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Knight's & Magic

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3



Knight's & Magic 3

INTRODUCTION

Great Rampage

Ernesti's wild and willful streak knows no end in this third volume.

He creates **new units** unthinkable by those with common sense one after another, sometimes even putting his own life in danger. It seems Ernie's style is to **selfishly do as he pleases**, pushing onward and forward, until his own imagination is made real.

Potentially influencing the entire country, the young boy's efforts have gone far beyond the scale of mere play.

How far will Ernie go? Now, witness this boy **as he runs riot!**



illustration:
KUROGIN

Knight's & Magic 3

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Prologue: Order of the Silver Phoenix, Activate

Since when was it like this?

The first thing Ernesti Echevalier noticed was that he was floating, alone, in darkness.

The featureless black space seemed to stretch on forever, contrasting sharply with his white skin and bright purplish-silver hair.

He could not feel the ground beneath his feet; it only seemed to him like he was floating, as if he were in water.

Strangely, though, he didn't mind. In fact, he seemed completely disinterested in this strange situation; he was simply staring off into the dark distance with a vague expression.

Eventually, some anomaly other than Ernie appeared in the darkness.

It was a rectangular box with colorful art printed on it. The art on the box obviously depicted a robot, along with a logo that indicated the robot's name. Product details were written along the sides of the box.

In other words, this box was the retail packaging for a plastic model.

There wasn't only one box.

Many different boxes began to emerge, surrounding Ernie. Every single one of these boxes was familiar to Ernie. There was no way he'd forget—they were the models that he had just bought when he got hit by the car.

"Ahh...that's right. These are the ones I didn't get the chance to make. Well, now that I have the chance, I should get to it."

Strange as it was, Ernesti didn't seem to think much of these plastic model boxes appearing in front of him when he should have lost them. He simply smiled softly and naturally flowed into his habitual routine.

He had a pair of nippers in his hand. There was a cutting mat in front of him, as well as a scalpel knife, tweezers, file, and glue, all lined up neatly.

Having completed his preparations, Ernie reached out toward one of the boxes floating in space, clearly in the best mood possible.

He opened the box, took out the sprues, and started reading the instruction booklet.

Now it was blissful hobby time. But unfortunately for him, the box suddenly moved, dodging his hand. He reached out for the boxes over and over, but he was never able to grab hold of one. In fact, the boxes gradually got farther and farther away from him, eventually disappearing into the mysterious darkness of this place.

“Uh...huh? Wait a second. I haven’t managed to build anything yet. I still have such a huge backlog! I want to keep building!”

He chased after the boxes in a panic, but no matter how many attempts he made, the moment it seemed he was about to catch up to one, the boxes deftly evaded his hands.

Ernie’s patience ran out, and finally he started giving chase for real. At some point, the pair of nippers in his hand was replaced with a Winchester.

Mana ran through the script that was constructed through his favorite strangely shaped staff and was turned into a magical phenomenon through the crystal catalyst in his weapon. The spell was Aero Thrust, which caused a magical explosion of pressurized atmosphere, launching Ernie bodily. He accelerated at a rate far too fast for any normal person to achieve, but even with all that, he could not reach even one of the boxes. As if mocking his desperation, the boxes continued to remain at a distance just barely out of his arm’s reach.

“I won’t let them go... I won’t let them go! They’re *my* plastic models!”

Ernie just needed a little more distance. Just a little farther, and it seemed his fingertips might graze a box. Finally, Ernie jumped headfirst at one of the boxes.

At long last, he caught a box in his hands and hugged it tight so as not to let it get away.

Plastic model boxes were usually made of cardboard.

However, the one he had grabbed had a familiar feel to it. It was a strange mix of softness and hardness.

That was when he finally started to question things, and he flung his head upward from the box in his hands to—

Then, Ernie woke up.

Any remaining sleepiness haunting him quickly receded.

For a while longer, he continued to blink away the cobwebs before heaving a deep sigh. He was fully awake, but now his mood was at its worst.

“So it was a dream, huh... For it to end there...if it’s a dream anyway, at least let me finish the model!”

The light filtering through the thin curtains in his room started to gradually get brighter. Dawn had already broken, and while he felt dissatisfied when he thought back to his dream, no matter how vague in his memories it was becoming, Ernie still obeyed his habits and attempted to get up.

That was when he noticed that there was something right in front of him, holding him down.

It was so close he had thought it was his bedding, but now that he was looking closer he noticed it was a *someone* rather than a *something*.

When he looked up a little, the identity of this person was quickly revealed. The person—his childhood friend Adeltrude “Addy” Alter—was hugging Ernie tightly as she slept. That was when Ernie got an inkling of why his dream had ended the way it had.

“Ahh, now I remember. We went to sleep together.”

Ernie tilted his head somewhat in puzzlement, as he couldn’t understand why he was in this situation, but the reason quickly came to mind.

It had happened last night.

Addy had personally told him how angry she was at having been left behind when Ernie and the people around him had gotten involved in the mess the other day.

So she'd sentenced Ernie to the body pillow punishment and promptly carried it out, burrowing into bed with him.

Now Addy was sleeping peacefully, with steady breaths that spoke of how free of worry she was. Her expression similarly spoke of how secure she felt. She looked so happy that Ernie hesitated to wake her up.

If he hadn't been unable to move, he might even have let her be.

"Addy, it's morning. Wake up, please."

However, since he couldn't move, he had no other choice. Ernie shook Addy's shoulder in an attempt to wake her up. After a while, she blearily opened her eyes—and then smiled, hugging Ernie even tighter.

"Mmnn...it's Ernie... Hee hee, so soft...and warm... I'm so happy..."

It was currently winter, a time when anyone would long for the warmth of their bed. The boy who was trapped in his friend's embrace just happened to be very effective as a hot-water-bottle replacement.

"Come on, wake up, Addy. You can't stay asleep forever just because it's cold."

"Just three more...hours..."

He wasn't making any progress. Addy was nuzzling into Ernie's hair, smiling and seeming just as happy as she claimed as she tried to once again sail off into dreamland.

Ernie gave up, deciding that trying to coax her awake with words would probably be useless. So he decided to resort to emergency measures. Gently and quietly, he slipped his arm back through the outer layer of his pajamas and proceeded to tickle Addy's sides and back. For a while, Addy remained asleep, but eventually, she started twitching in response, before finally responding more actively.

Addy made wordless noises a few times before she fully woke up. And then, "Urgfhwyaah?! Wai— S-Stop, Ernie! It tickles! It tickleessss!"

Addy continued to flail around for a while before finally managing to stop Ernie's hands and defend herself from any further attack. She looked down,

locking eyes with Ernie as he looked back up at her with an airy smile.

She reddened, complaining with teary eyes, “Eerrnniiiiiee! Urghh...I really think you’ve been too mean to me lately!”

“Oh, come now, that’s not true. Good morning—it seems you’re finally awake. It’s a nice morning, so let’s get up.”

Addy seemed reluctant, but Ernie still took her hand and pulled her up.

While she immediately adopted an unhappy face because of the cold, Ernie stretched and started swinging his arms around.

“There’s no time to succumb to the cold—we’ve got to start our activities as the Order of the Silver Phoenix! I couldn’t reach those boxes in my dreams, but I won’t let that happen again!”

Addy seemed puzzled. “Is it just me or have you been strangely happy ever since you got a new knight order, Ernie?”

Ernie’s energetic shout had been incomprehensible to Addy, leaving her puzzled. In the end, she was forced fully out of bed by her childhood friend.

“Ah, all those plastic models from my dream... They’re completely out of my grasp now. That just means I should make the real thing instead! As if I’d ever give up on any of it!”

It had been a while since he’d last had a dream of his previous life.

The dream had given Ernie a purpose—albeit one that put the cart before the horse, and one which others would struggle to understand.

It would take some time before the feelings toward this world he had started to harbor because of this would take shape.

“Wait for me, my robots!”

For now, though, at least he was energetic.

Part 5: Centaur Knight Arc

Chapter 19: Laihiala Knight Runner Academy in Turmoil

It was a wintry day, with sparse clouds dotting the sky.

“Hmm, so the Order of the Silver Phoenix has returned to Laihiala,” groused the tenth ruler of the kingdom of Fremmevilla, Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla, as he sat with one elbow resting on the arm of his throne. He was currently fifty-seven years old, which was quite advanced by this world’s standards. He usually radiated a sense of power that made him seem much younger than he was, but it was currently clouded.

“Indeed. Their carriages left this morning. They should arrive at the academy by nightfall.”

The one who answered Ambrosius was Duke Cnut Dixgard. They were currently in the audience chamber of Schreiber Castle, along with a few other people.

Recently, the many incidents plaguing Fremmevilla had been heavy on Ambrosius’s mind. It was the year 1277 O.C., and it was turning out to be a rare year of turmoil for the kingdom.

It had all started in spring. Along with the budding greenery a division-class monster—a behemoth—had come to kick off a large-scale calamity, which was colloquially referred to as the behemoth incident. Many silhouette knights and their pilots, knight runners, had become victims in this incident. Furthermore, the incident resulted in the destruction of part of the border between the kingdom and the monsters’ territory, the Great Bocuse Forest.

A mere half-year after that, before the wounds caused by the behemoth incident could fully heal, they had been assaulted by another one.

Fort Casadesus—the gate to the Dixgard ducal house’s territory, which was situated in the kingdom’s north—had been attacked by thieves of unknown

origin. It had happened precisely when the fort was holding the newest model of prototype silhouette knight that had been invented after the behemoth incident, the Tellestarle. With the advent of the attack, the fort's guardians, the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, mustered all the forces available to them to do battle. The battle resulted in the fortress catching on fire and the destruction of not only the knight order's silhouette knights, but almost all the Tellestarles as well.

This incident, which had happened soon after the behemoth incident, was thus named the Casadesus Disaster.

"Still...thieves, huh? I don't know where those fools came from, but they've really pulled off something troublesome, haven't they? To think the day would come when we, who serve as a shield for the Occidents, would have to watch our own backs. I can only assume it's been long enough that they've forgotten *why* they've managed to avoid the unpleasant bite of monster attacks. Truly deplorable."

Ambrosius's expression was filled with clear displeasure. In a sense, the Casadesus Disaster was a bigger problem than the behemoth incident.

The behemoth incident had been brought about by a monster—a beast without reason, or in other words, something akin to a natural disaster. On the other hand, the Casadesus Disaster had been brought about by thieves—by humans *with* reason.

Fremmevilla Kingdom, which was the only human country on the continent of Setterlund's eastern side, shielded the Occidents in the west against the natural disasters called "monsters." That was why they had spent several centuries completely divorced from interhuman conflict. The Casadesus Disaster, which had reintroduced them to this concept, was enough to call Fremmevilla's very founding into question.

"Still, given what's happened, we can't afford to stay our peaceful selves. There's also the matter of the Tellestarle that they managed to get away with."

Ambrosius was referring to the thieves' objective in attacking Fort Casadesus in the first place—to steal the prototypes that had just been completed. The prototypes were targeted because by some means, they were able to exhibit far

more power than current silhouette knights. And after the fighting was over, the thieves had managed to abscond with one of them.

“I’m sorry to have to inform you that we are probably too late to retrieve the stolen unit. So we must instead turn to proceeding forward as fast as possible. However, before we do so, there is something else we must do.”

That was when Ambrosius turned his attention to the group that was still waiting behind Cnut.

“And that is the eradication of the *parasites* infesting us. They should still be out there somewhere—the minions that put the thieves on the scent of our prototype. And I believe that they are still hiding within our country. Now is the time for you all to work hard, Order of the Indigo Falcon.”

Cnut’s words were directed to the people behind him, who responded by raising their heads. These people, referred to as the Order of the Indigo Falcon, did not wear impressive armor like normal knights did. Nor did they wear leather armor like knight runners. Instead, they were all dressed like normal citizens off the street. They looked rather bizarre for a group being hailed as a knight order.

“As you will! Though we have spent a long time facing only monsters, we will prove to you that our ‘skills’ have not rusted with our results.” The man in the middle of the group replied as their representative.

There was nothing really distinctive about him; he seemed like he could fit in anywhere. Aside from him, the group also had young women and the elderly. Every single one of them looked like a normal person, the type to blend into the backdrop of a town or city. However, they all had one thing in common, something that would sometimes flash across their eyes: a sharp look, as if they could see to the heart of anything.

Ambrosius nodded, seemingly satisfied at the man’s response, before turning to Cnut.

“Good. Well then, Cnut, I will entrust you to direct the Order of the Indigo Falcon. This will allow you to atone for your failure.”

Cnut bowed deeply. As he lowered his head, a strange glimmer flashed in his

eyes. Fort Casadesus, which gave its name to the event in which it had been attacked by thieves, lay in his territory. Furthermore, he had also placed a lot of hope on the prototype Tellestarles, which had been stolen or destroyed. The Casadesus Disaster had been like a slap to the face. His resentment had seeped all the way into his marrow.

As Ambrosius had said, this job was a chance for Cnut to wash away the ignominy that had been put on his name thanks to the disaster. At the same time, it was a way to utilize Cnut's rage to a good end. He would likely use the fullness of that sharp acumen he was famed for throughout the kingdom in this job.

Ambrosius seemed satisfied with Cnut's response and allowed his expression to relax.

"I'll be looking forward to the fruits of your efforts. But let's put that aside for now. After all, that little rascal is still active. Now that he's got his own knight order, I'm sure he'll show his true colors sooner or later. That must also proceed smoothly, so I believe you should keep yourself up to date on their circumstances... Don't you agree, Cnut?"

Cnut did not show any outward sign of the raging fires of his anger, but Ambrosius's words caused his expression to clearly stiffen. They had no idea what that runaway hobbyist would do, and that made him much more threatening than some thieves.

After a long pause, Cnut replied, "Yes, please leave that to me as well. I will arrange it so that they will be able to work in their best state."

Still, they needed to succeed. The only way for them to wipe away the humiliation they had suffered at Fort Casadesus was to have the Order of the Silver Phoenix produce their "results."

Between the prototype that had been taken out of the country and the foreign elements left inside the country, Fremmevilla Kingdom was teetering on the brink. This trial, the first of its kind since the founding of the country centuries before, would require everyone to unite and work toward a solution.



As for the Order of the Silver Phoenix, who were currently being discussed in the royal castle as the people who would greatly affect the country's fate...

"Heeey, we can see Laihiala now! We're finally back!"

They were traveling with the aid of horses—or more accurately, inside carriages being *pulled* by horses. Their destination was one of the cities at the foot of the Auvinier Mountain Range, Laihiala Academy City, and they could now see the walls surrounding it. This city, which had been built around the kingdom's largest educational facility, Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, was to be the home base for the Order of the Silver Phoenix, who could also be referred to as student knights.

Having reached the academy city, the group breathed a sigh of relief as they passed through its gates. After creating the prototype Tellestarles, they had been involved in the Casadesus Disaster and now were a knight order. They had been through one nerve-racking situation after another. It seemed to them they had been nothing more than simple students just the other day, so it was only natural to feel like they were carrying a heavy burden.

Once the carriage had reached the academy itself, the group disbanded. Most of the students lived in the dorms, but some also had family homes in the city. Ernesti and his childhood friends, the twins Archid and Adeltrude, were examples of this. All three of them headed for the Echevalier household.

"Oohhh, it's been so long since I've been in Ernie's house! Aghh, jeez, I'm so tired!" Addy exclaimed.

"Yeah, I want to just take it easy for a while..."

Having finally returned home, the three couldn't help but cheer. Ernie's mother, Selestina Echevalier, heard their cheers and burst out of the front door as if she'd been waiting for them the whole time. She ran forward and swept Ernie up into a hug with such momentum it looked like she'd pounced on him. In response, the boy slowly hugged his mother back.

"I'm back, mother."

"Welcome back, Ernie. You're not hurt, are you? I'm glad. So, how was it? Did they like the silhouette knights you all made?"

“They did, and we made a good impression too! We made a little mistake and the silhouette knights broke, but they wanted us to make more.”

“That’s great! I’ll need to put my all into making tonight’s dinner so that you can continue to work your hardest, Ernie!”

“I’m looking forward to it!”

While mother and son embraced each other in a heartwarming show, the two of them engaged in truly ridiculous conversation. Beside them, Ernie’s father felt some relief as he looked up to the heavens.

The sun sank behind the Auvinier Mountains, causing a dark curtain of night to fall on the academy town.

Dinner that day was taken with the Alter family, who at this point were all well-known to the Echevalier family. The mothers of both families, Tina and Ilma, put more effort than usual into the dinner, and so the dinner table was absolutely laden with luxurious dishes—the kind one would expect from a festival feast. The table instantly came alive with chatter, both families wrapped in a harmonious air.

Some time passed as everyone engaged in small talk, and most of the food had disappeared down the children’s gullets. Given that they were essentially knights, their appetites were ravenous. The mothers watched their children happily with smiles on their faces, seemingly satisfied, before starting to clean up the plates that had been emptied.

With the meal finished, everyone was resting and digesting, and that was when Ernie approached his father—Matthias—and his grandfather—Rowley.

“I have something I’d like to tell you two, father, grandfather. Under the king’s order, I have been appointed as a knight captain.”

There had been no segue at all. Ernie’s straightforward blow of a statement caused both Rowley and Matthias to do spit takes. The children had expected this and had made sure to place themselves outside the splash zone.

“Koff, khahoff! E-Ernie?! What do you mean, appointed?!”

“It is exactly as I said; I am the captain of a knight order now. More

specifically, of a newly formed knight order: the Order of the Silver Phoenix.” Ernie beamed as Matthias froze and Rowley put his head in his hands. Kid and Addy, who were watching from the sidelines, seemed completely unruffled.

After a long pause, Matthias spoke up again. “A-Ah, I see. I suppose...it’s a good thing? Still, if that’s the case, what about school? Will you be dropping out since you’re a knight captain now?”

Matthias had taken a long time to recover from his frozen state, and that was the first question he’d thought to ask. Leaving the school wasn’t such a rare thing. Even in this country, in which most citizens were able to receive an education, it wasn’t guaranteed that all students would always finish their courses.

Many people dropped out midway or only completed their elementary schooling, choosing not to proceed to middle school. Each student had his or her own circumstances, and they were free to choose how long and in what form they would be schooled.

Withdrawing from school in order to start one’s career was a fairly common reason for ending one’s education. The only wild thing about this case was that the career in question was *becoming the captain of a knight order*.

“No, I am not going to withdraw. His Majesty has arranged for the Order of the Silver Phoenix to be based here in Laihiala, at least for a while. The nature of this knight order is also somewhat strange, so while I am the knight order’s captain, I will also be continuing my schooling until I graduate.”

“Ernie...I know I said that I would help you with anything, but that might be a little...*too* unorthodox of you...”

The idea of a knight order’s captain who was still a student was unheard of, at least by Matthias. Even though he hadn’t drunk any alcohol, he could feel a headache coming on.

“That is why, even though I am a captain now, there is no need for me to change my residence. In exchange, though, we will be taking over the knight runner department facilities as our base. An official message with regard to that will be delivered to you soon, I believe.”

“I-I see...my Ernie has finally taken over the academy...” Rowley adopted a faraway look, seeming to stare into the distance as he imagined the face of his old friend, Ambrosius.

It seemed the friend in question had been regaining the playfulness of his old self ever since meeting Rowley’s grandson—they were both behaving far too wildly. Rowley had been prepared for something like this to happen someday, but he had never expected it to happen this soon.

Eventually, Rowley recovered from his shock and composed himself. Now he wore the expression of an academy’s headmaster—someone who had pride as an educator.

“However, there are things I cannot allow as Laihiala’s headmaster, even if it’s for your sake, Ernie. There will be new students coming to the knight runner department next year as well. If the Order of the Silver Phoenix—or whatever you said the name was—were to use the academy’s facilities, that would leave no place for the new students, leaving them out in the cold. I cannot allow that to happen, even if it is His Majesty’s order.”

Rowley looked at his grandson with a serious expression, which prompted Ernie to fix his posture and nod back.

“Of course, the upperclassmen of the Order of the Silver Phoenix would never steal from new students. Also, if I had to put the order’s objective into words, it would be to ‘create as yet unseen silhouette knights.’ Just like with the Tellestarle. That means we will most likely be creating new technologies.”

Ernie was all smiles as he spoke, but as the child went on, the cold sweat running down Rowley’s back only got more pronounced. He had already created the Tellestarle, an unassailable crystallization of new technology. If he were to start inventing in earnest with the power of a knight order at his fingertips, there was no telling how far he would go. At least, it was impossible for Rowley to imagine.

“So I am planning to teach that technology to all the students of the knight runner department, regardless of if they are upperclassmen or underclassmen. After all, it is certain they will be involved in the development of new models just like the Tellestarle, at the very least, so it wouldn’t hurt the seniors in any

way to have them learn these new skills.”

The country was changing, and Ernie—and his Order of the Silver Phoenix—was right at the center of it all. Rowley shivered, sensing the all-too-great flow of history running through these times. Still, his stern expression was replaced with a refreshed one, as if his previous face had been a lie.

“Good. I do not believe it would be a bad thing for you to walk together with the new students.”

“Yes, I’ll do my best along with everyone! I’m sure it’ll be great fun!”

Ernie’s smile shone brightly. The next day, Ambrosius formally announced the formation of the Order of the Silver Phoenix to the academy. That was the start of days filled with turmoil for the school.



Half a month had passed since the Order of the Silver Phoenix started to rent facilities from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

The students of the knight runner department gathered in the department’s workshop they were so familiar with. The king’s official order had been spread, and now they were officially members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. However, pretty much the only thing that had changed was their job title.

Given that they were living their days in the academy exactly as they had been up until now, it was understandable that their new statuses hadn’t sunk in yet.

“Good grief...so now we’ve ridden the wave all the way to becoming a knight order. Now that I think about it, it’s pretty hilarious,” muttered David Hepken, nicknamed the boss, sounding heartfelt.

Hearing that, Edgar C. Blanche shook his head. “You have it better since you were actually there, boss. I became a member while I was unconscious, you know?”

“Hah! And yet you immediately got a forlorn look on your face when you thought you might not have been included.” Helvi Olbarri teased with a grin.

“That’s not true. It’s not...I think...” Edgar’s response was clearly suspicious.

“I get it. We had fun making the new model, didn’t we? It wouldn’t have felt good to let it just end like that. So staying with Captain Ernesti is the far more fun choice.” Dietrich Künitz shrugged.

That seemed to spark something in the boss, though—he clapped his hands together before speaking. “That reminds me, since the silver kid, Ernesti, is the captain of our knight order now...are we gonna have to watch how we address him, what with all of us being his subordinates? Like...Captain Kid?”

“Maybe. What about Li’l Captain, then?”

“That’s far too sloppy. He’s still the leader of a knight order, so we need to address him properly as Sir Captain.”

“Oh, no, we should totally show proper respect and call him Lord Sir Knight Captain every time.”

At some point during the conversation the mood shifted, and they started getting more and more carried away with the joke. In the first place, the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s captain was the youngest in all the orders by a country mile. Considering their stated mission and origin, the order’s command structure and discipline was far more ambiguous than a normal order’s; it couldn’t be denied that in some respects they were woefully half-baked.

“I would prefer you didn’t call me that. It just doesn’t feel right; I’d be happier if you just continued to refer to me the way you always have.”

That was when the captain, Ernie, appeared. Understandably, he seemed somewhat tired.

“That aside, it’s perfect that everyone is already here. I’ve brought everyone’s first project as the Order of the Silver Phoenix.”

“We’re kickin’ it off already? Still living as fast as ever, kid.”

Ernie pointed behind him, and from that direction came the sound of metal scraping together and heavy footfalls. The origin of the sound quickly became clear. After a moment, a two-and-a-half-meter-tall magi-mechanical full-armor suit—a silhouette gear—appeared.

“Oh? If it isn’t the kid’s defective toy. What’re you plannin’ to do with this li’l

thing...hm? Hey, is the one moving it..."

Halfway through, the boss's voice began to sound puzzled.

Everyone here knew how big a part Ernie's silhouette gears had played during the Casadesus Disaster.

But at the same time, they also knew how defective the current silhouette gears were. Because the magical abilities required to control them were so high, only a small subsection of people—Ernie and the twins—could exhibit such useful abilities in them.

But now, the one controlling the silhouette gear was Ernie's other childhood friend, the dwarf boy Batson Termonen. This was made clear because the boy's face was showing underneath the armor's helm.

"There's no way the li'l Bat here is as good at magic as the kid. What's going on? Spit it out."

Though Batson was one of Ernie's childhood friends, he was purely a blacksmith and did not possess extreme magic prowess.



“Heh heh heh, this is the result of the improvements made by Batson and I! Well then, Batson, will you do the honors?”

With that, Batson switched places with Ernie, coming to the forefront and patting the silhouette gear’s chest proudly.

“Sure thing. Up until now, only people like Ernie could use the Motor Beat type of silhouette gear, but this Motolift type is different. It features a miniaturized magius engine, after all! As you can see, even I can use it, and I’m awful at magic!”

Back when the boss and the others were making the Tellestarle, Batson was working with Ernie and the others to create the Motor Beat.

They were so into it they messed with and adjusted every inch of the machine. Thanks to that, there was no one more well-versed in silhouette gears than Batson. Even the boss had to admit that.

“Oho! That’s interesting. But...did you say a miniaturized magius engine? Where the heck did you get something like that?”

“We asked Duke Dixgard and he got one for us right away,” Ernie said matter-of-factly, which caused the boss to let out a small sigh.

While they weren’t nearly as jealously guarded as ether reactors, magius engines were still classified technology and were hidden from the public eye. The fact that they were able to procure one with a single simple request showed how much expectation was being placed on the Order of the Silver Phoenix. The boss decided to ignore the fact that he was included in that group.

“Heh heh heh, and the most important part is yet to come, boss: the fact that Batson is operating one means that all the knightsmiths can use them!”

For a short while after that, the boss narrowed his eyes and mulled those words over. Soon enough, though, he realized a certain truth: the true value of the silhouette gear, which could on its own exhibit a lot of strength.

Knightsmiths mainly worked with silhouette knights, gigantic weapons that were ten meters tall. Each part of said machines was similarly huge, and large groups of people—along with cranes and other equipment—were necessary

just to move them around. With silhouette gears, though, it would be possible to handle those parts with much fewer numbers and equipment. That would immediately and greatly reduce the amount of labor needed.

“I see. Interesting! Okay, Li'l Bat, we're gonna make more of these silhouette gears. Help me.”

“Yeah, leave it to me! I'm part of the Order of the Silver Phoenix too, after all! I'll work hard!” Batson pounded his chest in salute before running forward. Thus, the silhouette gear Motolift became standard work equipment for knightsmiths.

It didn't take long for the machine to become so relied on that the knightsmiths of the Order of the Silver Phoenix could no longer stand to work without them.

As had been expected at the time, silhouette gears exhibited the coveted ability to manipulate large parts well. Furthermore, the knightsmiths also developed a brute-force technique to do their smithing work in the silhouette gear as well, either because they were too lazy to get out of the suit or because the suits were just that convenient. Ernie had not expected that.

Having started with this extremely *fresh* new smithing technique, the Order of the Silver Phoenix managed to shock the instructors of the knight runner department. Eventually, though, silhouette gears started to be adapted for other work in addition to smithing.

The fact that it spread well through Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, the largest school in Fremmevilla Kingdom, meant that before long it would also spread throughout the country. From then on, it would have a great impact on the academy's—no, the entire country's educational system. Thus, the origin of such change, the Order of the Silver Phoenix, would quietly make its presence felt more and more each day.



