Dietrich leaned back

and basked in the feeling. Guaire had the dubious honor of having taken unprecedented damage—a full ninety percent of it had been destroyed—but now the knightsmiths had finally put in their all and repaired it fully. They even upgraded it into a new form. The inside of the cockpit was almost completely new, with a new seat that still had that fresh leather smell to boot.

It tickled Dietrich's nose as he said, "Even though you're finally reborn with a new form, I have to hand you over...ggnrrr..."

Dietrich was the type that looked pretty hot as long as he stayed quiet, but those looks were currently twisted in a glum expression as he flicked at his controls to check on how things were inside. Almost everything in the cockpit that was new; the control yokes were the only things that had stayed the same. While feeling the grips that had been worn down to fit his hand, he felt some hesitation. However, even if David—the boss—and the twins' thoughts differed from his, it had been decided that the new model would be placed under the control of the duke. With a strained smile, he shook his head to do away with his concerns before opening the cover to the speaking tube in his cockpit.

"I'm going to make Guaire stand up. Please watch out, and make some room."

As Dietrich manipulated his control yokes and stepped down on the stirrups, Guaire in its new frame obeyed its pilot's orders as faithfully as always. Its ether reactor woke up, the gentle sounds of air intake spinning up into a shrill noise. The mana provided by its reactor was used by the magius engine to fuel the commands embedded in its script, making use of a special magic phenomenon that saw its crystal tissue expanding and contracting. The giant knight stood, its metal armor trembling a little as it did so. The crimson knight Guaire took its first steps in months with powerful, heavy footfalls.



Guaire walked out from the rear of the workshop. Its armor, which had once been warped and strewn all over the place, was now new, in perfect shape, and caught the light of the sun to shine a bright red. Because in the process of its repair it had been changed into a new Tellestarle, it could be called an entirely different thing inside, even though on the outside it looked mostly the same.

However, there were now two Shotel silhouette arms equipped as back weapons, as well as four swords at its waist. Considering lessons of the past, it had been provided with a pair of spares.

Guaire fundamentally liked to dual wield, and was a unit that placed great weight on the offense. With its equipment, in exchange for not having a shield, its armor stretching from its shoulder down to its arm was wider and somewhat thicker to allow it to be used in defense. That was why, when compared to Earlcumber which was shaped like the gold standard, Guaire was somewhat more rugged and square.

“Okay, looks like there are no problems on this end. Are the preparations ready?”

In response to Dietrich’s question, Earlcumber raised its hand and answered from its position in front of the workshop. Other than Earlcumber, there were also two carriages occupied by a bunch of familiar faces.

“You know, David, this silhouette knight is the academy’s property, nothing more or less. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t make the decision to hand it over on your own.”

“We can spare one, can’t we? We’re going to be getting the same number of Kaldatoahs from the duke anyway, after all. So it’s not like we’re losing anything permanently.”

“That’s not the problem here...but whatever. This year the knight runner department is full of exceptional, well, everything, including events, so it’s not like this is anything new...”

Rowley seemed to be getting used to just giving up these days, as he complained but waved his hands in resignation. Meanwhile, Batson groaned from his position in one of the carriages.

“We finished loading everything...but isn’t this a little *too* forceful? Still, if we don’t do this we won’t be able to get in...”

There were three silhouette gears—Motor Beats—lined up inside one of the carriages, two of which were for Kid and Addy’s use. They were secured to the flooring of the carriage by steel wire, and while they were smaller than

silhouette knights, they were still rather bulky and armored, so there was basically no space left inside. The three machines had the carriage to themselves.

“Three? We’re taking one for Ernie too?”

“It’s Ernie we’re talking about, so if we just brought ours, he’d probably sulk...”

The twins nodded in agreement as the boss finished loading up the other carriage and called out to them.

“Okay, then let’s set off for Casadesus!”

“Okaayyy! Bye then, Batty! We’ll bring Ernie back with us!”

“I’m sure you will! And since you have the chance, give him a good talking to!”

With everyone seeing them off, the carriages quietly left. The carriage carrying the boss, several members of the maintenance team, and the twins were in front, followed by the white and red silhouette knights. Batson continued waving as they left while Rowley quickly reset his mood.

“Now then, we need to start the meeting to discuss the upgrading work we’re going to have to do once the Kaldatoahs arrive. Depending on what happens, you juniors might need to take up some work, so be aware of that as things move along.”

Some of the remaining knightsmiths replied as the entire group turned on their heels to go back to the workshop. Though things were changing, they were still spending their days as usual.

This happened about a week earlier.

A single man was walking through Laihiala’s campus town. His footsteps were unwavering, and he arrived at a completely normal house in a certain corner of the city. There were several people already inside, and they were all surprised at the man’s arrival. There was a tall woman sitting furthest in the back of the room, and she was also taken aback to see the man for a moment, but her expression quickly changed, the wrinkles on her face deepening as she gave a cynical, twisted smile. Her eyes likewise narrowed threateningly.

“Well, if it isn’t an envoy from the ‘home country.’ This is rather sudden.”

Even after that sloppy welcome, the envoy made almost no reaction. He came to stand in front of the tall woman before speaking in a very businesslike tone. “Kerhilt Hietakannes. I have come with orders for you and your Copper Fang Knights from His Majesty.”

“Oh my, how kind of His Royalness. He’s still referring to us as knights.”

The visitor paid no heed to Kerhilt’s teasing words as he proceeded to matter-of-factly and one-sidedly state his business, “The information you have given us about the ‘toy’ has interested His Majesty greatly. He has given the order for you to obtain one by any means possible. It is wasted on Fremmevilla, the country of monster guards, and only in the hands of our country will it show its true worth. We will not question your methods, so make sure to obtain it and bring it to His Majesty.”

The envoy’s message had been exactly what Kerhilt had expected, so halfway through it she shrugged her shoulders.

“I was just feeling bored since all the missions we were getting were rather plain and simple, so this is great,” Kerhilt paused for a moment before continuing, “is what I’d love to say, but that ‘toy’ has been taken to a fortress. A huge one, at that. It’s not really a place we can just nip on over to and steal from. You get it, right?”

“We understand, which is why we will not question your methods. His Majesty knew this when he gave the order... He quite literally is allowing you to use anything and everything.”

For the first time, Kerhilt smiled from the heart. It seemed she was enjoying herself, but her smile was more that of a predator in front of its prey than anything else.

“I see...but, well, you get it, right? Does this include the oh-so-precious Vendobadahla?”

“Of course, as well as cursed bait.”

Kerhilt’s eyes widened for a moment, flabbergasted by the too-generous answer she had received. But the next instant, she started cackling.

“Ha ha! Well that’s just perfect! Seems like that miserly ruler of ours is pulling out all the stops! He must be *really* excited.”

Kerhilt shot the messenger a sticky look with her eyes narrowed into slits, but he gave no reaction. It seemed he absolutely didn’t care about her attitude.

“Well, if it’s an imperial decree then I guess we have to do it... I’ve already gathered the troops. Tell our ‘beloved lord’ that we will make sure to deliver his desired object.”

There was a beat before the envoy replied. “I shall. Right now, those monster guards should be in a festive mood and thus be less watchful. Please be quick about it.”

With that, the envoy turned on his heel, having finished his job. Kerhilt watched him leave, after which she started throwing out orders with the smile still on her face.

“He’s as unfriendly a man as ever. Well, whatever. All right, you dogs! Looks like good fortune and opportunity have finally arrived on our doorsteps after we were banished to this shit country!”

“Yes, as long as we make this happen, the world is our oyster!”

Conversation blew up between the men around her, and Kerhilt’s smile both deepened and darkened.

“Now then, let’s go make the monster guards’ prized ‘toy’ into our souvenir.”

Like that, the Copper Fang Knights started to act with no one in the country any the wiser.



A week after that, the scene shifts back to the vicinity around Fort Casadesus, where the Acquart Forest spreads its roots.

Acquart Forest was rife with thick vegetation, so even though the sun was still high in the sky, it was dim under the canopy of the trees, and the air felt heavy. The only open area in the forest was wherever the road passed through, which shed some light to the surrounding area. However, some things wriggled in the dark thicket outside of that light’s reach. They were clad in dark armor, and had

been waiting crouched, hidden, and as still as it could be. There was no sound in the area, other than the periodic cries of some wild birds.

An interminable amount of time passed before another shadow made its way smoothly through the brush. Just like the ones that were waiting, it wore darkly colored armor.

“Boss, the report from Revolving Deer is in. ‘The hunters have left their prey.’” The subordinate spoke in hushed tones.

After hearing that, the leader of the Copper Fang Knights, Kerhilt Hietakannes, gave out her orders in a similarly quiet voice.

“Okay, you dogs. You all ready? Start up the Vendobadahlas.”

Her subordinates nodded before disappearing into the foliage while making barely any sound.

They were called the Copper Fang Knights, but normal knights wouldn’t be able to do what they were doing. They suppressed their presences, hid in darkness, and acted with a plan. The moniker of “knights” must have been sarcasm, because they would normally be called spies. Either way, they acted with all the force they could bring to bear, meaning their goal was not something that could be accomplished otherwise.

Suddenly, the birds in the trees kicked up a fuss, the sounds of hurried flapping coming together as they all took flight at once. Once those wild birds took off, some giant *somethings* colored so as to blend into the forest tried to rise from behind the group with heavy, sluggish movements. They revealed themselves to be more than five times the size of a standard human, and were made with metal and crystal. They were silhouette knights.

The things, referred to by Kerhilt as Vendobadahlas, had many strange traits. Their outer skin was smooth, with fluid curves. They were only sparsely covered with actual armor, and many places would have been exposed to the elements if not for monster leather coverings. Their heads were rounded, like an egg, with only one hole in it, presumably for sight. The eyeball crystals inside wavered from their sockets as they sent their empty gazes out into the world. They had shaved away so much superficial weight that the things actually looked creepy.

Also, the Vendobadahlas did not emit that awfully loud running noise that was special to silhouette knights. The sound of their air intakes had been suppressed to a mutter, enough to blend into the background noise of the forest. That went for the crystal tissue as well, which usually produced a high, shrill note as it flexed that sounded like it belonged to a string instrument. Any movement they made was accompanied by almost no noise; even the dull and heavy sound of their footsteps was pretty much nothing when compared to that of a normal silhouette knight.

The expressionless giants hardly had any presence. They were almost like ghosts in the dimness of the forest, as their very existence seemed...unclear. Kerhilt looked up at them as they sheltered blurrily in the darkness, and her smile deepened.

“These things are our treasure that we took great pains to bring over, so we’re going to have them work enough to repay that. Now then...it’s time for war. We only have one shot, and we can’t afford anything other than success. Put your backs into it, you guys!”

The three Vendobadahlas obeyed the orders she issued with an exaggerated swing of her hand, and they slowly advanced. The squirming ghosts were moving toward the road that had been opened through the forest. At their destination, right at this moment, were two damaged Kaldatoahs that were passing through. They were the knights from the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit that had been sent back from Darier village to report.

As soon as the ghosts made visual contact with the knights, they approached behind their targets like a creeping shadow.

The knight runners in their Kaldatoahs had not let their guards down. They may have looked like they were walking without a care in the world, but they had been wary of monster attacks the entire time. Still, they were mostly focused on picking up sound. Any monster threatening enough to be dangerous to a silhouette knight would make loud sounds as it moved, and the knight runners had been trained to pick up on any unnatural noises. Because of that, they hadn’t noticed the ghosts sneaking up on them, the attackers’ muffled running noises mixing in with that of their own Kaldatoahs.

The Vendobadahlas had managed to get completely behind the Kaldatoahs, and they wasted no time in quickly but quietly making their final approach. They wielded weapons called thrusting swords: weapons with sharp, quadrangular pyramid shaped blades made for thrusting. In exchange for maximizing silence and stealth, Vendobadahlas sacrificed their individual combat capabilities. The output of their reactors was lower than the average, their armor was barely even there, and they had no stamina either. In a head-on fight, a single Kaldatoah was still more than a match for three of these specialized units. These silhouette knights were pure assassins.

The points of their thrusting swords were aimed at their targets' flanks. A silhouette knight's structure meant that any joints, such as the base of the arm, were more thinly protected. Even if there was armor there, it would only be as strong as chain mail and still mostly covered with monster leather. Furthermore, the flank also tended to contain the upper part of the ether reactor, which was directly connected to the air intake. Not only that, but the chest also contained the most vulnerable part of a silhouette knight—the knight runner. It was the vital of all vitals.

The Vendobadahlas crashed into the Kaldatoahs, hugging them and using their momentum to drive their blades deep into their targets' flanks. The blades, specialized to pierce their victims, easily penetrated the thin armor they encountered to hit the knight runners inside. It was doubtful whether the knight runners even realized what was going on as their lives were easily reaped by the silent giants. There was no reaction; the Kaldatoahs simply froze like marionettes with their strings cut. Without a knight runner to control them, silhouette knights would not go on a rampage like living things. Seeing that the two Kaldatoahs had stopped moving, Kerhilt smiled under her face covering.

“Awwright, looks like it went well. Now, next we move our pieces. Hurry up with the preparations, you guys!”

The Vendobadahlas gently laid the Kaldatoahs on their sides, and the rest of Kerhilt's soldiers appeared, scattered, from the forest. Other than the fact that the thrusting swords could finish a silhouette knight in one strike under certain conditions, they had one more advantage: the fact that the only damage done would be to a small amount of armor, the air intake, and the knight runner. In

other words, it had very little effect on the function of the silhouette knight itself, allowing their targets to continue being piloted provided there was another knight runner.

The men quickly “cleaned up” the Kaldatoahs’ original knight runners before getting in without hesitation, despite the marks of destruction and rather...grisly state of the seats. Like that, the Kaldatoahs were transformed into true ghosts as they stood up. The design of a Kaldatoah pursued simplicity and ease of use, which ironically was to the advantage of the attackers. The stolen Kaldatoahs moved once more with sure steps, as if nothing had ever happened, while the Vendobadahlas once again disappeared into the darkness of the forest. One step after the other, the ghosts advanced upon Fort Casadesus.

Chapter 16: Fort Casadesus on Fire

The bright and life-giving sun set between the Auvinier Mountains, drenching the landscape in darkness along with the cool of autumn. The knight order members who were manning the gates of Fort Casadesus shivered terribly when they were hit by the cool night wind. A fellow knight returned to the watchmen's room on top of the gate. He had been out lighting bonfires along the wall as the sun set.

"Damn, watching the gate's just gonna get harder and harder this season."

"It really is. I really wish this shift would be over already so I can get inside and rest..."

After some time spent making small talk, they started to hear the footsteps of something large approaching. Immediately, the guards were on alert. They looked out to the road from their position above the gates. The sun hadn't completely set yet so there was still some daylight left, from which they could see giant knights in iron-colored armor.

"Oh, those're Kaldatoahs. From the company that went over to Darier village?"

"Wait, lemme check... Yeah, that coat of arms is ours. There's no mistake."

They could see the coat of arms belonging to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit on the approaching Kaldatoahs' shoulders. Along with seeing their approach, the knights could hear them coming as well. It seemed to them that the silhouette knights were extra loud because of damage, as every time they moved it came with something that was almost ear-piercing. From the looks of them, they had taken quite a lot of damage, so the guards snapped off a single quick salute before one of them asked, "Thanks for the hard work. Did the sortie to Darier village go all right?"

"Yeah. The damage was awful, but we took care of all the monsters."

The knight runner in one of the Kaldatoahs reported on their victory, as well

as the fact that they needed to return the more damaged units to base. The guards processed this information before running to open the gates. Once the Kaldatoahs that were assigned to protect the gates started working the controls to open them, sounds of heavy lumber moving could be heard.

The two returning Kaldatoahs were followed slowly by a cart, and they all passed through the gates. The damaged Kaldatoahs were showered in words of appreciation by the gate guards as they passed, for as long as victory was won even wounds would become a medal of honor of a sort. It was only natural that the guards were excited.

“Man, you guys really got hit badly. You should stop by the workshop before going to give your report.”

“Yeah...that’s the plan.”

The two damaged Kaldatoahs gave awkward salutes to their brethren who opened the gates before slowly making their way to the workshop. The cart followed behind them, but no one paid it any attention, thinking that it must have come for more supplies or something.

The knightsmiths that had been left behind in the fortress saw the two wounded Kaldatoahs enter and leaped into action to perform their duties. They had already been on duty, thoroughly preparing the silhouette knights that had remained at the fortress in case of emergency, so that they could move at any time. The entire order had been given standby orders, so there were knight runners on call in the station that had been set up inside the workshop as well.

The knightsmiths’ leader took notice of the Kaldatoah’s strange movements and abnormal running noise and immediately shot orders to his team. The maintenance team hurriedly retrieved the necessary spare parts as the pair of Kaldatoahs slowly walked toward their berths that were lined up along with the other silhouette knights. If that was all that happened, no one would have thought anything of it, but a cart also entered after them, causing the knightsmiths to tilt their heads in puzzlement.

The knight runners should be in the station, so is that being driven by the knightsmiths who left with the company? they wondered.

However, since they all had work to do, none of them could really believe that

their comrades would so readily do something that would cost them helping hands. With that thought, a knightsmith approached the cart to try and figure this out. But, at that moment, something jumped out of the cart.

Several bolts unerringly pierced through the chest of that knightsmith, leaving behind only the sound of them cutting through the air. He fell, coughing up blood, at the same time an armed group jumped out of the cart. Furthermore, the Kaldatoahs that had been walking past revealed their true colors. The strange movements they'd been exhibiting disappeared as if it had all been a lie, and they quickly drew their swords, swinging them at the entrance they had just walked through. The passageway, having taken such heavy blows from giants, crumbled into rubble that blocked the entrance. With that, the intruders had prevented the possibility of reinforcements, and they shot their crossbows and swung their swords, speedily dispatching the remaining knightsmiths. The last figure to appear from inside the cart was the leader of the Copper Fang Knights, Kerhilt.

“You guys guard the front! How long do you plan on being tied up by some smiths?! Hurry up and take our objective!”

The Copper Fang Knights had occupied the workshop in the blink of an eye. Leaving the Kaldatoahs to guard the entrance, the rest started searching the workshop interior. Soon enough, one of them called out to Kerhilt. She ran over to find a rather unrefined unit that was markedly different from a Kaldatoah. The new model clearly lacked polish, as if to reinforce the fact that it was a prototype, and in front of that sight the woman became sure that their operation had already mostly succeeded.

“Oho, so this is it... It's exactly as described. Now then, you lot, let's finish this up!”

The Copper Fang Knights were originally spies, so their individual combat prowess aside, not many could serve as knight runners. However, given the objective of their current mission, they had gathered everyone who could operate a silhouette knight. While Kerhilt and some of her subordinates were starting up the “toys,” the rest of her subordinates got into Kaldatoahs. There were only three that they could get started up, though. Most of them couldn't figure it out.

“The rest of the Kaldatoahs are just in the way; break them. It’s about time for the garrison to get back on their feet, so we don’t have time to just stand around! Hurry it up!” As soon as she said that, the stolen Kaldatoahs turned on their comrades still in their berths and reduced them to scrap, one by one.



It was by this time that the remaining members of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit started to realize that something was going on. The order’s Kaldatoahs that were currently active at the gates and inside the rest of the fortress heard the commotion being caused and swarmed to the source, only to be attacked by what looked like comrades that were exiting the workshop.

“Dammit, who *are* these people?! Why are they operating our Kaldatoahs?!”