The Auvinier Mountains split the continent of Setterlund in two. At their foot lay the capital of Fremmevilla, Konkaanen, as well as several more of the country's largest cities—such as Laihiala Academy City—all gathered together. This area was the origin of the West Fremmevilla Highway, as well as the origin

of the country itself.

Several days' carriage ride south of the cluster of large cities was a town in a dense forest, far removed from that hub of liveliness. It was called the fortress city of Dufort.

Both Konkaanen and Laihiala were equipped with castle walls. That was only natural in a country where monsters wandered around everywhere. Any town of a certain size tended to have such a thing.

Dufort was no exception; it was surrounded by castle walls. However, for a number of reasons, the walls were far larger in scale and sturdier than other settlements of similar size. The shape of the town was also unique, with only a moderate amount of small buildings that looked like housing. Meanwhile, most of the town was taken up by a single facility, the size of which outstripped even Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's campus.

Solid walls, a large fortress-like central building, and the rest of the town's structure all contributed to why Dufort was called a fortress city.

The large facility was actually the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory—or the national lab for short. It was a series of workshops for research and development. The national lab was Fremmevilla Kingdom's largest research-facility-slash-organization for silhouette knight technology. Their mission was to collect all sorts of technologies related to silhouette knights and compile them into a new model. They had been carrying on this duty since the founding of the country. Still, creating a new silhouette knight needed roughly a century's time. These facilities weren't just for research either; they also served as a manufacturing plant for silhouette knights in peacetime.

The innards of such a large workshop were filled with a variety of facilities and a mountain of machines that seemed like prototypes. Because "history" had piled up a little too much, the accumulated mess of the fruits of their labor could only be described as "utter chaos." Still, it would probably make a certain mecha otaku dance wildly with joy at the sight of it.

The First Development Studio—the incarnation of that chaos—was currently playing host to a large mass of knightsmiths. They were gathered around four silhouette knights. They were rather unrefined and possessed a different design

than the officially adopted, mass-produced model, the Kaldatoah. Were they in the midst of assembling them? No, the task they were immersing themselves so passionately in was the exact opposite: they were *disassembling* the silhouette knights.

“What is going on here... Even the way they connected the muscles is different. So they needed this much tensile strength?”

“This little thing is an arm, huh? I would never have even imagined attaching more arms and trying to move them.”

The machines being disassembled currently had started off damaged. Some among them were even basically destroyed. They were Tellestarles—the machines that had once fallen into the hands of thieves in the Casadesus Disaster, and had to be destroyed.

Normally they would have been repaired first, but because the original manufacturer—the Order of the Silver Phoenix—had already selfishly run off to do their own thing already, these machines had been left in the lurch. So, rather than disposing of them, they had been given to the national lab for research.

“Hmm...I would’ve liked to have been able to take it apart from a functional state.”

The knightsmiths looked like children with a new toy, and they had been working without a moment’s rest for a while now. Every bit of progress came with a new discovery, sparking discussion over the mysteries of the Tellestarle and its construction, which was far different from any existing machine. Of course, they did all this without ever pausing the disassembly.

The Tellestarle had been thought up by Ernie, who’d brought over knowledge from his world, Earth—naturally, it didn’t have any clear causal relationship to this world. This strange machine, which seemed to have simply fallen from the heavens one day, was of great interest to the knightsmiths. They examined every part they took off the giants carefully, as if they wanted to consume every piece of it, greedily attempting to absorb the technology that lay within.

However, regardless of the overflowing zeal displayed by the knightsmiths, the disassembly of the giants was not going well. In the end, it was just too different. The ideas behind these machines were far removed from existing

silhouette knights, which delayed the knightsmiths' attempts to understand them. They'd spent whole days entirely on discussion and debate about their findings. If it weren't for the design specs that had been sent along with the Tellestarles, their efforts might have been stalled indefinitely.

In this workshop, overtaken as it was by the knightsmiths' willpower and passion, a certain figure appeared—a man with a short, stocky build. His expression was buried in a mass of wrinkles, and his hair grew almost to his feet, complete with a neatly braided beard. His looks caused him to stand out, marking him as an elderly dwarf.

“Ch-Chief Gaizka...”

The expression of the knightsmith who went to greet him seemed slightly bitter. Chief Gaizka Johansson was the leader of the First Development Studio. In other words, he was the knightsmiths' boss.

“You're taking quite a long time with this, aren't you? Of course, I can assume you all have finished by now, yes?” His voice sounded like the creaking of a rusted tool, and it sent shivers up the spines of all the knightsmiths.

They froze in place, exchanging some awkward looks among themselves, before one of them hesitantly spoke.

“We've uncovered several interesting truths, chief. However, there are a lot of things packed into this silhouette knight that just don't have any existing equivalent, so we still need more time for our research. These machines are like treasure maps; the more we look into them, the more new things we find. Still, it's totally unclear what the inventor was thinking when he made this thing... I can only imagine how much trouble we would have had if the design specs hadn't been given to us along with the machines. For example—”

Gaizka knew that his subordinate had a tendency to *go on and on* when he got excited; he could see the beginnings of a ramble. He waved him off to interrupt the speech.

“I see. So, how much have you uncovered? And how much of it is useful?”

Suddenly the knightsmith gummed up—all that talkativeness, gone. It wasn't hard to extrapolate that the results hadn't been promising. The crow's-feet

around Gaizka's narrow eyes deepened as he narrowed them even further.

"Um...as I have just said, the ideas are just so...original... It's not like imitating them isn't impossible, but actually understanding the technologies involved will take some more time..."

The knightsmiths did not try to make any more excuses because they could see the rage that had settled in Gaizka's eyes.

"Are you...seriously saying that something a mere student created is stumping the proud engineers of the national lab?"

"No, not at all! We *have* produced results. For example, the way they use crystal tissue. This structure allows it to exhibit much more power than before, and it should be rather easy to apply to our designs."

The knightsmith saw that the answer they'd given Gaizka did not satisfy him at all; the man's expression remained harsh. There were already rivers of cold sweat running down the speaking knightsmith's back, and given what he still had to report, he wanted nothing more than to just run away.

"Um...Chief...there's also, err...one more problem..." The knightsmith spoke hesitantly, and all emotion drained from Gaizka's face. "We'll be able to solve the problem of the mechanisms themselves given enough time, but...there is a different problem. This machine seems to have had its magius engine modified greatly as well. The syntax parsers are putting all their effort into it, but we have yet to understand all of it..."

"What?" Gaizka paused in shock. "Still though, even if the magius engine's script was overwritten, can't you work backward and interpret the script by its functions?"

"It's true that we have the design specs to try that with, but what's written on it is...um... Well, it's a total mystery to us how to even activate this feature here..."

Gaizka's eyes once again started to sharpen in anger, but the knightsmith's face had already turned to an unhealthy pallor.

"Okay, listen here. We have been entrusted by His Majesty to develop an entirely new model of silhouette knight. An entirely new model! This is a huge

project, a century in the making! Our names will be recorded in the annals of history upon its completion. How could you stumble at such an early stage?!”

No matter how many excuses they tried to make, it was a fact that the knightsmiths had failed to make enough progress. They were stuck between an angry boss and the harshness of reality, causing them to be drenched in a cold sweat, and it didn't seem like the situation would be improving anytime soon.

What saved the knightsmiths, who were driven into a corner, was the appearance of a third party.

“Come now, Gaizka, there's no need to yell like that. You're just going to make them shrivel up so hard they won't be able to swing their hammers.”

The reaction on both sides was extreme. Gaizka turned around like he'd been physically flung that way, while the expressions of the knightsmiths glowed, as if they'd seen their savior.

“Well if it isn't Director Olvår... What kind of change of heart brings you all the way out here? You, whose pitifully weak body usually does nothing but sit on a chair and spread its roots?”

Olvår Brommdall was the head of the national lab. He looked like quite a young man, and he was tall and lean in contrast to Gaizka's dwarven frame. He wore a loose robe and had a vividly dyed cloth wrapped around his head. His distinctive features included a calm and gentle smile and narrow eyes like slits.

It seemed Gaizka hadn't expected his appearance—for a moment, he looked greatly surprised. But before anyone else could notice, he covered it up with a click of his tongue.

“Of course it's to get a look at the new model. Having an entirely new silhouette knight brought in is the rarest of rare events, after all. I figured I might as well listen in on any exposition that was happening, so I opened up some time in my schedule. As for you knightsmiths: while this is an order from His Majesty, that doesn't mean you have to be in a hurry. Make sure you take as much time as you need to do your work properly.”

Out of self-interest, the knightsmiths immediately nodded their understanding and returned to their work before anyone else could say

otherwise. Soon enough, the only one left in the harsh atmosphere that Gaizka had created was the easygoing Olvår.

“That was wrong, Director. Every studio’s chief is allowed to manage their knightsmiths how they wish, but you just went over my head.”

“Oh, I suppose that’s true. I just thought that rushing them like that wasn’t good, so I kindly warned them.”

“I understand how you feel, Director, but I don’t think that concern is necessary... Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s something else that’s concerning me at the moment.” Gaizka turned around on his heel and left quickly.

Olvår watched him go, shrugging. “My word, Gaizka is so stubborn... He’s good at what he does, but he needs to learn to be more flexible; having some leeway in all things is important. Especially in times like this, while we’re being ‘tested.’”

There was a reason why Olvår had come to this place. While interest in the new silhouette knight was part of it, his main goal lay somewhere else. Rumors of a newly founded development organization had reached his ears. Apparently they had arrived with the fanfare of the first new prototype in a century.

“I still find it hard to believe, but it seems it’s true that His Majesty has founded another organization for development. With the people who brought in this new model too, no less. We’re clearly on the back foot.”

There was no one to catch his mumblings amidst all the hubbub of the dismantling. He had never meant for someone else to hear in the first place, though.

“Are we the stalking horse? Or...is this meant to be bitter medicine? His Majesty is unexpectedly mean-spirited, isn’t he? Or maybe...it’s both? He makes a separate organization and encourages competition to... Hmm, maybe I’m just reading too much into it. Either way, I’ll need to keep my ears peeled for a little longer, it seems. There’s a limit to being able to ‘hear’ well, after all.”

His soliloquy melted away into the tumultuous atmosphere of the workshop.

“Damn youngsters...acting all big just because you’ve got the attention of His Majesty... Just watch.” Gaizka’s footsteps were heavy as he walked, spitting

those angry words. A different sort of displeasure from when he heard the knightsmiths' report was rubbing him the wrong way.

A fire was alight within the deep wells that were his eye sockets as he glared at the Tellestarle with a look that could kill.

"The next official mass-produced unit... As long as I am the one to complete it, my name will go down in history. I won't let those damn youngsters keep puffing themselves up like that!" He steeled himself with a murky fire in his eyes, and an ominous smile appeared on his face.

He once again raised his voice to stir up his pathetic subordinates—all in order to achieve his greatest wish.

Chapter 20: The Order of the Silver Phoenix Takes Off

It was now the year 1278 O.C.

Winter was at its harshest right after the new year, and it was snowing at the foot of the Auvinier Mountains.

It wasn't enough to force everything to close, but the thin sheet of white snow that covered the scenery meant there were fewer people on the street than usual. Those that *were* out and about had donned thick clothing in an attempt to defend themselves from the chill wind as they went about their business as fast as possible.

In a rare turn of events, a large group of knights was walking down the central street that did nothing to curtail the freezing winds blowing down it. But they were no ordinary knights. These knights stood a gigantic three stories tall plus change... They were silhouette knights. From inside the buildings that lined the street, residents peered out with inquisitive eyes.

What were the knights here for? In this season, which was rather bereft of entertainment, even small things quickly became the talk of the town. And with this group of giants, it was likely to be the topic of choice at dinner tables for a while. Of course, the knights did not seem to care as they silently made their way forward. Their destination was the place that gave this city its name: Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

In the knight runner department's workshop, knightsmiths were swinging their hammers as usual. However, what was being swung were hammers so large not even dwarves could wield them, and the ones doing the swinging were the new silhouette gear models: Motolifts.

In the time since they'd been introduced, Motolifts had seen a lot of change. The Motor Beat that was their basis was made for combat, so it wasn't suited for work.

In addition, since everyone had adopted the machines because they were so useful, a large number had been produced in a short time. Because of all that, their structure had been greatly simplified in order to streamline the manufacturing process.

What was most striking about the changes lay in the torso, where there was no armor at all. The pilots looked like they were sitting down on the machine's pelvis, with their body secured directly to the machine's main frame—essentially its spine—by a single leather seat belt. The pilot was only protected by something referred to as an iron fence, which looked like a frame or a cage. It had almost no defensive properties, but it wouldn't trap heat inside, so it was highly rated by the knightsmiths.

"Hmm...this is a problem." Ernie groaned.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix seemed to be running smoothly, but behind the scenes a certain problem had arisen.

"You're right... We were halved after the behemoth incident. Then we repaired them and made them into Tellestarles...and they ended up destroyed anyway."

Helvi let out a sigh from her position beside Ernie, who was resting his chin in his hands.

Even though the introduction of silhouette gears was going well, these past few months the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been at an effective standstill. The reason for that was the number of silhouette knights in their possession. Frankly, they had nowhere near enough.

In the first place, the order was sharing ownership of the few silhouette knights they had with the academy.

Originally, the academy had owned a total of twenty training units. Ten of them hadn't been involved with the behemoth incident and thus hadn't been remodeled. Those units, along with the revived Guaire, were all the units they had left.

"And if we mess with the remaining units, the knight runner department won't be able to function. There's not much we can do like this," the boss

complained, and everybody agreed.

The reason the Order of the Silver Phoenix had even been founded was to make new silhouette knights. However, that required resources. These repeated incidents had dealt a great blow to what they had on hand, and honestly, the mass production of silhouette gears hadn't helped.

"Mmrr...and we've been careful about what we should be making too. After making full use of class time among other things, it sucks to not be able to make a move right away."

"Come on, Captain Ernie, you should at least go to your classes." Helvi warned Ernie, who seemed proud for some reason.

That was when Dietrich, his arms crossed, seemed to remember something. "Hm? That reminds me—weren't we supposed to be given new units? I remember hearing about that somewhere."

"Yes, we were. Originally, we were supposed to receive Kaldatoahs in exchange for handing over the Tellestarles...from Duke Dixgard."

The others were smart, so that was enough to get them to understand the situation. It was known that said duke's territory was where the Casadesus Disaster had taken place, after all.

"I see. Even if he's a duke, I can't see him getting around to us anytime soon. Oh well, I guess we'll just have to train by making silhouette gears for a while."

"You're right about that. Then in the meanwhile, I'll brainstorm up some ways to perfect what's inside. During class."

"Didn't I just tell you not to? Why do you insist on doing that during class?"

It happened as they were trying to amuse themselves out of their ennui. Suddenly a commotion could be heard outside the workshop. The group looked at each other and then out of the building. There was a crowd of rubbernecks making noise, heedless of the thin covering of snow and cold air everywhere. They tried straining their ears to catch what the crowd was saying, and they could make out the words "gates" and "knight order."

Ernie and the boss seemed to notice something, and they quickly ran off

toward the school's gates.



Because Laihiala Knight Runner Academy used silhouette knights in their classes, there was a space to park them right beside the school gates.

It didn't see much use, but at the moment there was a small army of giants lined up there. A little ways away from them stood a crowd of rubberneckers who refused to give in to the cold in their desire to watch the event from far away.

The giants, Kaldatoahs that were Fremmevilla's officially adopted mass-produced unit, were lined up in orderly fashion and parked on one knee. There were a total of twenty of them—two companies. With this, the academy possessed forces equivalent to a small fortress.

Thin trails of steam came off the surface of the Kaldatoahs, thanks to a combination of the heater provided for the cockpit and the heat generated by their activation. The sight of the group of them lined up, wreathed in mist, gave off a somewhat solemn feel, causing the people gathered there to ooh and aah in excitement.

The knight runners who had disembarked from their machines gave orders to the infantry that had accompanied them. Among those soldiers that were moving busily, Ernie saw a familiar face. That person also noticed Ernie as the child proceeded forward out of the crowd of rubberneckers. The familiar face swung his brawny, bearlike body around as a smile appeared on his face, though it was surrounded by a thick beard—it was the captain of the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit, Morten Fredholme.

This was the first time the two had seen each other since the Casadesus Disaster, which had been several months ago. He approached Ernie, tightened up his stance, stood up straight, and snapped off a smart salute.

"By Duke Dixgard's order, we have come to deliver two companies of Kaldatoahs to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Please confirm their delivery, Sir Knight Captain Echevalier."

"Yes, I hereby confirm the delivery, Sir Knight Captain Fredholme. Good work,

and please give my regards to his lordship the duke.”

Ernie saluted back, but that was the extent of the two’s serious attitudes. Morten was the first one to let the facade crumble. He looked down at the small boy, watching him try his best to strain upward and be as impressive as possible, and couldn’t suppress a snort.

“Pfft... Hoo ha ha... You’re really good at acting like a knight captain, Ernesti.”

“Erm, Captain Fredholme, how should I put this... That’s too much.”

“Ha ha! No need to be so formal. You can just call me Morten. We’re both captains, so we can leave questions of age and seniority aside and just be equals. In fact, you might technically have more authority, since you report directly to His Majesty while I’m only in charge of a fortress.”

Ernie only responded to that with a vaguely meaningful smile and a tilted head.

“So, about the Kaldatoahs...”

“Ah, we were supposed to provide you with these in exchange for the new models, right? With all that’s happened, this is quite late, but now we’ve fulfilled that promise.”

“But hasn’t the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit been dealt a serious blow during the Casadesus Disaster? We’re definitely happy about this, but are you sure you’re okay with handing us the machines before you resupply your own forces?”

The Casadesus Disaster had driven the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit to near destruction.

It was unknown how much of a burden would fall on Duke Dixgard if they were to hand all this to Ernie. But while Ernie couldn’t hide how bewildered he was at this preferential treatment, Morten flashed a frank smile.

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve filled the holes in our ranks with some temporary members from other places. Also, according to his lordship, ‘Anyone can protect a fortress, but only you can do what you do. It’s clear what should be given priority.’”

Ernie looked behind Morten at the Kaldatoahs that had steam coming out of their intakes. They were giants made of crystal and steel who did not speak, but Ernie still felt a lot of emotion when he looked at them.

“I understand his lordship’s words. Please tell him that I will do my utmost not to betray his expectations.”

“Okay, I will. Personally, I’m expecting a lot from you guys too. I might have to have you take a look at my Heimerwort one of these days too!”

Morten mussed Ernie’s hair as he gave his short goodbye before taking the others from the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit and returning to Casadesus. Knight runners split up to move the twenty Kaldatoahs that had been left behind. Though the members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been through a lot this past year, it seemed they still felt some special emotion because they were piloting the country’s officially adopted, mass-produced unit, and it took some wrangling before all the units were inside the workshop.

The inside of the workshop, which had been inactive until now, regained its liveliness as it was inundated with silhouette knights. Not to mention they were current-gen models that were active on the front line. As materials they were the best of the best.

“Now then, for a lot of reasons we’re not allowed to go back anymore. My word, how dreadful.”

“You say that, Ernie, but you look like you’re having a lot of fun.”

Standing in front of all the lined-up Kaldatoahs, Ernie looked like he was having so much fun he couldn’t contain himself. No matter how favorably you tried to look at him, it seemed like he was plotting something untoward.



Inside the workshop was a section that had been cordoned off with a simple partition. It was called the “meeting room,” and the Order of the Silver Phoenix was currently gathered within it. Everyone had their own chair and was sitting wherever they happened to sit. As one might expect, Ernesti, their captain, stood in front of them.

“It’s a raid, everyone.”

“Where?”

It wasn't clear whether or not Kid's retort got through to Ernie, tired as Kid was. Given how ecstatic Ernie was and how his face was flushed, everyone was silently in agreement: it wouldn't matter what they said.

“That was a joke, but still...it's time for the Order of the Silver Phoenix to fulfill its mission.”

“Thought so. We got an advance payment, after all. There's no way we can half-ass this.”

Everyone nodded their agreement. The order had been formed with *that* in mind, so no one would object.

“The order is to create a silhouette knight that will shock the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory. It will have decisive differences in ability to everything up until now, and I would prefer that to be clear in its appearance.”

Ernie opened up a trunk that had been placed beside him, then took out a bundle of paper. He started to paste them up on the blackboard that had been left in the meeting room as he continued.

“Heh heh heh... I've thought up a lot of different ideas! I took the battle at Casadesus the other day as inspiration, as there were a lot of problems during that. It's unfortunate that we let a Tellestarle get away...but why did that happen? Because we were interrupted? Because they resisted? My thinking is that the real reason lies before all of that, in that both units could only move at relatively the same speed. Currently, this country has no unit that excels at movement. So, I want to make one that does!”

“Great—so the next one will be a lighter unit?”

When it came to silhouette knights, speed was generally decided by the weight of the unit. Since they were shaped like humans, their method of movement was with two legs. If the unit had to carry a heavy load, it would move slower, while a lighter load would allow the unit to move faster. It was obvious logic. Other factors included the amount and quality of the crystal tissue in the body, but it wasn't a very appreciable difference. So the general expectation was that *fast* equaled *light*.

“Did you forget the lessons we learned with the Tellestarle? If there is a function we want, the form should change to fit it. Even if the form becomes inhuman.”

The logic of making something lighter was obvious, but it was the logic of a human who walked on two legs. Even in this world, there are many things faster than humans. Since he’d seen the abundance of mech designs that flowed from the overripe world he’d come from, Ernie’s answer to the problem was both perfect and gave a strong impression.

Ernie had taken out a blueprint of a unit.

The first thing everyone else in the meeting room did was look at that blueprint. The upper half of the proposed machine was more normal than they had expected. The balance of it seemed slightly unusual, but that was just a trifling concern. The abnormality came in the lower half. From the waist down it was like there was another torso, as it ballooned into something gigantic. It had thick, powerful thighs and really sturdy-looking legs that seemed made to withstand the undoubtedly heavy weight of the rest of the body.

That wasn’t all: the biggest difference was its side profile. It clearly had more than two legs... Specifically, it had four.

It looked like from the waist down, the machine suddenly became modeled after a different animal. It was an animal that they were all very familiar with—a knight’s best friend, otherwise known as a horse.

The unit on the blueprint that Ernie had posted was genuinely strange, a fusion of man and horse—a centaur.

“This... Uhh... Is it going to be...*that* sort of thing? Are we going to be known as beast specialists or something?”

Silence had reigned for around a full ten minutes before finally the boss squeezed out a question that belied his impression of the design. He was representing pretty much everyone there in that moment.

“Well, rather than a beast... No, wait... Erm, how do I put this? Basically, what is this?” Dietrich rambled.

“It’s a machine whose purpose is easy to understand from its form, and it’s

very fast,” Ernie replied.

“Huh? Well I mean, I guess, but...huh?”

While Dietrich’s thoughts had started to go haywire, Ernie’s reply was concise and to the point.

The knightsmiths had also heard the sound of their common sense crumbling away in the past when it was time to mount the sub-arms to the Tellestarle. And now they were hearing the agonizing death screams of their common sense thanks to this follow-up blow. The fact that the only physical reaction was them cradling their head in their hands was either thanks to their being used to Ernie or thanks to how resolute they had to be after coming this far as part of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

“Plus, I think if we go this far, we’ll definitely be able to give the people over at the national lab a good shock to the system.”

“I don’t think it’ll just be a shock. I’d bet all their blood would boil over and they’d die. This is just totally, completely, *absolutely* for the sake of argument...but I’ll give you that this ‘horse’ idea is good. If that’s the case, what’s with the upper half?!”

If Ernie had simply come up with a horse-shaped silhouette knight, the boss might’ve been exasperated by how silly the idea was, but he probably wouldn’t have found it nearly as objectionable. In this world, centaurs—mythical beings that combined the features of horses and humans—didn’t exist. As one might expect, they were limited to being the stuff of fairy tales and imaginations.

And Ernie was trying to bring such a fantastic and imaginary form into real life. It could just have been that he was fond of fairy tales and had an unexpectedly poetic streak, but a different sort of concern had the knightsmiths shivering.

“Why? Because...it’s cool!”

“No way... Is that really the reason?!” Almost everyone there shouted in chorus.

To Ernie, it was a pretty serious reason, but after seeing everyone react like that, he turned away somewhat awkwardly and started to elaborate.

“Well, erm...if you want something other than that, then let’s see... If you just make it a regular horse, it’d be hard to fight in, and there’d be no point in being able to catch up to fleeing enemies. But if we tried to put another unit on top, that would just be double the work for half the benefit. So, this combines a human upper half with a horse’s lower half to allow it to move fast while being able to fight on its own. In other words, the goal is to combine both halves of a mounted unit into one silhouette knight.”

Because that had been a reasonable explanation, at least, the knightsmiths collectively rubbed down their chests in relief, attempting to calm down their rapid heartbeats. Ernie’s goals were in fact concrete and logical; they just didn’t pay any heed to common sense to get there. He wasn’t going out of his way to make it fairy-tale-like for no reason.

“Ahh, well...we get what you want to do now. That doesn’t change the fact that you’ve gone off the rails on this one, but we can leave that aside for now. Still, would anyone normally tack on a horse below just for that...”

Having checked over the remaining blueprints, the boss and the other knightsmiths were all in a state somewhere between readiness and resignation.

“And from what I can see, you actually seriously thought about its structure... Wait a second, I’ve never seen anything like this before. Where the heck did you get this from?”

“I worried a lot over where it connects the two halves, but the lower half is pretty much exactly that of a horse.”

The knowledge and experience Ernie had relating to design had originally come from him forcing his way into knightsmithing classes. Ernie had been abnormally serious in his studies and had managed to stay well above the average in class, but it shouldn’t have been enough for him to come up with such monstrosities as this. What had leveled up his abilities was the experience he’d gained with the Tellestarle.

With that under his belt, Ernie managed to connect his practical knowledge with all his ideas. Everything from the weight distribution—which affected balance—to the structure of the inner skeleton that would support all of it, to the output and placement of the strand crystal tissue that had to fit the form of

a horse, to the shape of its outer skin, had been written down in detail on the blueprints.

“Wow...the Tellestarle is starting to look like a cute little thing to me now. This idea is totally reckless—and totally interesting. I won’t have any time to rest my hammer arm.”

The boss had given up trying to play the straight man to get Ernie to see sense. Now, he totally looked like an engineer, and though his smile was strained, he showed no signs of rejecting the idea. That was when Dietrich hesitantly raised his hand.

“I’ll leave the structure of it to the knightsmiths. But there is something I’m concerned about... Something that gave us a lot of pain with the Tellestarle. If this new ‘horse’ were to be stolen, regular units wouldn’t be able to catch up to it. Wouldn’t that just make it harder to pursue the enemy than before?”

The cocktail of emotions on his face was complicated, as he’d been directly involved with the incident in question. None of them had any intention of letting their machines get stolen again, but it wasn’t wrong to try and think of ways to prevent it from happening in the first place. It was only natural to hypothesize about what would happen if such a disaster befell them again. If these machines were stolen, then it would be like humans trying to chase down a horse on foot: utterly impossible.

“There’s no need to worry on that front, Sir Dee. I’ve thought of several ways to make sure these units cannot be stolen. We’ll need to make prototypes first, but if things go well, we can mount these countermeasures on other silhouette knights too.”

Ernie had no intention of making the same mistake again. Since he spoke so confidently, Dietrich just gave a small shrug.

With the shock of seeing the new unit still fresh on their minds, the knightsmiths got to work.

They used their combined knowledge and experience to decipher Ernie’s blueprints and either strengthen or change them to better suit the overall design goal of the model. Seeing them already start arguing over what to do, Ernie had a satisfied look on his face.

“It’ll be a lot of work since this new model is very different from everything up until now, I know, but they’re acting like there’s only one new machine.”

Edgar paused for a moment with dread before saying, “You say that like you’ve got something else up your sleeve.”

Ernie’s smile deepened, but no answer came. Too afraid to pry further, Edgar just averted his eyes.

“Well, leaving that aside, it’s true that I’m very confident in this new ‘horse.’ Still, we can’t rest on our laurels with only one new unit.”

“Yes, I get what you’re trying to say, but...this already looks like a lot of work. Wouldn’t adding even more onto this be impossible for them?”

Just remembering the carnage from last year was enough to give Helvi an exhausted look. Even assuming that the new “horse” was only as hard to make as the Tellestarle, many harsh days of work lay ahead of them. The Order of the Silver Phoenix only had limited manpower available to them, so they had to make up the difference with time.

“That’s why I’m thinking of leaving the time-consuming development of the frame to them while I try my hand at making some...optional equipment. I’ll call them my Option Works.”

Edgar and Helvi acted puzzled at hearing the unfamiliar word; it was like question marks had popped up over their heads. Rather than explain verbally, it was faster for Ernie to pull out a set of blueprints and point its contents out to them. The blueprints were of several armor plates that combined together and would fit around a silhouette knight’s shoulders. Its function resembled that of the surcoat, but it was different: there were some complicated mechanisms on the back of the armor plates.

“I’ve named this the Flexible Coat. Put simply, if back weapons refer to the system where sub-arms aim weapons for you, then imagine this is the same but for shields.”

“Hrm...that’s fine and all, Ernesti, but shields need to be braced or there’s no point. Sub-arms are too weak to add much defense.”

“Yes, they would be if the sub-arms are left as is. But think: what does a

silhouette knight do to make up for the frailties in its frame?”

“That’d be strengthening magic...oh.”

Edgar was immediately convinced, and he looked back to the blueprint. Sub-arms were much weaker than normal arms. This would be fixed by adding on strengthening magic, and that was the principle behind this equipment.

“On paper, it should provide a fair amount of extra defense. The drawback would be the increase in mana consumption while it’s deployed.”

“What an interesting idea. It would depend on the situation, but this would certainly have its uses.”

“It would. Also, I’m going to make several prototypes of equipment much like this, so I think they’ll pile up. I’m counting on you all to test how they feel to use.”

Edgar and the others nodded in the affirmative with wry smiles on their faces. It seemed the knight runners wouldn’t have much free time either.



The Order of the Silver Phoenix followed their stated purpose and moved to bring Ernie’s ideas to life. In order to build both the centaur type and Ernie’s Option Works, the entire order would be needed. The only ones left free were Ernie, who was basking in his feeling of satisfaction after lining up all his ideas, the twins Kid and Addy, and Batson.

“Good good, let’s keep making more. Now then, while everyone else is working hard, let’s do what we can as well!”

“What?! There’s still more, Ernie?!” Addy shouted in exasperation, her eyes turning into saucers.

He had just finished proposing a mountain of optional equipment for silhouette knights, and now it seemed he was planning to add more. Though she knew Ernesti was just the type to do that, the sheer variety had blown past the level of impressive and into the realm of too much.

“Yes. To tell you the truth, I had another one that I thought up but...it’s got some problems.”

“Is it gonna be the same thing again? Where we’re going to have to spend days upon days on trial and error?” Batson thought back to last year and the days they’d spent on the Motor Beat as well as the Scorpius and Wire Anchor. Those days had been both fun and trying.

“Heh heh heh, leave that kind of thing to me! By the way, Kid, Addy...how do you two use Aero Thrust?”

“How?” Kid paused, wondering if it was a trick question. “Isn’t it just making an explosion behind you?”

“It is. The spell uses the recoil from the explosion. Now, here’s the real question: what happens if you use Aero Thrust multiple times in rapid succession?”

“Err, well...you’d be pushed farther and farther, and build up a lot of momentum...I guess?” Addy tilted her head as she tried to imagine what it was like when she used Aero Thrust.

“That’s right. In theory, the recoil could continue to stack on top of itself, resulting in continuous acceleration. That goes for humans and silhouette knights as well.”

“Are you seriously going to try casting a whole bunch of Aero Thrusts while riding in a silhouette knight?”

The kids knew that Ernie could construct an overspell on his own. The natural conclusion of what he had said was that silhouette knights could also be accelerated in the same way. However, Ernie responded with a slow shake of his head.

“Unfortunately, that’s a negative. That would of course be going too far. It’s very taxing to continually cast overspells that can affect a silhouette knight, after all.”

“No, no, normally something like that’d be way beyond just ‘taxing.’”

“That’s why, just like with silhouette arms, we will prepare a piece of equipment with an Emblem Graph on it. By equipping it, the silhouette knight will be able to use it as a source of propulsion as long as its mana reserves allow.”

“Uhh... Sure, on paper that sounds correct...” After hearing the theory on it, Batson imagined the steps that would be needed to achieve that effect, and his face froze. Even the twins got the feeling that they had just heard an incredibly frightening proposal.

“Well, Batty aside, what should we do, then?”

“A lot of this will depend on the magic script, so I’ll be counting on you two for that. Let’s create the script together. Eventually, we can borrow one of the Kaldatoahs and do some testing. When that happens, we’ll have Batson help.”

The three kids looked at each other, each coming to the realization that Ernie had never once proposed something like this and not moved to make it happen. In the end, everyone agreed to help.

That was how one new model, several new pieces of equipment, and a secret and unprecedented new propulsion system were born into this world.

Chapter 21: Formidable Enemy and Determination

Time passed, and now winter had left Fremmevilla Kingdom, giving way to spring.

Spring was the season of meetings and partings. It was when students graduated and were replaced with new entrants. Older students moved up to the next grade, which for some meant graduating to the next level of schooling. The students were starting a new year, in which they would experience new scenery, though with the same faces.

In the midst of the merry mood that had spread throughout the academy, the knight runner department in the high school section also welcomed new students. These new students had freshly graduated from middle school and were aiming to become knight runners and knightsmiths. Burning up with hope and passion, they had no idea what they were getting into. This year, the knight runner department had become a hellish realm in which common sense went to die.

A Kaldatoah walked forward, shaking the ground with every step. The new knight runners and knightsmiths, who were being led somewhere by instructors, paused and shouted in exultation. As the officially adopted mass-produced unit, Kaldatoahs had spent many years protecting Fremmevilla. Their fame within the country was unparalleled, to the point where they had become synonymous with silhouette knights themselves. The new students were impressed, one of them muttering, "Wow, as expected of Laihiala, they even have the official in-service models." And they all shivered in joy, thinking that they would be able to touch such wonderful machines.

The new students were being led to the workshop the Kaldatoah came out from. As usual, the inside was awash with the heat that came with active smithing, and many other Kaldatoahs could be seen resting on maintenance tables. In the smithy at the very back, knightsmiths were even now pounding on metal, in the middle of creating new parts. The newbies watched with interest

and hope at what they would be learning in the years to come, but it wasn't long before they tilted their heads in puzzlement, seeming to emit question marks.

Knightsmiths making new parts wasn't in itself strange; it was something that any blacksmithing student would have more than one experience with. What was strange was what the knightsmiths had "equipped." It was clearly a suit of armor—it couldn't be anything else. To state the obvious, armor was defensive equipment, which wasn't something that smiths needed. In fact, armor would usually be in the way.

Of course, the armor the knightsmiths were wearing wasn't normal armor; they were wearing silhouette gears—Motolifts. These silhouette gears had only been introduced at the end of last year, but the knightsmiths of the Order of the Silver Phoenix were already using them constantly, producing tremendous sounds as they swung their hammers.

The new students that saw this—especially the knightsmiths—were reminded of last year's events. It was known that the ones who made the Motolift's predecessor, the Motor Beat, were middle schoolers and not the high school knightsmiths—or, in short, precisely the new students who were here now. If their memory served, silhouette gears were far from practically usable, so they would never have imagined that silhouette gears would see mass production for use in smithing.

"Yo, newbies! Finally here, huh?!"

As the new students stared speechlessly at the scene in the workshop, a voice rang out from the back—one that did not lose out in volume to the sound of the hammers. They started in surprise as a dwarven student (or rather, former student, since he was now the head knightsmith of the Order of the Silver Phoenix) appeared. The man who held this exaggerated title was the boss, David Hepken. Like all dwarves, he was short but had a very sturdy, muscular build. His arms, which had been used for smithing for years, looked so solid they seemed to be made of metal themselves. Though the boss was alone, the sense of presence he gave off was enough to put a lot of pressure on the new students.

“Hah! Hah! I’ve been waiting! Oh man... These days I’ve got a small mountain of things to do, so I was really looking forward to you guys showing up. I’m gonna work you guys to the bone now, so you’re sure to become full-fledged smiths in no time. Resign yourselves to your fate!”

The boss’s line caused the new students’ eyes to narrow into pinpricks. Edgar had heard what the boss said as well, and with a sigh, he lightly admonished the dwarf, saying, “Come on, boss. That’s not just unkind; you’re basically threatening them.”

Edgar’s blond hair was cropped close, and he looked like a hardened veteran with his toned body and well-worn leather armor. He was actually quite young, but from the perspective of the even younger new students, he gave off a feeling of great dignity. As an aside, he held the position of leader of the first company, out of the two the Order of the Silver Phoenix currently had.

The boss acquiesced, “Then I’ll rephrase. Welcome, all you new students. The knight runner department welcomes you. I’m sure there’s a lot you still don’t understand, so I’ll try for a simple explanation: Starting from this year, the knight runner department’s facilities have been commandeered by us, the Order of the Silver Phoenix. We are a special knight order that reports directly to His Majesty the King. Also, everyone you see here is a member of the order, and while you all are new students of the knight runner department, you are now also apprentices attached to the order. Remember that.”

That speech was a lot, and all the new students looked befuddled. Then a stir went through the crowd. They had finally started to realize that the knight runner department this year had changed significantly from last year. Some among the group broke out in cold sweats; it was sinking in that they were dealing with a knight order that reported *directly to the king*. There wasn’t even a shred of the normal school life that they had envisioned here. This was beyond the pale of their imagination.

Edgar stepped in to clarify, “Leaving aside the knight order stuff, you guys will just be making or moving silhouette knights as you came to do. Well, you’ll also be making silhouette gears. A lot of our methods may seem strange to you, but I hope you’ll do your best to just get used to it.”

“I’m gonna have you all start with modifying a Kaldatoah as training, so prepare yourselves.”

Everyone in the group was newly admitted to the department, and normally they would start by building experience under the guidance of an upperclassman before finally starting to spread their wings in earnest during their second year. What the boss and Edgar were saying skipped straight over several steps of the normal procedure. To the newbies, things had truly taken a sudden turn. And just as the group fell into confusion over all this news, another calamity appeared just to push them over the edge.

“Ah, the new first-year...upperclassmen? So they’re here.”

A voice like a small bird’s singing—so out of place in this space filled with metal and fire—interrupted their thoughts. The entire group slowly turned to look at the owner of said voice, only to see a small boy with purplish-silver hair that bounced fluffily as he walked. Of course no introduction was needed; he was the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier.

When they saw Ernie, the new students’ dumbfounded expressions shifted to even more severe ones. It wasn’t because they had seen an unfamiliar child. In fact, almost all of them knew Ernie, which was why they were so surprised, wondering what the child was doing here. During the behemoth incident, the middle school knights—who now made up the majority of the first-year knight runner department students here—had become isolated in the forest and fell into a tight spot. The ones who had saved them were Ernie, Kid, and Addy. Even without that incident, Ernie was famous in the knight department for a variety of reasons, so even if someone hadn’t met him, they would know it was him right away.

Though Edgar felt a lot of sympathy for the new first-years, that didn’t stop him from clearing his throat to make sure he could be heard before he spoke.

“That reminds me, there is one more important thing I should tell you. You know of the existence of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, but what you don’t know is that its central figure, the captain, is...Ernesti Echevalier. Well, I’m sure you at least know his name, but...”

Ernie gave a single bow as the new students were once again struck

speechless, their mental faculties unable to keep up with all this new information. Seeing them like that, even the boss started to sympathize with them. Ernie felt the crowd freeze over, so he looked over at Edgar with a vaguely wry smile.

“Ah, um...well... I’m sure you guys have your own thoughts on this, but I’m thinking we should get started in earnest tomorrow. Let’s stop it here for today.”

No one paid attention to Edgar’s closing remarks, which made it all the more clear to the new students that their lives had just gone off the rails.



The new first-years of the knight runner department filed away at last, the shock having nearly done them in. None of them could hide the tired looks on their faces. But there was one among them who moved differently from the rest. That person smoothly peeled away from the group, making sure not to stand out, and returned to the workshop.

“Captain Echevalier...”

Ernie turned around after seeing a thin shadow that stretched all the way past his feet. The person who approached him was wearing the simple leather armor of a squire knight runner provided by the knight runner department. To anybody else watching, the figure would seem to be one of the new first-years, but Ernie recognized the one who approached him. With a smile, he nodded and spoke to the boss and Edgar, who had started walking ahead of him.

“Sorry, can you two return first? I still have some business left to attend to.”

The two of them exchanged looks before returning to the workshop. This left Ernie and the new student together, and they headed for the meeting room, which was currently unoccupied.

“That was unexpected. It surprised me to see that someone from the Order of the Indigo Falcon had become a first-year knight runner student.”

“Originally I was just sent here as a messenger. Several other objectives got mixed in, though, which is why I ended up being dispatched like this.”

Ernie seemed to accept that explanation as he looked up at the person that was quite a bit taller than him. Her name was Nora Frykberg, and as Ernie had said, she was a knight of the Order of the Indigo Falcon.

Her order wasn't known to the average citizen. In the first place, no one would find a name like that in any of the country's fortresses. This knight order had no defined form; it would've been more accurate to describe them as spies rather than knights. Not only were there very few people who knew of them, there probably wasn't anyone who knew their full scope outside of the king himself, Ambrosius. Even Ernie did not know anyone from the order other than Nora, who had been introduced to him as a liaison.

The reason someone like her, part of an organization of spies, infiltrated as a first-year student had to do with the mission entrusted to them.

"May I assume from the fact that you came to report to me that your people have accomplished something?"

Nora swiped away her hair, which was of a vaguely middling length, as she nodded expressionlessly. She then started to speak in a monotone. "First, allow me to report the results of our investigation. We have once again checked the identities of every member of the Order of the Silver Phoenix as well as those affiliated with Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. We have found several people with suspicious backgrounds and histories."

Around the time of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's formation, Ambrosius had commanded the Order of the Indigo Falcon to do a thorough investigation of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. He had wanted to start the investigation on the thieves' identities from the most likely place to have a clue. And thanks to a certain duke throwing his authority around, a thorough and extremely cutthroat investigation had taken place, yielding very fruitful results.

"And that was how information on the prototype Tellestarle was leaked by foreign elements that had infiltrated before the incident. That is what we've uncovered."

"I couldn't think of any other way this could have happened, so I'm not surprised. Still, I'm sure those foreign elements didn't just show up right beforehand with perfect timing. These foreign people must have gotten into

the academy a long time ago.”

Nora nodded in agreement, her expression still unchanging.

“We believe these foreign infiltrators have been sent in at regular intervals for a while now. We continued investigating with that assumption, and we have found that every year one of the graduates has had an unnatural, unidentifiable background.”

Since so many new students enrolled in the academy every year, background checks had by necessity been reduced to the bare minimum, and as long as the student’s attitude toward entering the school was good, they were accepted. As long as the academy did that, the latest knowledge would automatically spread. Internally, Ernie gave a strained chuckle, thinking that the spies must have worked very hard in their investigation. Nora herself gave no opinion on their findings; she simply and clinically told the facts.

“We have already finished ‘taking care’ of the problematic people in question and have managed to confirm how they pass reports and messages to their comrades. It seems the enemy’s strength has fallen considerably since the Casadesus Disaster. Using this opportunity, we will move to eliminate these hostile forces from the country entirely. At the same time, we have placed a ‘barrier’ around the academy and the city itself to prevent any more spies from being able to infiltrate. There will be no need to worry about a similar incident in the future.”

The barrier she referred to was, to rephrase, an intelligence network. Even as amazing as Ernie was, he was out of his depth when it came to information warfare, and had no countermeasures to put into play. So he left all matters of counterintelligence to Nora and her comrades. Nora nodded in satisfaction at the completeness of their countermeasures. Then she let out a small giggle and smiled.

“I understand,” said Ernie. “We’ll be relying on you specialists from here on out. I just ask that you give me a regular report and tell me if any problems arise.”

“Roger that. As liaison, I will continue to participate as a student of the knight runner department. If something happens, the message will be relayed through

me.”

Having finished her report, Nora gave a neat bow before leaving. Ernie narrowed his eyes listlessly as he saw her off, waving at her back. However, his mouth soon curved up in a disquieting smile.

So the spies have already been smoked out. I know I can't say that's boring out loud, but... Ernie hesitated before admitting the facts to himself. I still wanted at least one more tumultuous event. Oh well, they'll probably try something eventually, so I guess I should just focus on preparations for now.

It might have been a good thing that no one knew his true thoughts on the matter.

However, Ernie, as immersed in his own thoughts as he was, failed to notice that there was someone watching him secretly from the shadows. That person hesitated for a while, but eventually left the meeting room.



“Ernie...looked like he was having so much fun...”

The figure that left the meeting room was Addy, and she was trudging away with her shoulders drooped.

“I play with Ernie like a toy all the time, but he rarely—if ever—talks to *me* like he's having that much fun...”

It was a grave problem. Most of the time whenever Ernie was talking to a girl, she'd be stroking his head and playing around with him like a toy, so it was rare for him to seem truly happy or like he was having fun as he spoke. On top of that, Ernie's interests as a person were very specialized, so the selection of possible topics for a chat were both narrow and deep for different reasons. That was why there were few girls Ernie would happily converse with, which also meant that whoever that was was quite a threat to Addy. At the very least, that was what Addy thought.

Addy thought back to the girl Ernie was talking with. For a girl, she was tall and slim. Though she didn't show much emotion as she talked, her face was well proportioned. Addy confirmed in her mind that the girl was a threat. Yes, she was a threat—and along with this realization, Addy came to *another*

conclusion.

“That reminds me! Ernie tends to talk to tall girls, doesn’t he? Maybe...tall girls are his type?!”

Unfortunately, though Addy felt she’d awakened to the truth, she was wrong. In truth, it was just that Ernie was a lot shorter than everyone around him. To further boost this unfortunateness, there was no one around to correct Addy on this mistake. Usually the one to take on this responsibility would be her twin brother, Kid.

“If that’s the case, then I should have a good chance! Though it would suck if Ernie were to say he only likes girls who are cuter than him...”

While Ernie fell below the average height for his age, Addy was the opposite; she was slightly tall for a girl her age. She didn’t hate that she was tall, but because she had Ernie, the embodiment of cuteness, so close to her, she couldn’t help but compare herself to him. The fact that she didn’t make Ernie an exception showed how hardcore her tastes were.

“Ah, but he looked like he was having a lot of fun. I wonder what they were talking about... Well, if Ernie’s having that much fun, it’s gotta be about silhouette knights or the knight order. I can’t think of anything else.”

Of course, Addy hadn’t been informed about the existence of the Order of the Indigo Falcon, so there was no way for her to make an accurate guess.

“She really is a formidable rival... I can’t afford to sit on my laurels! But I’m not that knowledgeable about silhouette knights... The best I can do is move a silhouette gear around, I think? But as things stand, I might end up as the mistress. Hmm, yeah, it has to be knights, not gears. If I want to be with Ernie, I need silhouette knights too! What can I do to get one...? That’s right!”

With a great idea in mind, Addy pumped her fist energetically in the air. A strong will settled in her eyes, and she ran off.



“Ernie! I want to ride silhouette knights too!”

It was evening now, and they were in Ernie’s room at home.

Ernie and Kid were etching Emblem Graphs on a silver board at a leisurely pace. It was part of the process to make the propulsion system that Ernie had talked about. In contrast to the insane content of what they were trying to do, the steps to get there seemed like a lighthearted and innocent scene of kids doodling.

At any rate, when Addy showed up suddenly and spouted that line, the two stopped what they were doing to look up at her.

“What happened to you? Shouting about how much he likes silhouette knights is Ernie’s specialty.”

“Think about it, Kid. We’re part of the Order of the Silver Phoenix too, so it’s only natural for us to pilot silhouette knights! In fact, I *want* to!”

She was standing imposingly and breathing heavily as she said that, which only puzzled the other two more. Still, Ernie would never dismiss a wish for silhouette knights out of hand, which played into Addy’s intentions exactly.

“I’m not sure what’s got you like this, but it’s great that you want to pilot a silhouette knight. Yeah, it really is... Okay then, while we’re at it, why don’t you two help me with something?”

“Yay! I knew you’d come through, Ernie! Love ya!”

“Huh? Me too? Well, I’m fine with it, but...”

Addy jumped forward immediately, wrapping Ernie up in a hug as the boy took out a blueprint from his desk. He spread it out in front of the twins, revealing the model the Order of the Silver Phoenix was currently trying to build: the centaur knight.

“I’ll have you two help me with the creation of this centaur knight. Then, once it’s finished, you can be its pilot.”

Addy, who’d totally expected to be given a Kaldatoah to pilot, skillfully managed to freeze up with the full-faced smile still on her face.

“Hey, come on, Ernie, are you seriously going to put us on the new model right away?! There are tons of other people who are more used to piloting, like Edgar and Dee... Wouldn’t they be a better choice?” Kid looked at Ernie,

somewhat exasperated.

His questions were well-founded, and Ernie nodded before answering, “It needn’t be said that this centaur knight will be a very *special* silhouette knight. After all, it has a horse’s lower half. Of course, the way it feels to control will also be completely different; its difficulty will probably be incomparable to the Tellestarle.”

The twins had never even ridden a normal silhouette knight, so it was easy to imagine how impossible it would be for them to properly control the centaur type.

“So I decided to totally change the way I thought about this. Since this machine combines a pair of elements, what better way to control it than to use a pair of people as well?! This is perfect timing; since we’re still building it, we can change the plans to make it a two-seater. The horse section is huge, after all, so there’s a lot of extra room available. We should be able to fit it.”

At least at this time, no two-seater silhouette knight existed in the world. Given that silhouette knights were things that were very close to the human body and were controlled as such, a second pilot was meaningless, and almost no one would even think of such a thing. If the boss or someone similar were to hear this, they would probably clutch at their skulls in pain, but unfortunately neither Kid nor Addy were knowledgeable about silhouette knights, so they simply believed whatever Ernie said.

“Of course, since the two of you will be piloting one machine, you’ll need to be totally in sync. That was why I chose you two twins. Also, you could say this is my real goal here, but...” In fact, the next words Ernie let out of his mouth were far more impactful. “I want you two to write the script for controlling the centaur knight as you pilot it.”

The twins had learned a lot of different scripts and spells from Ernie up until now, but they hadn’t reached the level of writing one on their own yet. Being told that their first attempt at such a thing would be for such an important role was completely unexpected, and had them in shock.

“In the end, I’d like to return to making it a single-seater, to have the knight runner feel like they are riding a horse as they pilot the machine. In order to do

that, I had planned to make some sort of movement control function, but that's been causing me a lot of trouble. I still only have the basic foundation built. So I'm thinking about having you move it around using raw inputs at first to adjust the script... If the two of you will do this, it would help me a lot."

"I wonder if we can even manage that..." It was only natural for Kid to hesitate.

If Ernie was the one doing this, he would have the skills and the past achievements to back up the attempt. However, the twins were a completely unknown factor. Not only that, they would be doing this for the Order of the Silver Phoenix's cutting-edge invention, the result of everyone's efforts. They were very nervous being put in charge of the finishing touches like that.

While Kid was filled with nothing but worry, Addy revived herself and raised her hand excitedly. "It'll be fine; just leave it to us! But, Ernie, isn't it really hard to write those magic scripts or whatever?"

"It's basically the same as controlling a Motor Beat, which I know you two can do. I'm sure you'll be great. I'll provide a base for you to work off of, and I'll teach you how to do it too."

Kid had reacted to Addy's enthusiasm with a reflexive pratfall, which he only barely managed to stop himself from committing to before he turned to glare at his twin sister with a look that told her to think before acting. While the two of them were twins, they didn't much resemble each other personality-wise. Still, they were really good at communicating with each other. Addy was eager for the opportunity, but what about Kid?

Well, he wasn't all that opposed either; he was just being cautious. He was already interested in silhouette knights and felt like he wanted to try piloting one. He looked over at Addy, who smiled back at him as if to say she saw through everything he was thinking. This got Kid to finally raise his hands in defeat.

"Agh, jeez! I get it already! Okay! If we're going to do this, though, we're gonna make it the best ever!"

"Of course! Hee hee, I'm gonna make this thing with Ernie! I'm so looking forward to it!"

With that decided, their lives got a little bit busier. With Ernie's help, the twins started studying and training in preparation of when the centaur knight would be completed.

Separate from that, though, the next day Ernie came into the workshop with a revised blueprint.

The moment the knightsmiths saw this blueprint, everyone starting with the boss raised a strangled cry. Suddenly, the already peculiar centaur knight had been changed to a two-seater, making it even stranger. There should have been a limit to how nonsensical things could be.

Though a huge fuss had been raised, no one tried to stop the change. In the end, people calmed down and got to work on the changes. They had gotten used to the Order of the Silver Phoenix's unique atmosphere.



After that, half a month passed.

After finishing his classes for the day, Ernie hurried to the workshop. It was part of his daily routine to check on the progress of the centaur knight's construction.

"Hello, boss. Are the two of them here?"

"Oh hey, it's you, Ernesti. If you're talking about those twin brats, they've already kicked things off."

After the two exchanged greetings, they walked deeper into the workshop.

In the deepest, rearmost section of the building lay an open space, where all the silhouette knight maintenance tables had been cleared away. The space was occupied by a machine that was in the midst of being built. It was a machine still in the womb, not yet ready to come out onto the world stage.

This machine was so tall it threatened to scrape the ceiling of the workshop, which had been made to provide plenty of space even to silhouette knights. Its shape was so strange, regular maintenance tables would not work with it. Instead, a multitude of chains had been strung from the crane that ran along the roof to fix the machine in place while suspending it in the air. At first glance,

one could see that the upper half, which had bare primal skin showing in places, was normal. However, the machine's lower half was completely different, and much more aberrant. Four legs were bent in a sitting position; the lower half was clearly not human.

The machine was larger than the Kaldatoahs around it; a strangely shaped monstrosity. It was the centaur silhouette knight—officially named, “Tzenndorg.” It would be the Order of the Silver Phoenix's most advanced model.

“Ah, it's Ernie! Hee hee hee, perfect timing! Now's my chance to show my good side!”

“This is important, Addy; don't get distracted. Come on, we're standing up.”