The Order of the Scarlet Rabbit had yet to get a good grasp of the situation. They could only surmise that intruders had taken their Kaldatoahs in the process of occupying their workshop.

Still, they were burning with anger as they started their fierce counterattack. Of course they were—enemies had stolen their own machines and were running riot in the fortress as if they owned the place. Who wouldn’t feel anger in such a situation? The defenders quickly rid themselves of any hesitation and went on the attack. However, even though they started full of enthusiasm and will, as soon as the knights of the order confirmed unfamiliar units behind the stolen Kaldatoahs, they were once again shaken to their core.

“Th-Those are...no way!”

The lack of coherence in looks, the hurried construction, and the menacing back weapons which weren’t found on other units gave off an overpowering presence. While exhibiting such power that mere footsteps threatened to break the flooring of the workshop, the new model of silhouette knight—the Tellestarles—walked forth. All five units brought from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had fallen into the hands of the Copper Fang Knights.

“What the hell? This output...it’s more than was reported. It’s like a bucking horse!” Kerhilt, from her position in one of the units, couldn’t help but curse as she felt the strange feedback in her controls.

They'd already been informed on the special traits of the Tellestarle's controls, but now that they were actually piloting the units, they found that the information hadn't prepared them or their imaginations for what it was really like. Even though the pilots had some experience using silhouette knights, it seemed it would take time for them to get used to the powerful quirks that came with this new unit.

"So are these just second-rate trash built by students, in the end? This is way too much trouble... Oh, so these are the back weapons."

She manipulated an unfamiliar lever that she'd been told about beforehand. The Tellestarle did as its knight runner commanded, the sub-arms on its back moving into position and raising the silhouette arms they held over the unit's shoulders. Having confirmed this from the slight shaking that traveled down to the cockpit, she depressed the firing trigger.

This attack was made while she basically knew nothing about the aiming function, but somehow in this situation the rounds flew straight and impacted right in the middle of the preparing knights. The explosion caused by the overspells further confused the knights. To the knights, that attack signaled the occurrence of the worst possible situation.



Duke Cnut Dixgard felt the room he was in, the fortress's command and control center, shake slightly from the explosions going off in the distance, and he glared up at the ceiling unhappily. After that, he shifted his gaze to the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit member that was giving his report.

"So, how many raiders are there?"

"Right! At the time of the attack, we believe there were two silhouette knights and ten foot soldiers, and they have currently taken over the workshop. It seems they've taken several Kaldatoahs from us."

Cnut maintained his surface-level calm in front of his subordinate, but inside a boiling-hot fury was swirling within his chest and turning his stomach. Of all things, raiders had stolen the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit's silhouette knights. Well, given the fact that they attacked the workshop first, it was easy to surmise that stealing the silhouette knights had been their plan. Cnut was

seething internally, but he had to admit that the enemy's plan to sabotage the fortress was extremely effective.

At the same time, Cnut was puzzled as to what the overall goal of this attack could be. They had sabotaged the fortress and stolen some silhouette knights. He couldn't see the gain in any of that. In this country, where attacks from monsters never ceased, pretty much no one would benefit from hampering a fortress's function and harming their knight orders. The same went for stealing silhouette knights. It was true that they were the most powerful of weapons, and a force unto themselves in battle. But at the same time, they were huge money sinks that required a lot of daily maintenance, consumable goods, and other costs to run for any length of time. The only profit that could be gained by using them was either to nobles who could use them for the safety of their citizens and thus tax funds, or merchants who could use them to protect their goods. For both of those categories of people, it was much better to go through proper channels to obtain a silhouette knight, as there would be no need for them to pull such a dangerous stunt.

"Captain Morten has sortied in his Heimerwort!"

Cnut had sunk into thought when a knight flew into the room to give his report. Cnut's head shot up. The leader of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, Morten, was entering the fray. At the moment, the knight order's side was lacking equipment and thus on the back foot, but he and his Heimerwort had enough power to turn things around.

"I'm counting on you, Morten."

Cnut, having finally seen a light at the end of the tunnel, muttered a prayer. Right afterward, though, a noticeably larger explosion resounded and shook the fortress. Having heard that, his expression turned even more severe. The battle was getting fiercer.



The overspell fired by the silhouette arms left a slight trail of light as it flew. It impacted just before one of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit's Kaldatoahs, and it transformed into a large explosion just as its script demanded, kicking up a cloud of dust. The knight order unit had been crossing swords with one of the

stolen Kaldatoahs, but now it was forced to fall back with its shield raised. After firing, the Tellestarle continued to advance into the inner court of Fort Casadesus with its back weapons still raised, and with strangely careful and unnatural movements.

Shaken, the knights of the order ran. At the moment, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit's side had six remaining Kaldatoahs, while their enemies had lost one and were down to four Kaldatoahs and five Tellestarles. Unlike before, the numerical advantage was now in the hands of the raiders. On top of that, the Tellestarle's power had been proven. What the knights of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit knew about the Tellestarles had come entirely from what they'd seen in the shaker worm fight. Since they had never actually piloted the new model, they had no way of figuring out what the raider pilots were dealing with, and so had to show more caution than was actually necessary.

The situation had reached a sort of equilibrium, but while the knights of the order were finding it hard to go on the attack, Kerhilt and her Copper Fang Knights felt like they were on thin ice. Unable to stand the feeling, she started to grouse from her pilot's seat.

"Aren't the silhouette knights of this country supposed to be easy to use?! That's supposed be this place's, like, only good point! Damn, as things stand we can't even fight them properly. It'd be best to just make like a tree and—"

"The new model's specs might actually be pretty bangin'. The silver linin' in all o' dis is that they're kitted out nice."

Seeing one of her men swing around their back weapons, Kerhilt scrunched her face up.

"But that's pretty much the only thing we can use. We gotta split while the enemy is still wary of us. Get ready."

To them, it looked like the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit was hanging back and waiting to secure a numerical advantage. So, this was their chance. Though they currently outnumbered their enemy, none of them wanted to engage in combat using such hard-to-pilot silhouette knights. In the first place, the entire reason they had used such force was to steal these units. Even though there were five of them, it was best for them to get away with as few losses as possible.

Their plan had always been to withdraw immediately after stealing the new models, so of course they had prepared tricks to help them accomplish just such a feat. Still, they would need to get out of the fortress to be able to use them. Because the new models were so much harder to move than they had expected, their expectation that they would be able to use sheer numbers to push their way through had started to crumble, but they still had the numerical advantage. So, the Copper Fang Knights decided to try breaking through before the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit could detect their discomfort.

“Get in front, Kaldatoahs! The new models will support from the rear!”

Close combat naturally became the Kaldatoahs’ job, as they could move much more freely and were not the objective the Copper Fang Knights had to retrieve. Though there were only four, that was enough. The Tellestarles provided concentrated support, their bombardment bringing about a storm of fire that further shifted the situation in the fort in their favor. The invaders’ Kaldatoahs weaved through the bombardment to advance toward their foes. Having been forced onto the back foot, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s forces could only keep their shields raised and accept being cornered slowly.

“Make way, knights!”

Suddenly, a ferocious howl reverberated from behind the distressed knight order units. Immediately, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s formation reflexively split to either side, revealing a single silhouette knight in the center that was charging with incredible force.

The silhouette knight held a long-handled hammer with both hands, which it swung in a similarly large arc, making use of its charging momentum to add power to the attack. The hammer almost seemed like it was being sucked toward one of the enemy Kaldatoahs that were about to clash with a knight of the order, hitting it directly and transferring all the force into its target. Unable to withstand the power of such a heavy weapon, the Kaldatoah’s torso bent inward and pieces of its armor went flying everywhere as it fell to the ground. The force of the attack not only went through its torso armor, but its crystal tissue and inner skeleton as well. Even the Kaldatoah’s spine was crushed, and it was destroyed in a single hit. This truly painful strike took the wind out of the raiders’ sails as they stumbled backward, curses on their lips.

“You filthy thieves! Don’t think you can get away so easily after all this!”

The unit that had made the attack and proceeded to spin its hammer around before taking a stance with it once again was not a Kaldatoah. It had a smoothly contoured outer skin, with scarlet coloring in places, and it wore finely detailed additional armor shaped like a mantle, which was called a surcoat and added to its bold appearance. It was the personal silhouette knight of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s leader, Heimerwort. Because it was always parked in a different spot from the Kaldatoahs, it had managed to avoid being a victim of the attack.

“Seems all of you have been doing as you please, so I’ll have to return the favor. No need to hold back. Take it all!”

Heimerwort was being controlled by the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s leader, Morten Fredholme, who looked like a hungry, angry bear inside his cockpit. With his arrival, the knight order forces that had been thrown into confusion immediately regained all their discipline, deploying to Heimerwort’s flanks. Heimerwort was the symbol of the knight order and the strongest knight, so its overwhelming presence provided a powerful sense of relief to the others.

“Knights, advance! Crush those filthy thieving rats!”

Morten raised his hammer like a ceremonial staff as he shouted those encouraging words, and the knights of the order went on the attack. The raiders still had the numbers advantage, but given the knights’ vigor and unity, they couldn’t afford to be complacent.

Heimerwort led from the front, outpacing the knight order’s Kaldatoahs in its charge. In order to intercept, the Tellestarles unleashed their back weapons on Heimerwort, but they were all turned aside by its surcoat. Though the lavishly decorated armor plates were blown apart and scattered to the winds, the silhouette knight itself took nearly no damage and was able to keep going. Though Heimerwort did not possess a shield, it was a size larger and heavier than the Kaldatoah, and so had tougher armor. Even though the Tellestarles boasted heavy bombardment capabilities, it would not prove easy to take down.

As soon as Heimerwort pushed through the spell fire and reached the enemy, it swung its hammer, causing a sound so loud it sounded like an explosion.

Having seen what happened to the Kaldatoah that took a direct hit before, the other raiders broke out into cold sweats as they desperately dodged this swing.

“Awwright, get outta the way, small fries!”

But that was exactly what Morten wanted. Heimerwort spun its hammer right around, bringing it all the way into position for another attack as it continued forward. His goal was the Tellestarles in the rear of the enemy formation. Though the new models were precious, he couldn’t bear to let them be stolen. And given the fact that they were proving to be a tactical obstacle, Morten wanted to destroy them immediately.

His metal hammer roared on its way toward Kerhilt’s Tellestarle. She spat curses as she desperately moved her unit as best she could, just barely managing to avoid the hammer strike. However, Morten’s attack didn’t stop at just one swing. Just like before, he smoothly spun his hammer around to have it come back for another go. He hadn’t been promoted to captain of a knight order for show or on a whim. His explosive series of hammer attacks, during which he showed his prowess in being able to manipulate his hammer freely, was his specialty. When combined with a unit that sported heavy armor and great output, it made his style of standing in the front into something that allowed him to pulverize everything in his way.

“Krkhh...is he the captain?! He’s damn strong!”

Even during that short exchange of blows, Kerhilt was getting used to controlling her machine, though it was slow. Still, before she could get a good grasp on her unit’s quirks, Morten’s merciless combo was driving her into a corner. Finally, it happened when his destructive hammer was about to land the finishing blow.

“Boooosss!”

Before the hammer could accelerate enough, a different Tellestarle with a shield stepped in the way. The pilot had said to hell with any fancy piloting techniques, and charged in relying on pure power. And because the hammer had yet to build up enough force, it was intercepted in full by the Tellestarle’s shield.

“You cheeky little...!!!”

Heimerwort, being a heavy unit, let its output do the talking as it put pressure on the Tellestarle and its shield. A Tellestarle didn't differ much from a Kaldatoah in terms of build, but its strand crystal tissue made it able to equal Morten's unit. Seeing the Tellestarle resisting his beloved partner, Morten was shocked, but at the same time his mouth twisted from inside his beard.

"Oho, so this is the new model. To think it's a match for my Heimerwort. I would love for my knight order to have these, but right now there's nothing I hate more!"

He was currently experiencing how terrible the new model would be to have as an enemy. Though it was the same rank of unit as a Kaldatoah, it could exert strength rivaling Heimerwort. It was like a bad joke. While they clashed, the other Tellestarles slipped by them, periodically shooting their back weapons as they charged at the Kaldatoahs that followed. That spoiled the momentum of the knight order's charge, bringing the battle situation back to even.

"Now's our chance, boss!"

Kerhilt nodded in response to her subordinate. She knew that now was their best, and possibly only, chance to break out of the fortress. Heimerwort was a threat. Though they could match it for power, they probably still couldn't hold a candle to it in close combat. None of them had any desire to do battle against the captain of a knight order in units they weren't used to. And the Copper Fang Knights had no idea how long their comrades in the Kaldatoahs could withstand the knight order's fierce attacks. At this point, she had given up on obtaining all of the Tellestarles.

"This'll have to do. Anyone that can move, follow me!"

So, she decided to prioritize securing the intact units they could instead of trying to win the battle while they still had the advantage in numbers. This was the difference in mindset between a knight and a spy. Their objective wasn't to defeat the enemy. Engaging in battle was just a means for them to buy time and ensure a safe getaway. Having decided to use her subordinates that were tied down in battle as roadblocks, she used her back weapons to throw out suppressing fire, shooting overspells randomly as they left the battlefield, running to the gates that had lost their guards.

Successive spell fire crashed into the inside of the gates, destroying them. Kerhilt and two of her subordinates in Tellestarles finally made it out of the fortress onto the road, and into the veil of darkness.



Having broken out of the fortress in the confusion, there was no one chasing Kerhilt and her men, so all they had to do was travel down their escape route as planned. Though they hadn't managed to steal all of the new models, they *had* managed to escape with three mostly undamaged units. That however meant that most of the Copper Fang Knights had been left behind to buy time, so this would result in them being basically completely destroyed. Still, those losses were within the expected range for Kerhilt.

In the first place, the Copper Fang Knights were a group that mainly dealt in intelligence, and so had very little in the way of pure combat power. The only direct combat weapons they possessed were the few Vendobadahla silhouette knights that Kerhilt had spent a lot of effort to transport in secret from the homeland. But that had made their impossible mission in this faraway land possible, even if it meant having to raid a fortress to steal silhouette knights. Furthermore, if Kerhilt considered that they had to deal with how hard the Tellestarles were to pilot on top of enemy resistance, it was a great accomplishment that they'd gotten away with just the effective destruction of their "knight order."

But even though they'd been successful, Kerhilt was a jumbled mess of relief, satisfaction, displeasure, and regret. Filled with such a complicated cocktail, she let out a sigh as she decided to set aside the losses to her force that she'd just incurred. Shaking her head, she thought about what they needed to do next. First, they would meet up with the Vendobadahla unit they had on standby in the Acquart Forest. She stepped on her stirrups hard, driving her Tellestarle into an awkward but speedy run.



Thin clouds flowed across the sky as a nearly perfectly round moon lit the way for the three Tellestarles as they ran down the road without saying a word. Only the sounds of their heavy footsteps resounded through the area. It was about

time for them to enter the forest and meet up with the Vendobadahlas. Kerhilt was just slowing her Tellestarle down when a vague red and white pair appeared in her vision.

It was a moonlit night, so the road was visible for quite a distance. Even without the moon, though, she was trained in night operations. That was why she so quickly noticed the faint light that reflected off of the figures—they were silhouette knights. A red and white pair of silhouette knights were walking down the road toward the fortress, coming from where she wanted to run.

Tch! I never received any information on any reinforcements! Why are there silhouette knights in a place like this?! Kerhilt cursed internally.

Though they didn't destroy all of Fort Casadesus's military assets, the subordinates she left behind were tying them up, so there shouldn't have been anyone chasing them. At the same time, there was a sizable distance between forts, so even if the fort's garrison had managed to get a messenger out, by the time anyone else could have received that distress call and ridden out as reinforcements, she should have been able to be long gone from Fremmevilla. Furthermore, taking action during the night was dangerous, so normally it wasn't done except under circumstances like hers. Kerhilt couldn't think of any reason she would be seeing silhouette knights at this time and in this place. Because these new factors had shown up at such a fatal and unexpected place, she couldn't suppress the irritation she felt. She also had no idea just how much time the men she left at the fort would be able to buy. At any rate, she and the two with her didn't have the time to spare.

Since they had no time to try and talk themselves out of the situation, Kerhilt immediately decided to eliminate the obstacles on her path. She sent a small signal to her subordinates, who silently nodded with their units in response. Like that, she and her men deployed the back weapons of their three Tellestarles. With no room for negotiation, they attacked the red and white silhouette knights.



A little earlier...

The group that departed from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had the boss,

David, and the twins in a carriage while Guaire and Earlcumber walked alongside. Their trip was going swimmingly, and they were already almost to their destination of Fort Casadesus. The group was in good spirits, since they encountered no real obstacles and they were already so close to their goal.

“Compared to last time, things have gone way smoother, haven’t they?”

“Seriously, last time was terrible. I won’t be able to even look at worms for a while yet.”

“When would we ever welcome the sight of worms?”

The sun had already completely set. Luckily, it was rather bright out tonight, so the group continued to slowly make their way forward. Normally, continuing to travel at night would be out of the question, since the darkness would make it too difficult to intercept any attacking nocturnal monsters. However, they were nearly to Fort Casadesus, so they had decided to force a march to their destination in hopes of reaching it sooner. They reasoned that though they were accompanied by silhouette knights, they were only a small group accompanied by a carriage and a cart.

They were making lighthearted small talk as they proceeded down the road when they noticed something strange. They could hear repeating heavy metallic noises coming from ahead of them. This was accompanied by the shrill noise of air intakes—a familiar sound to knight runners. They were the sounds of active silhouette knights. The group tilted their heads, wondering who would be out in the middle of the night like this, completely forgetting about how they themselves were in the same boat.

The footsteps were rapidly getting louder. Soon enough, the group became able to see who was making the noise in the distance. Seeing the silhouette knights that appeared, they swallowed a breath. It was a group of the model they’d made and that were being held in Fort Casadesus: the Tellestarle. All of them were running toward the group for some unknown reason, which both shocked and confused them.

Supposing that some sort of incident had occurred which necessitated sending troops out, there was no reason for them to send such a small force of just new models. Furthermore, there was no way the knight runners in the

fortress would have trained to use the Tellestarles sufficiently yet, so it didn't make sense for them to be using units with such strong...*quirks*.

"What do you think is going on, Dee?"

"No idea. We'll just have to ask, won't we?"

Their decision to confirm the situation was a very reasonable one. However, the situation unfolded in a way they would never have expected.

The approaching Tellestarles opened fire with their back weapons without giving them time to say anything. Kerhilt and her comrades in their Tellestarles couldn't afford to stop. Of course that would lead to them deciding to eliminate the enemies in front of them, so they had gone for a preemptive attack with their back weapons. So far, they'd found that more effective than trying to engage in close combat.

Edgar and Dietrich were taken aback. Not even in their dreams would Tellestarles that should have been allies attacked them. The only reason they were able to respond was because they were so familiar with the Tellestarle as a unit, and thus knew how effective the back weapons were.

Both Dietrich in his Guaire, which had been turned into one of the new models, and the old model Earlcumber piloted by Edgar showed wonderful reflexes. Guaire quickly drew the swords at its hips and used skillful swordplay to cut apart the incoming bombardment. Earlcumber raised its shield, blocking any projectiles that Guaire missed and protecting the vehicles behind it.

Seeing their surprise attack be dealt with so easily, Kerhilt clicked her tongue, as she was forced to stop.

From inside his cockpit in Earlcumber, Edgar watched the Tellestarles secure some distance from them as he opened his speaking tube.