Addy had managed to catch sight of Ernie out of the corner of her holomonitor, and instantly she was way more excited than before, forcing Kid to chide her. The two were in a dim, narrow space. While it wasn't so narrow they couldn't move at all, it was still very restrictive. They were in the Tzenndorg's cockpit.

Kid leaned back in his seat, sinking into it before opening his eyes. He saw his sister's back in the dim light of the cockpit and spoke up with a question.

“I'm getting a good response from the control yokes, and the base in the magius engine seems to be working. How is it on your end?”

The cockpit's space was long and narrow, continuing from Kid's seat diagonally downward. Addy was a level lower and in front of Kid, basically right in front of his feet.

“Hmm...it's working exactly as Ernie taught us, but it feels a little difficult. Still, I'll make it work!”

She let go of the control yokes, which she'd been gripping tightly, to sit up and take a deep breath. Kid was sitting in a backed seat that was standard for silhouette knights, but Addy's seat was different. It was shaped like a horse's saddle and didn't have a back. The only part that was different from riding a horse were the control yokes that had been placed ahead and to either side of her, making it so she had to bend forward to pilot. In Earth terms, it was like she

was riding a motorcycle.

“Okay then, let’s start the start-up test. Everyone, clear the area!”

Kid shouted into the speaking tube, and the knightsmiths around them scattered, putting some distance from the silhouette knight. In exchange, knight runners got into their Kaldatoahs to prepare for any scenario. From his spot a fair distance away, Ernie clapped excitedly.

“Let’s go, Tzenny! Stand uuupppp!”

The output of the ether reactor climbed along with the braying of its intake, filling the Tzenndorg with mana. The crystal tissue in the machine’s body thrummed and creaked as it flexed, causing the silhouette knight’s four feet to plant themselves firmly on the ground. The sight looked exactly like a newborn horse taking its first steps. The four legs braced the body and found their balance, and slowly—shakily—lifted the body up.

“We can do this—it’s working! It’s just like Physical Boost... Think of the placement of the muscles... Make it smoother... Like this? Then this and this... Put some strength into it...”

The chains that had been supporting the machine were detached one by one. Now, the Tzenndorg was standing instead of being supported upright.

The machine’s movements were terribly awkward. The awkwardness was even more pronounced because everyone was used to seeing actual horses move. But Addy’s expression was frantic as she tried to control her part from inside. She’d been trained by Ernie and polished her magic skills with silhouette gears. Using all that, she did her utmost to compensate for the unfinished magius engine. She didn’t realize it, but while it was very unskilled, she was performing an imitation of Ernie’s special Full Control style. At any rate, she was fully focused on doing things as she was taught.

Eventually, the Tzenndorg slowly transitioned to walking forward. The knightsmiths all raised their arms and cheered the machine on. Each step taken was done so cautiously, as if to verify this was actually working. But, they were definitely bringing this strangely shaped machine into fruition.

Finally, the new silhouette knight was about to walk outside of the workshop.

Suddenly, though, Addy felt something strange. The Tzenndorg's body lurched, and no matter how desperately she tried with her controls, Addy couldn't put any power into the machine's four legs, meaning she couldn't support the body.

"Uh, huh?! What is this, all of a sudden?! Come on, Tzenny! You can do it!"

Addy's cheers fell on deaf ears, as the Tzenndorg had already lost power and had fallen to its knees. The Kaldatoahs surrounding it couldn't react in time to support it, so the Tzenndorg crumbled to the ground, causing a small tremor.



"Urghh, I'm so sorry!" Addy cried. "Everyone worked so hard to make it...and Ernie was looking forward to it so much... All because I failed! I'm so sorry!"

"It's fine! We're not mad, so please stop crying. Actually, I'm just relieved both of you are okay."

Ever since the twins had been rescued from the Tzenndorg, which had fallen over and remained unmoving, Addy had been slumped on the ground crying inconsolably. To her, who had stuck her nose into the creation of the Tzenndorg purely because she wanted to be with Ernie, this failure was extremely painful. Ernie had spent the past while trying to soothe her, but she had yet to show any signs of calming down.

"Oh man, I was so surprised, seriously. So, boss, was this really because of a mistake we made?" In contrast, Kid was as easygoing as always. He asked his question while watching the Kaldatoahs, who had gathered together to carry the Tzenndorg back to the rear of the workshop, out of the corner of his eye.

The boss groaned in response, crossing his arms together and taking a moment to formulate his response. "No, I can't say for sure that it's you kids' fault. I suspect it might just be because this thing's too big."

"Is being big...bad?" Kid didn't understand why that was such a bad thing, which he showed by tilting his head in puzzlement.

"It is. The structure of this thing as well as the amount of crystal tissue inside it is incomparable to a normal silhouette knight. It's so big that the output of the ether reactor can't support it. I'm sure of it now."

The reason for this failure didn't lie with the twins. The Tzenndorg had always had a huge flaw hidden within it. The flaw originated in one of the silhouette knight's basic functions.

Silhouette knights were man-made giants. However, there was a limit to how large something made by human hands could be. That was why silhouette knights were formed by combining a bunch of smaller parts. In order to impart enough toughness to the machine's frame, silhouette knights needed to constantly use a portion of the mana output by the ether reactor to maintain its instance of strengthening magic. If this magic were to be interrupted, the silhouette knight would self-destruct from being unable to bear its own weight.

Normal silhouette knights didn't need to worry about this. Even slightly bigger units wouldn't be affected by this problem. However, the Tzenndorg was different. This machine was a whole lot taller than the normal silhouette knight at fifteen meters, and its lower half was also shaped like a horse's lower half. Of course, that made it much larger than a normal human shape, which came with tons of extra weight.

In short, the amount of mana needed to maintain the strengthening magic was so large they couldn't just ignore it anymore.

"So I did some quick tests," the boss started, "and I confirmed that almost all the mana being produced by the reactor is being drained by this thing's strengthening spell. Also, the amount of muscle on this thing is so incomparable to the norm that it uses up a monstrous amount of mana just to move. To be fair, it's got the mana pool to match its size, but if the mana production doesn't also fit, then there's no point. Thanks to that, it becomes like this just by walking around a bit."

The boss scritch'd at his unruly hair and groaned. That was when, having finally soothed Addy, Ernie joined the conversation.

"I see. The failure was caused by the increase in the consumption of the strengthening magic... That makes sense. So that's why silhouette knight size doesn't vary much. The current standard size is perfect for being supported by a single ether reactor."

"You fool, now's not the time to be impressed by some weird realization. This

problem's gonna be tough, since the bigger the size, the more mana it eats. To fix this, we'll need to shrink the thing down to the size of a normal silhouette knight."

"If we try to force its size to match with a normal silhouette knight, there's no way we'll be able to keep the horse body. The upper half would also need to be shrunk to the size of a child, which would ruin its combat abilities. If we do that, we might as well not even make the Tzenndorg."

"All right, I get it! But what else is there to do?" the boss moaned with a bitter expression on his face. This problem would be much harder to solve than any of the problems they'd encountered with the Tellestarle. They had no idea how to solve such a thing.

"Is Tzenny gonna be scrapped?" Addy looked over to the Tzenndorg that had been returned to its spot in the back of the workshop and mumbled to herself. Her original intentions aside, no one would be happy to see the machine they'd worked so hard to write a script for and finally managed to make move be thrown away.

"It won't. I mean, it's true that this is a big problem, but there's definitely a solution..."

"Sorry, Ernie. This is all happening because I had to bring out such a huge problem..."

As they talked, Addy once again started to tear up. Seeing that, Ernie smiled softly and gently embraced her, stroking her like he was trying to put a child to sleep.

"That is not true, Addy. In fact, I want to thank you for finding this flaw. It's because you worked so hard that we managed to find it now. Heh heh heh, it sure is a troubling one too. One that we'll have to deal with immediately. I'm looking forward to it!"

"Okay, yeah. Thanks, Ernie!" Addy regained her smile and hugged Ernie back. She melted in the soft and fluffy feeling from hugging and being hugged by Ernie—even though he immediately slipped out of her arms and moved to pull out a blackboard.

“Now then, as for the fix to this problem...”

As he ignored Addy, who had frozen up in a strange pose, the chalk in Ernie’s hand danced across the blackboard, making satisfying clacking noises as he drew up a certain set of design schematics. The boss’s expression as he saw all this go down gradually got more and more exasperated.

“Hey, kid... Did you actually memorize the entire structure of that thing?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Of course I have; as if I could ever forget it.”

Ernie had an abnormally good memory for anything that had to do with robots, given his obsession, which was so strong it was like a curse. This was especially true for the Tzenndorg, which Ernie had designed from the ground up. Even the boss was creeped out at this absurd trick that Ernie brought out like it was nothing.

But Ernie didn’t mind at all; he just continued to tweak the design schematics that were on the blackboard.

As he did so, he groaned, “Hmm... There’s no other choice. I had thought this would be the only thing I wouldn’t do, but it seems there’s no other possible fix.”

At its current size, the Tzenndorg wouldn’t be able to move properly. Unfortunately, they were unable to modify ether reactors to fix that. So what was to be done? The answer was simple, and Ernie had actually already thought of it.

Even so, his expression did not lighten up one bit. He continued to glare at the schematics and hem and haw for a while before finally heaving a sigh and turning around.

“Oh? What is it? If there’s a way to fix this, then what’s there to hesitate about?” The boss had breathed a sigh of relief seeing how quickly and easily a solution had been brought forth, but that all changed when he heard what Ernie had to say next.

“We can’t change the size of the chassis; nor can we change the reactor. So, there’s only one answer left: increase the number of reactors. Putting two ether reactors in the machine will double the output, which should be able to support

the Tzenndorg's size."

Those words, spoken so casually but with a hint of lament as if there were no other choice, made the boss stop moving, as if he were totally frozen. Meanwhile, the twins weren't following what was being said at all.

After a while, the boss finally squeezed out a groan.

"You... You're really intending to stick an extra heart in this monster, aren't you? Oh, no, right. It's a machine, so I guess I should shelve thoughts like that..."

It was usually hard to tell what kind of an expression a dwarf was making, but in a rare show, the boss's eyes were wide with shock. He heaved a long sigh to go along with it. By the time he had let out all the air in his lungs, the boss no longer seemed shaken.

"I can't really recommend solving the problem that way, though. First, we should complete it. Then, we can start to look over its structure and control script to optimize the fuel efficiency to try and get it to work with only one reactor."

Rather than try to persuade the boss, Ernie started muttering, seemingly to himself.

"So even you can hesitate every once in a while, huh?" the boss remarked. "What's wrong? It's rare for you to be so reluctant."

"I mean, ether reactors are just so expensive."

That stopped the boss in his tracks as he tried to process that reasoning. "Whaaaat?! I mean, yeah, sure, that's true...but *that's* the problem you have with it?! After picking a fight with common sense itself in such a flashy way, all of a sudden you care about the price?! At *this* juncture?!"

"Of course I'd care about the price; it's an important aspect of making these things, right? Increasing the number of ether reactors makes the price skyrocket all at once. This one unit aside, if we make it too expensive to manufacture, then we won't be able to even think about mass production later."

"How should I put it... What you're saying is right, but hearing you say it really

takes all the persuasive power out of the argument.”

Though he complained, the boss didn't reject Ernie's opinion. This was because, while having twin reactors was utterly unprecedented, he couldn't think of any better solution to the problem they were facing. Unfortunately, the only problem he had with the solution was how he should break the news of it to everyone else. Trying to think about it was giving him a headache.

“At any rate, now that we've decided what to do, we should hurry up and adjust the schematics. Though we've got enough leeway room-wise in the Tzenndorg, we'll still have to reconsider how the internals are placed and the thing's general shape in a big way... Hrmmm... Still, this is getting to be pretty fun! Things're gonna heat up in tomorrow's class.”

“No, no, come on. Take your classes seriously.”

Ernie was in high spirits in the face of this challenge, and the boss just had to retort, futile and somewhat off-point though it was.

Ernie ignored it, though, and turned back to the twins. “Once the fixes are done, it's your turn. Kid, Addy, let's keep working hard on this, together.”

“Sure thing, leave it to me!”

“Yeah! Next time I'll definitely make Tzenny walk!”

Beside the trio, who were waving their arms around in excitement, the boss looked over at the blackboard. The schematics written on it specified a centaur shape, twin reactors, and a two-seater cockpit. There should have been a limit to how many new concepts you could cram into something at once. To the boss, this machine was the most aberrant machine possible. Still, the higher the goal was, the more worthy it was for a knightsmith to chase. The boss couldn't help but give a wry chuckle at his own way of thinking.

“Good grief, I'm getting to be pretty weird myself, huh?”

After that, the boss gathered power into his gut so he could emit a voice loud enough to call out to the rest of the knightsmiths. It would only be a few more minutes until his shout echoed throughout the workshop.



The crane ran along the rails on the ceiling of the workshop, making a deep noise as it did so. The crane had chains dangling from it, which were attached to a lump of metal that seemed like part of an armor set, which was currently being pushed by a knightsmith in a silhouette gear. Having built up some momentum, the piece of metal almost smashed into someone, who promptly got out of the way while unleashing a string of insults and curses.

The workshop was overflowing with heat, both physical and metaphorical, produced by the fervor of the people inside as they pushed to complete the centaur silhouette knight, the Tzenndorg. At first, they had only devoted the rearmost area of the workshop to this effort—but now it had moved front and center.

At this point, the Tzenndorg had most of its outer skin installed. A single horn stood proud sticking out of its forehead, and there were also other decorations in places which referenced legendary horses. Compared to its somewhat thin upper half, its lower half was huge and heavy. Its legs were as thick as a regular silhouette knight's torso, and it was clear from a glance that they possessed incredible power output. The joints that connected these legs to the body were all covered in several layers of armor and looked like large lumps.

The cockpit, ether reactor, and magius engine were collectively referred to as the heart of the silhouette knight. This "heart" was normally placed in a silhouette knight's torso, but on the Tzenndorg, it was located in the bottom half of the machine. The two-seater cockpit, dual ether reactors, and magius engine—which needed to be made larger in order to allow for a larger script—could no longer fit inside a normal humanoid torso. The Tzenndorg's larger body was both the cause and the solution to this problem.

So close to completion, the Tzenndorg finally revealed its final form, a form so bizarre people would hesitate to even go near it. Watching their upperclassmen move around out of the corner of their eyes, the new knightsmiths continued their work in silence.

At first they'd been excited over the newness of everything they saw, and when they had first laid eyes on the Tzenndorg, they had fallen over out of horror and amazement. But after all the training and work they were given to do, their outlook senses slowly slipped further and further to the other side.

Now, they just wanted to quickly learn how to make the Motolift silhouette gear so they could manufacture their own to use. These, too, had them surprised and fearful at first, but after a while they realized how incredibly useful the machines were and got totally hooked. It went to show how scary familiarity could be.



A single knight runner, who was looking for something, weaved between all these people carrying heavy loads and swinging hammers. The knight runner had somewhat long blond hair, a long and slender figure, and wore red-dyed leather armor. It was Dietrich, commander of the second company of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. After making a circuit of the inside of the workshop, he took a deep breath and called out to some nearby new students.

“Hey, have you seen the captain? Ernesti?”

All of them shook their heads in response to Dietrich’s question. The Order of the Silver Phoenix’s captain stood out in a lot of ways. If he were around, they would most likely have known.

“I see, thanks. And...the childhood friends aren’t around either. I wonder where our little captain went? I just hope he’s not trying to do something weird.”

Unfortunately, his misgivings were right on the money.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix was on the verge of completing their centaur knight, the Tzenndorg. This project was all the knightsmiths were occupied with, while the knight runners trained under their seniors’ instruction. Their days were being spent busily, unlike their dear knight captain, who had distanced himself from the manual labor.

What should be remembered was that along with the Tzenndorg, he had made a lot of other designs as well. These other designs were for new equipment that he was making along with his childhood friends. This was why he had set off a fearsome incident in secret as he attempted to test a prototype of his.



The sky was clear, and the sun's rays felt mild. It was perfect weather for a picnic.

The location was an unpopulated forest some ways away from Laihiala Academy City. A single giant weaved between the sparse tree cover, its footsteps creating sounds that spoke of its heavy weight. It was a Kaldatoah belonging to the Order of the Silver Phoenix, and it was being piloted by Ernie. At its feet, three silhouette gears were walking alongside it. They were Kid and Addy in their Motor Beats, and Batson in his Motolift. While there *was* a danger of monsters outside of the city, the equipment these kids were carrying seemed a little overblown for that.

For a while, it seemed like they were simply enjoying a stroll, but eventually they came upon a clearing in the forest. Though this area may have had duel-class monsters before, it was totally empty now. Ernie had the Kaldatoah put down the luggage it was carrying. The three silhouette gears also put down what they were holding, which included a strange set of tubes that they started to attach to the Kaldatoah once it parked in a kneeling position. The tubes were large enough that each silhouette gear needed both arms to carry one. The Kaldatoah's shoulders and hips had been premodified so as to fit these tubes onto them.

"Aww right, this should be all of them," said Kid. "Still, though, how should I put it..."

"We're good here too!" Addy exclaimed. "Hey, err..."

"Like...it just looks weird, right?"

After finishing the work, the three of them sat back and looked up at the modified Kaldatoah. The sight of the machine with all these mysterious tubes latched onto it transformed its original unadorned look into something a lot more surreal.

"Well then, let's get right into this test. The workmanship is good, so all that's left is to witness the fruits of our efforts."

From the cockpit, Ernie couldn't see what the machine looked like. So he either did not notice how the silhouette knight looked, or he was ignoring that aspect. At any rate, he was in a great mood as he stood the Kaldatoah up to

start the tests that were their objective in coming here. Then he started up the mysterious device.

When he did so, the tubes started to suck in a large amount of air from the front, creating a rather unique sound. All the birds in the vicinity took flight then, most likely out of surprise at the sudden strange noise.

From their spot a little ways away, Kid, Addy, and Batson watched the test. The Kaldatoah lowered its stance a little bit before running off. Its crystal tissue pumped as the ten-meter-tall giant easily shifted into a sprint. In a short time, the Kaldatoah had built up enough speed.

Thus began the real test. With a fearless smile, Ernie flipped a series of switches that were placed around the control yokes.

Instantly, the world changed.

The insides of the tubes were shaped like two funnels with their thin ends attached to each other. The front half of these tubes had an Emblem Graph of a script that sucked in air, compressed it, and sent it through the narrowly constricted middle. The rear half of the tube would then activate the script carved into it. The Emblem Graph there caused explosions and gave them directionality. This would turn the compressed air into a fierce jet of explosive flame.

Thus, these devices used a modified version of Aero Thrust to compress air and have it burst backward, which was then further accelerated by an explosive spell. These two spells combined resulted in a high-speed jet that could be used as propulsion. That was the theory behind these tubes, named Magius Jet Thrusters.

What first occurred was a bright flash of red light, followed by a long tail of flame trailing behind the machine. This was followed a little after by a thunderous, earsplitting roar.

Without delay, the awakened Magius Jet Thrusters showed their true fierce nature. The compressed atmosphere was set on fire with explosions and turned into a strong jet that flowed out behind the Kaldatoah, accelerating it forward. In fact, it was already far beyond mere acceleration; it was more accurate to say that the silhouette knight had been launched bodily.

“O— OOOOAAAUUuugghh?! FUUUUUuuuUULLL POOOWWEEERRRRR?!”



The severe propulsive power far outstripped even the expectations of Ernie, its creator, and the Kaldatoah was propelled forward abnormally fast. Ernie's small body was also hit with an intense sense of inertia, and he was so desperate to combat this feeling that his control of the device became sloppy. Meanwhile, the Magius Jet Thrusters stayed true to their programming and continued to spew crazy amounts of propulsive force.

Then, in the midst of this never-ending acceleration—there was a small disturbance in the airflow. In an instant, the Kaldatoah floated up, and its posture and attitude shifted and crumbled. Normally, the machine would have immediately fallen back down due to the clutches of gravity, but the “uncontrollable beast” attached to the machine's frame was able to overcome the pull of such elemental forces with sheer thrust. Ernie panicked a little once he felt the direction of his inertia shift, but before he could apply any countermeasures, the machine took off into the vast sky and freedom. This flight was supported by pure explosive thrust, and the machine had no aerodynamic properties whatsoever. So, as if it were a leaf caught in a storm, the silhouette knight blew through the air while Ernie made every effort he could to bring the thing back under his control. However, it was all he could do to prevent the machine from falling apart midair.

The sight of the Kaldatoah flying through the air with a bright tail of fire resembled a *comet*. Ernie's unfortunate circumstances aside, the strangely moving scene had Kid, Addy, and Batson dumbstruck, their mouths hanging open and everything.

The situation had been set off explosively, and the ending was just as sudden. While Ernie had no leeway to try anything, the magius engine continued to carry out its duty faithfully. Thanks to the extreme mana consumption of this activity, once the mana pool was running dry, the safety limiter was activated, forcefully ending the mana supply to the device attached to silhouette knight. Immediately after this happened, the screaming fire that was keeping the Kaldatoah in the air stopped. This sudden occurrence meant that the machine lost all of the thrust driving it forward, and it dropped to the ground under the pull of gravity as fast as air resistance would allow.

“Wwaaaaiigghhaaaaaahhh?!”

Ironically, thanks to the Magius Jet Thruster stopping, Ernie regained enough composure to wrest back control of the machine. Momentum aside, there was a silver lining in this situation in that everything stopped before the Kaldatoah could be brought up too high. Though on the verge of destruction, the unit managed to touch back down on the ground. However, just because it landed didn't mean the overwhelming momentum it had built up had disappeared. The silhouette knight tried to put on the brakes, causing sparks to fly from both feet as its outer skin there was literally filed away by the friction. Ernie realized that at the rate things were going, the legs themselves would quickly reach their limit, so he threw the unit forward. By forcing his machine into a roll, he could bleed off the momentum more safely.

While the Kaldatoah rolled, the Magius Jet Thrusters attached to it were bent, broken, and sent flying. Ernie didn't have the room to care about that, though; the silhouette knight continued rolling for several hundred meters before finally slowing down and coming to a stop and flopping to the ground, spread-eagled.

The three childhood friends only started to come back to their senses when the surroundings had become quiet again. This silence was broken up by Addy. "Is Ernie...alive?"

Kid gasped as he came back to his senses. "There's no way that was a good thing! We need to go help him!"



The first thing Ernie saw when he woke up was a familiar face, though upside down, looking at him.

"You're finally awake, Ernie. Are you okay?"

He looked around and noticed the ragged Kaldatoah, as well as the fact that Addy's thighs were under his head. Apparently Addy had treated him to a lap pillow while he was unconscious. Ernie shook his head to get the remaining cobwebs out, and Addy brushed away the hair that had come to rest on his cheek.

"Addy...I'm...fine. But grrr... This won't do. This equipment won't work—it's rejected! Actually...no, it's not, but it definitely needs fixing. A full remake."

“Ernie, you need to reflect on your actions a little. I was worried about you,” Addy said, puffing out her cheeks angrily.

When he saw that, there was no way Ernie could argue. He got up and looked away awkwardly, which brought his eyeline right to the Kaldatoah in its disastrous state. It had managed to keep its basic human shape, but its outer skin was dented and warped. Its legs had also been abraded to the point that they were falling apart. The heat from the friction caused by the braking had welded some of the parts in the legs together, rendering them useless. The fact that Ernie got away with only being knocked unconscious for a while after such a huge accident was due to his prodigious skills and daily training. No normal person should ever attempt what he had done.

Realizing that Ernie had woken up, Kid and Batson stopped cleaning up the scattered parts and came back.

“Hey, you okay, Ernie? That was really dangerous. If you’d been just a little slower in stopping the thruster, you would’ve become a star, huh?”

“You’re wrong... I didn’t stop it—it just stopped. It ate too much mana, basically burning through almost all the mana pool in a single stroke. And in the end, it was shut off! Yeah, yeah, you’re right! It’s a dud, a total failure!”

“E-Ernie, calm down! There, there. It’s all better now.”

Ernie had fallen into a state of confusion after he’d been reminded of what had happened; Addy had to forcefully stop Ernie by throwing her arms around him. He struggled for a while, but eventually quieted down. Turning around, they could all see the long furrow that had been carved into the ground by the Kaldatoah. Once again, they breathed a sigh of relief that Ernie wasn’t hurt.

“Hey, Ernie, why don’t we just stop this? It’s way too dangerous,” Addy tried to suggest, out of deep worry.

But unfortunately, Ernie was...Ernie. By the time he’d looked up at her from within her embrace, his face had reverted to its usual expression, full of passion for his hobby.

“Okay, I’m done reflecting. You’re right; I may have rushed things a little too fast. We needed to take some more time to go through all the steps. First, we

need to look at the scope of the script and its output. Then, we need to figure out a new control mechanism that will be able to change that output to match the situation. The mana consumption is also a problem, but I think we can combat that by improving the efficiency a little to pair with the reduced output... No, actually—maybe we can figure something out on the silhouette knight's side?"

There was no doubt that Ernie was already drawing up new schematics in his mind. Seeing him become like that so unhesitatingly, even though he had just escaped a huge accident, Kid and Batson couldn't help but look up to the heavens in exasperation. To them, he was a hopeless case.

For a while, Ernie continued to sit there, nodding and groaning to himself—until suddenly he seemed to hit upon a good idea and turned to the other three.

"By the way, would all of you like to try riding it too?"

"Of course not!"

That obvious answer reverberated through the forest.

As an aside, when Ernie maneuvered the ragged Kaldatoah back to the workshop afterward, the other members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix got up in arms, thinking there had been an attack.



A desk and chair of obviously rushed make had been installed in a corner of the workshop in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. On top of the desk was a nameplate (of similarly rushed make) which read, "Knight Order Captain," in scribbled handwriting. Ernie sat in the seat behind that desk as he looked nervously at his surroundings.

"Do I...have to be here?"

"Yep. Siddown, Sir Captain."

"Yeah. With you around, we'll all tighten up."

"He's right. Captains should be more...solid, stationary, or composed."

"And in the first place, how is it you haven't gotten enough after that huge

stunt you almost got yourself killed in?”

Ernie was surrounded by, of course, the dwarven head knightsmith that was the pride of the order, and the leaders of the knight runners with their trained bodies. They stood intimidatingly around him, physically keeping Ernie in his seat.

“You’re all so cruel...”

“You idiot! If we take one eye offa you, there’s no telling what you’ll get up to!”

With a resentful look in his eyes, Ernie turned to look at the silhouette knight nearby. It was a Kaldatoah, basically in pieces. After the disaster that had been the Magius Jet Thruster test firing, while it had barely been able to walk back, it was edging right up into destroyed territory, and so was currently barred from being used. By its master, the captain of the knight order, at least. Also, since he had very nearly destroyed a silhouette knight over what he called a test firing, he had received an intense scolding from the others in the order. On top of that, he’d then been forced to focus on “normal knight captain work.”

“You don’t need to worry; I’ve reflected on what happened. As proof, look! I’ve got a concrete plan on how to improve it!”

“Shut it! And what about that means you’ve reflected?! Just sit still for a while!”

Ernie produced a schematic from out of nowhere, like such a thing was only natural. But the boss snatched it right out of his hands. Their knight captain possessed incredible talent and overflowing passion. He charged fearlessly toward monsters and fundamentally only took actions that defied common sense when it came to silhouette knights. This was something that his extraordinary abilities allowed him to do, so no one had tried to stop him. But then what would happen if he failed? Of course, it would become a huge catastrophe, which was exactly what had happened to Ernie. That had everyone at their wit’s end.