"We are squires belonging to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. We are currently heading toward Fort Casadesus, for we have business with the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit. However, you have attacked us suddenly without giving us the chance to name ourselves. What is the meaning of this?! If you have any acceptable reason, state it now!"

Edgar was clearly furious, but the Tellestarles continued to maintain their

creepy silence. There was no way anything Kerhilt and her men could say would help. However, now they knew the identity of the white and red units. Immediately she started to make light of her opponents, who in her mind would no doubt be easier to defeat than a full-fledged knight. Normally, they would want to avoid combat as much as possible, but they were only facing two students in training machines. The raiders figured they could push through them easily with their strategic advantage. They knew that the Tellestarle's high output made it a threat to other silhouette knights. If they were to clash head-to-head without any tricks, whether it be a knight order machine or student machine, neither would come out unscathed. They were also gradually getting used to the Tellestarles they were piloting, so, letting their guard down, Kerhilt and her men attacked straight-on.

They had forgotten just who had created the silhouette knights they were trying to steal.

"Edgar..."

"I know. I'm leaving it to you."

There was no more room for doubt: the Tellestarles that had silently attacked them were enemies. It was painful for them to turn their swords on the machines they'd spent so much effort helping to make, but they had no intention of just rolling over and dying. After their very precise exchange, they stepped forward, all hesitation gone. The red silhouette knight kicked powerfully off the ground, and a beat later the white one followed.

Matching their enemies' charge, a single Tellestarle stepped forward to meet Guaire, who had taken the lead. Though it was a little rough, its sword strike had quite a lot of power behind it, and defending against it should have been difficult. Guaire, however, swung both its swords together from one side. Since it had the same strength as the Tellestarle, they clashed evenly, neither one seeming to be the obvious winner.

Guaire diverted its opponent's strength, causing both their swords to bounce away to either side. The Tellestarle, who swung with all its might, lost its balance as its sword was repelled. The Copper Fang Knight, shocked, tried to pull his machine's arm back, but it wasn't an easy feat. The opening the

Tellestarle exposed was far too large, and Guaire swung its swords to take advantage. The arc was smooth, and its steel swords seemed almost sucked into the Tellestarle's right arm, which was cleanly severed at the elbow with the sword still in its hand. The Tellestarle had a shield in its left hand, so now it had lost its main method of attack in close quarters.

The Copper Fang Knight's face twisted in shock. This was the exact same feeling Morten had experienced just a little earlier: surprise over the fact that the opponent had the same strength. However, of course he hadn't made it this far for nothing. He forcefully restored his unit's balance, deployed his back weapons, and tried to fire them.

"It's true that back weapons are powerful. But not when you use them in such a simple manner!" Dietrich shouted as he deployed Guaire's own back weapons.

These were different from the ones equipped by the Tellestarle, and were somewhat wider and shaped more like short swords or daggers. They got into position above Guaire's shoulders, and Dietrich in his pilot's seat saw the aiming reticle appear on his holomonitor. Once he aligned the reticle with his target, he depressed the trigger.

In response, the silhouette arms unleashed their magic. Guaire was equipped with Shotel silhouette arms. These did not shoot the orthodox explosive flames that most silhouette knights liked to use. Instead, these silhouette arms were mid-to-short-range ones that shot blade-shaped vacuum faults. The blades hit the Tellestarle's back weapon just as it was about to fire. The vacuum blades burst into a shock wave, shattering the Tellestarle's silhouette arms. The Tellestarle's balance was already on thin ice, and now a fierce shock wave was hitting it, causing it to be blown back onto the ground. All this transpired in only a few seconds since they had started the charge.

While one of the Tellestarles and Guaire clashed, Earlcumber moved to stand in front of the other two. If they interfered with the two who were already fighting, there was a possibility they could hit their friends. So naturally, the remaining two Tellestarles fixed their sights on Earlcumber. This meant that right off the bat, Edgar was fighting two-on-one, and against new models, to boot. To anyone, this would have been nothing but reckless. Kerhilt had her

Tellestarle ready its sword to put her opponent in the grave, while her subordinate deployed his back weapons. They were going to try and come up with some off-the-cuff teamwork.

However, unlike Guaire, Earlcumber stopped its charge once it was a certain distance away and pointed its silhouette arms, a Culverin, at the ground and fired it. The spell impacted the ground and threw up a fountain of flames and dirt. It was an improvised smoke screen, and it successfully blocked off the Tellestarles' sight.

“So you like pulling stupid little tricks like that, huh?!”

Kerhilt pulled her unit back while her partner's bombardment hit only air. Earlcumber shifted from attack to retreat, raising its shield to maximize its defense. It was clearly inviting them in, which made Kerhilt immediately hesitate.

In that moment, a loud sound came from beside them, and they could see something go flying. When the combatants turned to get a better look, they saw Guaire standing in a composed stance while the Tellestarle it was fighting had taken a direct hit and fallen. Kerhilt would never have imagined their new model would lose to a student, which resulted in feelings of impatience and anxiousness rising up within her as she thought of a certain possibility.

“That one...could it be a new model too?! I never heard that there was another one!” There was no way for her to figure that out; not that it originally wasn't meant to be completed, or that this outcome had happened entirely because of the selfishness of a pair of twins.

The moment she realized what she was fighting against, she also realized the predicament she was in. She was fighting a silhouette knight that was the same Tellestarle as them. On top of that, judging from this situation, the knight runner inside was much better than they were at piloting it. While they were still not used to how their machines were controlled, an opponent that could make use of all the new model's abilities was nothing other than a nightmare. They'd been had. The white unit had clearly been a decoy. While it drew as many combatants toward it as it could and focused on defense, the powerful red unit would hunt the enemy. Kerhilt reflexively ground her teeth once she

realized that she'd fallen for the enemy's trap, but that wouldn't help their situation. She had to question whether she could fight off the red unit while she couldn't even properly control her own machine, and she wasn't so conceited as to believe she could.

Kerhilt and her men had been driven into a corner, but at the same time she could see a way for them to get out of it. The red unit was a new model, but the white one wasn't. She could tell from what had happened during their fight so far. So, as long as they could slow down the red unit somehow, their chances of breaking through the white one would be high. So, from here on out, it would be a gamble for them.

Meanwhile, seeing that their enemies actually became more motivated instead of being shaken from seeing their comrade defeated, Edgar and Dietrich once again took ready stances warily. Both sides were looking for an opening to exploit, so the situation abruptly came to a standstill.

However, if there were a god that held sway over destiny, that god hadn't yet abandoned Kerhilt and her remaining subordinate. Something unexpected to everyone there happened.

“Wooooooooaaaarrrrrgggghhhhhh!!!”

The silhouette knight that everyone thought Guaire had defeated stood up with a shout. A fallen silhouette knight wasn't as safe as one might think. Essentially, a ten-meter-tall silhouette knight would be falling with the knight runner still in the pilot seat, slamming into the ground at full force. Of course, this would deal massive damage to the knight runner as well. The silhouette knight had strengthening magic applied to it which would somewhat protect the knight runner inside, but it would still be enough that the person inside wouldn't be able to move again right away. Dee had thought the same, and so was completely caught off guard when the silhouette knight stood back up.

“Wha—?! What tenacity!”

The once again risen Tellestarle charged, aiming a shoulder tackle at Guaire from the side. It hit Guaire directly, and both units fell to the ground. With the situation having changed this much, there was no way the other combatants wouldn't react.

“Damn, they just don’t know how to give up! Dee, you all right?!” Edgar shouted, concerned.

Meanwhile, Kerhilt was a lot more enthusiastic about this turn of events. “Awesome, well done!”

Earlcumber took a defensive stance. The situation had returned to being a two-on-one against Tellestarles, so Edgar had no choice but to prioritize his own protection.

Kerhilt and her remaining subordinate didn’t hesitate to aim their back weapons at the ground and shoot. It was a callback to what Earlcumber had done earlier. Now, on top of being on a dark road with only the moonlight to rely on, there was a thick cloud of dust hanging over the area thanks to their aggressive fire. Edgar took a large step back, because it would have been a big threat if the Tellestarles continued to fire their weapons randomly. However, no bombardment came even though Earlcumber was ready with its shield. Instead, heavy footfalls could be heard on the other side of the cloud getting farther away. Kerhilt had made use of this small bit of leeway afforded to her by Guaire being held down and chose to run.

“Krrghh...they’re really decisive. But I won’t let you get away!”

Earlcumber ran off, though it was a beat late. The Tellestarles’ goals were still unknown, but there was no way he could just allow their pilots to run.

“Wait, Edgar! Grkghh, aaghh! Get off me, you bastard!”

Dietrich had barely managed to minimize the damage from his fall and avoid being knocked out, but Guaire still wasn’t in a position to make a move immediately. Though the Tellestarle who had shoulder checked him was now half-destroyed, it was still a Tellestarle. Since they were basically attached at the hip, Dietrich couldn’t take advantage of the fact that he could pilot his machine better, and so because they were tied in power, the Tellestarle was managing to hold him down completely.

“Grkh...heh ha ha ha...no need to panic, student! You just have to stay with me for a little while longer...”

The Tellestarle dragged itself up Guaire’s back as Dietrich panicked.

Even though Edgar was skilled, Earlcumber was clearly not powerful enough to take on two Tellestarles by itself.

“Aaggh, it’s dangerous, but there’s no other way! I’ll blow you away!”

Even though they were in such close proximity, Dietrich decided to ignore any potential damage to himself as he fired the Shotels that were equipped as his back weapons at the Tellestarle. The blade-shaped faults of vacuum created an influx of atmosphere that exploded into violent winds, the shock wave of which assaulted both units.



While Guaire and Earlcumber were fighting the Tellestarles, the boss and the others in his cart made a mad dash for Fort Casadesus in a bid to get to safety. No vehicle would be able to withstand getting caught up in a fight between silhouette knights. Given that the Tellestarles had run from the fortress, chances were high that something was going on inside, but they had nowhere else to go.

While moving at such a speed that their horses were frothing at the mouth, a cloth covering flapped in the wind before being blown away. Below it, armored figures snapped the steel wire that was there to hold them down as they stood. These warped figures stood two and a half meters tall—they were silhouette gears, Motor Beats.

Of course, Kid and Addy were the ones inside. The machines had been packed in with weapons, and so they were each equipped with a Scorpius and were also carrying as much extra ammo as they could as they jumped off and ran. Their claims of being faster than horses were true, as these heavy suits of metal armor made off at amazing speeds. Because they’d spent so much time training with Ernie and had moved around in their silhouette gears daily, this was a piece of cake for them.

Edgar, who was chasing after the Tellestarles that ran, realized that at some point he was hearing extra footsteps. Earlcumber had been joined by two figures too small to be silhouette knights to either side. He slowly turned his machine’s head to either side to see that a pair of silhouette gears, only tall enough to come to a silhouette knight’s knees, had been running with him. The

moment he realized this, he forgot all about what situation he was in and started yelling.

“Wha— Hey, you two! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re chasing the thieves with you, Edgar.”

“Yeah. There’s two of us, so we can take on one of them!”

They had entered the forest, so moonlight was now sporadic, but the silhouette knight and pair of smaller figures continued to yell at each other as they chased the dull metal-colored backs of the thieves.

“Don’t be stupid! I know you two think you’re strong, but you’re up against silhouette knights, mankind’s greatest weapons! It’s too dangerous—you two need to turn back and leave this to me!”

“Then, Edgar, can you really go up against two of them?”

“Grk!” Edgar’s groan was his only response. At the moment, the thieves disliked the idea of fighting in machines they found hard to move, so they were focusing on running away, but Edgar was the one who was actually at a disadvantage since he had to face two silhouette knights at once. Edgar, being the type that was a little too serious, tended to gum up in times like this since he couldn’t dress the truth very well.

“You’re not the only one, Edgar. We’re really angry too.”

“We all helped to make those, didn’t we? We won’t ever allow someone to just steal them right out from under us!”

On an emotional level, Edgar felt the same as the twins, and he lacked the words to convince them to stop. He was deeply troubled about it, but it was true that he was stretched to the limit in this situation, and the twins weren’t the type to listen. So, he resolved himself and squeezed out the words.

“Don’t... Don’t you dare push yourselves. Don’t try to attack them from the front. If you’re going to do this anyway, then stick to supporting me and prioritize your own safety! Understand?”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure not to ‘push myself,’ Edgar!”

“Yes, we’ll just be ‘supporting you,’ Edgar!”

They went deeper into the forest as the night wore on. This incident surrounding the new model of silhouette knight had involved many people, but it was now arriving at its conclusion.

Chapter 17: The Conclusion in the Forest

While Edgar was chasing the Tellestarles in his Earlcumber, the fight between the Copper Fang Knights and the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit inside Fort Casadesus was reaching its climax. There were remains of silhouette knights that had been defeated or were out of power strewn about, while fires caused by silhouette arms dotted the battlefield.

Ernesti was watching this fierce battle progress from inside the destroyed workshop. Normally, his expression would be lit up with joy while watching silhouette knights fight against each other. However, it was easy to tell that in the moment, all he was feeling was frustration.

“So they decided to destroy all the leftover silhouette knights, huh? How thorough of them.”

Behind him were the remains of the Kaldatoahs destroyed by the Copper Fang Knights. For a while now, Ernie’s gaze had been going back and forth between those wrecks and the ongoing battle.

“There’s a huge battle between silhouette knights right in front of me, but I have no robot to pilot. This is frustrating, so frustrating. Should I charge in anyway, with just me and whatever I have on me? But there’s nothing more vulgar than taking part in a battle between robots without being in a robot yourself! That would be unforgivable...but I don’t have that all-important piece...”

He looked upward, his gaze filled with the most lament ever in his life. He, who had dedicated his life to robots, had now found himself in front of a force of enemy robots, and he couldn’t very well just sit the fight out. However, at the same time, his own sense of aesthetics wouldn’t allow him to take part without a robot of his own.

That was why he had rushed to the workshop as soon as the fight started. However, all he was able to find were units broken beyond immediate repair. It needn’t be said how disappointed he was.

And as he was busy feeling frustrated, silhouette knights were falling one by one. At this rate, the fight would be over before he could join in. Feeling rushed for time, Ernie made a decision.

“Okay, let’s just steal one that’s still standing! It’s not impossible!”

Once that decision was made, Ernie acted fast. Using a human-portable wire anchor, he climbed up to the roof of the fort to be able to view the battlefield in full. Even for Ernie, stealing an active silhouette knight would be extremely hard. So, he sat and waited for his opportunity with the persistence of a snake, the eyes of a hawk, and the silence of a spider.

That was when he noticed something moving out of the corner of his eye. It wasn’t one of the silhouette knights that were currently fighting. The movement was coming from the gates that had been busted when the Tellestarles ran earlier. When Ernie concentrated to get a better look, he saw two vehicles hurriedly making their way through the remains of the gate.

It was because Ernie had enough time to tilt his head in confusion as to why this capricious-seeming group was trying to enter a fort that was clearly in the middle of a battle that he saw a certain *something* inside one of the vehicles. He felt surprise, enough to widen his eyes instantly, but in the next moment he was already flying through the air. Leaving behind only the dry sounds of pressurized air being released, a silver flash danced through the night sky.



“Hey, can’t you go any faster?!”

“This is the limit, boss! Any faster and the horses will trip and fall!”

Even for running on stone pavement, the horses were already going at an abnormal speed for traveling down a dark road at night. The boss, David, had been leaning out of his passenger’s seat and egging on the student that was serving as the driver this entire time. The horses that had been forced into an all-out sprint by the driver were already foaming at the mouth, running as fast as they could. From the looks of things, they could fall over at any time. However, there was a reason the boss’s group had to hurry.

While this was happening, Edgar and Dietrich were fighting the Tellestarles

that attacked them on the road. The boss and his group had to go report that to the knight order garrisoning the fortress.

However, as they got close to the fort, they all became lost for words. Fort Casadesus, an important stronghold in Acquart Forest, was in flames. These fires that had sprouted up in several areas around the fortress were large enough to light up the entire fortress against the backdrop of night.

“H-Hey come on, what the heck is going on here?”

Luckily, they reached Fort Casadesus before the horses collapsed due to exhaustion. However, what greeted the boss’s group was the sight of destroyed gates, buildings on fire, and a fierce battle between silhouette knights unfolding before their eyes. They had no grasp on the situation at all, and so they could only stand still, not doing anything. They wanted to retreat so they wouldn’t get caught up in this battle, but they couldn’t even tell where would be a safe place to retreat to.

That was when a silver bullet touched down in front of them. Even though this bullet had come from high above them, it achieved a surprisingly smooth landing with some reverse thrust and a cast of Air Suspension. The boss and the others were utterly confused by the quick succession of surprising events they were exposed to, but then Ernie, the true identity of the silver bullet, asked a question with his head tilted.

“I was wondering who you guys were, but it turns out it’s just you, boss. Why’re you here? This is a battlefield, you know.”

“What?! It’s you, Ernesti! What the heck is going on here?!”

The boss was so excited he nearly bowled Ernie over in his rush to run over to him, and because of that Ernie could only try to calm him down before getting into an explanation with a vague, slightly troubled smile.

“I don’t really know all the details either. What I do know is that some thieves came in using Kaldatoahs from the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit. Then they took over the workshop and stole more of the knight order’s silhouette knights, which leads us to our current situation.”

As the explanation was happening, overspells continued to flash and explode,

causing thunderous roars that rumbled through the area. There was no sign of the chaos that reigned in the area settling down. With such a battle as the backdrop, the boss and the other students, having heard Ernie's explanation, had their expressions change immediately.

"I see...so those Tellestarles... On the way here we ran into some Tellestarles, and they suddenly attacked us without any warning! Edgar and Dee engaged them, but I have no idea how that's going. So those were stolen by the thieves?!"

The boss seemed to be getting angrier and angrier as he spoke, given how he was clenching his fist. Beside him, Ernie nodded frequently, having come to some sort of conclusion.

"I see, so the thieves' objective was the Tellestarles... Rather, if you consider that they were after the new models, a lot of things start to make sense... I see, so this is a hijacking event. This was a blind spot for me; even though it's a 'trope' in a sense, I never thought it would happen to me."

Luckily, the latter half of what Ernie muttered had been obscured by the sounds of battle, so the boss didn't hear it. If he had, there was no telling what he would have thought of it. The boss, blissfully unaware of Ernie's mutterings, burned with rage. Suddenly though, he noticed something and turned back to Ernie.

"So, what're you doing?"

"I was searching for a silhouette knight. I told you that the first thing the thieves did was take control of the workshop, right? When they did, they destroyed all the remaining units... Thanks to that, I'm forced to sit here twiddling my thumbs while a silhouette knight battle-fest is going on right in front of me. What the thieves did was very logical, but it's still infuriating. I was going around, looking for a chance to interfere and maybe obtain a silhouette knight to use. And...that brings me to my point."

As soon as Ernie finished saying that, he turned his gaze behind the boss. With an ominous smile spread wide across his entire face, he pointed into the wagon behind him.

"That armor you've got there...that's my Motor Beat, isn't it?"

The boss roughly nodded his beard. The remaining object in the wagon was indeed the blue Motor Beat that only Ernie could use.

“You got it. The brats wanted to take it along since they were taking theirs anyway. That reminds me, they went off chasing after the Tellestarles too.”

“The two of them came too? *And* they chased after the fleeing Tellestarles? I’m so jea—*ahem*—that’s so dangerous. I need to go help them right away!”

“Hey, is it just me or do you seem to be having a lot of fun...aaaand he’s not even listening.”