“Grr, fine. I get it. I’ll stick to just helping with simple things for a while.” Ernie was clearly dissatisfied, mumbling about how it was a waste since he had a plan for improvement. But it seemed even he could feel guilt, given how little time

had passed since the incident in question, so he obediently focused on helping others.

“We can’t afford to give the kid free time, huh? We should finish up the Tzenndorg quickly. If I remember correctly, there should be a lot more to do besides, right? Use the newbies and have him work on those plans. At any rate, just don’t let him do anything unnecessary.”

At the moment, they didn’t have any other method of stopping Ernie. Feeling nervous about their chances of success at managing to keep their knight captain from stirring up any more trouble, they started to put their plan into action.



Meanwhile, a certain report had reached Duke Cnut Dixgard. Its contents read, “The captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix attempted to fly in a silhouette knight and failed.” Of course, after reading that, Cnut spent some time with his head clutched in his hands.

“Damn you, Ernesti... You really have no intention of hiding at all, even after the Casadesus Disaster!”

“What should we do? Would you have us give Sir Ernesti some stern counsel?” Nora muttered. She was the member of the Order of the Indigo Falcon who’d brought in the report.

However, not giving an actual suggestion on a countermeasure despite all her training showed exactly how exasperated she was on the inside. In response, Cnut heaved a huge sigh and sank into thought for a moment. But he quickly waved his hand no.

“No, don’t do that. I’m sure the rest of the order will do something. Also, whatever he makes will eventually spread throughout the country. Just focus on eliminating any ‘outside’ movements for now.”

“Are you sure?”

“People like that will happily overcome any obstacles that are in front of them, but when met with any issue *outside* of their sphere of interest, even something small, they lose all of their strength. His Majesty was also like that in the past,” Cnut groused, a somewhat faraway look in his eyes. He was surely

reminiscing in the back of his mind.

Nora read the room and decided not to pursue that any further.

“At any rate, just let him cook. That will surely lead to results. We just need to set the table...” Cnut said with finality, though he did so with a tired expression.

Nora only replied with a precise bow.



Luckily for everyone(?), several days had passed with nothing big happening. Ernie quietly made progress on making schematics for his other equipment projects and did not cause any more huge explosions or anything of the sort.

The members of the order, though they were wary at first, eventually got buried in their own work and became lax. But a second incident was secretly approaching, using exactly that opening.

“Ah, please wait a second, Edgar.”

A voice called out to stop Edgar, who was about to head out with the new students for training. The bell-like voice was familiar, so he turned around and found Ernie, as expected. What was unusual, though, was that he had a large number of short swords in his arms. He took one and offered it to Edgar.

“Here.”

“What’s this? A short sword...but it’s silver. Huh.”

Edgar looked down at the short sword he had been handed. It was densely decorated and looked like a ceremonial sword. This was reinforced by the fact that it was made out of silver. While silver was a metal, it was much weaker than steel and not suited for making weapons out of.

“Just in case, it’s possible to use that as a weapon, but that’s not what it’s made for. Come with me for a bit.”

Before Edgar could fit in a question edgewise, Ernie made his way toward a Kaldatoah. Edgar couldn’t hide how suspicious he felt, but he followed the boy anyway, figuring that his questions would be answered anyway if he went.

Their destination was the cockpit of a Kaldatoah that was completely normal.

Ever since he'd lost Earlcumber in the Casadesus Disaster, Edgar mainly piloted Kaldatoahs, so this was a familiar sight by now. He followed Ernie's instructions and sat down in the pilot's seat, and further obeyed instructions to start up the machine.

He fastened the leather seat belt before putting his hands and feet in place on the stirrups and control yokes. Next, in order to raise the ether reactor from a dormant state to an active one with output, Edgar operated the output adjustment lever. That was when something strange happened. Normally, the whine of the reactor would have risen in volume to go along with the movement of the lever, but this time there was no sound of the ether reactor sucking in the surrounding air at all; the reactor had stayed dormant. Edgar had failed to start up the reactor, which was a first for him, even with all his experience piloting silhouette knights.

Of course he started to panic a little, but he diligently repeated the steps once again anyway. Still, no matter how many times he tried, the result was the same. No matter what, the reactor would not awaken, and he couldn't get the unit to move. With every repetition, Edgar got more and more flustered and impatient. That was when he remembered the premise of this experiment. The one who'd ordered him to do this in the first place—his captain, Ernie—had climbed up on the torso armor and was smiling down at him like a mischievous child.

"Hey, Ernesti... Did you...do something to this?"

Edgar saw the boy rap a fist into his other palm, which told him that he was correct. To Ernie, this was a small bit of revenge for all the scolding he'd gotten before. After taking a moment to bask in the enjoyment, Ernie gave Edgar, who had crossed his arms and adopted a glare, a small bow.

"I did, sorry. Don't be so mad—I'm going to teach you the trick now. Erm, look down at your feet. Do you see the little slit there? Try slotting the short sword I just handed you into that slit."

With the indignant look still on his face, Edgar did as he was told and put the short sword into the slit. Once the silver short sword sank to its hilt, the clicking sound of something meshing together could be heard, which was followed by

the sound of several more mechanisms seeming to go off. Before long, a strong roar could be heard from under the seat. It was the familiar heartbeat of a silhouette knight. The ether reactor had started up.

“This vibration... Thank goodness, the reactor woke up. Still, it wouldn’t do that at all earlier... No, wait a second... I see, Ernesti, this short sword must be a key.”

“Correct! I told you before, didn’t I? That I’d prepare some measures to ensure no silhouette knight would be stolen ever again. This is that measure... I call it the Pattern Identifier.”

Ernie continued to chuckle while Edgar heaved a deep sigh and raised his hands.

“I’m seriously surprised, Ernesti... It’s fine to play pranks, but please make them more mild! This was bad for my heart. So how does this thing work? Putting in just any sword won’t work, will it?”

“Of course not. Anything other than that short sword and this Kaldatoah won’t move a centimeter. Also, it’s shaped like a sword, but it’s got an internally cast Emblem graph. And inside this slit is the matching graph. Without making a proper match, the reactor won’t awaken, and the magius engine won’t work either.”

With no mana from the reactor and no response from the magius engine that governed movement, it was impossible to pilot a silhouette knight. Using a script in such a device was tricky. Unlike scripts meant to bring about magic, the purely theoretical structure of this would be incredibly difficult to unpack. In other words, as long as the silver short sword that acted as the key wasn’t stolen, the Kaldatoah could not be stolen.

And when Edgar pulled out the silver short sword, the reactor once again went dormant, and the magius engine stopped responding. Leaving aside the prank that’d been played on him earlier, Edgar was blatantly impressed.

“By the way, is there a special reason why you made the key a silver short sword?”

“A certain amount of size was necessary for the Emblem Graph, and just

making it a flat board wouldn't be interesting, so I tried making it a little fancy. Also, silver works great for Emblem Graphs, and since we're the Order of the Silver Phoenix, I thought it was appropriate."

Edgar took a close look at the short sword. It was true that such a device would help prevent another Casadesus Disaster. The stolen unit flashed across the back of his mind. Edgar raised the short sword as if praying to it, then carefully sheathed it.

This device meant to prevent the theft of silhouette knights, the Pattern Identifier, spread explosively as soon as it was publicly announced. Even the form of a short sword made with silver was copied, and that became the standard for the device. Eventually, silver short swords would become a symbol that proved one's status as a knight runner—though that would be for a later age.



It seemed forbidding Ernie from developing his main passion project at the moment, the Magius Jet Thruster, caused more frustration to build up in him than expected. Even after the Pattern Identifier, he continued to develop new equipment with fearsome vigor.

Still, even if he were to draw up the schematics, they would never come to fruition if no one were to make them. On the flip side, since the Tzenndorg was nearing completion, the knightsmiths were starting to enjoy more and more free time. Part of the reason for this was also because the new students had started to get used to things and were able to show off their stuff. So they helped develop these machines in their free time. All these pieces of equipment had been grouped under the name Option Works.

With that, the next to become busy were the knight runners that had to test such equipment. Because there were so many different pieces of equipment attached to the silhouette knight, it looked like a bed of chaos. Nevertheless, the Kaldatoah was moved to the training area.

Among the participating knight runners were Edgar and Helvi.

"Are you ready, Edgar? Okay, then let's go straight on."

Two Kaldatoahs faced each other. The one Helvi was in raised its sword. Though it was only handling the sword one-handed, it was a beautiful, straightforward stance. Meanwhile, Edgar only made his Kaldatoah nod. He neither tried to move nor defend himself.

Helvi was piloting a standard Kaldatoah, while Edgar was in one that had unfamiliar equipment strapped to it. There was prototype additional armor that went over both shoulders and hung down the back. It took the form of armor plates that would come together using something a lot like sub-arms, and it was named the Flexible Coat. Because it was a prototype, the plates were unadorned and plain, but it matched the similarly no-frills Kaldatoah surprisingly well.

“Okay, feel free to come at me at any time.”

Having been given permission, Helvi urged her unit into a run at Edgar, slashing at him from the front. Though she was using a blunt blade meant for training, she put plenty of power into the blow. It was a straightforward and honest downward slash, clearly meant for the head. Once Edgar, from inside his cockpit, had gotten a measure of space between them, he flipped a switch that was placed next to the control yoke. This ordered the Flexible Coat to activate, and with a small noise it quickly deployed, forming a shape to protect the head and shoulders. The sword that Helvi’s unit swung down hit the angled armor plates and slid off the surface of the metal while shedding sparks. The Flexible Coat, which used strengthening magic to enhance its weak moving parts, was able to defend against a direct hit without giving a centimeter.

“Looks pretty good, doesn’t it? Then I’ll try going harder next time.”

“Oh no, wait a second. First we should check the results... Hm, that took quite a bit of mana. It might be because of the movement, or just because the strengthening spell is a glutton. Also, while the defensive power itself is great, it’s hard to use. I need to tell that to Ernesti. Okay...sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s try hitting from another angle.”

Because it required strengthening magic in its activation, the mana consumption of the Flexible Coat would grow when it was actually defending from a blow. That was why it had been made to focus on turning blows aside,

rather than trying to take them straight on and risk the enemy trying to push damage through. Most of the preprogrammed movement patterns included slopes and angles.

Helvi's unit made several attacks, but each one was successfully defended against and turned aside. For some reason, she started to get into it, and at some point during the tests, she started to attack for real. Even though Edgar's unit had defensive equipment on, he was taking blows from another silhouette knight. The slightest mistake could result in a catastrophe, but neither of them seemed to care. Helvi believed that Edgar would properly defend her blows, and Edgar was doing his best to respond to that belief. They both trusted each other, in a way, which was why what had started as a test of some equipment turned into something of a mock battle by the end.

"It's getting kind of...scarily heated over there, isn't it?"

Some distance away from the two, who had basically started a mock battle on their own, Dietrich was testing a different piece of equipment. It seemed to him that for some reason or another, Helvi was holding back less and less with Edgar lately. As a result, she tended to go harder with her attacks in times like these—so hard it was scary. While praying for Edgar's soul to find peace, he turned Guaire to face a target.

"Now then... I should get to my own work!"

There was a flash of effort on Dietrich's part. Following his orders, Guaire struck out with its fist in a punching motion. At first glance, it didn't look like Guaire had any extra equipment on. What was even stranger was that Guaire had made its punching motion from some distance away from the target—and it wasn't as if the arm had stretched or anything like that. Of course, the attack did not reach the target either. That called into question what that bit of effort was for, as it seemed to be utterly useless.

However, there was an actual purpose to that action. The moment Guaire's fist reached its fastest speed, a metal mass was launched at speed out of the gauntlet from under the fist. This metal mass looked like two cones attached together at the base. For a moment, it looked like this projectile might reach the target, but it was woefully lacking in momentum.

Suddenly, though, multiple bursts of compressed air exploded out from behind the metal mass in rapid succession. The mass accelerated using the recoil from those explosions, gaining enough momentum to hit the target with a heavy thunk, causing the target to wobble. The mass had some weight to it, so the shock from its impact would not be small. It was confirmed that the mass would be rather powerful as a blunt weapon. However, the weapon had yet to show its true worth.

After confirming a successful hit with the projectile, Dietrich depressed a trigger that had been placed on one of his control yokes. The device that had been implanted inside Guaire's arm accepted the mana along with the orders for it, manifesting an overspell according to the script that had been implanted within it. Upon closer inspection, a metal wire braided with a silver nerve could be seen trailing from the metal mass, connecting it to the inside of Guaire's gauntlet. This wire facilitated the transfer of mana and also possessed the properties of normal metal...that property being conductivity.

What was emitted from the mechanism in the arm was a lightning spell. The electricity from this spell rivaled a lightning bolt, and it traveled through the wire toward the target. Having been subjected to a large amount of electricity, the target heated up, let out sparks, and burst.

The name of the equipment was Lightning Flail. It was a combination of a silhouette arms and a larger version of a Wire Anchor, and was the cutting edge in directed electricity armament.

"Wow, this thing is just *nasty*. I like it, though."

Out of all the ideas proposed in Ernie's Option Works, the Lightning Flail was one of the more eccentric ones. Unlike the Flexible Coat or back weapons, which were external equipment, it was an internal piece of equipment. There had yet to be any silhouette arms incorporated into the internals of a silhouette knight. The reason lay in the structure of a silhouette arms. These weapons were generally made by engraving an Emblem Graph onto a silver plate. On top of the big drawback of lacking durability, when it came to spells as big as overspells, the size of the Emblem Graph would be similarly bulky. In other words, silhouette arms were both large and brittle. Putting such a thing inside a silhouette knight just meant adding a weakness to the part. That wasn't

desirable for a fighting machine like a silhouette knight.

This was especially true for lightning spells, as they tended to be more complex than explosion-type spells, which of course made the Emblem Graph even larger. Put roughly, compared to fire—which would fly straight once it was launched—a lightning attack required guidance to reach the target.

But the Lightning Flail solved that through physical means. The solution was the Wire Anchor. The metal wire acted as a guide. By shooting it into the target beforehand, the metal would guide the electricity. That allowed the guidance portion of the script to be omitted, and the entire silhouette arms to be miniaturized enough to fit inside.

Still, this was a trick that was only available to Guaire because it sported a larger set of armor, due to it focusing on close combat. For example, a regular Kaldatoah would need a fairly large-scale remodel, so it wasn't a very practical piece of equipment.

“As expected, the arm feels somewhat heavy to move...but the hidden aspect of it is interesting.”

The greatest selling point of the Lightning Flail, and internal equipment in general, was that it was difficult to identify with just a look. Furthermore, because the silhouette arms portion was covered by strong armor, there was less danger of it being destroyed compared to the handheld version. It was a powerful electric weapon that could be activated to surprise an opponent in close combat. Truly, it was a nasty piece of work.

There were many other devices in the Option Works being tested other than the Flexible Coat and Lightning Flail, but most of them had ended in failure. Still, lessons were learned and things were reflected on, which would lead to further improvement, steadily bringing the various equipment closer to completion.

So for a time, Kaldatoahs sporting very bizarre equipment could be seen frequently walking around Laihiala Academy City.



“Okay, we'll be starting with the usual inspection. First, we check the movement... First reactor output...second reactor output, both stable. I can see

where the distribution of the reactor output is on this scale, and it looks like they're both within the safety zone."

With deft movements, Kid checked the meters next to his control yokes. Meanwhile, the low roar of the ether reactor filled the cockpit. At first, the noise was quiet, but it gradually got louder and louder until it was shaking the air itself, and then it suddenly quieted down again and stabilized to a certain extent.

"The magius engine's response is good! The crystal tissue's tension is also fine... Okay, Tzenny, wake uuuup!"

At Addy's energetic call, the wall in front of the twins lit up brightly. Actually, the brightness was only relative as light from the wall right in front of them pierced through the darkness. The wall—the cockpit's holomonitor—was showing them the scene reflected in the Tzenndorg's eye crystal. They could see the usual knightsmiths that watched from a distance away, and the Kaldatoah squad that was on standby in case anything happened.

Before, the Tzenndorg couldn't even move around properly because of mana supply issues. They'd fixed this by mounting a second ether reactor in the machine, an unprecedented solution. Redesigning the interior to fit everything had been a major operation, but thanks to the knightsmiths' efforts, the rework had succeeded.

Recently, Kid and Addy had resumed conducting tests daily.

"We're supposed to run a little faster today, right? Heh heh, it's about time for Tzenny to show its stuff!"

"As long as we can do this, all that's left is the minute confirmations. Okay then, let's do this like always."

Addy once again gripped her control yokes and gradually put more force onto her stirrups. In response, the Tzenndorg tried to stand up. The twin ether reactors let out a fearsome intake noise, shaking the armor all over its body, the rattling noise joining the cacophony. The keening of flexing crystal tissue in the legs could be heard as the machine rose from its horse's sitting position. The thudding of its feet against the ground was heavy, as if the machine were hitting the ground with a powerful blunt weapon. One leg, then two legs stood

solid on the ground, lifting up part of its body. Those movements were powerful, and showed no signs of any instability. Eventually, the chains that were fixing the silhouette knight in place jangled as they were taken away. Its huge body had been freed.

There was nothing unsafe about the twins' piloting. They used the Full Control style of piloting that Ernie had taught them while also borrowing strength from the special magius engine in the machine, allowing them to steer the prototype splendidly. It being a centaur meant the shape of the body was strange beyond measure. The two-seater cockpit was also unprecedented. There was no way a normal knight runner would be able to pilot the machine satisfactorily. This time, the twins' lack of knowledge about silhouette knights worked for them.

Having stood up, the Tzenndorg took some time to fidget and move its body around as the twins checked the status of everything. Eventually, though, they finished their checks and started to walk slowly. The Tzenndorg was over twice the weight of a normal silhouette knight, so the sound of its footsteps was heavy to match. While the onlookers watched, it slowly moved out of the workshop, its every step shaking the ground.

Then, it finally showed its form under daylight.

The machine's chassis hadn't been painted yet, so it was still the color of dull metal. The single horn on its head reflected the sunlight, shining brightly. This machine, combining the forms of human and horse, seemed to embody power.

However, that was as far as the surprisingly peaceful and calm demonstration went. Suddenly, an ominous laugh came from the Tzenndorg's loudhorn. Hearing that, everyone imagined the worst. Furthermore, to back up those imaginations, the Tzenndorg's back legs started to scrape the ground. It looked exactly like a horse about to take off.

"Mm heh heh heh... FULL SPEED AHEAD!"

"HEYYOUIDIOTTHINKOFWHEREWEAREWATCHOUTFOREVERYONEAROUNDUS
SSSSAAGGHHHHHEVERYONERETREEEEEAAAAAAT!"

It was true that the twins' lack of knowledge about silhouette knights worked in their favor. But having no common sense was *not* a good thing. Without hesitation, the Tzenndorg took off at full speed from right in front of the

workshop. The knightsmiths nearly lost their heads as they hurried to get away in a panic. Meanwhile, the Tzenndorg truly galloped like a horse, leaving the dumbstruck members of the knight order behind as it took off at incredible speed.

“That was crazy dangerous, you absolute idiot! Agh, dammit, I guess they’re still the kid’s friends in the end! Every single one of them!”

“Good, good. It doesn’t look like there are any problems even when it runs at full speed. It’s well-made.”

“Hey, Ernie, I don’t think that’s what you should be paying attention to right now...”

With dwarves of various sizes looking up to the heavens on one side of his peripheral vision, he watched the Tzenndorg leave the city in a flash.

The Tzenndorg’s crystal tissue knew no fatigue and its twin ether reactors supplied it with enormous amounts of mana, so it continued to run without letting up on its speed. The twins couldn’t hide their excitement as they watched the landscape pass them by at lightning speed.

“Wowww! Tzenny’s so fast!”

“Ha haaaaa! This feels great! You’re amazing, Tzenndorg! Okay, let’s continue on through the forest!”

“Yeah, let’s!”

Like that, Kid and Addy enjoyed their fill of running around in the prototype before returning, where the boss’s super *grateful* fist awaited them.

Chapter 22: Let's Reveal the New Model

The year was 1278 O.C., and fall was fast approaching.

It was a little after sunrise, and a fleet of carriages could be seen traveling down the West Fremmevilla Highway.

Almost all the carriages were actually transporting goods. Giant humanoids could also be seen around them. This group consisted of merchants who did business in Fremmevilla and their guards, a mercantile knight order. Even though they were peaceful merchants, in the kingdom of Fremmevilla, they still needed the protection of silhouette knights. These large machines following the convoy looked exactly like a true knight order, hence their name.

Fundamentally, all merchants rose crazy early and were exceedingly energetic. The faster they acted, the more leeway in time they would create, which would give them more time to do business. Their schedule also resembled that of a knight order's, yet more proof of the name they'd been given.

"What's that? Something's there—stop!"

The road was veiled in a thick mist, forcing the Mercantile Knight Order to gradually drop their speed. That was when it happened.

Suddenly a pointed warning came from the guard silhouette knight in front.

Heeding the man's warning, the rest of the order quickly stopped. There were many knight runners that had been hired as guards who excelled in sensing enemy presences, and the fact that they sensed something was wrong meant that there was.

The knight runner piloting the escorting unit reached down for the sword at his machine's hip, refusing to let his guard down. He strained his ears instead of trying to rely on his sight, which was being obscured by the strange mist.

When the order stopped, suddenly everything somehow seemed *quieter*—though in the midst of that hush, something far off could be heard making a

noise.

The escorting knight runner furrowed his brows slightly.

His ears told him those were the sounds of horse hooves. However, strangely, the footsteps made whatever it was seem far too big to be a horse, given their distance. The sound made whatever was originating it seem like a fearsomely large and incredibly heavy horse.

Eventually, a large writhing shadow could be seen dimly through the mist.

It was a *something* that was creating loud noises that seemed like the clapping of horse hooves. It was impossible to tell what it was just from the shadow, but the escorts, deciding it was a monster, drew their swords. They moved to cover the carriage behind them as they tried to look for an avenue of retreat that would allow them to detour around whatever this was and go on to their destination. It was only natural they'd come to this decision, as the size of whatever it was on the other side of the mist seemed to be as large or larger than a silhouette knight. This horselike object of such prodigious size did not ring any bells in the escorts, but that didn't change their suspicions that it was a duel-class monster.

Then, when one of the escorting silhouette knights tried to step forward to buy time for the carriage to make a detour, the monster seemed to have noticed them and slowed down with an accompanying loud noise. Soon enough, it came to a stop in front of them.

The escorting knight runners gulped nervously. Whatever it was was clearly a horse, even through the fog. Judging from how fast it was moving, they knew it was fast enough to leave them in the dust and attack the carriages if it wanted.

However, their nervousness didn't last for long. The moment they thought hostilities were about to kick off, the monster turned on its heel and went back.

"Neiiighh!"

The monster left the shocked escorts behind with a shrill cry almost like a little girl's voice. While they felt somewhat offended, getting the feeling that they were somehow being made fun of, the escorts continued to be vigilant. Eventually, the sounds of horse hooves disappeared completely, and they

finally resumed their travel, hurrying to the next town.

That incident was the start of a number of occasional run-ins with a mysterious monster on the West Fremmevilla Highway. As the number of encounters grew, these rumors spread through towns along the highway. Of course, they reached the ears of the Order of the Silver Phoenix in Laihiala Academy City as well.

“Seems there’s rumors going around lately. Rumors about a mysterious horse monster.”

“Yeah, we’re totally famous!”

“Oh no, wait a second. No one knows it’s us, so we’re not actually famous.”

“Really? Isn’t it basically the same thing?”

Two boys and a girl snuck through the darkness of the dim forest. Two of them had brown hair, their hair swaying in the wind as they argued loudly. The one who got in between them was a size smaller than the other two, with purplish-silver hair that also swayed in the breeze as he stood up.

“I wonder. At any rate, the timing is perfect. We’ve done enough tests, and we’re reaching the limit of being able to hide the project. It’s about time to put on the finishing touches.”

They weren’t standing on the ground or sitting up in a tree. They were on a gigantic steel object that was pushing its way through the trees.

The somewhat orderly make and regular angles suggested its outside was armor, showing that the giant object was a silhouette knight. It was actually larger than a normal silhouette knight, and its lower half was bizarrely shaped like a horse. In other words, the thing they were using as a platform was the true form of the Highway Monster.

“Then are we finally gonna do it?”

“Yes, this will all be in order to fulfill His Majesty’s order... Let’s go give them a huge shock.”

Thus, for a time, the rumors of the Highway Monster faded into the background. When next it would become the subject of rumors, it would be as

something totally different.

At the same time the rumors of the unknown monster were livening up the West Fremmevilla Highway, the fortress city of Dufort, south of the capital, Konkaanen, was awash with quiet excitement. Dufort held the stronghold of the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory, which could best be described as the headquarters of all silhouette knight development in the country. Inside, there were many different facilities related to silhouette knights.

There were a total of three developmental workshop bands. These groups of buildings had expansive warehouses to store all the materials that would be needed for everything from development to manufacturing, as well as training areas to test prototypes in. The training area especially was one of the largest in the country, and a source of pride for those in the national lab. At the moment, that training area was playing host to more than ten silhouette knights that were currently just standing there. They were the reason for this fervor—and could be said to be the symbol of this town's entire reason for existing.

The construction of the training area was relatively orthodox: it was made of stone. The space was rectangular, surrounded by four walls. There were a smattering of spectators on the walls as well as an attached smithy beside them. Meanwhile, the group of silhouette knights, all of the same make and model, were in formation in the center of the space. The giants of metal and crystal were all kneeling down, silently awaiting orders from their masters.

Most of the units were rather unadorned, which may have just been due to the temperament of the country. There were very few distinctive features among them, and their solid construction that made it seem like durability was prioritized above all made them seem somehow like Kaldatoahs. However, when one took in the entire machine at once, it was clear to see that they weren't Kaldatoahs. The silhouette of the armor was smoother, and the seams and segments had been worked so that it was very pleasant to look at. It was only natural that these machines resembled Kaldatoahs; they were the next generation of mass-produced silhouette knight, which adapted the new technology used in the Tellestarle to a new chassis, based on the Kaldatoah. They were considered the first prototype models, designated the Kaldatoah Dash.

The chief of the national lab's first development workshop, Gaizka Johansson, looked over the lined-up Kaldatoah Dashes, a flood of emotions behind his eyes. The Kaldatoah Dash looked like a relative of the Kaldatoah, but on the inside it was basically a completely different machine. Other than the fact that the inner skeleton of the Kaldatoah had been reused to an extent, everything else was pretty much completely new. At most, about twenty percent of the prototype was reused parts. At the same time, its current form was a frank illustration of all the pain the knightsmiths of the national lab had needed to go through, and all the changes they'd had to make.

The Kaldatoah Dash had inherited all of the Tellestarle's new functions: the strand crystal tissue, capacity frame, and back weapons.

Of course, the knightsmiths didn't just slap the new functions onto their prototype. First, instead of simply replacing all the muscles of the machine with strand crystal tissue, they had thoroughly researched the best placements and amounts for the new type of crystal tissue. Gaizka and the others knew that the increase in muscle strength would lead to more attack power, but at the same time it would also have a bad effect on how easy the machine was to control. Put simply, the Tellestarle was so strong it tended to run amok. In order to combat that, they lessened the amount of muscle so that the Dash only had about thirty percent more strength than the current generation of silhouette knight.

The reduction of muscle opened up some extra space in the unit. Most of that was allotted to more capacity frame armor. Thanks to that, the Tellestarle's ongoing problems with mana efficiency and the size of its mana pool had been fixed even further.

That wasn't all. Thanks to the persistent efforts of the national lab's knightsmiths, the structure of the muscle they had limited the amounts of had been adjusted to dramatically improve how easy the Dash was to pilot compared to the Tellestarle.

Far from the Tellestarle that had been given the nickname "Runaway Horse," the Dash was almost as obedient and easy to control as the Kaldatoah. At this point, almost all the Tellestarle's problems had been fixed or at least greatly improved.

Gaizka and his knighthsmiths had been making steady progress, but there was one aspect they had struggled with right up until the end. Surprisingly, it was something that had already been completed by the Tellestarle: the back weapon.

Put roughly, every *other* improvement had just been improving existing silhouette knight functions. However, the back weapons were different. It was a standout unknown piece of equipment, and because it was already completed, it wasn't easy to make any changes. In the first place, they had their hands full trying to parse the Ernesti-stamped changes to the magius engine, so all they could do was give up in tears and make a one-to-one copy. Poking over the Dash's shoulders were two Culverin silhouette arms. The mechanisms and controls were all copied from the Tellestarle, which was still a bit of a sore point for the knighthsmiths. Still, the Dash's back weapons worked just fine, and they had managed to mass-produce the machine.

The Kaldatoah Dash was made up of high output, strengthened armor, a variety of new technologies, and the ease of use that was Fremmevilla Kingdom's specialty. The degree of this machine's perfection could be said to be an example of the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory's technical prowess, and so many people felt deep satisfaction and confidence when looking upon the prototype—most of all, those of the first development workshop, who'd actually worked on the machines. Gaizka was famed for his normally ugly personality, but because he was so happy right now, well...one could guess what he was like.

There was no doubt that the Kaldatoah Dash would be adopted as the next mass-produced unit, and having accomplished this was a knighthsmith's greatest honor. None of them doubted that the Dash would do great things, or that such a feat would bring even further honor upon the national lab.

Meanwhile, a shadow watched the Kaldatoah Dashes lined up in the training area from another building. It was the director of the national lab, Olvår Brommdall.

There was also another person in the room with him. Unlike the training area, which was swirling with crazed enthusiasm, this place was quiet and far away. This was partially because Olvår was being quiet, and partially because the

other person was waiting silently. Olvår lowered the window's blinds before shrugging and sitting behind the magnificent desk that was in the room.

"I suppose we should be celebrating along with them. Today has been a good day."

"You aren't going to join in, Sir Protector?"

"No, all that noise is a bit harsh for our ears. It's hard to have to wear this covering for so long too."

Meanwhile, the other person stood in the middle of the room. Both people seemed to have a similar air about them. That may have been caused by their similar faces, or because they were both meticulous blonds. Or it could have been the long ears that extended from the sides of their heads. These ears, which seemed like they would be excellent at gathering sound, did seem like it would make being in the midst of such a tumultuous fervor difficult.

"Now then, since we know that our rival is active, we can't afford to rest on our laurels. I *am*, after all, the leader of an organization."

For the first time, the other man adopted an easy-to-understand expression. It was bewilderment.

"Do you really believe that...erm...this Highway Monster is *his* work, Sir Protector?"

"I understand your confusion; if possible, I'd have liked to doubt this idea too. But the rumor is about an unidentifiable monster, and it spread with Laihiala as its center, at this specific time... It would be harder to *not* suspect it."

Feeling the same bewilderment as his companion, Olvår let out a strained chuckle, his feelings showing through his thread-narrow eyes.

"It's been quite a while since the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit brought those Kaldatoahs to Laihiala. I can't believe that the ones who created the prototype for our new model—I believe it was called the Tellestarle?—aren't doing anything with them. Still, if the rumors are true, they made something truly frightening."

A hard-to-describe feeling ran down Olvår's spine. The information he had

managed to gather thus far said that the entire order was made up of mold-breaking, extraordinary people. The true identity of the Highway Monster was likely something they were responsible for.

“Then I don’t think there’s any need for me to continue to sit here. Wouldn’t it be better to make some sort of move?”

Olvàr shook his head fervently in response to the man’s question, as if he was shaking away the chills that had assaulted him.

“Oh no, I won’t do anything. Ah, please continue gathering information like you have been doing.”

“Are you sure? Do you really want to do nothing if you’re that suspicious of them?”

“I’m doing nothing *because* I’m so suspicious of them. I’m not a knight, but as someone who serves His Majesty, ruining his fun would just be boorish. Still, if things continue, I’m going to end up feeling sorry for Gaizka.”

He seemed to continue worrying over it for a while, but after a moment he tapped his fist into his other palm.

“That’s right! Okay, will you prepare to send out the Alvans?”

“Ah, the Alvans... Does this mean you think you’re going to have to fight them?”

“It’s just in case. It seems they’re several steps ahead of us, after all. There’s no other choice but to struggle where we can’t catch up. Now is our chance to close the gap, though.”

“Understood.”

The man bowed before silently exiting the room. For a while, Olvàr was lost in his thoughts, but soon enough he seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion; he seemed truly fed up as he stood.

“Now then, if I don’t go and show my face, they’re going to call me a homebody. Being on top is a difficult thing.”

He picked up the head wrapping that had been placed to his side and started applying it so that his ears couldn’t be seen. Then, once his preparations were

finished, he walked off toward the development workshop, though he truly seemed to hate the idea, as his feet were heavy.



Things kicked off when they were sent a summons from the king.

“I want to confirm the abilities of the new model that was in the reports. Following that, an announcement will be made on the following schedule in Konkaanen...”

Of course, the people of the national lab happily accepted this proposal. The Kaldatoah Dash’s abilities far outstripped the normal Kaldatoah’s. A straight comparison would’ve been hard to make, but the knightsmiths were certain that the new model had twice the combined attack and defense abilities of the Kaldatoah, and in fact, such belief wasn’t misplaced. It had the ability to answer most problems, and it could handle battle well. Of course, there was no way for it to compete with the “wort” series of silhouette knights that were exclusive to knight captains, but they did have a chance of winning against a similar number of personal units.

Certain of their success, they sent a company (ten) Kaldatoah Dashes.



The capital, Konkaanen: it was a city built on a gentle slope at the foot of the Auvnier Mountains, and there were strong holdovers from its time as a fortress. The knight order guarding this city were called the Royal Guards, and while they guarded the city itself, they were also treated as a special knight order under the king’s direct authority. Konkaanen had several facilities for their use, such as maneuvering grounds in the suburbs of the city. Those grounds were where the prototype silhouette knights of the national lab were headed.

The center of the maneuvering grounds consisted of flattened bare earth. Spectator seats surrounded that, scaled like a mortar. One section of it was especially high, since it was meant for nobles. That was where King Ambrosius sat. Since this was a private unveiling, there weren’t many people present. Among them, though, were Marquis Joachim Serrati and Duke Cnut Dixgard.

“The new model created by the national lab, huh...”

“Yes. Apparently they made it based off of the prototype Tellestarle. We’re about to hear the details, but in general I think we can expect a significant improvement from the Kaldatoah.”

The two looked down at the unfamiliar silhouette knights that were filing into the center of the grounds.

The Kaldatoah Dash’s movements were smooth, and they didn’t seem unsteady at all. Compared to the Tellestarles, which had a roughness about their gait, it was a large improvement. Joachim gave honest praise to the national lab.

Around them, the other people that had gathered to watch were holding lively conversations about the new model. Just the capabilities they’d been told about beforehand had the spectators plenty excited.

“I see... So that is the new model. It has a strong shape to it like the Kaldiaria, even though it’s based on the Kaldatoah. And then there’s the silhouette arms attached to its back! I hear that it’s able to fire them without having to swap weapons?”

“That’s not all. I also hear that their strength rivals the Order of the Scarlet Rabbit’s Heimerwort.”

“Oho! His might is famous even in my country...how fearsome.”

The excitement of the crowd showed no signs of abating. As he looked around at all the faces around him, Joachim suddenly realized that someone was missing, someone that should have been there.

“Duke Dixgard, why are *they* not here? They were the ones who originated the idea for this new model, and I don’t believe that His Majesty wouldn’t invite them—”

Joachim had no choice but to stop midsentence. This was because suddenly, in the seat beside him, Cnut started to massage his brow before turning up to face the sky. The duke put his incredible self-control to work, squeezing out an answer:

“You’ll...probably see why in due time.”

That line alone was enough to tell Joachim that nothing decent was going to happen.



The king of Fremmevilla, Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla, frowned as he looked down at the silhouette knights from his seat at the center of the raised section for nobles.

The director of the national lab, Olvår Brommdall, was currently introducing the new model from his place beside the king. “And that is the gist of it,” he finished. “What do you think, Your Majesty? This is the new form of the unit that is the pride of our country, the Kaldatoah. The Kaldatoah Dash exceeds the capabilities of the standard model in any and all capacities, and I believe that we, the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory, have succeeded in bringing about the best result.”

“Good, as expected of the knightsmiths our country takes so much pride in. Well done.”

Ambrosius smiled. Gaizka, who was behind them, reacted to every word with a twitch.

“These are wonderfully powerful. It is only natural for you all to be so confident. So... The reason I have called you here this day is because I have an appropriate opponent for you to show your silhouette knight’s strength against.”

Ambrosius let out a throaty, foreshadowing laugh, to which Olvår only smiled wryly. Setting him aside, as he did some research beforehand, the others around him only assumed that Ambrosius meant they would be holding a mock battle against the Royal Guard or something similar.

“By the way, you based that off a model made by students, right? Don’t you want to try meeting the ones who made it?”

The flow of the conversation started to feel off, raising questions in the people around them. They wondered why the conversation the king was having didn’t seem to mesh. It was as if the opponents were—

“According to him, this is a design competition. One in which two parties with different philosophies come and compare their works.”

The sound of a horse’s hooves could be heard in the distance. However, it sounded too heavy—and too large—to be from a regular horse.

“Open the gates! He will be making his entrance shortly... The one who made the original prototype, who by my decree has founded a new knight order!”

The Royal Guards’ Kaldiarias moved to throw open the gates. This gigantic opening was wide enough for five silhouette knights to enter abreast, and something could be seen on the other side, approaching at such a speed as to throw up a huge dust cloud. The bizarrely heavy hoof sounds continued from before, and it didn’t seem like they’d stop. Everyone there froze, gulping nervously as they focused on the gates, wondering what would appear.

Ambrosius raised his arms and boldly announced his other guests.

“Come...Order of the Silver Phoenix!”

The moment *that* was clear for everyone to see, their screams melded together to become powerful enough to shake the ground.

“What the— What... What is that?!”

The spectators, the people from the national lab... *Everyone* there was so shocked at what they saw that they couldn’t help but raise a scream as they stood up. Anyone who didn’t stand didn’t do so simply because the strength had left their bodies.

The thing boldly came in through the gates, accompanied by roaring and a heavy dust cloud. The thing that had stolen everyone’s attention was both a man and a horse, a giant thing that was as big as a duel-class monster. The horse’s torso was at a normal silhouette knight’s shoulder height, and the legs below it were thick and gave off an incredible sense of power. Currently, the hooves were tapping a loud rhythm into the ground, signifying how heavy the machine was. The most shocking thing to everyone there was the fact that a human upper torso was sticking out of where the horse’s neck and head would normally have been.

It was a rather *fantastic* form, one that combined human and horse together.

It was something that couldn't exist outside of fairy tales, a new type of "monstrous" object.

The people were so surprised that they froze up, but eventually they regained their calm and came to realize the true nature of the thing. The aesthetically shaped metal armor it was wearing and the singular horn sticking out of its forehead were not things that came about naturally, so it was clearly a piece of art made by human hands. It held a huge halberd in its right hand and a long shield with a sharpened tip in its left. The sight of it was hard to believe, but the people who saw it were still led to one truth:

It was man-made.

An artificial giant, the same as a silhouette knight.

A shiver caused by a different emotion ran up their backs as they realized the centaur knight was towing something, something that was being obscured by the dust cloud. Soon enough, it was revealed to be a tough-looking cart, one made of wood but with a steel frame. There was something wrapped up in cloth inside the cart.

Whatever it was, it had come while being towed by a giant centaur knight that was as big as a duel-class monster. Everyone present had imagined the same thing: it was probably another silhouette knight.

"Heh heh... Heh HA HA HA HA! You really did it, Ernesti! I knew I was right to expect great things from you! This is even better than I imagined! My word, this is fun!"

The king's excited laugh brought everyone back down to earth. Then, they remembered what the king had said at the start. They realized that he was referring to this new knight order—the Order of the Silver Phoenix—who'd made the original prototype. Then the crowd realized that this wasn't just about the national lab's new model anymore, and that this day would go down in history.

Meanwhile, completely ignorant of the shock the spectators were feeling, Kid and Addy—who were the centaur's pilots—followed the proper steps that had been planned out for when they arrived.

“It’s time to release the carriage. First, put the connector in a buffered state.”

“I’m moving on to the last procedure! Storing the towing anchor, taking some distance, and putting on the brakes!”

It was hard for the people who were watching from a distance to tell, but the four wires connecting the Tzenndorg to the carriage detached themselves and wound back up inside the Tzenndorg. Then the carriage started braking and dropping speed. Sparks flew from the wheels, the scream of friction coming from them signaling to everyone what was happening. At the same time, the hard connection between the two, which seemed like a pair of sub-arms, deployed as it slowly got farther and farther away from the Tzenndorg. Both the carriage and the Tzenndorg gradually slowed down, until finally the connector reached the limit of its length.

“Distance OK! Final decoupling!”

The mechanism that was connecting the two actually *were* basically sub-arms. As the ends of the attachment let go of the Tzenndorg, the carriage fulfilled its final order and fully separated from the centaur knight. Because its wheels were locked, it quickly dropped speed until it came to a full stop amidst a dust cloud.

The “luggage,” which had remained still up until then, started moving right afterward. A light clanging could be heard as whatever was tying the objects down were released and sent flying. The giants, having fully regained their freedom, rose from their kneeling position.

The cloth covering that had been used to protect the objects from dust flapped like a mantle as it flipped over, revealing vivid crimson armor. It was an unfamiliar, flashily decorated unit. There were wide dagger-shaped silhouette arms on its back, and a total of four swords strapped to its sides. Behind it, a bright pure-white unit stood. Its armor was unrefined and somewhat mismatched, making it seem truly like a prototype. Its solid build told of how heavy and powerful it was as well. Finally, the last unit was of the same make as the pure white one, only it wasn’t even painted. The only difference was the large number of overlapping armor plates poking up and around this silhouette knight’s shoulders.

While the three silhouette knights were standing up inside the carriage, the

Tzenndorg drew a big arc around the grounds to bleed off some speed. Once it was back down to a normal trot, it came to stand in front of the metal-colored unit.

At some point, the entire space had gone quiet. Everyone was getting so nervous that no one even coughed. Everyone's attention was locked on to the centaur knight and the other three silhouette knights that were with it.

The three silhouette knights walked up to the noble seating and knelt down into a parked position. Their torso armors opened up to reveal a trio of young knight runners. Among them was a boy with silver hair, a boy so young he could still be considered a true child. At this point, the spectators had no idea what kind of reactions they should've been having, so they just stood there, frozen. That was when the shrill sound of compressed air being released broke the silence. When the people looked, they saw that the centaur knight had also knelt down, and the cockpit was opening up. What opened up was what could be considered the waist...the area slightly behind where the human torso connected to the horse torso. The back of that area opened up to the sky to allow its similarly young pilots to get out. Yes—for some reason, there were two of them.



Once he confirmed that everyone had gotten out, the boy who had been piloting the unpainted, metal-colored silhouette knight stepped forward as the representative of the group, pulling off a beautiful knight's bow.

"I am the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier. In response to your orders, Your Majesty, I have brought the commander of my first company, Edgar C. Blanche; my second company commander, Dietrich Kunitz; and our cutting-edge centaur silhouette knight, the Tzenndorg."

As Ernie lifted his head, his purplish-silver hair parted to reveal a full-faced smile. He looked like nothing but a child showing off his toys. Though it really was true that on the outside, at least, he was a child.

"I commend you for your hard work, Ernesti. It is obvious just by looking, you seem to have brought so many interesting new things. Tell me in full detail what they are."

Both parties let out ominous chuckles after that, causing the people around them to look their way with hard-to-describe expressions. No one there could get a word in between the two, and social standing had nothing to do with it.

The bizarre centaur-shaped silhouette knight galloped across the maneuvering grounds like it owned the place, bright sunlight reflecting dully off its armor. The thing's hooves, which seemed to be supporting a lot of mass, clanged off the ground, each hoofbeat sounding like a thunderclap reverberating the eardrums of the spectators where they sat. These spectators forgot to even blink as they watched the centaur in action raptly. Silhouette knights were the largest weapons handled by humans, and while this was a type of silhouette knight, its form was far removed from a normal human's. Its name: Tzenndorg.

The spectators weren't the only ones fixated on the Tzenndorg. The knight runners in their Kaldatoah Dashes glowered at the Tzenndorg as it stood gallantly upon the same ground they did. But they were clearly just as interested.

"Look at that, Tsuva! Wow, they made a silhouette knight shaped like a horse."

“No wonder why Lord Protector wanted us here... You really can’t underestimate the *normals*.”

“You’ve got that right. Still, did Lord Protector fall into someone’s trap or something? As things stand, this looks like an unveiling for that thing.”

After hearing some cynical laughter coming from the unit beside him, he once again crossed his arms as he glared at the centaur knight on the other side of his holomonitor.

“Well, I wonder... The fact that we were summoned means there’s no way he was simply tricked. More importantly, we should figure out how to fight that thing while we have the chance.”

“I thought we got the short end of the stick, but it seems things are getting...pretty interesting!”

The shine of the Kaldatoah Dashes’ eye crystals strengthened as they followed the centaur knight’s every move. The knight runners were already in a different place from the spectators and their tumult. They knew they were looking at their enemy, and they knew they needed to figure out how it moved. It was quiet, but the fight had already started.

However, the knight runners’ nervousness wouldn’t reach all the way up to the spectators’ seats, especially through all the clamor. Most of the spectators there were nobles. Their curiosity was almost entirely aimed at the Tzenndorg as it strutted about, and even more at the group that made such a silhouette knight—the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They wanted to know why the king had founded an entirely new organization, even though the national lab already existed.

If it’d been any normal knight order, they probably wouldn’t have been interested. They had all heard of the outside attack that had happened a year ago; it wasn’t strange for there to be another one or two knight orders raised. However, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was no normal knight order.

There’d been an attack, a new model, and now a new knight order. In the midst of all this song and dance, of disparate factors weaving together, *he* was there. So what would the next card reveal? The one who held all the cards was their king, and he was keeping his ears peeled, determined not to miss a thing.

Just like a strong evening shower, the huge shock they felt quickly passed, leaving behind only silence and chilly air. Rather than apathy, it was more like they couldn't ask the king about it directly. Still, they were so interested they couldn't bear talking about anything else. That was how the mood in the noble seats felt. Ambrosius allowed himself a small smile as he watched the Tzenndorg run around. Suddenly, though, he turned to look at Olvår beside him.

"You don't seem all that surprised."

"With all due respect, my liege, that's absurd. I had been hearing rumors of a fearsome monster appearing around Laihiala, but I never would have imagined it was actually a new type of silhouette knight. I, Olvår, am truly shaking in my boots from surprise."

The light behind Olvår's thread-thin eyes shifted to a strange and complicated color for an instant, but he erased it before anyone else could realize. He tried to cover it up by bowing his head, making an obvious act that he was an ordinary person. How little he actually seemed to be affected stood out greatly in this viscous atmosphere.

"Your hearing from those ears seems as good as always. So you've put together the Alvans?" Ambrosius spoke softly. Olvår only reacted with his eyes.

"Of course this goes for the new model as well, but I wanted to take this chance to see how far *they* can go in a fight. Don't think of them as snot-nosed brats; they've been through some tough spots," Ambrosius mumbled as though to himself, so quietly that it was possible not even Olvår could hear what Ambrosius said from his spot right beside the man. It would have been nearly impossible, if not for his special "ears."

"I knew you would provide worthy opponents for them. Well done; the stage is perfectly set."

"I am glad you are so pleased." This time, Olvår bowed deeply.

"Before that, I need to make this known about them..."

Right after Ambrosius muttered that to no one in particular, a knock came from the door to the nobles' seating. A herald announced the arrival of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. A stifled sigh filled the room as everyone at once

looked toward the door.

The well-oiled door opened smoothly and with no noise. The plush carpet covering the floor depressed slightly under the weight of the new arrivals from the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They were as introduced earlier: the captain, Ernesti Echevalier; the first company commander, Edgar C. Blanche; and the second company commander, Dietrich Kunitz.

The arrayed nobility swallowed the groan that reflexively rose up in their throats. Usually, they would immediately have started appraising the new arrivals, starting from their looks. But this time was an exception. The two people flanking the leader, Edgar and Dietrich, were still fine. Judging from their trained bodies, it was clear that they were good knight runners. At the same time, though, it showed that they were nothing more.

The problem lay in their leader, Ernesti. The first impression he gave was “small and young.” Every time he took a step, his semilong, fluffy purplish-silver hair bounced. This, combined with his girlish facial features and small stature, made him seem more like a well-to-do girl that had been raised in a gilded cage. And yet he had claimed to be the captain of a knight order under the king’s direct control. It seemed like nothing but a nasty joke, and no one present had the skills to properly assess him.

But the boy didn’t flinch, even though he was bathed in so many concentrated stares that he could probably feel physical pressure from them. Instead, he looked straight at the king, a strong will behind his large eyes.

“In accordance with your will, Your Majesty, we have brought our latest prototype, the Tzenndorg, along with some Kaldatoah-based Tellestarles that have been equipped with our Option Works.”

“Well done.”

The contents of his speech further incited interest in the surrounding people. The name “Tzenndorg” probably referred to the centaur knight, and while that was extremely interesting in itself, another unknown piece of vocabulary had made its presence known. What did the boy mean by “Option Works”? Was he still hiding something? At this point, these people were totally caught in the king’s schemes. All their cards were out in the open, while their opponents’

cards were still held close to their chests. It was clear who was in control here.

Ambrosius could sense the crowd's excitement and confusion like they were in the palm of his hand. He was in such a good mood that he had no confidence he was hiding his smile properly. At this point, his little prankster's heart was full to the point of bursting. It was finally time to reveal the trick. At the same time, this would establish the pecking order between the national lab and the Order of the Silver Phoenix. He hadn't made things so flashy out of simple mischievous desire, though that was probably part of the reason; it was also in preparation to make the aftermath smoother. At this point, it was already a one-sided game, though.

"Now then, everyone. This is Ernesti Echevalier...grandson to Rowley, the headmaster of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and the original designer of the new model and this centaur knight. Now, due to my decree, he is also the head of the Order of the Silver Phoenix."

At least, it should have been.

"A... A child like you...designed that?!"

A single man interrupted the king.

It was the chief of the first development workshop of the national lab, Gaizka Johansson, who stepped forward with wide bloodshot eyes as he violently scratched at his white hair, throwing it into disarray. It was obvious from a single glance at the way he was carrying himself that he wasn't in the right state of mind. This was made even more clear by the fact that he'd interrupted his superior, the king himself.

"No... No way! There's no way that kind of thing...that kind of thing would be able to move. It's a trick... There's got to be some sort of trick! You must've learned it from someone... No, someone made it for you, didn't they?! That's wrong... That thing should be impossible... Then what happened?!"

At this point, he was no longer actually seeing his surroundings. He mumbled incoherently as he steadily drew closer to Ernie. Seeing how crazed the man was, Ambrosius allowed himself a rare show of bewilderment.

Oh...maybe this pill was a bit too rough to swallow... Ambrosius thought. /

would have preferred to leave him with some sense of rivalry.

For an instant, Ambrosius wondered whether or not he could stop the man with words, but after taking another look at the completely deranged man, he knew that no words would get through. So he gave up on that, and he was about to order his guards to secure the man when he locked eyes with Ernie, who seemed like he had something to say. Ambrosius's interest was instantly piqued, so he closed his mouth and signaled to Ernie with his eyes, allowing whatever was about to happen, happen.

Ernie turned to face Gaizka, who was approaching him while screaming about irrelevant nonsense. To either side, Edgar and Dietrich were ready to spring into action, just in case. Even if the attacker was a dwarf who excelled at physical might, against two active knight runners, there was no way the dwarf would stand a chance.

"The Tzenndorg uses two ether reactors."

At this point, Gaizka was close enough he could probably have reached out and touched Ernie, but the child's utterance had gotten through to him. With an indecipherable noise, the dwarf froze up. At the same time, Olvår widened his eyes in a rare show, allowing shock to show on his face. A beat later, what Ernie had said and what those words *meant* hit the crowd, and their surprise spread like a wave.

"Do you understand why?" Ernie asked, tilting his head and beaming.

Meanwhile, Gaizka spent the next while frozen in a foolish pose, but eventually he thawed.

"Th-That's... I... I see... Because it's too large. A single reactor cannot support it... So you needed to go that far..."

As he muttered to himself, the light of intelligence returned to Gaizka's eyes. Reason was required to answer questions, and no matter how strange it seemed, the thing had still been made with technology—and so reason and knowledge should make its mysteries clear. "A centaur monster with two hearts." That truth was a large shock to the man now that he'd regained his mind, enough to make him shiver. But more than that, he could feel questions and the desire for knowledge flood into him.

“It’s true that that would allow it to maintain its shape...but that alone wouldn’t allow it to move. It’s not enough. You... You’ve got to have added in other tricks.”

“Yes, of course. We have included several other ideas... Erm, let’s see... Allow me to explain with a visual aid. Edgar, Dee, please.”

Now that things had gone this far, Edgar had prepared himself not to make any quips or retorts. Instead, he silently opened the suitcase he had on him. Dietrich did the same, also silent, assembling a wooden platform as well as a simple blackboard. Ernie quickly posted up several schematic sheets, all with a full-faced smile like a blooming flower.

“Then allow me to explain! First, let’s start with the basic structure...”

“Oh no—wait a second, you fool. Don’t you ignore me and start explaining on your own.”

The one who stopped this budding presentation with a fluster was, of course, Ambrosius. His one line also brought the surrounding people, who had been sucked into the allure of such a presentation, back to their senses.

“Please, Your Majesty, you’re welcome to listen in as well! It’s fine; I’ve brought these documents to have everyone listen anyway, so I’ll be going over everything slowly and thoroughly!”

“And what about that is fine?! I’ll listen to you all you like later, so put that away for now.”

Of course, Edgar and Dietrich stayed silent through all this, and they smoothly and efficiently packed everything away. Ernie watched all this happen, seeming truly disappointed.

“You step back too, Gaizka.”

Gaizka made a noise in surprise. “A-Ah, yes. My...my apolo... I cannot believe I...”

“My word, it seems the medicine was *too* effective. Well, whatever—if you’ve come back to your senses, then just listen up for now.”

Gaizka had had a complete change in attitude, and had bowed so low in

apology that his head was scraping the ground. Ambrosius, though, reacted dismissively.

“Pft! Khahh... Hee hee hee...”

Ambrosius let out a small sigh as he slowly turned to face the source of the laughter—it was coming from beside him, from someone who probably couldn’t resist any longer.

“You too, Olvår?”