Ernie immediately got into his Motor Beat. The Motor Beat’s front torso armor closed up, enclosing his form inside. His mana spread through the entire thing, causing the strand crystal tissue inside to contract so the machine stood up. The boss and the others couldn’t see Ernie’s expression from under the armor, but they could easily imagine what it looked like. A terribly happy voice came from inside the armor.

“Startup complete... With a machine to use, there’s no problem. None at all. I can have as much fun as I want, fight as much as I want. I’ll finish what’s going on here first, and then go help everyone... Yeah!”

Once he was done speaking, the Motor Beat jumped out of the wagon, leaving behind only a shock wave so strong it threatened to pulverize the vehicle that had been carrying it. The sounds of a winding mechanism and compressed air being released overlapped as Ernie’s wire anchor sliced through the night sky. It would serve as the guide that would lead the Motor Beat to the battlefield. The Motor Beat, currently in the air, looked around resolutely at its surroundings that were dyed red by fire as it reflected the moonlight with a blue tint.

The boss followed the Motor Beat’s progress for a while as it climbed up the wall and onto the roof with incredible speed, but soon enough he let out a sigh that probably contained feelings of exasperation and turned around.

“Not even duel-class monsters are as scary as he is. Not that I’m sympathizing with those thieves, but...anyway, there’s nothing more we can do, so we’re running.”

The others finally came back to their senses after hearing that, and they all quickly ran for the entrance to the fortress.



At the owls' occasional hoot, as if reminded that it was a thing they did, nocturnal beasts that made their way through the underbrush raised their heads. Acquart Forest, lit in sharp relief by the moonlight, was usually calm. However, that calm was being broken by the intrusive presence of battle.

The intruders, giants made of metal and crystal, ran among the trees. Every branch that they occasionally caught against was snapped, the ground was leveled under their feet, and everything shook in response to their progression. Inside one of the running Tellestarles, the leader of the Copper Fang Knights, Kerhilt Hietakannes, gripped her control yokes tightly with a pained expression as she let up on the stirrups that she'd been flooring this entire time.

"Tch! Doesn't seem like I can push it any further."

They had moved quite some distance from Fort Casadesus in their Tellestarles. That was why she had noticed that her machine was losing power compared to when she first started it up. It was a sign that the Tellestarle's mana pool was getting low.

They were still some ways away from the spot they were set to meet up with the Vendobadahlas. At their current pace, the Tellestarles would run out of mana and stop before getting to that point. Even if they sported high output, or rather, because they sported high output, the new models had a problem with fuel efficiency. And currently, the Tellestarles' mana pools were running low. They had yet to solve the model's biggest drawback. She had never heard about this fact, but to her the fact that they were running low was more important than any explanation as to why.

"Seems like it'll be impossible to keep running like we have been... I don't really want to fight with this thing, though."

If they forced themselves to keep running, they would risk having their pursuers catch up to them once they ran out of mana. If that were to happen to them, even standard mass-produced units would beat them easily. So, she decided to completely eliminate her pursuers before that could happen. At this

point, she couldn't see a way for them to win by running. With a click of her tongue, she gave a signal to her subordinate, and both of them stopped and turned around in the Tellestarles. This just left the sound of their ether reactors roaring as the rest of the forest quickly regained its quiet. Kerhilt glared at the white silhouette knight she could see weaving through the trees on her holomonitor.



In the pilot's seat of Earlcumber, Edgar saw the Tellestarles slow down, and he smiled.

"Looks like they're running out of mana." Ahead of him, the two Tellestarles had stopped running and turned to wait for him. As an experienced person who ran up against the same problem, Edgar accurately surmised the reason the Tellestarles had stopped. "I still have some leeway, so at the moment I should be able to fight at an advantage. I'll go in from the front, you guys focus on supporting by sowing confusion. Don't get too close, even by accident!"

The twins, who had been running at his feet, replied to Edgar's instructions with rough salutes before disappearing into the darkness of the forest. While biting back a sigh that he almost unconsciously let out, he returned his attention to the Tellestarles, who had suddenly split to either side of his heading, hiding behind trees. Right afterward, spell fire from the Tellestarles flew between the trees. Several shots hit other trees that were in the way, resulting in large explosions. Earlcumber closed the distance further, the over spells not even grazing its shield.

"Tch! He's seen right through us!" Kerhilt realized that using their back weapons would just be a waste of mana, so she shouted irritably before stowing the weapons once more.

Unlike the knights from the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, the students were very knowledgeable about the Tellestarle in exchange for having less experience piloting as a whole. This knowledge was proving to be much more troublesome than she'd expected. The strategies she thought of had all been predicted by her opponent, and each and every one of them were dealt with almost before she even put them into motion. As a result, regardless of the fact

that her silhouette knight was clearly more powerful, Kerhilt and her comrade were being cornered.

“We need to split up and pincer him!”

Finally, she decided to go for a true fight. The difference in numbers would give them the most simple and effective advantage. Her subordinate nodded through his machine, and they acted quickly to attack Earlcumber.

The clashing silhouette knights occasionally caught the light, resulting in dull flashes amid the forest’s gloom. This meant it wasn’t difficult to find them in this forest that would only get darker as the night wore on. More than anything, the sheer presence given off by a ten-meter-tall giant couldn’t be completely hidden by mere darkness.

Edgar noticed the Tellestarles moving to pincer him almost right away. While he manipulated Earlcumber in a bid to not be a sitting duck for ranged attacks, he also attempted to close the distance on Kerhilt’s Tellestarle.

Of course, the Tellestarles didn’t just stand still. They reacted to Earlcumber’s approach and changed positions. By dodging between trees, Earlcumber tried to avoid having to face both of them at once, as the other Copper Fang Knight raised his speed to try and get behind Earlcumber. The three danced around each other through the forest, trying to find an advantageous position without clashing once.



Something else was running between the trees, mixing in among the three silhouette knight’s loud footfalls. They were suits of armor about a quarter of the size of a silhouette knight—silhouette gears, or Motor Beats. Kid and Addy successfully snuck up behind the enemy without them noticing. Kid hid behind a tree slightly outside the silhouette knights’ range of attack as he watched the battle and tried to calm his breathing and heartbeat.

Silhouette knights sure do look big from this perspective... he mused.

Because he had gone in and out of the knight runner department many times with Ernie, he had a lot of chances to come in contact with them, and was used to seeing them. However, now that he was actually facing a pair as enemies,

their sheer size and the fierceness of the battle was making Kid nervous. Silhouette knights were humanity's strongest weapons, which also meant that nothing in a human's arsenal could match them. A silhouette knight's maximum capability was yet to be known, but it was clear that Motor Beats were no match for such machines in terms of pure combat capability.

A huge and strong enemy... I wonder if this is how Ernie felt when he fought the behemoth, Kid wondered.

Kid sucked in a deep breath, giving himself a chance to cut away the fear he was feeling as he drew the sword that was strapped to his back. It was a huge two-handed sword, almost surpassing two meters in length. It was something he'd hastily pulled out of storage just before leaving because he didn't have any weapons that fit his silhouette gear. This massive sword, of such size that it would be hard for any human to wield, turned out to be just the perfect size for Kid in his silhouette gear.

If that's the case, there's no way I can run away. Those guys trying to steal the Tellestarles piss me off, and I'll never be able to catch up to Ernie if I shy away here too. So let's get pumped! he encouraged himself.

Kid took another deep breath and rested the two-handed sword over his shoulder. That was when he heard a whisper saying, "Kid." He looked over to Addy, who was likewise hiding behind a different tree some ways away. She waved her Scorpius, so Kid lightly waved his sword in response.

"Okay, let's do this!" With that, Kid raised his machine's arm. As he did so, a wire anchor shot out of it with a small bursting sound.

The arrowheads fitted with internal crystal tissue flew up and hit the upper reaches of a nearby tree before transforming into a scissorlike form that bit deep into the tree and locked the arrowhead into position. The winding mechanism roared and Kid was pulled into the air. Addy in her machine also leaped for her tree a beat later, taking a stance with her Scorpius.

"We gotta take our 'support' role seriously!"

"But only enough not to 'push' ourselves!"

Kid's unit had risen to the upper reaches of a tree, but it now kicked off the

tree's trunk to send itself flying. At the same time, Addy's unit started firing its weapon. Steel bolts were launched into the battle, threatening to further the confusion as they ripped through the air.



With their teamwork, the two Tellestarles were cornering Earlcumber. In the end, there was no easy way to make up for the difference in numbers, and Earlcumber had been forced to fall back several times already. The longer this disadvantageous situation continued, the heavier the mental burden it would place on the knight runner. However, Edgar, though his expression was taut with effort, was showing his incredible powers of concentration from inside his pilot's seat, despite being in a position that would lead to his defeat should he relax even a little bit. Even though he was in an overwhelmingly bad position, he refused to give up and continued to patiently wait for a chance to counterattack. His absurd persistence in the face of a numerical disadvantage only served to irritate Kerhilt further.

That was when an opportunity presented itself.

At this point, Kerhilt and her subordinate's attention was solely on Earlcumber. This was only natural, as they hadn't spotted anything else. As had happened many times before, Kerhilt's subordinate readied his sword to attack Earlcumber from behind. He was about to close the distance and strike...

But the moment he took a step forward, suddenly something flew through the space between Earlcumber and the Tellestarle. All the man could see was a momentary ferocious flash of metal that reflected the unreliable moonlight that filtered through the trees. What appeared was followed by the tremendous sound of its flight as it pierced into a tree that was in front of the Tellestarle, creating another heavy sound of impact. Whatever it was had been so strong its imparted momentum shook the tree.

"An attack?! Enemy reinforcements!"

The subordinate, shocked, pulled back the leg that he had ordered his Tellestarle to take a step with. There was something else present, something that was clearly aiming for the Tellestarles. That fact affected him greatly. They had been able to confidently aim to pincer the white silhouette knight because

they had the numbers advantage. If there were more enemies present, then that premise would crumble. So, he hesitated to advance, instead opting to try and locate this invisible enemy.

Seeing that, Kid and Addy smiled under their helms. That last attack had been made with the sole purpose of temporarily stopping the subordinate's unit from attacking. Kid's unit, which was moving around above the silhouette knight's head, continued to jump through the trees, accelerating further. Kid readied his two-handed sword and aimed for the Tellestarle's head.

“RaaaAAAAAGGGHHH!”

The subordinate turned around, wanting to survey the area, which only meant that he caught a flash of something humanoid flying at him with incredible speed. Surprised by this unexpected attack, he forcefully twisted his unit's body in an attempt to dodge, but he was unable to move far enough, since he was already in the unnatural position of having turned around while standing still. The unpleasant sound of slicing steel resounded and sparks flew as Kid's two-handed sword gouged into the Tellestarle's helm. As expected, the silhouette knight's armor, which had strengthening magic applied to it, was no joke. Though the hit had landed, the damage was light, and there was no damage to the eye crystal. In exchange, the Tellestarle stumbled, as the unreasonable lengths its pilot had gone to to dodge the attack came back to bite it.

The twins' attack continued, taking advantage of that opening. From a little ways away, Addy's Motor Beat put power into its legs and lowered its hips to solidify its aim as she unhesitatingly shot her Scorpius at full power. Every time the sound of the miniature ballista flexing and releasing its stored power could be heard, giant bolts that looked like spears were launched through the air. Her earlier shot had allowed her to adjust her aim, so it was now on point. The storm of bolts mercilessly assaulted the Tellestarle that had shown such a huge opening.



Edgar saw the silhouette gears toying with the Tellestarle being piloted by the Copper Fang Knight, so he abandoned his earlier caution and immediately

closed the distance between him and Kerhilt's unit. He had no idea how long the twins would be able to hold off the other one, so he knew he had to make the most out of this opportunity. Edgar closed in on his opponent so aggressively he was basically defenseless.

"Prepare yourself!"

Between the sudden ambush and the student that was now attacking her, Kerhilt's irritation had reached its peak.

"You damn, stupid little brats!!! Don't you *dare* make light of us!"

Her Tellestarle's sword strike was so incredibly sharp and fearsome that her earlier confusion at its difficulty to control was almost unbelievable.

Earlcumber purposefully chose to intercept that strike with its own sword. The Tellestarle's power rivaled that of a modern mass-produced heavy unit. It of course overpowered Earlcumber. That was why Edgar didn't just rely on pure power, but added a further step-in to throw his unit's entire weight into the attack. For a moment, Earlcumber's sword matched the Tellestarle's in power, bringing both sides to a standstill. What he had just used was an anti-new-model technique that Edgar had formulated using his experience fighting them. Because it would lose its effect as soon as the opponent was wary of it, it couldn't be used too often. The technique had a lot of weaknesses too. That was why Edgar had chosen to teach his opponent a lesson with his first move. This standstill could be quickly broken by the Tellestarle by simply putting some extra power into it, but before that Earlcumber pushed with its sword, forcing both swords downward.

"Yooouu?!"

Earlcumber greatly pulled back its shield-bearing left arm before thrusting it at the Tellestarle. He was using a kite shield: a shield shaped like a kite with a pointed tip. Of course, it wasn't sharp at all, but it was still possible to use the thing as a simple blunt weapon. Of course, Edgar aimed for his opponent's arm. Not only did this part play a big role in the unit's attack capabilities, it was also the least durable part of any silhouette knight due to their construction.

The shield made contact with the Tellestarle's arm, causing a strange snapping noise from the machine's elbow. The temptation to follow up on this

attack flashed across Edgar's mind, but he instead quickly pulled back his unit. Immediately afterward, fire from a pair of back weapons hit the spot where Earlcumber had been.

"I guess it just won't go well..."

Edgar calmly observed his opponent. That led to him realizing a certain truth that twisted his young features. His opponent did not pick up on his shock, but there was no follow-up attack from the Tellestarle as it stowed its back weapons once again. The attack earlier failed to result in a mortal wound, and not only did Kerhilt's unit still seem to have the use of its arm, but it hadn't dropped its sword either. Seeing that the Tellestarle was only standing there creepily instead of flying into a rage, Edgar slipped from shock into wariness.

"I guess I should apologize, student."

Suddenly, he heard a voice from the Tellestarle. The words were said matter-of-factly, so Edgar couldn't detect any emotion behind the statement. This only caused him to grow more wary.

"Honestly, I underestimated you. You're only a student, after all. But it turns out you're quite the knight already."

With movements that could even be described as leisurely, the Tellestarle took a stance. This stance no longer showed any of the unnaturalness that had been present before. No matter how hard to control the machine was, Kerhilt had come a long way inside it, so she was now much more familiar with the machine's workings. Indeed, she wasn't the leader of the Copper Fang Knights for nothing—even though they weren't actual knights, the title would never be given to someone without the skills to back it up.

"As an apology, I'll show you something. I might have gotten dull these days, but...this is the Copper Snake's Fang!"

Before she finished speaking, a sword strike with even sharper movement than before attacked Earlcumber. This sudden strong counterblow took everything Earlcumber had to intercept it.

"So strong! I knew this wouldn't be easy!"

Earlcumber carefully measured its distance from its opponent; making sure to

keep its shield up as it tried to find its next move. Both silhouette knights moved at the same time, running while accompanied by the sounds of their roaring engines.



While listening to the sounds of Earlcumber and one of the Tellestarles fighting in the distance, the other Copper Fang Knight raised an angry shout, prompted by the fact that things weren't going as he'd hoped.

"Damn these things, flitting all over the place!"

He could hear the sounds of his enemies kicking off trees around him. These sounds echoed through the forest, making it hard for him to pinpoint their location. He swung his sword wildly out of irritation, but it didn't even graze his targets. Meanwhile, another huge bolt came flying from deep in the forest, sparking off the Tellestarle's outer skin.

This same pattern had been repeating this entire time. He was facing two enemies: one had a close-combat weapon and flitted among the trees, while the other would shoot fat spear-like arrows from a distance. Their teamwork was perfect; it was scary how in sync they were as they led the subordinate's unit by the nose.

His enemies were far smaller than a silhouette knight. However, that actually worked in their favor, allowing them to hide among the trees. The terrain supported their elusive attacks. Each separate attack wasn't much; silhouette knights weren't just huge lumps of metal, after all, they were strengthened by magic too, and so were far tougher than they looked. However, not even a silhouette knight could be armored everywhere. If in an unfortunate turn of events one of the attacks were to hit a joint, that would pose a threat even to something as powerful as a silhouette knight.

It wasn't as if each and every hit was deadly, but they were just dangerous enough that he couldn't afford to ignore them. Because the attackers were so small, he knew that he could defeat them if only he could hit them, but it turned out to be a mistake to underestimate his enemies in that way. When he aimed for the enemy that was moving around above him, a concentrated flurry of bolts flew at his unprotected back.

Unfortunately, he was piloting a Tellestarle—meaning he had silhouette arms equipped to his back. These weapons had very precise construction for their emblem graphs, and so were not very durable. There was no way they could endure the rain of bolts that flew at them, so once the piercing missiles hit them in succession, they ruined the emblem graph, thus rendering the silhouette arms useless.

Realizing what situation he was in, he tried to defend himself, but it was too late; he had already lost one of the largest advantages of the Tellestarle. After that, he made sure to keep defense well in mind, but that only led to the current situation, where he was being attacked one-sidedly.

The Copper Fang Knight adopted a ferocious expression like a fierce beast from his seat in the cockpit as he tried to think of a way to defeat these annoying, infuriating enemies. The ranged one was keeping a very cautious distance, and if he were to approach that one it would just run away somewhere. If he wanted to defeat one, he would have to start with the close-combat one. In order to do that, he had to either get it to stop somehow, or be able to properly catch sight of it. Otherwise, he would get nowhere. He somehow managed to rack his brain, which seemed like it would burn out from all the anger, and pondered a solution. Meanwhile, the attacks from his enemies continued, only throwing fuel into the flames of his fury.

Suddenly, a ray of moonlight stabbed through the trees, reaching the Tellestarle's eye crystal. It displayed on his holomonitor, giving the subordinate a quite literal and vivid flash of inspiration. His expression turned to one of a beast gazing at its prey, and, looking like he could lick his lips at any moment, he immediately acted upon his idea.

Having had his attack bounce off for the umpteenth time, Kid was getting fed up with the silhouette knight's toughness. Silhouette gears didn't have the attack power to break through the armor, since the power they exhibited was only within human levels. He had been trying to make up for this by using momentum and aiming for joints, but of course the Tellestarle wasn't so foolish as to just allow that to happen.

Edgar was right; we can only buy time. It's enough, but it's not really satisfying... Kid groused internally as he used his wire anchor to swing himself

like a pendulum and accelerate. The speed he built up also served to remove the arrowhead from the tree it was stuck in, allowing it to be used on the next tree. Realizing his mind was wandering, Kid forced himself to focus as he kicked off of the top of the tree he was in. The Tellestarle had blocked the bolt fired by Addy's gear, so its back was now facing him. He attacked, aiming for the shoulder joint, but as expected his attack was also blocked, thus ending in failure.

Kid tried to pull back, but the Tellestarle followed up with something that they had not seen so far in the fight. It started to go on a rampage, swinging its sword around wildly as if it had fallen to despair. Of course such random attacks wouldn't hit Kid's gear, but instead they hit the trees around it, and more importantly the tree branches, cutting through them easily due to the strand crystal tissue's power.

"What the heck? That's dangerous!"

Does he think he'll hit if he just lets his strength do the talking? Kid wondered, sensing the Tellestarle's knight runner's lack of patience and laughing quietly. *I know how you feel. I'm annoyed too since you won't go down.* The Tellestarle attacked over and over, felling several trees around it, but not enough to make it harder for Kid to move around. Having accelerated to a good speed, Kid in his gear once again assaulted the Tellestarle.