“My apologies. Oh man, I was wondering what kind of child he’d be, and he turned out to be quite entertaining... It’s rare to see anyone who can make you act like that, Your Majesty.”

Olvår bowed in apology, the smile still on his face. Ambrosius reacted to that dismissively as well, but the nervous atmosphere from before had completely dissipated, turning into something much more lax.

Ambrosius cleared his throat to try and steer things back on track, and he succeeded in changing the mood.

“Yes, well, I suppose going in order would be best. This all started when Ernesti here made an entirely new silhouette knight as a ‘hobby’...”

To the others, it sounded as if something deeply unnatural had just been said, but they decided to ignore that.

“What occurred after that is probably known to all of you as well—the new models were stolen. We have no idea who those little rats were or how they got wind of their prey, and the fact that they got away with one was painful, but luckily the inventor was completely unscathed. So I gave the order to form the Order of the Silver Phoenix. It would be a development organization to make this boy’s great ideas into reality, as well as serve as bodyguards for him.”

As they learned of the origins of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, the crowd nodded along at first, but soon enough they started having questions.

“I understand that, Your Majesty, but if you wanted a development organization, why not have him join us at the national lab? I believe it would be fine for the Order of the Silver Phoenix to simply be a guarding force.”

Olvàr had made a reasonable point, to which Ambrosius let out an appreciative grunt before turning to face Ernie. At some point, the suitcase Edgar was carrying had found its way into Ernie's arms, and the boy seemed like he was just waiting for his chance to use it. Ambrosius tried to stop Ernie with his eyes as he chewed over his words for a moment.

"Well, he is still a child, after all. At first I was worried whether or not you people would take to him, but...now I think it may have been the right choice to just throw him in with you lot."

Having heard that, everyone in the crowd seemed to agree.

"And as I look down at the two silhouette knights you each have made, I also think it may be a good idea to leave these organizations separate. After all, he's an eccentric who made a horse rider when I asked for a knight; there's no way he'd fit into a respectable organization. Also, don't you think his creations have been a good source of motivation for you?"

A dispirited Gaizka flinched under the king's gaze. "Yes! Truly..."

"That was one of my reasons for this, but there are others. This kid's products are all interesting, but...they're all terrible to use. Gaizka, how was the Tellestarle before you remade it?"

"Right! Well...it was packed with powerful muscles and groundbreaking mechanisms and was extremely powerful, but, well...it was a bucking horse that was not only hard to control, but would run out of gas almost immediately."

Edgar and Dietrich nodded in agreement to that assessment in secret.

"Thought so. I would wager that Tzenndorg is the same way. There's no chance it has a proper control scheme."

"That's not true. It just requires two pilots."

"And what about that is normal? Well, it's as you hear. While Ernesti's works all have a wide variety of good points, they are all unrefined in the extreme. How should I put it...? They're like ores or uncut gems. They won't show their true worth without some polish. The only ones who have the skills to apply such polish would be you folks at the national lab."

Olvàr clapped in cheer.

“Well then, Your Majesty, does that mean from now on they will be creating new prototypes, which we will then be remaking so that others can use them?”

“Put bluntly, yes. I’m counting on you, Olvàr.”

Starting with him, everybody else in the nobles’ seating bowed their heads at once. That was how the Order of the Silver Phoenix became known to the public, and Ernesti’s name quietly spread throughout Fremmevilla’s nobility, starting with the people who were in attendance that day.

The name also happened to carry a warning: the person named Ernesti Echevalier, the knight captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, was a font of ideas...but was also a huge fool for silhouette knights.



Then, a while after the conversation seemed to be over...

“Now that you all know who these people are, you are probably next most interested in that centaur knight. Here is where we will start the mock battle between the national lab and the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Both sides, get ready.”

Following Ambrosius’s order, the Order of the Silver Phoenix members descended back down to the maneuvering grounds. Gaizka went with them, and he exchanged knowledge and opinions with Ernie all along the way, their voices bouncing down the passageways. Gaizka, having been a self-made engineer originally, was naturally greedy for unknown technologies. Given that Ernie was unable to stop talking about his hobbies once he’d gotten started, their conversation didn’t stop until they reached the workshop.

Meanwhile, the nobles’ seating had lost the pointed air that had suffused it before. Now the space was filled with lively debate over the units that each organization had given their all to make. In essence, they were nothing but rubberneckers.

Olvàr remained in this relaxed atmosphere, and he was left to think about the future of the national lab. As a result of that last scene, the national lab had effectively been stripped of the important role of developing new units—which

could've been perceived as a huge blow to the organization. But depending on how one thought of it, it wasn't such a bad thing.

This rampaging child, this font of new silhouette knight designs, would continue to head a knight order under the direct control of the king. If you put that differently, it could've been described as the king himself taking the reins on such an enterprise. From what he'd observed from the sidelines earlier, the child, while certainly talented, was very *peculiar*. It was probably far better to leave controlling him up to the king, rather than Olvår trying to force the child under his own influence. Furthermore, given that the things he made tended to have many problems and drawbacks, the national lab was in no danger of losing its role. In other words, their importance to the country had not been affected at all. Still, at the prospect of explaining such a thing to his subordinates, all he could feel was gloom.

As Olvår indulged in his ceaseless thoughts all without a change in his expression, his sharp ears picked up a voice calling for him. He looked up and turned toward the king, who was beside him.

"In the near future, I will probably be taking that child to visit your *home*, Olvår."

Deep down, Olvår had suspected that would be the case, and everything seemed to click into place. He did his best to maintain his impassive mask.

"You rate that child quite highly, Your Majesty."

"The results he brings are worth more than enough. Well...that's part of the reason. I also made a promise to him—that I would teach him the secrets of the ether reactor in exchange for large enough contributions. As a ruler, I cannot go back on my word."

Olvår spent the next while with his eyes closed, thinking about what he should do. Ambrosius made sure not to hurry him. He seemed to be somewhat *too* considerate of his subordinates.

"I will relay your words back...home, as the Protector. However, the elders will have to make the final decision... Even you, Your Majesty, will have to abide by the rules."

“I know. But I’m sure those elders wouldn’t refuse such an interesting person.”

Olvàr only returned a vague smile. To wrap up the conversation, both parties turned their gazes to the two squads that had deployed on the maneuvering grounds.

“We will now start the mock battle between the national lab and the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Furthermore, in order to make sure both sides are equal, the Order of the Silver Phoenix will be fielding a platoon—three units—and one mounted machine! The national lab will be fielding two platoons, or six units!”

With a backdrop of cheers, Ambrosius announced the rules of the match. While the spectators were getting fired up, Dietrich complained from his position on the maneuvering grounds, seemingly annoyed.

“So they determined that the Tzenndorg is worth three silhouette knights. One knight on horseback is worth three on foot, I guess. I wonder if that truly works for silhouette knights as well, though?”

“Who knows. In this case, we’re facing Tellestarles that’ve been improved by the national lab. And the Tzenndorg is worth three of them... To be honest, I think we got the short end of the stick there.”

The main proponent of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s might was the new Guaire piloted by Dietrich and the Tellestarle piloted by Edgar—which had been modified from a Kaldatoah. In essence, while all three units looked different, their basic abilities didn’t differ much from a Tellestarle. Meanwhile, the national lab’s Kaldatoah Dash was a prototype that had been made after a complete overhaul of the Tellestarle. Of course, it was only natural to assume the national lab’s version had the better performance.

“I’m looking forward to it! I wonder how ‘proper’ they made the Tellestarle, given how hard to handle it was? It seems it’s been made much easier to pilot, so... Okay, let’s ask to give it a try later!”

“Uhh, yeah... Seeing you act as usual makes me jealous.” Dietrich shook his head in exasperation after hearing Ernie give his honest impressions on something seemingly completely irrelevant.

“Well, it’s not like we’re the same either.”

Guaire’s arms had grown a little bigger, while Edgar’s machine was now wearing an armored cape. Then there was Ernie’s unit, which sported a mysterious set of supplemental armor. Their silhouette knights weren’t normal Tellestarles either. Each one was equipped with something special from the Option Works, strengthening them.

“Hey, so...what should *we* do?”

“Will we really have to take on three of them?”

The twins’ voices came from the Tzenndorg behind them. This machine represented the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s greatest fighting force, as well as another big unknown factor. After all, this was basically the twins’ virgin combat, and it was hard to predict what would happen.

“Let’s see... Should we keep to the book, or...”

“About that... Edgar, Dee, can I ask you to be a little reckless for a while?”

After hearing their leader’s orders, the two adopted fearless smiles in their cockpits.



The loud sounds of a trumpet resounded between the two sides facing each other on the maneuvering grounds. Then a gong marked the start of the match, followed by a loud voice.

“Begiiin the maaatch!!!”

Right after those signals, the giant knights charged each other, shaking the ground with their weight. The first one to make a move was the Order of the Silver Phoenix. The three silhouette knights ran forth while the Tzenndorg matched speed so it stayed slightly behind them. The national lab team was composed of Kaldatoah Dashes controlled by a group of knight runners called Alvans. Their leader, Arniesse, watched the Order of the Silver Phoenix roll out and let out a low hum.

“Were they aiming for a simultaneous clash? Oh well—this is still within expectations. Form a spear wall; we’re advancing.”

Their two platoons lined up side by side, each of them wielding a shield and pike. Once they formed up, the formation started to slowly inch forward. Clearly they were very conscious of the Tzenndorg, which closely resembled a mounted unit. The spear wall was an old trick to counter monsters with a strong charge, and even though the weapons themselves were blunted, the extended pikes posed enough of a threat to give the other side second thoughts about making that attack.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix raised the speed at which they approached. Furthermore, the Tzenndorg split off on its own, going off some distance to the side before starting to outpace the three units that had been in front of it.

“Second platoon, turn to the right while maintaining the spear wall. First platoon, prepare for combat!”

Responding to the Tzenndorg’s movements, the Alvans split into their respective platoons. One continued pointing their pikes at the Tzenndorg in order to meet its charge, while the other dropped their pikes and prepared to meet the other silhouette knights in combat. Pikes were effective against enemies that were charging at you, but they were a liability against silhouette knights that excelled in maneuverability and flexibility. With two platoons on their side, the Alvans were able to split roles neatly and use their numbers to their advantage.

Most of the spectators, having watched both sides make their moves, thought that the fight had split evenly between the coming clash between infantry and how the mounted unit would deal with its opponents. That only lasted for a moment, though, until one of the Order of the Silver Phoenix units started to act strangely.

“Magius Jet Thruster, activate... Deploying lamination, starting air intake and compression...”

Accompanying that sudden statement came a roar that was different from the thundering footsteps that already filled the area. The suddenly concentrated air swirled around, producing a unique and shrill noise. This noise was several times more intense than the intake noise of an ether reactor, and it was all being produced by one of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s silhouette

knights.

It was the one that hadn't been painted, and so was colored like dull steel. The extra armor along its shoulders and waist had changed their positions, and now they faced behind it instead. The layered pieces of armor had flat valves under them that were now pointed backward as well. These layered armor pieces were also hollow inside, though they *were* packed full with an Emblem Graph.

When they saw that, confusion spread throughout the spectators. Why did the armor move? That defeated the purpose of it, and what was being protected was now exposed, they wondered and tittered among themselves. They had yet to realize the identity of the noise and the meaning behind it. However, the Alvans were of course wary of this strange movement.

"What the hell...is that?"

"It's concentrating the air... Maybe some sort of silhouette arms that shoots an Air Bullet? It seems to be a new weapon, but...I have no clue as to its purpose."

"Tsuva, Idra, be on your guard for something to come flying at us. We're almost in range, so we'll be using our own silhouette arms."

The first platoon, who had tossed aside their pikes, deployed the back weapons that were ubiquitous among Kaldatoah Dashes. At the same time, the second platoon, who'd kept their pikes, deployed theirs. The Tzenndorg, with all its speed, had outpaced its friends. It was about time for the enemy to be in range of their silhouette arms.

Right before this duel of long-ranged bombardments was about to kick off, it happened. The steel-colored knight bent a knee and lowered its body as it built up power. It reflected its knight runner Ernie's will as the strand crystal tissue exhibited all its power under the boy's Full Control. The first step the unit took gouged out earth as it instantly transitioned into a sprint, spewing bright trails of crimson fire behind it. Light and noise accompanied this long tail of fire, giving the unit that was stepping forward incredible acceleration. Silhouette knights were made of metal and crystal, were about five times the size of a human, and were heavy to match. When one of these large masses attained

this much speed, it was like a cannonball.

The tail of fire only lasted a short while. By the time the steel-colored knight was about to take its second step, it would have already settled into a mere haze, muddying the air behind the machine. However, when the steel-colored knight *did* take its second step, the fire once again manifested itself. Of course, the amazing speed the knight had gained only increased.

“Zercuuuuse! Watch out! It’s going at—”

While everyone was shaken at this unprecedented sight, the first one to notice what was happening was the leader of the first platoon, Arniesse. The steel-colored knight had already managed absurd speeds, outpacing even the Tzenndorg, which had ranged ahead as it charged at the Alvans. More specifically, the second platoon, which still had their pikes.

“No way... What *is* that?!”

“The pikes won’t make it in time! Shoot!”

The second platoon, who had been entirely focused on the Tzenndorg, could not react in time to the steel-colored knight that had approached them with such speed it seemed like spellfire. Even so, they managed to discharge their silhouette arms at a moment’s notice in an attempt to intercept the enemy. Though they were fired in haste, the flying overspells traveled accurately toward the steel-colored knight, showing how skilled the knight runners were.

Though they were greatly astonished, the second platoon’s leader, Zercuse, maintained calm in a small corner of his mind that was now sure of his opponent’s mistake. Though the speed of the assault was worthy of praise, that same speed worked against the machine, making it unable to evade attacks. The enemy had essentially destroyed itself.

Unfortunately, the steel-colored knight went above and beyond expectations. The knight runner, Ernie, had as a prerequisite been mostly training in high-speed combat. His trained reflexes and overwhelming computational power allowed him to instantly take action when needed.

The additional armor plates placed on the steel-colored knight’s shoulders, called Magius Jet Thrusters, all changed direction at once. This was followed by

a short explosive sound and a flash of fire as the steel-colored knight was suddenly redirected to the side, instantly changing its vector from a straight to diagonal heading.

“Huh?”

The enemy had gone far beyond the expectations of the second platoon. Their good aim had been to their detriment, as all the spellfire passed by the steel-colored knight without even grazing it.

“Uwaaarrrgghhh?!”

A white blade flashed. The steel-colored knight passed by the left flank of the second platoon as it swung its sword. This slash, carried by overwhelming speed, held destructive power equal to a duel-class monster’s charge. The fact that the units held shields in their left hands had saved the one situated on the left flank. Even so, it felt a huge shock as its shield was sent flying, causing the unit to lurch heavily to one side and fall over.

“Phillia! Oh crap, I’ll go deal with that thing. Yunfu, cover the rear—”

“That’s not your only enemy, Zercuse. Don’t act too recklessly.”

His comrade’s words reminded Zercuse who they were facing. Under the cover of the steel-colored knight and the explosive noise it made, the centaur knight had managed to come right up to them. The mounted unit raised a dust cloud as it charged with all the intimidation that came with such an action. The second platoon’s formation had crumbled thanks to the steel-colored knight’s attack, so it would be impossible for them to properly intercept the centaur knight. Zercuse came to that conclusion quickly, shouting, “Dodge it!” before forcing his machine to jump to the side. Yunfu’s machine did the same without missing a beat.

The Tzenndorg rushed through the space they’d opened up. As it passed by, it tried swiping at them with the long shield it held in its left hand, but Yunfu’s unit turned the blow aside with its own shield, keeping damage to a minimum.

The steel-colored knight used the moment that it bought to stop, bleeding off the prodigious and explosive speed it had cultivated. It braced with both legs and pointed its Magius Jet Thrusters forward. This time, the jet lasted longer

than an instant, the thrust being needed to cancel out all the machine's momentum. The steel-colored knight finally came to a stop in the midst of a thick cloud, the heat surrounding it making its form seem hazy and indistinct. When it turned around with somewhat slow movements, it was greeted with the side of a completely broken second platoon.

“Wh-What kind of joke *is* this?!”

The disastrous state of the second platoon and the steel-colored knight that caused it both shook the members of the first platoon heavily. They immediately moved to save the second platoon, but were stopped by Arniesse.

“Calm down! The remaining knights are coming; they'll stab us in the back if we go to help the second platoon now!”

Those words reminded the remaining two units of the foot soldiers that had remained. The steel-colored knight's attack had been so flashy that they had completely forgotten about the other ones.

“We're advancing. It's two against three, so we'll beat them as fast as possible! Zercuse won't fall so easily; he should be solidifying his defenses now.”

Though there was some impatience evident in the way they moved, the three Dashes ran forth. The space between them and the rest of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's forces was chewed up quickly.

“Idra, watch out for the steel-colored one! If you hear the noise again, prioritize intercepting it!”

Arniesse's and Tsuva's machines led the way, firing their back weapons as they went. Meanwhile, of the red-white Order of the Silver Phoenix pair, the white one stepped forward. The moment they thought their spellfire would bite into it, the armor around the white knight's shoulders moved. The sub-arms beneath had arranged all the armor pieces to concentrate forward. Furthermore, it braced with its shield, and having achieved a fully defensive stance, the white knight managed to have all the overspells bounce off it.

“So that's not a normal machine either...”

“The steel-colored one isn't moving; now's our chance. There's no way that

weird armor can take everything we have to throw at it!”

The three Alvans units continued firing, pressuring their opponents as they closed into sword range. This time, the red knight stepped out of the shadow of the white one. It was an attack-oriented, heavily armed unit. It raised its arms and slashed toward Tsuva’s unit—or so it seemed. Tsuva had braced himself, expecting to clash swords, but instead something burst out of the red knight’s gauntlet and flew at him. Surprised, he hadn’t been able to avoid it, and so the metal lump hit the head of Tsuva’s machine. The impact had hit the unit’s crystal eye, causing half of the picture delivered to the holomonitor in the cockpit to warp.

“What kind of weird equipment does this one have?!”

The red knight used the opening caused by Tsuva’s unit flinching to slash at Idra’s unit, pushing that one back with pure might. Beside them, Arniesse in his machine slashed at the white knight before also taking some distance for the moment.

“So we can’t...take them down so easily!” Arniesse ground his teeth secretly in frustration.

The Alvans had the advantage in numbers, but the red and white knights were specialized in attack and defense, and so were formidable opponents still. That was when the sound of a large amount of air being sucked in could be heard from behind them. The steel-colored knight was making its move again.

“We’re in a tight spot... Idra, watch our rear. Tsuva, can you keep going?”

“Yeah, my movements aren’t impaired! I’ll pay him back... Let’s go!”

Once again, the Alvans went on the attack. The red and white knights each moved to meet them in combat.



Rewinding time back to before the fight started, on the reddish-brown maneuvering grounds, two forces with the most advanced silhouette knights available faced off silently.

As it was taller than the other silhouette knights, the Tzenndorg’s head

peeked out over the rest from the center of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's side. With nothing in the way of its line of sight, it could clearly see the neat line of Kaldatoah Dashes—Kaldatoahs with a somewhat smoother silhouette to their armor—opposite them. The start of the fight was fast approaching.

Inside the Tzenndorg's cockpit, Kid and Addy were acting restless. They were feeling nervous in a different way from when they had their first battle in their silhouette gears. Thinking back to it, they'd been desperate back then, and it'd been a real fight—meaning they hadn't had to worry about the way they'd given battle. Manners hadn't been required of them back then. Now, though, they were taking part in a mock battle, and it was up to them to show off the power of the Tzenndorg. It was a heavy responsibility, and the difference between then and now was great, if hard to explain.

According to Edgar's briefing, their opponents had six units. That meant the Tzenndorg was evaluated as being equivalent to three silhouette knights. They needed to take on these opponents and claim victory. Though there was quite a distance between the maneuvering grounds and the spectator seating, the twins could really *feel* the stares coming from them for some reason. It was a really strange delusion.

In this situation, where their nervousness would only get worse, Ernie was acting the same as usual. "About that... Edgar, Dee, can I ask you to be a little reckless for a while?"

Why would this conversation that was about how to fight with the Tzenndorg turn into Edgar and Dietrich being reckless? As always, Ernie seemed to draw conclusions from nowhere.

"If you're going as far as to ask, then you must have some sort of plan, Ernesti. What do you want?"

"It's simple. First, the Tellestarles and the Tzenndorg will split up to see how our opponent will react. Most likely they'll split up by platoon. Strategies for fighting against the Tzenndorg and the Tellestarles are too different from each other... Nine times out of ten, if we make a move, they'll react accordingly."

The white, red, and centaur knights nodded. That much was easy to imagine, and was within the opponent's expectations as well.

“We also need to have the Tzenndorg act alone to make use of its speed, after all. Still, if they act according to the book and split off three units, the Tzenndorg will of course have trouble dealing with them... So for our first move, we’ll do something unexpected: make a preemptive attack on the forces they split off to intercept the Tzenndorg.”

“I see what you’re getting at. You’re going to hit them, aren’t you?” Edgar turned the head of his silhouette knight to look square at the Tellestarle Ernie was piloting.

Ernie’s machine had integrated a Magius Jet Thruster on its shoulders and around its hips. This improved version was miniaturized and could mount several at once to make it easy to adjust the output. Furthermore, by making the thrusters positionable, it allowed the unit to gain mobility in all directions; the equipment was now a threatening addition. The price for such abilities was how complicated it was to use; it was to the point where saying it was a burden to operate was putting it very lightly, and basically the only one capable of using this defective product was Ernie.

“Yes, this will be an ambush using my mobility to its fullest. That’s how I’ll crumble the anti-Tzenndorg platoon’s formation before returning to the fight between silhouette knights. Of course, in the meanwhile, your side will become weaker. I want you two, Edgar and Dee, to hold on in that disadvantageous situation until I return.”

This strategy was brute force, only possible because the Magius Jet Thruster Ernie had equipped was probably outside the scope of their opponents’ imagination. At the same time, it was a bizarre one that would purposefully upset the balance of both sides’ combat strength. Even if the other side had numbers, this strategy may have been *too* much brute force.

“Okay. I’ll do my best to hold on.”

“It’s a request from our dear knight captain, after all.”

Edgar and Dietrich met eyes for a moment before giving an immediate agreement. The Kaldatoah Dashes made by the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory weren’t weak machines that could be underestimated. Though they agreed quickly, the burden they took on wouldn’t be light.

“I suppose this is what would be called the first prong? Basically, we just have to charge in after Ernie does his thing, right?”

“Leave it to us! We’ll show them the might of Tzenny’s momentum!”

That ended up relieving the twins, in a sense. Since they knew about the Magius Jet Thruster, they were sure it would give their opponent the fright of their lives, and they couldn’t hide their laughter at the thought.

“Good, these are good vibes. Then let’s go shock them to their cores!”

“Well, I’ll just be using Edgar as a shield until you come back, so I’m counting on you to do that before he falls over.”

“Dee, you...”

Addy’s snickering accompanied the relaxed and loose mood that followed. At some point, Kid and Addy’s nervousness had completely disappeared. Ernie was running wild as usual, only barely being kept under control by Edgar and Dietrich. There was nothing the two trusted more.

The white Tellestarle and Guaire, which had lined up in a wall formation, exchanged looks. Edgar and Dietrich were very aware of why Ernie had suggested such a forceful strategy. In the end, they were his upperclassmen, as well as warriors who had made it through a significant number of fierce battles. Excluding Ernie, who was a special case among special cases, they knew it was their job to cover for the newbies who were having their first battle. Once the two finished their impromptu strategy session, the trumpet signaling the start of the match sounded.

“Okay then; let’s go.”

A joking neigh came from the centaur knight that was at the center of their formation. Along with the starting gong, the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s side ran forth.



And now, back in the present, Ernesti heaved a sigh filled with resignation from inside the cockpit of his steel-colored Tellestarle.

“Yeah...I knew this would happen. The mana pool’s been totally sucked dry.”

Ernie had acted according to plan and used his Magius Jet Thruster to make a high-speed assault. He had managed to take down a silhouette knight and shake the enemy, but the price for such reckless action was paid for by his mana pool.

“Accelerating is fine, but the real problem comes when I have to slow back down. In the end, I need to retrofire the thrusters to avoid breaking my unit like back in that ‘accident’...”

Ernie had realized firing the thrusters for long periods of time was dangerous in the course of his reflection on the Shooting Star Incident. In order to avoid that, he’d come up with the method of firing the thrusters in short bursts in concert with the unit’s movement. But that only worked for acceleration. Deceleration still had to be done through brute force. There was nothing that could be used for deceleration, and the maneuvering grounds were limited in its size. Brute-force deceleration through retrofiring the Magius Jet Thruster took a massive fee in mana, and this paired with the Tellestarle that had always been mana hungry made the burden even worse. Of course, as a consequence, Ernie’s machine started to run out of mana and was moving slower.

“I know it can’t be helped, but to think I’m at less than twenty percent mana already... Jeez, I guess I can’t make that attack anymore.”

Since he charged so flashily, Ernie’s machine was much farther away from where the main battle was happening. He would need some time to run back. Once again, the Magius Jet Thruster started sucking in air. As the air swirled around, gathering in the thrusters, the distinctive sound could be heard throughout the battlefield, making people nervous.

“I can’t run. If I don’t walk and recover mana, it’ll be too dangerous to return to battle.”

The steel-colored Tellestarle let out a loud intake sound as it walked toward the battle.

Meanwhile, the captain of the Alvans, Arniesse, swung his Kaldatoah Dash’s sword with enthusiasm. Edgar’s white Tellestarle intercepted the blow with its shield, after which it took advantage of the opening to counterattack. It made a sharp thrust with its sword, which Arniesse in his unit had to pull back and bat

away with its own sword.

Both machines then took some distance, but Arniesse's machine didn't fire its back weapons. He knew that against Edgar's unit, with its Flexible Coat, the spellfire would just bounce off. Because of that knowledge, the two silhouette knights were locked in a contest of swords and shields; a battle that had returned to the basics. However, their fight wasn't plain or boring in the slightest. It was a fierce and exciting exchange of sword blows.

A series of blows were exchanged; there were slashes full of drive with some feints mixed in. Every clash made sparks fly, and every time swords or shields impacted each other, the ground shook. Arniesse and Edgar both had proven skills and the stoutheartedness not to give an inch. Each swing only saw their swordplay sharpen in an attempt to make the next swordstroke surpass their opponent. While the spectators gulped, enraptured, the fight between the two only got even more fierce.

Dietrich, however, did not pay any mind to how Edgar was doing at all. He and his Guaire had to face off against two Dashes: Tzuva's and Idra's machines. Guaire, being specialized for attack, had no shield, and that meant he wasn't well protected. Thinking that, the Alvans platoon decided to have Arniesse keep the white Tellestarle busy while the other two tried to take down Guaire as fast as possible.

A lump of metal scythed through the air with a dull buzz. The tip of the Lightning Flail flew from Guaire's arm, and it swung the thing around like a chain. Because his opponents had seen the thing flying from his unit's gauntlet already, he couldn't hope for a surprise attack anymore. Instead, Dietrich was using it as a blunt weapon with a long range. The weapon swept to the side, causing Tsuva to back his machine up slightly to avoid it. Tsuva retaliated with his back weapons since he had been forced to back away, but Guaire feinted a dodge before swiping at Idra's machine with its sword. Idra's machine put its shield forward to protect itself, but was met with Guaire's back weapons: dual Shotels. The wind blades had a short range, but in exchange, they were very easy to wield in close quarters. The spellfire was shaped like thin blades, and while they weren't especially strong, they were very easy to hit with.