Kid's Motor Beat, having jumped into the cleared area, reflected the moonlight just as the Copper Fang Knight expected. It glittered brightly in the dark forest, clearly showing where it was to the subordinate.

"There you are! I finally found you!"

The subordinate, having been grieved by his two opponents for so long, swung his sword with all his might, filling it with all the begrudging feelings he had. To the Motor Beat, which had been using its size to its advantage in this forest, the situation was a fatal one. The sword would hit it before it would be able to kick off a tree to change course. The attack, having been polished by massive amounts of resentment, ironically proved to be by far the fiercest attack the man had pulled out so far.

"KIIIIIIID!!!" Addy shouted, her eyes wide. She wavered greatly on what to

do next, but a bolt from her Scorpius wouldn't make it, even if she fired immediately. So, she started running, driven by a faint hope.

Kid felt like all the blood in his body was flowing the wrong way as he glared at the giant's sword that was coming toward him with fearsome speed. That was when he had a certain thought, a thought about his teacher, Ernie. He remembered how he, the boy who boasted incredible nimbleness and almost inhuman magical prowess, moved. *Right, wasn't Ernie able to change directions in midair with nothing around him? Didn't I learn the spell to accelerate in midair using nothing but myself from him?*

A silhouette gear's construction consisted of a metal skeleton that was moved by crystal tissue. In addition, this crystal tissue acted as a catalyst, allowing magic to be cast through it.

"WooaaAAARRRAAAAGHGH!!!"

With a rousing shriek, Kid stuck out his gear's leg. Mana flooded through the crystal tissue that drove the leg forward, and at the same time a simple spell that was close to being just a basic elemental spell manifested on a grand scale. Kid hadn't the time nor leeway to properly control the magic, so the compressed air bubble basically just exploded. The spell that Ernie named Aero Thrust violently changed Kid's gear's heading, and it looked for all the world like he had bounced off of something invisible. The giant's sword, having been swung in a manner much like a rising diagonal slash, swept its overwhelming destructive power through the spot Kid's gear had been in just an instant before.

"Oowwaaaarrgghh?!"

Kid had evaded certain death by a hair's breadth, but he was nevertheless helpless in the air. He was different from Ernie, who danced through the air all the time. Having used a movement option he wasn't used to, Kid obviously could not follow that up properly. He had sent himself into a tailspin as he flew through the air, but in a bid to bring himself back into the fight, he forced his wire anchor into firing position and shot.

Luckily, the wire anchor hit a tree and affixed itself. Kid, in his desperation, clung onto the idea that he would be able to regain his footing once he wound

up the wire. But, before he could do that, in a stroke of bad luck the wire anchor's wire had spooled out to its maximum length as he had continued to fly.

"Mnggraghh!"

Once the wire reached its limit, Kid was pulled to a stop and felt a very strong shock as his gear's heading once again was changed with extreme urgency. With the wire anchor fixed in place, Kid's gear was at its mercy and flew through the air around the trees. While confused and unable to protect himself from the centrifugal force, he saw that he was nearing the ground at quite a high speed. This caused him to scream as he desperately righted himself, using a well-controlled cast of Aero Thrust this time to slow himself down. After all, his forceful use of it last time didn't work out so well. Additionally, he added in a cast of Air Suspension, another one of Ernie's originals that he had been taught, to create a cushion of atmosphere to cushion his landing. Kid had just barely managed a nice and soft landing instead of being dashed on the ground.

"Whoa...that was close... Seriously close..."

Because he had activated several spells at reckless power levels in quick succession, Kid's breathing became ragged, as if he was having a coughing fit. While trying to calm his heart that was also beating so fast it was like it was screaming, Kid unsteadily stood up. It wasn't just the loss of mana, he was also feeling relief over escaping a potentially fatal situation; this was all made clear by how his body shook.

However, the situation wouldn't allow him to catch his breath. He could hear something heavy with a huge presence drawing closer to him from the sound of footfalls and the shaking of the earth.

Of course, the Tellestarle had seen all of what had just transpired. The Copper Fang Knight would normally have figured Kid for dead, and that it was only a matter of time until his enemy crashed into the ground, but he had recognized the twins as annoying enough foes to not let his guard down until he was sure they were dead. He had approached to deal the finishing blow himself.

There was no other choice but to run. Kid forced a deep breath to calm down his breathing, and once that was done he again started moving his silhouette

gear. The moment he tried to use his wire anchor to get going, he felt shock as he looked down at his machine's arm. While he had been hurtling through the air, the wire anchor had gotten caught in more than one tree and now was in an unusable state. Even if he pulled on the wire, it wouldn't move at all. Kid gnashed his teeth as he tore the wire spooler from his arm. At this point, it was nothing but a hindrance.

In order to gain as much distance from the giant that was attacking him as possible, Kid squeezed out his last bit of strength and started running.

Addy's gear ran through the forest, kicking up dirt as it went. While moving, she aimed her Scorpius at the Tellestarle that was chasing Kid, launching bolt after bolt as fast as she could. Unfortunately, reality was heartless, and the bolts all bounced off the silhouette knight's armor. Far away from stopping the thing, they didn't even have any visible effect. In this state, where both sides were moving, she couldn't hope for any useful damage outside of a massive stroke of luck and coincidence.

Addy gnashed her teeth, trying to bite down on the irritation and impatience that were rising within her as she continued firing her ballista. All the while, she wished and prayed for her enemy to stop. The Tellestarle closed in on Kid's gear with the manner of a starving beast. It even looked like it would lick the helpless prey that was in front of it all over. Kid's gear was clearly spent, and was in no shape to run away. The only one that could stop the Tellestarle in this situation and save Kid was Addy. With a prayer, she continued her attacks.

However, her prayers went unanswered.

The Tellestarle had completely cornered Kid's gear, and was rushing at him to finish him off, its sword once again raised up in the air. In a few more steps, it would be in range to hit Kid with its sword. The Tellestarle started to make its final step.

Addy's vision filled with tears as she grew resigned to Kid's fate, and a smile deepened on her face, telling of the pleasure she would derive from exacting revenge on the pilot of the Tellestarle. But then, something happened that no one would have expected. There was a certain something in between Kid's fleeing gear and the pursuing Tellestarle. It was the wire anchor that Kid had

torn off his gear. The wire was wrapped tight around a tree and was at silhouette gear height—in short, it was at just the height to hit the Tellestarle's feet.

The Tellestarle stepped forward, not paying any attention to its surroundings, and the wire wrapped around its ankle. The wire, which was so fixed in place not even the Tellestarle moved it, mercilessly arrested all of the giant's movement. This could have been considered an unavoidable weak point for silhouette knights, who were bipedal just like humans. The Tellestarle, who had completely shifted its center of gravity already, had its leg pulled out from under it, so its own momentum caused it to fall forward.

The blood had rushed to its pilot's head, so he couldn't react right away. The way the Tellestarle fell forward was almost beautiful, and its head crashed into a tree, making a dull snapping sound. It had basically charged into the tree at full speed; with its head bent at an angle that would likely have killed a normal human, the giant fell to the ground with a loud thud and a large cloud of dust.

For a long while, it seemed like everything had frozen. Then, "Uhh...this... What happened?"

Kid had watched the whole thing play out behind him, his mouth agape the entire time in a foolish expression. The Tellestarle that fell, causing the huge thud, did not move after that. It simply lay in the dirt cloud of its own making.

"Kid! Kid! Are you okay?! You alive?!"

After a small delay, Addy ran to Kid's side. She checked how Kid was doing as he was busy standing in a daze before letting out a large, deep sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness, I thought you were done for! Agggghh, jeez, I'm so glad! But wow, you're amazing, Kid! To think you set a trap like this while you were running away!"

"Mwuh? Uh...huh? Ahh...yeah, I guess? It was no biggie."

Kid let out a dry laugh as he looked diagonally up and off into the distance. Meanwhile, Addy looked overjoyed, and she displayed it with huge arm gestures.

"Anyway, I guess we should clean this guy up properly." With that, Kid

clenched his fist, which was still trembling a little.



The Tellestarle fell.

Even before hitting the tree on the way down, the pilot was tossed about in his seat just like his machine was, and had fallen into intense confusion, unable to understand what had happened. He had no time to try and brace himself or intercept his fall, so the Tellestarle proceeded to slam into the ground. Though its collision with the tree softened the unit's momentum somewhat, an extreme amount of falling damage was still transmitted to the knight runner inside the cockpit. The impact, which felt like it speared right through his guts, forced the air out of his lungs and caused him to cough heavily. Because he was secured in his fixed seat, he managed to get away with just being tossed around a little, but if he hadn't been he might have been thrown bodily around the cockpit and turned into mincemeat.

Once the machine stopped, he shook his head to clear up the hazy fog that had settled over his consciousness before desperately trying to get a grip on the situation. The image being displayed on the holomonitor was incredibly warped, most likely because the head had taken catastrophic damage during the fall. In fact, it looked like the image feed could cut out at any time. It was so bad he couldn't get a read on how damaged the rest of the body was; the only thing he could sense, thanks to the vibrations being transmitted into his seat, was that the reactor was still fine.

At any rate, standing back up had to be his first priority. Whipping his hurt body into action, he reached out to the control yokes. That was when he heard the sharp hissing of air jets. The light went out on his holomonitor as the entire torso section opened. In exchange, the cold night air rushed in and he was able to actually view his surroundings.

The first thing he saw was the moon. With how dazed he was, he simply sat and looked at it for a small while. The moon was almost a perfect sphere tonight, and it was terribly bright. But suddenly, someone's shadow obstructed his view. While his thoughts were still jumbled, all he noticed was that it was the same large armor that he had been fighting.

“Punishing finisher punch!”

The last thing he remembered before everything went blank was a shrill, young voice, and a huge fist that took up his entire field of vision.



The scene shifts, once again, to Fort Casadesus.

After Kerhilt, the leader of the Copper Fang Knights, got away safely with the Tellestarles that were her objective, the remaining members were stuck keeping the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit company, and the fight continued. After all, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit was boiling with fury over having their fort trashed like this by the raiders, and were attacking with the clear intent to annihilate them all. If the Copper Fang Knights were to turn their backs to run, they would simply be stabbed by countless swords. It would basically be suicide. There was no other choice for the raiders than to fight.

Unexpectedly, though, the battle was even. Of course, the main reasons for this were the two new models that had remained. The units were extremely hard to control, but their specs more than made up for that. As they say, unruly horses run far. The Order of the Scarlet Rabbit could not contain their irritation at how well their enemies were holding on.

Then, *something* happened. A gust of wind ran through the battlefield that was swirling with explosions and fire. The wind was a vivid blue, so blue it reflected even the red of the fires around it—it was Ernesti in his Motor Beat. He made full use of his wire anchor to fly around the outer walls of the fortress, observing the situation. From his vantage point above, it was easy to differentiate friend from enemy. The ones arranging themselves around the Tellestarles were enemies.

Immediately, he danced over to the nearest Kaldatoah. Silhouette gears were a size larger than humans, but they were still only a fourth the size of a silhouette knight. Because of that, he managed to get in close without being noticed, touching down gently on one of the Kaldatoah’s shoulders.

“Good evening, Mr. Thief. Sorry to keep you waiting, please allow me to take part in this battle festival.”

The raider, who had kept his entire attention on his knight order opponents, was completely taken aback by the sudden appearance of the armored knight on his holomonitor. Before he could make sense of the situation, the Motor Beat that was already so close covered the silhouette knight's eye with its hand. To a silhouette knight, the head was basically just equipment to allow sight; a housing to point and protect the eye crystal. Of course, the armored helmets and faceplates all heavily protected the important organ.

However, it was possible for a Motor Beat, which was far smaller than a silhouette knight, to attack the eye directly by sticking the hand into the gap between the faceplate and helmet. Ernie had gotten so close that the eye couldn't properly focus on him, and all it could see now aside from his blurry hand was the faint but unique light of magic. The magic being invoked was an intermediate fire spell that outpaced Fireball in terms of firepower: Flame Strike. No matter how tough a silhouette knight's armor was, it wouldn't be able to resist an attack that directly hit its internals. Swirling red flames enveloped the Kaldatoah's sight, which was the last thing it saw before the holomonitor's light went out. Its eye crystal had been destroyed. With the holomonitor's light gone, the cockpit was immediately bathed in darkness. This sent the raider into a fearful panic.

Having fallen into confusion, the Kaldatoah started to thrash around. But before it could do that, the Motor Beat on top of it shot its wire anchor and pulled itself to a nearby Tellestarle, looking for all the world like a pendulum. While making minute adjustments to his heading using Aero Thrust, Ernie proceeded to charge in at his chosen target's knee within the span of a breath. By the time the Tellestarle noticed that something had coiled around it, the Motor Beat had already fired tens of Piercing Lances with great precision at the back of the unit's knee. Explosions blossomed at the joint, where the armor was thin, and the Tellestarle's knee was destroyed. The Motor Beat threw in a hard kick to try and finish off the machine, which caused the Tellestarle to lose its balance and fall over.

Seeing one of the new Tellestarles and an ally suddenly fall over one after the other, the Copper Fang Knights were thrown into confusion. The Order of the Scarlet Rabbit were similar in that they also didn't know what was going on, but

they could at least see a strange blue suit of armor going on a rampage.

After another Kaldatoah's knee was destroyed, the Copper Fang Knights finally noticed the strange suit of armor that was flying around them. Flustered, they rushed to destroy it, swinging their swords. However, before the giants' swords could reach their target, the blue armor seemed to be pulled by something and disappeared from their sight. The Motor Beat had jumped to the outer wall of the fort and proceeded to run up it before attacking the remaining Tellestarle from directly above—its blind spot. The Motor Beat, seeming to appear out of the darkness, used Air Suspension to land on the silhouette knight's shoulder.

At that time, the Tellestarle happened to be using its back weapons to keep the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit in check. Seeing that, Ernie's face formed a wide grin. After all, he was the inventor of the back weapon and the one who knew the most about its function and construction. He could think of any number of ways to take advantage of that knowledge. With a deft sense of balance, he quickly maneuvered over to the back weapons and grabbed the sub-arms that were holding on to them. Then, he destroyed the "hand" part of the sub-arms, leaving the silver nerves still intact and connected as he lifted the silhouette arms up. While dexterously controlling his Motor Beat, Ernie swung around the silhouette arms that were taller than his entire body with all his might. He stopped once the tip was touching that of the other silhouette arms and locked both in place.

There was no way for the knight runner inside to know that a disaster had been set up above him. He didn't hesitate to depress the trigger on his control yoke. The silhouette arms, after receiving the mana they needed to fire, manifested overspells at their tips. These tips were now touching thanks to Ernie, so of course this resulted in an immediate explosion that destroyed its origin and spread a powerful shock wave through the area. The Tellestarle itself, seeing the explosion go off right before its eyes, was flung bodily before the pilot could realize what had happened. Once it crashed into the ground, it didn't move again.

"And there she blows!"

Ernie, who should have been on the Tellestarle's shoulder, was instead

cheerfully mouthing off as he performed a beautiful somersault away from his victim, landing on the ground as if nothing had happened. Finally, after having had their numbers whittled down, the Copper Fang Knights' resistance disappeared as if it had all been a dream. It didn't take long for them to be annihilated.



Morten couldn't hold down the deep sigh that came out of him, filled with many things including exasperation. They should have been having trouble with the raiders. However, the enemies had been dealt with as if they were a joke through completely absurd means. Not only that, but this was all done by something that looked like a miniature of a real silhouette knight. If this wasn't ridiculous, what would be? He couldn't think of any other descriptor that fit. Morten had barely managed to hold on until the end, and once he noticed the identity of the person who climbed out of the blue armor after the fighting was finished, he couldn't help but look up to the sky.

"Ahh...so it was Ernesti."

Morten had to try really hard not to let his exhaustion show in his voice. Ernie, having opened up his Motor Beat, was terrifying—truly terrifying. His face was lit with a red tint by the fires all around, and he looked extremely satisfied, as if he'd just finished a job well done.

"Hello, sir captain of the knight order. Sorry for being late. It took some effort to secure a machine."

That's not the problem! Morten wanted to shout, but he forcefully swallowed the words as they welled up in his throat.

"Hm, don't worry about that... First, allow me to express my thanks for your help with those troublesome enemies. There's a lot I want to ask, but that can wait. At any rate, now that the ones here have been cleaned up, we need to go chase after the ones that ran...but we might not be able to catch up."

While stroking the perfectly trimmed beard he was so proud of, Morten crossed his arms. The thieves that had stolen the Tellestarles had a good head start given how long ago they'd run. It was only natural to assume that they'd gotten far enough that the knights wouldn't be able to catch up.

“In regards to that, I have something to report to you, sir knight captain. Students from Laihiala happened to encounter the running Tellestarles. They thought that the sudden appearance of Tellestarles was strange, so they tried to ask what the raiders were doing, but they were attacked without a word. They are currently engaging in battle with the raiders, or so I hear. That should have slowed them down considerably. There is a good possibility they haven’t gone as far as you think.”

Ernie couldn’t see it, but Morten once again had the smile of a fierce predator on his face. Or more specifically, the expression of a hunter who had cornered his prey. Heimerwort turned to the surviving Kaldatoahs.

“You heard him. I will now pursue the thieves that ran. However, I can’t just abandon the fort after all the damage it’s taken. I order all of you to stay here and guard it.”

Out of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s forces, which was a total of three companies, there was only twenty percent of that left in the fort. Destroying the enemy also meant destroying their own forces, which was the most hateful part of the raiders’ plan. The few remaining Kaldatoahs were all damaged, so they would be a little unreliable in battle. Thus, they would be left behind to guard the fort while the essentially untouched Heimerwort, who was also the order’s single greatest unit, would go out to chase the thieves. They had no leeway at all to do anything else.

“Now then, Ernesti, as you can see, we’re low on hands. I would like to have you guide me in that weird shrimpy little armor, but...”

“Yes, of course, don’t worry about it. Whether it be guiding or helping, I’ll do it all.”

Leaving behind the Kaldatoah squads who saluted as they left, Heimerwort and the Motor Beat ran along the road at fearsome speeds.



The distant sound of steel striking steel stopped.

Dietrich pushed down the mix of anxiety and hope that was welling from his heart, his well-shaped eyebrows rising slightly. He stepped harder on his

stirrups, ordering Guaire to run faster. His refused to let up his speed, which was almost suicidal during the night when he could only rely on what light was provided by the moon. Every once in a while, the unit's bent armor caught or scraped against itself, the sounds mixing with the heavy thuds of Dee's steel giant's footfalls and spreading sparks when they did.

Before entering the forest, Guaire had been forced into a grappling match by one of the Tellestarles. Dietrich had lost his temper and deployed his back weapons without thought for the damage he would incur himself. By doing so, he had gained freedom for a moment. But the Tellestarle that should have been half-destroyed didn't give up, continuing to get in Guaire's way. The Tellestarle resolutely obstructed Guaire even though it was pretty much dead already, and Guaire was stalled for longer than expected thanks to its persistence. Though the red knight hadn't taken much damage, in terms of time lost it had been hit badly.

Though it took some time, Dee eventually took the Tellestarle down, and he immediately switched to tracking down the Tellestarles that ran by following Earlcumber's footsteps. The silhouette knights had run all over Acquart Forest, leaving behind marks and other signs of their clashing, so it wasn't very hard to follow them. All Dee had to do was hurry.

After having run for some time, Guaire suddenly entered a clearing. Though, after looking closer, it was obvious that this clearing hadn't been here before. There were signs of the trees around having been cut down, with some even having been snapped in two before falling to the ground. The devastation told of how fierce the battle here had been. While shaking away the terrible premonition that was crawling up his spine, Dietrich quickly surveyed the area once more. At a glance, he could see darkly colored trees and speckled undergrowth. Then, he went through everything one by one until he finally spotted something on his holomonitor: a speck of white in this otherwise night-colored landscape. There was only one thing that could be white in this area.

"Edgar! I was looking for you! What happened to the Tellesta—"

Dietrich approached that bit of white he saw, but as he did he trailed off. He noticed that the giant figure was slumped against a tree, not moving. And the moment he confirmed that it was Earlcumber, his breath caught in his throat.

The machine's formerly spotless, pure white armor was now warped as the outcome of a fierce battle, turning it into a much duller color. Furthermore, it was missing its right arm, and a piece of its torso armor had been ripped off. It had probably taken a slash starting from the shoulder down. Its limp left arm was still holding on to a shield that had been scarred either by explosion or by more slashes, and was even now swaying in the wind. Aside from that, its legs were comparatively intact. That meant Earlcumber had stayed standing defiantly until the end.

However, the machine's torso had been punched through. The sword that had been left stabbed all the way into the trunk of the tree spoke most eloquently about the loss Earlcumber had suffered. Most likely, the result had been close to simultaneous destruction. The sword that was stuck in Earlcumber's gut was still being gripped by a severed arm that had belonged to a Tellestarle. Dee strained his ears, and he could hear something rattling around irregularly inside the machine that was now still. The ether reactor didn't sound perfectly fine, but it seemed it hadn't ceased to function just yet.



Seeing Earlcumber so still, Dietrich couldn't hide his panic as he ran over.

He gasped, "Edgar! Hey, answer me! Are you okay?!"

A hard-to-describe emotion grabbed hold of Dietrich's heart. It wasn't as if knight runners always took as much damage as their silhouette knights, but since silhouette knights were humanoid it was hard not to imagine that the pilot inside would be just as damaged. Some time after Dietrich's scream, Earlcumber slowly moved its head awkwardly, as if the joint was rusted. Half the armor protecting the head was bent out of shape, so the eye crystal in its dark, cracked-open eye socket wobbled as it looked at him.

"Urgh...Dee? Sorry, the Tellestarle got away..."

"Oh, yeah... I see. More importantly, are you okay?! Wait a second, I'll get you to the fortress right away..."

Dietrich breathed a sigh of relief as he made that suggestion, but Edgar stopped him with a sharp tone.

"Dee! Earlcumber's reactor is damaged heavily so it can't move, but it's not in danger of destroying itself. As for me, I'm a little bruised, but I'm fine. More importantly, it hasn't been that long, so you need to chase down that Tellestarle!"

Instantly, conflicting emotions rose within Dee. Was it really okay to go and chase after the enemy when Earlcumber was so clearly damaged and in need of help, right in front of him? Edgar claimed he was fine, but that didn't mean he actually was. Dietrich hesitated to leave and chase the Tellestarle, given their long friendship and rivalry in the knight runner department.

"Dee, we can't allow them to escape after all this. There's just one more, please!"

Dee hesitated for a moment more, but... "I understand. Leave it to me!"

What gave him the resolve needed for that last step was, in the end, his friend's words. The strong will embedded within them struck his heart and drove away all Dietrich's doubts. Edgar's will, shown by fighting in Earlcumber to the point of near destruction, couldn't be ignored. Dee saw that his friend

hadn't yet given up, so neither could he. Once more, Dee gave a deep nod from Guaire before quickly turning around and running into the forest to chase the Tellestarle.



While listening to Guaire's fading footsteps, Edgar's expression had been a constant pained grimace, but he forced a smile. Guaire was already gone from his holomonitor, which only showed a warped view of the outside, and though he couldn't actually hear his friend any longer he imagined he could by straining his ears.

"I'm counting on you, Dee. I'll just...be resting here...a little longer..."

Edgar let out a long breath as he bit down a pained groan. Then, he relaxed into his seat. Without the time to even wipe off the drops of blood that were falling from his forehead, he once again sunk into the darkness of unconsciousness.



Inside the dim forest, a red silhouette knight ran like the wind. Dietrich was keeping down his blossoming panic with the power of pure rage as he spurred his beloved partner on. Guaire had already drawn its swords and deployed its back weapons. Dee was fully ready to unleash the white-hot blades of his fury to send the Tellestarle to the afterlife the moment he saw it.

Even while running, he could see from various traces left behind by the Tellestarle that it was doing very badly. As expected, the damage Earlcumber had managed to inflict on the Tellestarle was not light. Guaire was in a position to put its opponent in checkmate.

"With this much damage, it can't have gone far! Where is it?!"

After running a while more, Dietrich's senses, which had been sharpened by time spent in battle, picked up something. There was a shadow writhing ahead of him, where the traces left in the forest led.

"That's...no, that's not a Tellestarle?!"

Dietrich's intuition told him immediately that it wasn't the enemy he was

looking for. The presence he was feeling was different—and more *numerous*. It seemed they had noticed Guaire's approach as well, as they let out a low growl before crawling forward under the cover of the darkness.

The identity of these shadows: monsters.

Given their size, they were no doubt duel-class. On top of that, they were in a pack. The trail the Tellestarle left behind went right through these monsters before seeming to disappear.

“What the...heck? What *are* these things?!”

Out of everything that could have happened, the traces he was following had been ravaged by these squirming monsters, and now it would be near impossible to follow what was left. The pursuing students, who were one step from checkmate, were waylaid by an unexpected ambush and had fallen short.

Dietrich started to get a headache from how angry he was getting. He was so angry that he was literally seeing red. But because he was so worked up, he didn't realize how unnatural the situation was.

He was facing many monsters *of different species*. Monster was a general term which included many different species within it. Normally, it was unthinkable for different ones to gather and act as a group. After all, they each had their own territories and nests and whatnot. In short, the group that was blocking Dee's way was very abnormal.

Several of the monsters lowered their bodies and attempted to intimidate Guaire. The monsters here hadn't just grouped together, they were all strangely excited; several of them were even baring their fangs and intimidating the others.

So what would happen if a giant giving off a presence dyed in anger were to appear? Beasts tended to be sensitive to what was around them. The monsters, acting on instinct, identified the giant that had stood still for a moment due to anger and confusion as an enemy, so they ran forth in a crazed dash.

Knowing that he had made a mistake and shown a fatal opening, Dietrich gnashed his molars and prepared to fight the monsters that were coming at him. The blood that was rushing through his boiling head had now slightly

calmed down. The part of him that was still composed enough to understand the situation smoothly transformed his anger into an impulse to attack. Guaire was already prepared to annihilate its target instantly, so it was also plenty prepared to show its combat prowess now. A powerful slash ended the life of a firedancer tiger that was leaping toward it, and it dealt with the next monster that was lagging only a little behind with a shot from its Shotel.

While finishing off the monsters, Dee came upon a certain truth, and his face scrunched up. He didn't have the time to pay attention to these numerous monsters when he needed to chase the Tellestarle. On top of that, the traces it left behind—his last ray of hope—had already been trampled over and nearly erased by monsters. Even if he was able to forcefully break through this pack of monsters, it wasn't likely he would be able to catch up to his target. So, should he simply skirt around this group? There were a lot of them spread out over a wide area; just imagining the size of the detour he would have to take was ridiculous. Furthermore, even if he was able to avoid combat with the monsters, he had no lead on where to find the Tellestarle. And Dee was in no way optimistic enough to believe he could randomly come upon his enemy by wandering around in this huge forest.

So she got away... That thought settled in Dietrich's heart like a lump of ice. At the same time, he felt like some sort of splinter had stabbed into his heart and was crawling around. From the bottom of his heart, he cursed the "coincidence" that brought these monsters to get in his way.

No matter how much blood rushed to Dietrich's head, he wouldn't just charge into a pack of monsters. But still, the situation progressed. While he was standing there, the scent of blood from the monsters he'd defeated spread. That scent reached other monsters, which drove them even deeper into their frenzy. Then, they moved to the source of the smell.

As a result, they found the red knight.

Seeing all the monsters appear one by one from the depths of the forest, Dietrich let out a curse-laden groan. He gritted his teeth and had Guaire retreat, but it was far too late for that. At that point, he had already lost the option to leave. Armored bears and firedancer tigers advanced on him. He couldn't get away. He had no choice but to fight somewhere. His enemies were numerous. If

they were to rush him all at once, it would be dangerous for Guaire, even if it was a new model now. While falling back, he cautiously tried to measure when to fight back.

Of course, the quadrupedal monsters proved to be faster than Guaire, which was bipedal, and they eventually managed to get within range to strike. Once the monsters seemed about to attack from behind, Guaire stopped and proceeded to spin with its swords out, like a bladed tornado. The overflowing power that was the specialty of the new model made each slash fatal. Guaire paid no attention to the fact that a firedancer tiger was thrown bodily away after being intercepted midair, and continued to shoot its Shotels to keep the monsters in the rear in check. Guaire saw that the monsters were getting confused after being caught up in the shock waves caused by his spell fire, so it once again retreated to try and create some leeway.

However, it was stopped when something pulled its arm suddenly and with incredible force. Looking back, Guaire saw that a blunt dragon had approached from the side and bit into its left arm. No normal silhouette knight could match the power of such a brawny monster. However, while Guaire did not *lose* in power, it couldn't help but be trapped. Dee had made a painful blunder, and now the monsters had regrouped and were once again on the attack. Dietrich let out a moan as if he had gone back to his old self. He wondered how many he could take down with his silhouette arms before they got too close. After a deep breath, his fighting spirit won out over resignation.

That was when the roar of something flying at high speeds passed over Guaire's head several times.

A huge number of giant spear-like bolts flew into the faces and legs of the approaching monsters, as if to say weight of fire was far more important than aim. Several monsters fell over in agony. Seeing that, Dietrich took the opportunity to relieve the blunt dragon of its head and free his unit's arm. Having regained freedom in such a tight spot, Guaire finally caught sight of large suits of armor that were standing on top of a tree. There were two Motor Beats. In his memory, there were only three people that could properly use those things, and two of them had come to his rescue.

"We came to reinforce you, Dee! Get back!"

“Why’re there so many monsters?! Agghh, you’re all in the way!”

The two of them—the twins Kid and Addy—made no attempt to hide how already fed up they were with the number of monsters as they fired a large volley of bolts out of their Scorpiuses. It was like the monsters had run into a line of braced spears, and they died while letting out pained screams. The crowd of monsters lost coherence, buying Dietrich time that was more precious than gold, but...

“Ahhh... Sorry, Dee. We’re out of bolts now. You should run.”

“It’s more than enough, thanks for the help. You two should be the ones to fall back.”

The twins had pulled out all the stops in their fight with their own Tellestarle, so they didn’t have many resources left; that last bit of heroism had drained them. Dietrich took a slow, deep breath. The support from his underclassmen had doused his overblown temper, returning enough composure to him to allow him to think of the situation with a wider view. Guaire resumed its careful retreat, but to Kid, it didn’t look like the red knight was moving with enough speed.

“If you don’t hurry up, they’ll catch up to you!”

“Yeah, that’s true. Unfortunately, I just remembered that Edgar’s fallen back this way. If I retreat too far, he’ll get caught up in it. Seems we’ll need to put these things down before that happens.”

“Edgar?! Oh no, we can’t let that happen! We’ll help too!” Addy shouted.

They were very enthusiastic about the defense, but the only weapon left to the twins was a two-handed sword. Also, the wire anchor on Kid’s gear was broken. Either way, it wasn’t enough to oppose the crowded masses of monsters in front of them. Their addition would be a drop in the bucket.

“You’re out of bolts, right? Thanks to you two, the monsters have scattered. I can do something about this by myself.”

That was exactly why Dietrich made a calmly measured reply. There was neither panic, anger, nor really any other emotion in his voice. It seemed he wouldn’t be allowed to run very easily. Either way, the monsters were hated

obstacles that stood in the way of him chasing the thieves. The fact that he had to fight them really just meant he no longer had to worry whether or not to fight them. He was actually feeling relieved to not have a choice.

“So you two go take Edgar and fall back. Don’t worry, you can leave—”

“Then allow me to accompany you instead.”

Before the twins could reply, worry on their faces, another reply came from a completely unexpected direction. Right afterward, the owner of the voice flew over their heads. It was a blue figure that did not hesitate at all to stand before the multitudes of attacking monsters. The figure was familiar, and the moment he recognized the figure’s identity, all the negative emotions Dietrich was feeling got blown away. The ends of his mouth couldn’t stop twitching. Meanwhile, from above, Kid and Addy high-fived each other and raised their voices in a cheer.

The newcomer from behind them—Ernesti in his blue silhouette gear, smiled fearlessly as he watched the mass of monsters approach him, the earth rumbling underneath their feet.

“By the way, can I get a rundown of the situation? The running pre—*ahem*, Tellestarles...where have they gone? And what’s with the pre—*ahem*, monsters here?”

Seeing him full of motivation from the get-go, a memory came unbidden to Dietrich’s mind, overlapping with the current situation. Just like before, this boy was happily charging into situations that would drive anyone else to despair, even if that situation was a gigantic monster. He was sure that the kid would do as he pleased here as well, and these monsters would never be able to stop him. At some point during this flashback, he adopted a wry smile.

“I ran into them while chasing a Tellestarle. Its footprints went further, but...they’ve already been effectively erased. I can’t tell where they lead to. I have no idea why all these monsters are here. They’re also the ones that erased the Tellestarle’s tracks, so I’m pissed. By the way, Edgar has fallen behind us, so we need to stop the monsters here.”

“I see. In other words, it’s time to take out our anger on them, right?”

“Yeah, uh...that’s fine for now, I guess. I’m counting on you to go all out, just like with the behemoth.”

“Understood.”

The blue Motor Beat was completely unfazed by the approaching horde of monsters, and it didn’t hesitate to rush forward, right into the middle of the crowd. Compared to a silhouette gear, duel-class monsters were very large, so the incoming horde was like a tidal wave. The blue suit of armor, which was infinitesimally small by comparison, looked like it would get swallowed by the wave with no recourse.

But before that could happen, a bursting sound could be heard at the Motor Beat’s feet as it suddenly accelerated. Suddenly, it was off like a bullet, slipping in between the monsters. Of course, it wasn’t just passing by; each time the Motor Beat went past a monster the light of magic twinkled, and a fire bullet manifested before being shot into said monster’s face. Having had their snouts or faces burned, the monsters writhed and rampaged. In an instant, the entire mass had been overtaken by confusion.

Even though he knew they had no margin for error, Dietrich wanted to put his hand to his forehead and look up to the heavens. He knew that Ernie would do this, and as expected it was terrible. But among it all, Dee came upon a certain truth. It was true that the Motor Beat was moving freely among the horde and confusing it. However, if he looked at it the other way around, that also meant that confusing them was all it could do. It didn’t have the power necessary to defeat a duel-class monster.

Since that was the case, it was Dee’s role to finish them off. Guaire activated its back weapons and readied its two swords. Knowing he couldn’t afford to let this chance go, the red knight ran toward the few monsters that seemed to be breaking out of the confused tussle. As he was about to intercept those monsters, he was interrupted by a roaring gust of wind.

“NUOOARRGGHHYAAAH!”

The sound it made was like an explosion, and it was followed by a lump of metal that swung, creating its own sound like a fierce beast’s roar as it hit the monsters. It wasn’t just power, but mass as well that lent momentum to this

deadly attack that pulped the monsters like they were tomatoes, sending their corpses back into the forest.

Dietrich was utterly amazed at the display as Heimerwort continued to swing its hammer, throwing monsters about and producing incredible noises as its weapon cut through the wind. Any monsters that attacked it were made into paste, regardless of what they were.

“Hrm, I had heard that students were the ones chasing the new models, but to think you wouldn’t take even a single step back in the face of all these monsters! That spirit is commendable. Though I alone may not be worth much, allow me to help!”

Heimerwort continued to manipulate its hammer, turning monsters one by one into mincemeat as if it were working at a factory. Meanwhile, Morten made light small talk. Though it wasn’t a new model, Heimerwort was solidly armored and very effective in large brawls like this. Furthermore, because it was on the heavy side, it boasted power comparable to the new model anyway and used that to dispose of the monsters around it. With the appearance of a powerful ally, Guaire nevertheless did not slack off. While using the storm zone that was Heimerwort as a shield, it buried monsters in a hit-and-run style, taking opportunities as they presented themselves.

At that time, the horde of monsters numbered in the several tens, climbing higher than the number that attacked Darier village. Ernie, Kid, and Addy’s silhouette gears paid no mind to their numbers, though, as they ran freely among the horde, sowing confusion and breaking them up into smaller groups for Heimerwort and Guaire to take care of. Nobody could stop them, but as one might have expected, it took some time to end so many. By the time the fight was over, the eastern sky was starting to lighten.



Ernie opened up his Motor Beat and took a look around. The part of the forest that had become their battlefield was now in shambles. Trees had fallen, the ground had been gouged up, and everywhere was littered with large beast corpses. Heimerwort and Guaire, who had defeated so many of them, were also at the breaking point for fatigue, from their armor to their weapons.

“Let’s...go back to the fortress.”

Ernie spoke to Guaire, who was still acting like he was in battle, quietly declaring the end.

“I knew it, it’s impossible...isn’t it?”

“Even if we wanted to give chase, too much time has passed. Not to mention, look around. We won’t be able to even tell what direction the thief took off in. We’re also exhausted, so even giving chase would be very hard.”

“It’s frustrating, but if that’s the case, we should call for help from somewhere else and—”

Dietrich tried to find some sort of lifeline, but Ernie shook his head.

“The damage to Fort Casadesus is so extensive, I would question whether they would even be able to mount a response in decent time. Not only that, but given how much effort the thieves went through, I don’t believe they’ll simply be running. If they’ve got some sort of diversion or camouflage ready, there won’t be anything we can do. I’ll try to make preparations, but as for whether it’ll help...”

With that, Dee released the stiff grip he had on his control yokes, and quietly pulled a lever. While playing a sad melody from its crystals, Guaire stowed its back weapons. The red knight also sheathed both its swords, and with a slow gait turned to head for the fortress.

The tumultuous night of the raid had passed, and dawn broke. Rays of light chased away the darkness from the forest, and accordingly the marks of destruction left in Acquart Forest became apparent. Every person involved in this incident, without exception, was exhausted, and all that was left behind was a destroyed forest and many casualties. The few Kaldatoahs remaining in Fort Casadesus were all at the peak of their fatigue, but they forced themselves to continue working. Though Fort Casadesus was on fire for a time, luckily, thanks to its stone construction, the fire did not spread to the insides of the buildings, leaving their function intact. However, the combat contingent in the fortress was a mess. There had been extreme losses to both people and silhouette knights.

Duke Cnut Dixgard took a seat in the high-ranking strategic meeting room. Though he was older now, he had nevertheless not lost any of his sharpness of mind as his expression made the wrinkles on his face grow deeper. Because the incident had taken place throughout the night, most of the people in Fort Casadesus, including him, had not slept a wink. At his age, he was bordering on being just old, so staying up through the night working would normally be a bit much, but from the sound of his voice, he didn't seem weakened by the lack of sleep at all.

“For damage to the actual fortress, including the destruction of the gate, we have suffered only about twenty percent losses. As for personnel, we have lost quite a lot of people, but the biggest problem is that our silhouette knight forces are pretty much nonexistent now.”

Cnut had collated all the damage reports for the fortress from his subordinates, and he was unable to hold back a sigh as he confirmed them for a second time. In a single night, the fortress had effectively been driven to destruction.

Thieves, huh? I have no idea where they're from, but they were infuriating in the extreme... Still, I suppose we were the ones who had let our guard down.

As far as Cnut knew, it had been more than a hundred years since silhouette knights were sent to bring down a fortress. Other than the fact that there was no benefit from doing so, another large reason for this was that the terrain served as a shield, thanks to the Auviner Mountain Range preventing other countries from interfering.

From a political standpoint, the country was very internally stable, and there were no signs of any riots or rebellions. Thanks to that, in recent years they'd been able to put all their effort into combating the monster problem. This incident happened because they had let their guard down. Their lack of experience with this type of thing had worked against them. At times, human intelligence could be more fearsome than any monsters. The price they paid for such a lesson was large, though.

After a knock on the door, Morten entered the room. He proceeded to silently offer a simple salute before getting right to the point.

“Please excuse the simplified greeting, Your Grace. About the new models...we have retrieved or destroyed four of the stolen units. One of them, however, shook off our pursuers and disappeared.”

“It got away, huh?”

“For various reasons, Laihialan students also took part in the chase...but midway through, there was a strange development.”

Cnut used his gaze to urge Morten to keep talking.

“There were monsters. For the one unit that got away, its escape route had monsters appear on it. We were forced to call off the pursuit because of them.”

Cnut’s expression caused a single even deeper wrinkle to appear. The existence of monsters in the forest itself wasn’t strange. However, would they really appear so conveniently as obstacles? Monsters were capricious, but even they acted according to their own sets of rules. Cnut expressed his feeling that their appearance was somehow intentional.

“Something’s off, I agree. So, I ordered an investigation...” Morten’s face, which was famous for how dauntless he usually looked, seemed like he had just swallowed something terribly bitter. The cause of this expression was a muddy, surging mix of disgust, rage, and contempt. As if he was spitting out the words, he continued. “There were remains of cursed bait at the site where the monster appeared.”

Instantly, Cnut, who up until now had been quietly listening and processing the report, widened his eyes in shock and anger. Cursed bait—it was a special chemical compound with the purpose of luring monsters to it. It worked by releasing a smell that monsters liked, and when used it would immediately call all the monsters in the area to it, crowding the surroundings with them. However, the monsters would also be put into an excited frenzy, increasing their ferociousness.

Furious after hearing that, Cnut kicked away his chair as he stood up.

“That can’t be... Cursed bait?! I can’t believe it. The thief used that *just to run*?! That idiot! I can’t believe they’re sane! If that’s true, then...no...it has to be...”

The outcome of using such a thing was known in Fremmevilla. Cursed bait, which was capable of causing a serious local monster-related calamity, was widely known as the biggest taboo in all the kingdom. Of course, its production method was also kept a strict secret. Within the country, not only would production and possession of cursed bait lead to the death penalty, merely handling it a little bit would. Even before it was forbidden by law, cursed bait was hard for people to allow both morally and emotionally. Using such a thing would mean purposefully summoning monsters in a country that was overflowing with them, where not only the knights but even regular citizens had to fight them daily. It needn't be said how repulsive and hard to forgive such an act would be. That fact alone naturally exposed the thieves' origin.

"I believe that the thieves were most likely from a different country..."

Morten's statement overlapped with some of Cnut's other conjectures, and he nodded. Setting the cursed bait aside, he couldn't think of any motive for anyone inside the country to cause this incident. He had considered the possibility before, somewhat, but now the cursed bait had pushed that possibility to the forefront. Cnut sunk into thought for a while. The incident this time had too many different components to it. He needed to sort through the situation and all the facts to undo the tangled strings.

"Continue to gather as much information as you can, Morten. You can put the restoration of the fort on the back burner, to an extent. I need to go see His Majesty...so I'm hurrying to Konkaanen. Ready the carriage!"

Chapter 18: When the Silver Phoenix Takes Flight

It was further into fall, and every day the weather was getting colder. Today as well, wind so cold it would chill someone to their core blew, bringing a small sign of winter to the nice clear sunny weather.

In one of the rooms of the infirmary in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, on the only bed in the room, Edgar gradually opened his eyes. The room was sparsely furnished, but neat. The sunlight that pierced through the thin lace curtain warmed his cheek some and gently stimulated his slightly opened eyes. His consciousness was still hazy, probably because he had been sleeping for so long, so he spent a while vacantly looking around. Gradually, his mind cleared up, and at the same time he remembered what situation he'd been in before losing consciousness. Suddenly feeling confused, he tried to get up.

“Urgghh...rgghh...”

He felt a dull pain radiating throughout his body, and he quickly gave up on the idea. In the midst of his confused thoughts, his last memory before waking up and the knowledge of his own state stood out. He had severe bruises and wounds from flying shrapnel. His injuries weren't life-threatening, but they also weren't light. Having determined that, he relaxed, once again sinking into the bed.

He was unable to go back to sleep, though, thanks to the dull pain he was feeling. And that was when he heard a restrained knock on the door. Edgar tried to answer, but his throat was too dry, so he couldn't get his voice out. The only thing he managed to squeeze from his voice box was a quiet moan. Before that had the chance to be heard on the other side, though, the door opened.

“Edgar! You woke up?!”

The person who burst through the door was a woman—Helvi. Her eyes widened into discs, and she jogged over to his bed. She held a pitcher of water in her hands.

“Thank goodness... It’s been three days. You wouldn’t wake up at all! I was so worried.”

Faint tears welled up at the corners of her eyes. Edgar was surprised to hear he had been passed out for three days, and at the same time he wanted to both apologize and thank her. However, the only thing his dry throat could produce was a hoarse noise. After wetting his throat and taking a breath, though, Edgar regained some of his voice.

“Sorry, Helvi. After... After I lost consciousness, what...happened?”

Helvi gave a small shrug at Edgar’s unflinching earnestness, even in a situation like this, before bringing a chair over to the side of the bed.

“I know; I’ll bring you up to speed. We have time, so just calm down a little.”

While drinking some water herself, she tilted her head and thought back.

“Right, let’s see. First...”



Several figures walked through the hallway that led to the king’s audience chamber in Schreiber Castle, which stood towering in the center of Fremmevilla kingdom’s capital, Konkaanen.

One was the king of Fremmevilla, Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla. Though he was currently the king and was approaching old age, in his younger days he had experience serving as a knight and a general. Since then, he did not fail to keep up his training, and he was proud of the fact that his body was plenty strong and fit. Due to this, combined with his white beard and hair that he had grown long like a lion’s, he exuded a certain impressiveness despite his age. A little behind him walked Duke Cnut Dixgard. Unlike the king, he was relatively thinner, and in general he gave off a sharp impression, much like a knife. However, his expression was currently awash with fatigue and impatience, hiding his usual sharpness.

“Hrrmm, so raiders got into Casadesus and made sure to steal the new model of silhouette knight?”

“Yes. Though we have recovered most of the stolen new silhouette knights,

one got away. At the moment, we are contacting the other forts to coordinate a search, but we have yet to find a trace. It is a grave failing, and I cannot apologize enough. I am ready for any punishment you see fit to—”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Cnut. Rather than a punishment, it’s more important to have you work right now. If you want to take responsibility, then put more effort into your work from now on to make up for your failure.”

Cnut probably would have had his forehead scraping the ground if Ambrosius hadn’t been walking, but the king lightly waved him off.

“So, as for the identity of these thieves...you strongly suspect they come from another country?”

“Yes! I am fairly certain. We are currently interrogating the captured thieves for information, but they seem to have been given special training, and they are hard to break. We will need some more time to determine where exactly they are from.”

“In any case, if the thief is still within our borders we will smoke them out eventually. Otherwise, depending on where that person ran, they would either die in the Bocuse or have to cross the mountains. It’s obvious which they would choose.”

The Great Bocuse Forest was a gigantic woodland that spread through the east of Fremmevilla kingdom and was home to countless monsters. The behemoth attack was still fresh on everyone’s minds. Considering the fact that running into the Bocuse Forest could see you encountering a monster even larger than that, it was obvious how foolish going into the forest would be.

On the other hand, west of Fremmevilla was where the other human countries—all part of the Occidents—were packed in tight. In order to get there, one would have to pass through the Auvinier Mountain Range, though. The tall peaks of the mountain range had been famous since ancient times for how hard they were to cross. However, that didn’t mean it was impossible. There were easier roads, all of which were actively maintained and furnished with checkpoints.

The problem was all the less convenient routes. They would normally be hard to use, but it wasn’t as if they were impossible to traverse, and it was very

possible that the thief had one such route under their control. There was no radar or anything so convenient in this world. Ambrosius knew full well that they were not watching the entire base of the mountains, though their coverage wasn't exactly full of holes either.

“My word, what a nuisance... How long has it been since another country has interfered with us?”

As one might expect, a big reason they had no problems so far given their current state was because of the country's position. It was like a defensive buffer between the monster-infested Great Bocuse Forest and the wall that was the Auvinier Mountains. To the Occidents, they were like a convenient faction that would take care of all the annoying things on this side for them. There was no need to go out of their way to poke holes in that. Because every one of the Occidents had come to the same conclusion, Fremmevilla had been free of interference. This lack of a history of connivance was the largest reason they had been so lax in this respect.

“The biggest reason would be the new silhouette knight that shows marked improvement from everything else so far. If I'm right, then once it gets out it will be impossible to keep the information from spreading. It's already too late to concern ourselves with that, so we must choose a path for ourselves.”

A path for themselves. At that time, the two of them were thinking of the exact same thing in the backs of their minds.



The king's audience chamber in Schreiber Castle was quite a large space. Of course it was, since it was meant for silhouette knights as well as humans. During official ceremonies and other similar functions, there would be a neat and orderly line of heroic-looking silhouette knights present.

At the moment, there were no silhouette knights in attendance. Instead, the space was filled with many young people. Of course, they were all students from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's knight runner department, along with two younger boys and a girl. After the turmoil at Fort Casadesus came to an end, everyone who had been left behind in Laihiala had been summoned, and so almost everyone in the knight runner department had gathered here.

And, as they waited in this overly spacious room while feeling a strange sense of intimidation, the king appeared.

“No need to be like that; at ease,” Ambrosius said immediately after seeing everyone take a knee. Then, he fell into his throne with a thud.

Though the Laihialan students had raised their heads with the permission of the king, they were all still frozen with nervousness. The students were already tense at the prospect of meeting a duke, and now that they were suddenly dragged face-to-face with the king, their reaction was to be expected. There was, however, a small-statured boy in front that didn’t seem worked up or nervous at all. Ambrosius shot that boy, Ernesti, a glance, and a small smile worked its way onto his face. The next moment though, he reined it in and spoke in a voice filled with majestic dignity from his throne.

“Now then, first things first. Your efforts in developing a new model are well appreciated, students. You, who are normally unripe and would still be studying, have managed a feat unprecedented in my country’s history. I am very pleased.”

Most of the students reacted to Ambrosius’s speech with excitement, their faces reddening. There were even those who were overcome with emotion.

“Still, in an unfortunate turn of events, we have suffered interference from some...*vulgar* sources. At the moment we are holding nothing back in giving chase, but we have yet to catch all the thieves. It would be better to assume that they have gotten away.”

Immediately, the students’ expressions clouded. Their hearts, which had soared for a moment thanks to the king’s praise, were brought back down by this reminder of cold reality.

“There is no need for such negativity. One unit has been stolen, but we have retrieved most of them. Still, now that the technology has been leaked, it will be a race to spread this new model. There is no way we would lose such a race. From what I hear, our own new model is still incomplete, no? The reason I have called you all here is, as you might suspect, for that completion. So, getting right to the point: Ernesti, what else is needed?”

After hearing the king’s question, Ernie took some time to think before

opening his mouth. “There are two problems. One of them will take some time to solve, no matter what. As for the other one...we would need the assistance of the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory.”

Ernie’s words ran counter to the expectations of most of the people present. They had expected the new model to be completed by Ernie himself, or at least Ernie and the rest of the students. That was also why Ambrosius asked him if there was anything he needed. However, instead of facilities or materials, Ernie gave the name of an entire organization.

“One of the new model’s remaining large problems is its ease of control. Borrowing the strength of the national lab, who are seasoned at adjusting such things, would make things much more efficient. Furthermore, if the new model were to ever be adopted as the standard, their productivity will also prove important. My opinion is that it would be best to take the Kaldatoahs, the most numerous model in this kingdom, and use them as groundwork to develop the new model. This would also mean that borrowing the national lab’s power, given that they know the most about Kaldatoahs, would be best.”

Ernie’s words flowed smoothly, as if he had prepared this answer in advance. Meanwhile, Ambrosius crossed his arms, seeming somewhat let down.

“Does that mean you will be transferring responsibility for the development of the new model to the national lab?”

“I am aware that doing that alone will not solve the problem. There will be a need to teach the people from the national lab about the unit as well. However, I have already made a move on that front. Luckily, I have been able to secure employment for my seniors at Laihiala Knight Runner Academy at the national lab through Duke Dixgard. They are all people who have participated in the development of the Tellestarle since day one. With both sides’ knowledge and experience, they will surely succeed.”

Ambrosius narrowed his eyes and slowly stroked his beard. *This child is seriously so attentive in the weirdest places*, he thought when suddenly, he was assaulted with a bizarre sense that something was wrong. He tried to figure out the source of that feeling, and when he focused once again at the boy who was still in the center of his vision, everything made sense.

“Hm, you have a point. Fine, I will talk to the national lab as well. As for the completion of the new model, I expect everyone’s full efforts to be put into it...but, I notice your name was conspicuously missing from that explanation just now.”

“Yes. I am about to proceed to my second year of middle school, so my graduation is still a ways away.”

At that statement, every other person present unified under the thoughts *You care about that now after all you’ve done?* and *Oohh, right. He’s a middle schooler.* Ambrosius didn’t even try to hide his exasperated expression.

“I don’t feel great asking this as the king of this country, but...do you seriously plan on still going to school? After everything you’ve done?”

Archid and Adeltrude shivered slightly in response to that question. If the king were to order Ernie to leave the school, there would be nothing they could do to stop it. The words that brought them to Casadesus in the first place rose up in their throats, but they swallowed the words back down instead of letting them out in this audience chamber. The pair simply looked down and clenched their fists, listening silently.

The two of them didn’t notice that Ernie had looked back at them for a moment.

“I...have my reasons. Your Majesty, I believe the reason I was able to propose a new model and create it this time was because I was blessed with exceptional luck.”

Ernie, being short, had to look up to talk to Ambrosius. Seeing the strong will behind the child’s eyes as Ernie looked straight at him, the king smiled.

“I see, so you’re saying all that was simple luck, rather than your talent.”

“As you know, I am only a little older than twelve years old. Anything I think up or find a means to accomplish would not have been able to happen without someone else’s help. The only reason I was able to come this far was because of my seniors in the knight runner department entertaining the whims of a child and taking that child seriously instead of laughing. I do not believe there would be many who would do the same.”

“But you have accomplished much anyway, I don’t believe we should be so ready to dismiss that. Also, if I were to give the order, the national lab would not ignore you like you so claim, no? So it would all be the same in the end.”

Ernie looked down for a moment before slowly shaking his head.

“But that would result in unnecessary friction between us. The development of the new model will take a long time and will require a lot of patience and perseverance. If you were to force someone in unnecessarily, that might close the door on an outcome that would otherwise have been possible.”

Those words precisely hit upon the doubts Ambrosius harbored internally. The National Silhouette Knight Laboratory was a historied organization that was established immediately after the founding of Fremmevilla kingdom itself. They had spent all this time supporting the development of silhouette knight technology. Their members were skilled and had high self-esteem, and a person’s self-esteem could be a troublesome thing. It meant that such a person would not accept just anyone, no matter how excellent or how great their achievements. This would be especially true in this case, with such a large age gap, that was clear to see.

Ambrosius and Cnut thought that, given Ernie’s tenaciousness and how he conducted himself, he wouldn’t crumple to such a small thing. And they also thought that if they were to give him their seal of approval, what friction it would cause could easily be gotten over. Even with all the problems that could be expected with his inclusion, they believed there would be meaning in forcing him into the team. However, as Ernie said, the problem was whether to entrust the national lab with the finishing touches.

For these finishing touches, it was true that without their skills, there were some things that would be impossible. Furthermore, if this happened they would be able to spread the finished model throughout the country. And, in the end, their pride would not be damaged. This would be the ideal solution, if they ignored one single thing. While looking at that thing, Ambrosius furrowed his brow, deepening his wrinkles there. Ernie, taking that expression to mean the king was troubled, immediately put on a smile.

“Please, there’s no need to worry. I haven’t forgotten my promise with you,

Your Majesty. I have not given up on creating the best silhouette knight. I'll design my next model by the time I graduate...so please...look forward to it."

"Oh no, wait a second. You're still going to make more?!"

Everyone there hallucinated the sound of a resounding pratfall. In fact, several people did hunch over, trying to hide strained smiles.

"They say that haste makes waste. I plan on taking my time and slowly, properly, and passionately working on it!"

"I told you to wait; that's not the problem."

To the side, Cnut brought his hands to his forehead and muttered, "*That thing...*"

Ambrosius saw that out of the corner of his eye and had to desperately suppress a laugh.

"Also, while the completion of the new model certainly is important...wouldn't it be more fun to think up a new one?"

Ernie seemed like he was sulking a little as he said that, and everyone finally understood. *This guy, he's trying to foist the troublesome adjustments off onto other people!* they thought. Unable to withstand the urge, Ambrosius's expression broke into a broad smile. When he was with this child, he couldn't help but feel like he was returning to the old days. Or, in short, back to the prank-loving brat with a hot head he used to be.

"I see, as expected of the dictionary definition of a hobbyist. This will be the biggest job those guys in the national lab have had in a long time, but their skills are guaranteed. I'm sure they'll produce better results than expected."

Ambrosius laughed for a while before suddenly returning to his serious face.

"Are you sure? You could also use their strength to produce the next one, you know?"

"The development of the Tellestarle this time could be called a prototype, an experiment. With it, I've been able to gain a lot of experience and knowledge. The frame we made will later become the basis for a lot of growth; it has that much latent power. But what Fremmevilla wants from a mass-produced unit is

utility and ease of use. What I am going to make next will be neither of those things.”

Ignoring Cnut, whose expression was incredibly...mixed, Ambrosius sunk into thought. He pondered the “next” that had been proclaimed by the boy who rewrote the country’s history of silhouette knight development thanks to his “hobbies.” While he found himself drawn to the boy out of simple interest, he also couldn’t overlook how important the boy was. Even his prototype was enough to shake history. Should Ambrosius allow him to proceed to his next creation, or should he place more weight on the completion of the mass-produced unit?

Furthermore, only the boy would be able to bring whatever he hinted was “next” to life. The national lab certainly was skilled, but Ambrosius couldn’t expect such dramatic progress from them. That fact alone basically settled the matter within his mind. The problem was how to realize this. That was when a flash of inspiration arrived in the king’s mind like a comet. Immediately, he shifted his position on the throne and prepared to put his scheme into motion.

“I understand your position. However, I cannot allow that to happen.”

Instantly, Cnut saw a shadow of the nightmares of his past in Ambrosius’s profile.

“I cannot allow you to play around as a mere student. There is no need to wait for whatever you claim is next. Make it now.”

Only Ernie was able to hear the small sigh let out from someone behind him. Not even he could find it in himself to bring his childhood friends’ selfish wishes to the king. While Ernie thought about what he should do next behind a meek expression, Ambrosius continued.

“By the way, Cnut, if Ernesti is going to make another new silhouette knight, his current standing will be a problem.”

“I agree completely.”

“My...standing? What do you mean?”

“Just think about it for a moment. This time, the thieves only aimed for the prototypes themselves, but the next time something like that happens there’s

no guarantee they won't target the source of all this: you. After all, you clearly have more ideas within you, and they would see no end if they were to just go after each new thing that pops up. So, there is a need to protect you."

"So you really are going to assign guards to me..."

"In short, what you need are knightsmiths to realize your ideas and knights to protect you."

That was when Ambrosius loosened the frown on his face in an obvious show, returning to his carefree smile.

"And also these people need to be ones who will accept what you say without making light of you or holding you in contempt. So, do you have any ideas for people that fit these criteria? No need to worry, Ernesti: the answer is simple. There's no need to even think about it."

For a while, Ernesti Echevalier was frozen with his eyes wide, as if he'd been surprised by an ambush. But eventually, he slowly started moving, looking behind him. By chance, all the students of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's knight runner department were also looking at him. Dietrich and the boss shot Ernie reassuring gazes, the silence between them filled with many words.

"That's right, the Laihialan students. You all already have experience making a new model together. So I will expect great things for the next one. I decree the founding of a new knight order. Ernesti, they will be the ones to make new silhouette knights with you, pilot them with you, and fight with you."

"A knight order...of us?"

Even Ernie's impregnable smile was strained and spasming at that. On the other hand, Ambrosius's smile only deepened.

"Now then, if we're going to make one we need a name, don't we? The order won't be large, so not enough for blue? No, given the purpose of the order, maybe we should go with a different convention. Oh, right, 'silver' would fit you perfectly. Don't you think, Ernesti? And then I will gift you 'phoenix' from me. The 'Order of the Silver Phoenix' will be the name of your knight order."

The name swept through everyone like a wave as they whispered it. Not even a little time was needed until the name had sunk into the minds of the "former"

Laihialan students and Ernesti's group.



“Ah, right. Though this knight order is now official, its founding has been very sudden. We won’t be able to prepare a place for you right away. So, you’ll need a temporary base until we can. Cnut, do you have any ideas?”

“Right. Everyone here is involved with Laihiala. Since there are so many students, I believe it would be fine to borrow the academy’s facilities for a while.”

“Indeed, that is a fine idea. There’s no need to worry, we’ll get something ready by the time Ernesti graduates.”

There was no way Ernie would refuse such a proposal. However, there was also a small part of him that felt vexed. It was all a matter of his emotions. No matter how wonderful a solution this was, he would not forget to attempt some sort of retaliation.

“But Your Majesty, wouldn’t that hinder the transfer of the new model’s development to the national lab?”

Though it was just an official excuse, the founding of this new knight order would actually cause a problem with that. Ambrosius had been pondering a solution as well.

“Ohh, you’re right about that. We need to do something... Then allow me to give my first order to you and the Order of the Silver Phoenix: give the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory a bloody nose. Pull the rug out from under them, boggle their minds with the silhouette knights you make. Show them that age means nothing, and force them to obey you... Can you do that?”

Once again, Ernie looked behind him. They all had expressions filled with determination—as he surveyed them, they nodded back at him, so he also steeled himself.

“As you wish... We will give our utmost to accomplish the task you have given us.”



“And, well, that’s what happened.”

At some point, the sun had started to set, and as the last rays of the day

streamed into the room, Helvi finished her story and took a breath before drinking some water.

Up until halfway through, Edgar had been listening quietly, but once the story started changing and going through its ups and downs, he ended up with a frozen and twitching smile. *Seriously, I didn't need to hear any of that!* His thoughts were written all over his face.

“There’s something I’d like to confirm...am I included in this Order of the Silver Phoenix thing?”

It was unclear whether his question was loaded with fear or expectation. It was hard to accurately read his emotional state with his face frozen and spasming the way it was.

“You are, but they won’t force you to be. You can decline if you want. You don’t need to worry; even if you do you’ll still be taken in by some other knight order once you graduate.”

“By the way, has anyone else declined?”

He knew what the answer would be, but he couldn’t stop himself from confirming. Helvi narrowed her catlike almond-shaped eyes in a cheerful smile as she gave the exact answer he expected.

“Nope. Not even one!”

Once Edgar heard that, he sank back into his bed with a wry smile.

For a while, silence reigned between the two. Suddenly though, Edgar remembered something important about the time before he had lost consciousness. He tightened up his expression and searched for what words he should use as he resolved himself to speak. Then, he started.

“Helvi, there’s something I need to tell you.”

With the smile still on her face, Helvi tilted her head, puzzled. Seeing that, he hesitated to continue for a few seconds, but continued he did.

“It’s about the Tellestarle. The one I fought at the end, and the one that was stolen... It was Unit 1. That was...yours...”

Edgar did not go further. Helvi had put her finger to his lips, after all.

“I know. We went and confirmed all the other Tellestarles that we retrieved.”

Helvi was looking down and being surprisingly quiet, considering Unit 1’s origins, but Edgar could see the vestiges of her emotions on her face.

That alone was more than enough to help him resolve himself.

“I see. Hey, Helvi, I’ll make you a promise.”

Helvi raised her head as Edgar squeezed her hand powerfully.

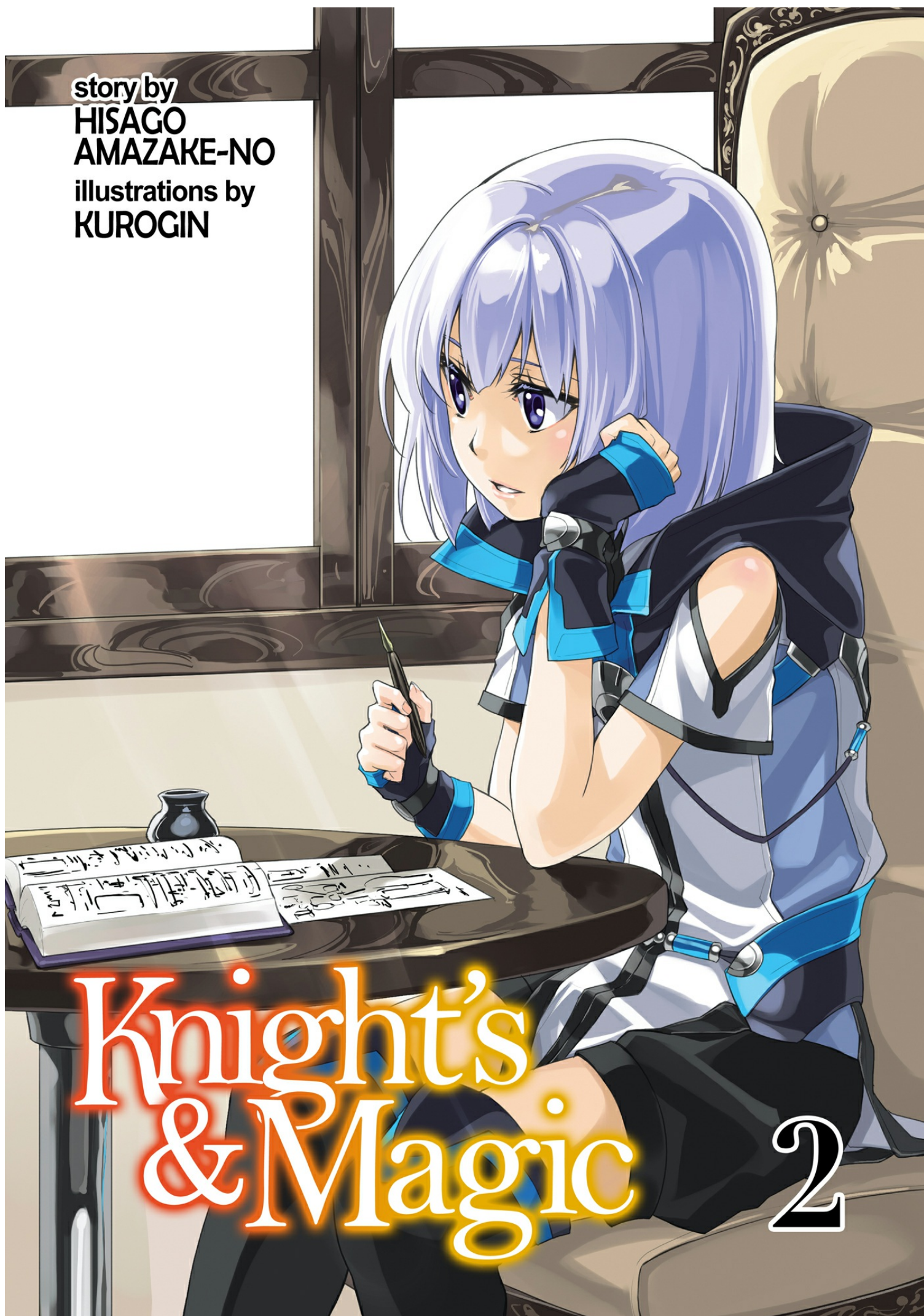
“Earlcumber and I will make sure to take it back. Or at least destroy it. Someday, for sure. We won’t let the crystallization of all our efforts, your partner, be toyed with by some thieves.”

That surprised Helvi, and for a while she sat there, blinking, in a daze. But soon enough, she broke out into a smile.

“Okay, I’ll be looking forward to that...thanks.” She squeezed Edgar’s hand back and muttered something else quietly.


—To be continued in *Knight’s & Magic* Vol. 3

story by
**HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO**
illustrations by
KUROGIN



Other maintenance team members, who had come after hearing the fuss that was kicked up by their arguing, saw the boss's big fist bump the twins' smaller fists in a heartwarming display.





Edgar lay back
in his bed,
tightened up
his expression,
and started to
speak.

“Helvi, there’s
something I need
to tell you.”

Guaire

Main Pilot: Dietrich Künitz

specs

Height: 10.4m

Weight: 18.7t

Equipment: longsword x4,
silhouette arms "Shotel"



explanation

A training silhouette knight belonging to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. The students assembled it themselves from obsolete units the government sold off. It eschews a shield to specialize in dual-sword close combat, but unfortunately the old model did not have the power output for such a fighting style, making it weak. It was completely destroyed in the behemoth incident and subsequently upgraded during its repair. The machine has now been reborn, stronger and fiercer than ever.

Earlcumber

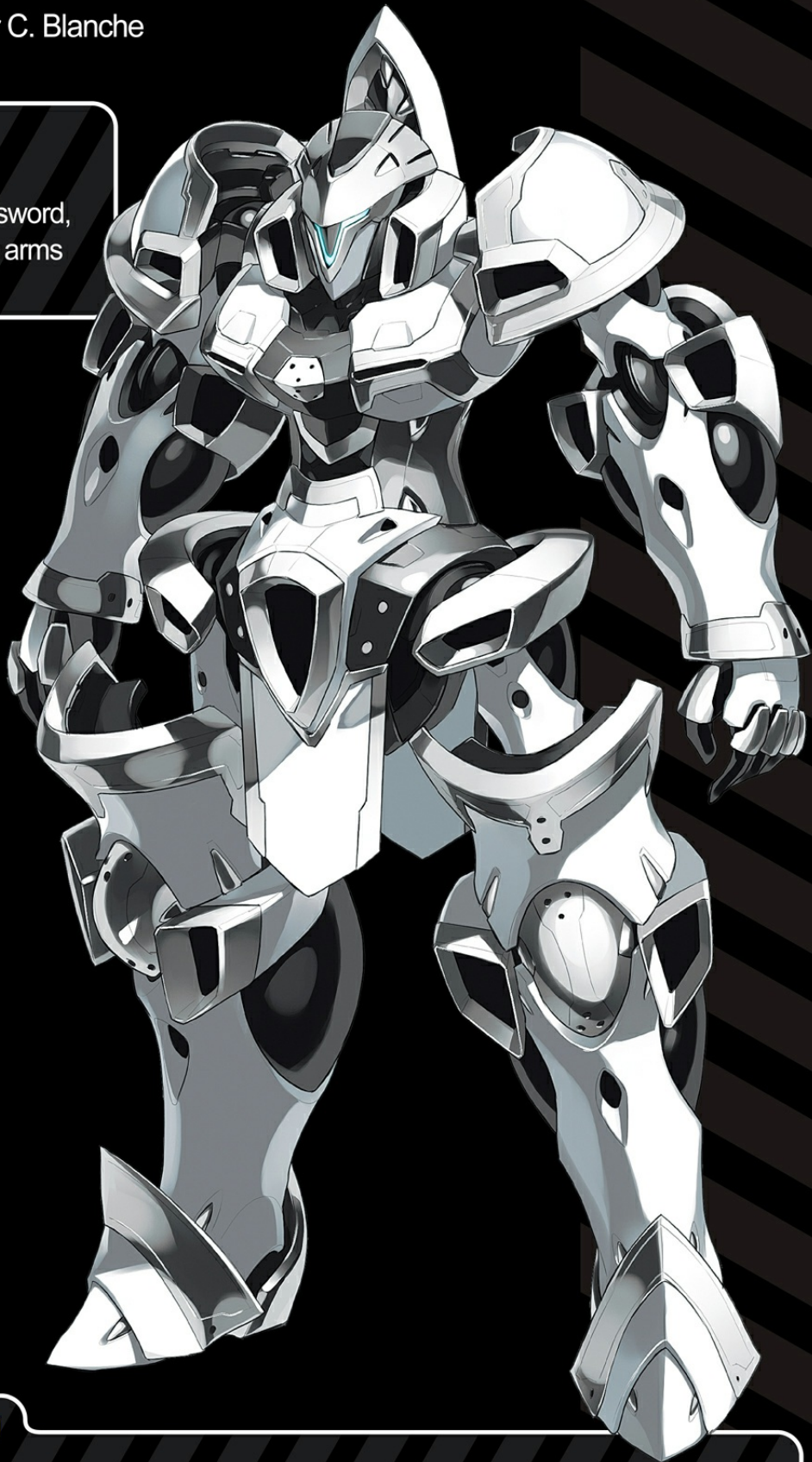
Main Pilot: Edgar C. Blanche

specs

Height: 10.1m

Weight: 18.4t

Equipment: longsword,
shield, silhouette arms
"Arquebus"



explanation

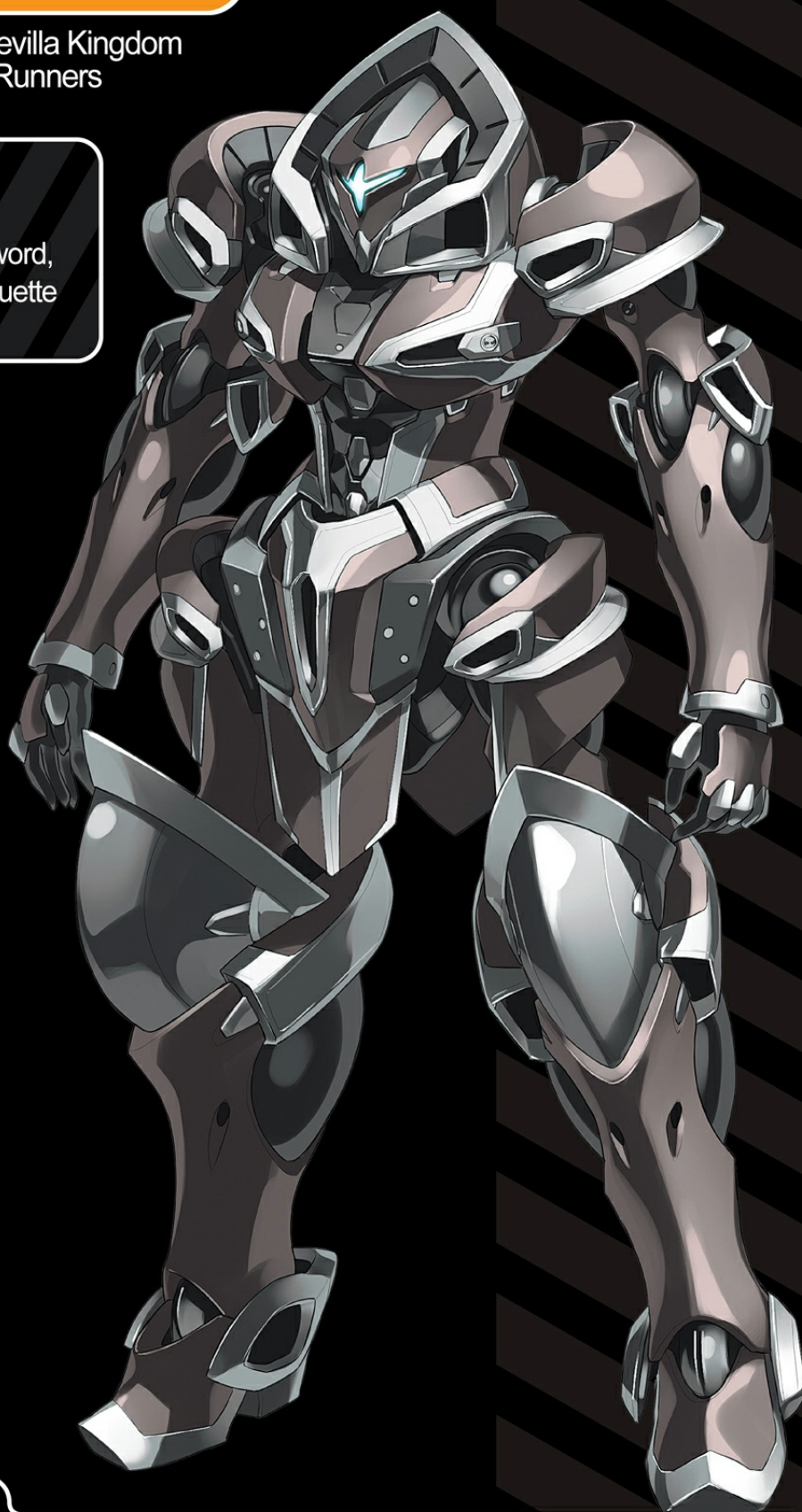
A training silhouette knight belonging to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. Like Guaire, it is an old government model modified by the students. This one, however, has not strayed far from its roots and is known for its ease of use. The unit itself is nothing out of the ordinary, but with Edgar's exceptional skills, it stands at the top of the academy. It has accordingly seen many a fight.

Kaldatoah

Main Pilot: Fremmevilla Kingdom
Knight Runners

specs

Height: 10.0m
Weight: 18.0t
Equipment: longsword,
spear, shield, silhouette
arms "Culverin"



explanation

The standard mass-produced silhouette knight adopted by Fremmevilla. It was designed a century ago and became prevalent throughout the country, so most people think of the Kaldatoah when they think of a silhouette knight. To ensure it could handle a wide variety of monsters, it was made as a jack-of-all-trades machine. It therefore has no special traits other than being easy to use.

Tellestarle

Main Pilot: Helvi Olbarri

specs

Height: 9.8m

Weight: 18.9t

Equipment: long-sword, halberd, shield, back weapon

"Culverins" equipped to the sub-arms



explanation

A test unit made by the students of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy implementing many unprecedented and revolutionary functions. It boasts output comparable to existing heavy units, and double the bombardment capabilities of normal silhouette knights. However, it is extremely hard to pilot and terribly fuel inefficient, so its operational time is short. There have been many hopes placed on it as a fledgeling new model, but that also made it the cause of a certain incident.









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Knight's & Magic: Volume 2

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