Idra's machine wasn't able to withstand the wind blades, and its stance

wavered. Seeing this, Guaire closed in with its dual blades. To prevent this, Tsuva's machine fired its own back weapons, obstructing Guaire's advance. Guaire stopped trying to close in, but before it switched to evasion, it shot out its Lightning Flail as a parting shot. The lump of metal accelerated at Idra's unit's head, grazing it before hitting its back weapons.

The Alvans were having an unexpectedly tough battle. Some of it could've been attributed to Tsuva getting tunnel vision because of the initial surprise attack, or Idra fighting while being wary of the steel-colored Tellestarle, but the biggest reason was because the Guaire's combat strength was higher than expected. Between its Shotels, the Lightning Flail, and its swords, it had a wide range of attack options and used them all well. Guaire had a unique way of fighting, where it made sure to keep a distance that was advantageous to it as it attacked, and it was causing the Alvans a lot of trouble.

The pair heard the distinctive sound of the steel-colored Tellestarle from behind them. For some reason it didn't use its transcendental speed to rush at them, but it put the Alvans on even stronger guard, taking away even more focus from the fight at hand. It was a vicious cycle—and to the spectators, the Alvans were at a disadvantage. The attack that Ernie's unit had made had left a large impression.



"Addy, we're going to circle around and attack from there! Start doing so now!"

"Okaayyy! I'll show them Tzenzy's footwork!"

The Tzenndorg ran across the maneuvering grounds, kicking up dirt as it did so. The rhythmic hoofbeats served as the music to which the battle was set, and now that the Alvans's second platoon had been scattered, the twins resumed their attack. From here on out, they wouldn't have Ernie's support; they already knew full well how mana guzzling the Magius Jet Thruster was.

The Tzenndorg's horse section had mobile armor, just like the Flexible Coat. Because of its size, the Tzenndorg was over twice as heavy as a normal silhouette knight. However, mobility was life for cavalry, and lightening the machine was necessary to maintain some of its necessary speed. In order to do

that, the Tzenndorg's armor was thinned throughout its entire body. The mobile armor was there to maximize the effectiveness of its thinner armor. And the twins had found another way to use the mobile armor outside of defense: as a counterweight.

Addy enthusiastically kicked down on her stirrups, making a magnificent display of her control of the Tzenndorg as it started a circling maneuver while losing almost no speed. The unit's fierce speed combined with its weight created a strong centrifugal force, which fought to pull the Tzenndorg's trajectory into a wider curve. In order to combat that, Kid ordered the Tzenndorg's upper half to lean greatly to one side and mobilized all the unit's armor panels to manipulate the machine's center of gravity. The Tzenndorg then pulled off a maneuver that would've been impossible for regular mounted cavalry, and it was already attacking the Alvans's platoon when it was in the midst of righting itself.

Having returned to charging down a straight line, the Tzenndorg activated its pelvic armor. Out of this opening appeared a large sub-arm with a hand like a vice. The Tzenndorg gripped the halberd it had in one hand with the sub-arm, locking it in place between both appendages. This appendage was called a lance rest, and it was meant to support lance charges. The solidly affixed halberd now had its deadly end pointed at the second platoon, and the distance between both sides closed in the blink of an eye.

Though it was a charge only made by a single mounted unit, given that the unit was silhouette knight-sized, the intimidation factor was huge. In the face of such pressure, which was different from that of a charging duel-class monster since a human was controlling it, Zercuse and Yunfu of the second platoon braced their pikes. The remaining member of the second platoon, Phillia, and her machine had been silent after taking the steel-colored silhouette knight's initial attack. The attack and subsequent fall had probably rendered the knight runner unconscious. While glaring at the approaching Tzenndorg, the other two gradually separated themselves from Phillia's unit in order to not involve her in the fight while she was out.

"Do you think we can intercept that thing with just our two pikes, Yunfu?"

"I wouldn't rely on that happening. Actually, Zercuse, I have an idea."

After exchanging words for a short time, they immediately went into action. Without warning, they threw away their pikes. This unexpected action caused a huge stir among the spectators, who thought that these were a huge part of their plan against the centaur knight. Once unburdened by these weapons, the pair hurried away from each other, their aim in doing this obvious.

“Is one a decoy? Or is this a pincer maneuver?”

“It’s gotta be one of those. Then let’s go for the one on the right!”

The Tzenndorg minutely adjusted its heading to charge at Yunfu’s machine, which had gone to the right.

“Sorry, Yunfu! I won’t waste this opportunity!”

Zercuse’s unit, which had been ignored, resolutely fired its back weapon. He was laying it on so thick it was like he didn’t care if he ran his mana pool dry. The sound of spellfire in flight was shrill as the rounds rushed forth to obstruct the Tzenndorg. The silhouette arms’ shots continued to impact the unprotected flank of the Tzenndorg...

Sike.

Instead, the Tzenndorg didn’t miss a beat, putting up the shield it had equipped to its left arm to repel the rounds one after the other. *Some* shots did make it past the shield, but the mobile armor underneath did its job well to defend against the attacks. The Tzenndorg continued its charge without dropping any speed. A duel-class monster would have flinched after being attacked from the side, let alone a normal silhouette knight. Zercuse felt something resembling fear as he was faced with the unfathomable abilities of his opponent.

Meanwhile, Yunfu’s unit didn’t seem particularly disturbed by the fact that it was targeted; it simply continued to act with indifference. The machine quickly jumped back to dodge the lance charge. The machine he was piloting, a Kaldatoah Dash, displayed its powerful legs and quick reflexes as it escaped from the threat of the charge mere moments before it landed. Yunfu’s machine, now in the natural stance for having just jumped to the side, deployed its back weapons instead of trying to get up. After its charge, the Tzenndorg had to turn around, so for a moment its back was exposed, which was the perfect chance.

That was when his sharp ears caught the sound of something bursting. It was a muffled sound, as if an Air Bullet had been cast in a confined space. Following that sound was another, this time sounding like something flying and cutting through the air. Yunfu immediately felt threatened, and reacted in the spur of the moment by stopping his attack and once again forcing his machine to jump. He had taken action as fast as possible, but it was too late. A shock wave assaulted Yunfu's unit.

Right after the Tzenndorg passed by Yunfu's machine, a certain something shot out of the rear of the Tzenndorg. What shot was a piece of equipment called a towing anchor, which had originally been used for the transport of luggage. The mechanism resembled the Wire Anchor—the projectile had the ability to accelerate using jets of compressed air, and the transformable projectile managed to be such thanks to crystal tissue—and the projectile now flew through the air thanks to Addy, attaching itself to one of Yunfu's unit's legs.

The Tzenndorg activated the wire spooler in its rear at full speed, causing the wire to quickly lose any slack it had. This equipment had originally been made with heavy loads in mind, so the wire had plenty of tensile strength, which led to Yunfu's machine being pulled fiercely as the hold on its leg proved solid. Yunfu's unit adopted a sliding pose as it was dragged into and through the air with momentum. The Tzenndorg's fearsome output didn't even waver at the weight of an extra silhouette knight, and Yunfu's machine was unable to resist as it was dragged along, raising a dust cloud.

"Crap, I can't get up—it's going too fast...but..."

While being dragged, Yunfu attempted to brute-force a counterattack. He activated his back weapons and forcibly bent up his machine's upper torso. His desperate attempt was in vain, though, as his silhouette knight responded to his commands with the sound of parts being crushed and squashed. As the machine had its leg grabbed, forcing it to fall before then being dragged along the ground, the repeated impacts had made the back weapons malfunction.

"So it's all over..."

The Tzenndorg continued to drag Yunfu's machine along as it circled back

around. This time, it did describe a large arc, causing Yunfu's machine to obey centrifugal force and fly off. Once the Tzenndorg released its towing anchor, Yunfu's unit rolled along the ground for a while, then never moved again.

"Jeez, this is no joke..."

Zercuse's failure to find any valid moves had resulted in him watching his comrade being defeated, but he seemed oddly refreshed as he put on a carefree but strained smile. His opponent had a wide variety of abilities that couldn't be compared to those of a monster or regular cavalry. On top of that, its huge frame gave it the advantage in melees as well. By himself, he knew he had basically no chance of winning. Still, he had absolutely no intention of retiring from the fight. In fact, he felt like he should at least be bold until the end. After assuming a beautiful stance and brandishing his sword and shield, he slashed at his opponent from the front.

Zercuse had no idea what the Tzenndorg's pilots were thinking, but the machine accepted his challenge and stopped charging to meet him and his machine in close combat. It took a small while after that for the Kaldatoah Dash Zercuse was piloting to fall after a fierce exchange.



Arniesse's Dash and Edgar's white Tellestarle jumped back and created some distance after an all-out exchange of fierce blows. Both units now let out sounds of fierce air intake, and their armor seemed to shimmer from the intense heat of their movement. The two pilots took deep breaths as they wondered how long they'd been fighting. The time had actually been deceptively short, but it had been so packed full of combat that they felt it had been much longer.

Looking at the white knight through his holomonitor, Arniesse communicated his praise without using words. What an opponent he had! Arniesse knew that among the Alvans, he was at the top or right next to it in terms of swordplay, and it had been a long time since he'd met an opponent he could not finish off after going all out. Of course, given how long the fight had gone on for he wasn't holding back at all.

Furthermore, he hadn't been planning to go all out. The white knight's

equipment clearly favored defense. So he had come into the fight knowing that it would be a lot of work to take his opponent down, and he had planned not to push himself and just keep his chosen opponent in place and in check. He had only thrown that plan away after a couple clashes—after realizing that his opponent was more capable than expected.

His opponent was *tough*, and not just because of his machine's strong defense. In fact, it was because the enemy unit prioritized defense that he had ended up taking a lot of attacks. Normally, continuously taking attack after attack would wear someone down and create a lot of stress; any mediocre soldier would eventually find themselves unable to withstand this stress and crumble. However, the white knight had turned aside all of Arniesse's fierce attacks, and whenever there was an opening, he'd even managed to throw in counterattacks that sent shivers down his spine. The knight runner he was facing had both skill and mental fortitude in spades, and what word could be used to describe that combination other than "wonderful"? Though his breath was ragged, Arniesse's smile was the best he could muster.

"He is a wonderful knight. But it's precisely because of that, that this is so unfortunate..."



"He's strong. But that's exactly why it's too bad..."

As he adjusted his distance from the Dash, Edgar knew his expression was growing more grim. In his duel with the Kaldatoah Dash, both sides were proving equal. Though both sides had been attacking determinedly, the damage on both sides was light; neither side could get in an effective blow. Edgar knew full well that his own machine, which traded in back weapons for a Flexible Coat, lacked offensive strength somewhat. The knight runner piloting the Dash was wonderfully skilled. Each blow he struck was heavy, sharp, and guarded. If it weren't for the fact that Edgar's Tellestarle was geared for defense, he might not have been able to defend against them for so long. Edgar couldn't build up his self-confidence. At the same time, a feeling he had dipped further and further into certainty.

"As expected for an improved version, the opponent's silhouette knight

moves better than mine.”

It was a simple problem of each machine’s characteristics. The Tellestarle excelled in maximum output, but that made it harder to control; on the other hand, the Kaldatoah Dash gave up some maximum output in exchange for excellent control. This difference created a gap that could no longer be ignored as the fight began to test the limits of both combatants’ skills. Edgar’s opponent wasn’t someone he could simply repel with brute force. While Edgar had to control his machine so it didn’t run amok while relying on pure power, his opponent’s attacks were all smooth and carried out at max power. Edgar had experienced the pain of feeling something off with his machine more than once or twice during this fight.

There was also another problem, and in a sense this was the fatal one. It was the Tellestarle’s bad fuel efficiency. Though it wasn’t a problem in short battles, in this fight where both sides were even, Edgar was at an overwhelming disadvantage. Given that the Flexible Coat also cost mana to use, this lack of fuel efficiency was even more pronounced. His Tellestarle had less than thirty percent mana left in its pool, and as things stood, it was clear Edgar would fall first. There needed to be a change, some sort of change that would allow him to break out of this situation.

Also, a thought gnawed at Edgar from a corner of his mind as he glared at his opponent. No matter who won this fight, Edgar would petition for a machine that handled well; that was the one thing he was determined to do.



The red knight Guaire retreated one, then two steps. The crystal tissue driving the machine’s locomotion emitted a melancholy sound that was almost like a song, though it disappeared quickly into the tumult of the match. The arm it should’ve been pointing at its opponents dropped halfway, the power behind its movements slackening.

“It seems Guaire’s so hungry it can’t move now, huh?”

Dietrich sounded lighthearted, but there was no way his expression could’ve been misinterpreted as him having fun—nothing of the sort. While Edgar and Arniesse had been fighting, the red knight Guaire and Dietrich had taken on the

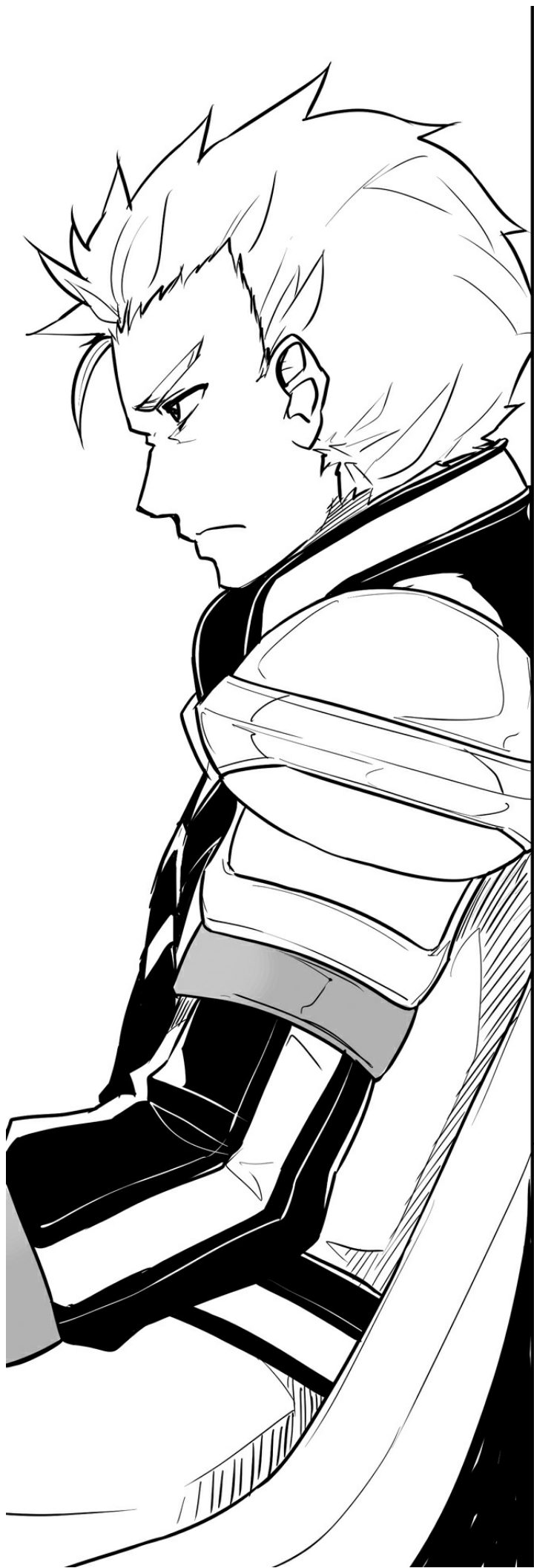
other two Alvans members in their Dashes. The attack-focused Guaire needed to be on the offensive, or it couldn't hold them off. But because it had to keep moving, it was clear that it would drain its mana pool faster than Edgar.

But the problem was whether or not Dietrich would honestly be okay with this outcome.

"This is frustrating. I guess I need more training to be able to handle two opponents at once."

The shriek of Guaire taking in air rose to its limits as the ether reactor spun up to full capacity. Even so, the mana output couldn't catch up to the rate it was being spent, and Guaire was at the point where it was questionable if it could manage even one more attack. Dietrich couldn't see a way to turn the tables around in this situation.

Actually, the two Alvans knight runners were also feeling bitter about the situation. Even though they outnumbered their opponent two to one, in the end they couldn't beat him until he was out of gas. In fact both Tsuva's and Idra's machines were fairly damaged. The red knight's attacking abilities had been a real threat. *If the fight had been one-on-one*, both knight runners thought—and there was no way that thought would relieve them.



“I’ll finish this one off. You go help the captain, Idra.”

“Understood. I know it’s on the verge of falling over, but don’t let your guard down.”

“I know... I won’t forget the damage my machine’s taken.”

Tsuva in his unit slowly approached Guaire while Idra’s machine set its sight on the white Tellestarle.

“Yeah...seems like I’m out of options. But don’t think I’ll let you put me down for free.”

Dietrich had made a decision on how he would spend his machine’s last dregs of mana. He fired off his Lightning Flail and Shotels, obstructing the path of the Alvans knight runners. It was unavoidable that Edgar would be left in an unfavorable position once he fell, but he planned to buy as much time as he could. Past that time, though, he could still gamble. Gamble that their captain would return.

A heartbeat later, everything started moving all at once.

Seeing Guaire completely ignore him, Tsuva knew that he was witnessing his enemy’s final struggle. Idra deployed his back weapons, moving his finger to the trigger. Once Dietrich sprang into action, they became aware of the *thing* behind them that was closing in. Everything overlapped, and the sound of a violent explosion could be heard from behind them. The Alvans should have been wary of the thing they had been most fearful of. However, over the course of their fierce fight with the red and white knights, at some point they started to let their guards down. Part of it was because their enemies were strong enough that they needed to focus.

Idra, who had carried the duty of being wary of *it*, was startled and immediately turned back toward the source of the sound. This reflexive act resulted in his holomonitor being filled to the brim with the color of dull steel. Before Idra’s mind could catch up and help him understand what just happened, it had reached his machine.

“It” being the steel-colored Tellestarle that had just landed a magnificent knee.

There was a crumpling sound, like paper being balled up, as the head of Idra's machine was pulverized. The head of a silhouette knight was there entirely to protect the eye crystal, which was the actually important part, so the helmets surrounding them were usually very tough. However, that toughness was nothing compared to the toughness of a silhouette knight's legs, which had to withstand the most burden out of all the other parts of a silhouette knight, much less the knee armor which was the sturdiest part of the leg.

After taking extra time to recover his silhouette knight's mana pool, Ernie had run all the way to close quarters with the opponent, only activating his Magius Jet Thruster for the last step for its explosive acceleration. This allowed the giant to focus all its momentum and weight on one point, turning its flying knee into an absolutely lethal attack. Idra's unit, which was probably the first in history to take this kind of attack, took the full brunt of Ernie's unit's momentum and was sent flying in a spin.

Ernie's attack was extremely strong, and also served to totally shock the people around him. It was as if everything stopped for a moment, and Arniesse in his machine took advantage of that opportunity to run. It quickly reduced the distance to Edgar's unit to zero, lashing out with a very strong attack of his own.

It was basically a charge, since he was using his momentum. Edgar was a bit late to react, so he was forced to take the attack with his sword, and both parties entered into a prolonged clash. Crystal tissue from both machines let out shrieks as a Dash and a Tellestarle both put their all into overpowering the other. Each machine's legs dug into the dirt, causing furrows due to the giant's enormous power. This effort resulted in heat, and it literally felt as if the air around them had gotten denser, as the scenery around them seemed to waver. The Tellestarle had the advantage in maximum output. The Dash's sword was pushed back, and the machine itself was forced into a painful posture.

But then the limit was reached.

Suddenly, the Tellestarle lost strength. Its legs, which had been filled with power, bent; the crystal tissue inside it let out a long, low, and sad cry. Before long, the white Tellestarle fell to one knee. The Dash put down its sword, and the white Tellestarle remained silent as it was propping itself up by using its sword.

Guaire had also lost power.

Tsuva's machine, which had stood in opposition to Dietrich until the end, rushed forward. Guaire used all its remaining mana to fire one round of its Shotel silhouette arms and Lightning Flail, which it combined with a sword swing in a multilayered attack in an attempt to intercept its opponent. Tsuva's unit took the blades of vacuum on its shield, which got blown away. Tsuva's machine didn't seem to mind, and it continued forward, sliding into range of the Lightning Flail, which it slapped away along with Guaire's sword swipe with its own weapon. Guaire had no power left to withstand that. Without power, the red knight wobbled and finally fell sideways onto the ground.

That was the moment Ambrosius, who had up until now been watching quietly, stood up.

"That's it! Both sides sheathe your swords!"

The gong rang quickly and in rapid succession. It cut straight through all the other noise, reaching the knights in battle. The remaining units on both sides had been about to move into a final showdown, so it took a beat for them to lower their swords, after which everything in the area stopped moving.

"Both sides have proven their silhouette knights to be wonderful and not lacking compared to the other! I have witnessed the good and bad parts of each model! Well done; allow me to pay you generous compliments!"

The spectators burst into an enormous round of applause for the knights that were still on the battlefield. The knights themselves seemed to have yet to catch up with what was happening, as they simply stood around in a daze without any cries of victory, as if they'd just woken up from a dream.

We were probably the ones that got rescued, Arniesse thought as he assessed the situation. Both sides had two units remaining. But taking on the Tzenndorg and the steel-colored Tellestarle with just two Dashes was reckless. Arniesse just couldn't find it in him to be sure of his victory. Furthermore, the Alvans had lost four units to down two of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's units. In terms of attrition, they had been clearly losing. It probably looked that way to the spectators as well, and muddying the outcome had probably been a political move. That, however, was outside of Arniesse's scope of interest.

Spare silhouette knights appeared from an annex of the maneuvering grounds, and they went to retrieve the remaining silhouette knights that couldn't move. The Kaldatoah Dashes of the Alvans were in a horrid state. Arniesse was somewhat worried for the safety of his comrades.

At that time, the white knight in front of him stirred. It had probably recovered some portion of its mana pool with the time it had been given. Its posture, which was supported by its sword, saw its arm lower and the torso armor open. The knight runner appeared from inside, and seeing that, Arniesse followed suit.

Edgar and Arniesse looked at each other. Each bowed to the other in a show of the utmost respect.

Unexpectedly, both sides seemed lost for words. Everything they needed to say had been expressed earlier, through their swords. Neither of them believed that words were necessary now. All the two of them had wanted to do was get a look at the other's face, but with that in mind Arniesse did open his mouth.

"I had the advantage this time. If possible, I would like the next time I meet you on the battlefield to see us both in the same model."

Edgar was a little surprised, but he quickly shook his head. "No, I don't want to use what I pilot as an excuse. I could have preserved more of my mana as I fought, and the fact that I didn't was due to your strength. I couldn't withstand it with my defensive stance... This loss was due to my lack of skill, and the results are clear."

Arniesse gave a small chuckle. His opponent being so deathly serious was a vivid reminder of someone in his life long ago.

"Ha ha, being serious is fine, but you should relax a little. There are some things you fail to notice when all you do is look forward."

Edgar paused for a moment to give that some thought. "Thank you for the advice, but I'm fine. My friends are always covering my blind spots for me."

That's not what I meant, though, Arniesse thought, flashing a wry smile in his mind. He replaced that with an ambiguous expression before it ever got to his face, though.



“Is it me? Am I the one in charge of his blind spots?” Dietrich grumbled as he sat cross-legged atop his fallen Guaire. He seemed deeply unsatisfied.

“You mean Edgar’s blind spots? He’s got way too many; it’d be a pain.”

That was when Dietrich heard heavy footsteps, and a shadow stretched over his head. He looked back to see the steel-colored Tellestarle and the Tzenndorg.

“Sorry, I didn’t make it in time. I guess it really was too much to ask.”

“It really was. Still, though, after scrapping with them, I feel like our weak spots have been made clear.”

Because the Kaldatoah Dash had similar abilities to a Tellestarle, the weak points of the Tellestarle had been thrown into even starker relief. Dietrich spent some time with his arms crossed, thinking, but soon enough he made a decision and spoke his thoughts.

“Hey, Ernesti, the Tzenndorg aside, the Tellestarle is a bit *too* flawed. I know it’s just a prototype so it’s kind of expected, but probably His Majesty will prefer the Dash...”

“Yes, I think he will too. Hmm...I suppose in that case when it enters mass production, we should get some Dashes as well. Or should we hand our equipment over to the national lab?”

Dietrich had been trying to be considerate, thinking that Ernie would be sad at having the Tellestarle’s weaknesses exposed, so seeing him so nonchalant took the wind out of his sails.

“Aren’t you, like, frustrated or anything?”

“Hm? Nope. The Tellestarle lost, but I don’t really care about that. The Dash is basically an improved version of the Tellestarle, after all. I just think that the Dash is amazing. Even if I didn’t make it, good things are good. So, I’m gonna go negotiate with His Majesty to see if we can’t get some of them!”

“Ah...yeah... Uhh...yeah. I see, you’re right. As expected of our captain. By the way, don’t you think it’s about time you get to making Edgar’s unit in earnest?”

Dietrich scratched at his cheek as he slipped into a mood where he just

stopped caring.

“Yeah... I think that after this, the mass-produced units will go to the final step of development. Once it’s finished, the silhouette knights in the kingdom will be swapped out in order. It won’t be too late to get to everyone’s silhouette knights after that happens.”

Wind carried small clouds of dust across the maneuvering grounds. Ernie narrowed his eyes a little, after which he stood up and looked around.

“It’s about time for us to pull out. Can you move, Dee?”

“Yeah, I should have recovered some mana by now. It shouldn’t be a problem to walk.”

“If you want, we can tow you. It’d be by grabbing onto your legs, though,” Kid offered.

“Don’t do that. You’ll break Guaire, after all the trouble I went through to keep it intact.”

While trading lively banter, the Order of the Silver Phoenix started moving.

In the maintenance workshop, built as an annex to the maneuvering grounds, Gaizka Johansson heaved a long, deep sigh as he watched the Kaldatoah Dashes. When he closed his eyes, he could see the fight that had just taken place vividly in his head. It had been a fierce battle between new models, with many pieces of equipment he’d never seen before, all being used by knight runners. Every new thing had appeared radiant to him, and each had been enough to enrapture him until the next. The result of the match wasn’t important to him. What stood out to him most was the mass of new technologies that had been on display. He was certainly very surprised over a lot of things, but they were all happy surprises, not anything that would cause a problem within him.

Until the meetings he’d had today, dissatisfaction had always swirled deep in his heart.

To him, a smith, working at the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory developing silhouette knight technology was a job to be proud of. However, the long strings of days with pretty much no change at all gradually wore him down.

The time required for silhouette knight development was exceedingly long; it was a matter of centuries for a new model to be born. The work they did would pretty much all only bear fruit in the next generation, or the one after that. Those fortunate enough to be born in such a time were truly blessed. But what about the ones that weren't?

He had started off by working his way up as an engineer, until he reached the honorable position of chief. So when was it this distortion of feeling started to show itself? By the time Gaizka noticed, he had become obsessively attached to his position. It was because he had nothing else to protect. Because of that, he couldn't stand that some youngster was standing above him, a chief of the national lab.

Then he'd been hit by a pretty forceful bolt from the blue.

A new model of silhouette knight had been invented—the kind of achievement he'd expected to take several hundred years.

The new project that suddenly dropped into their laps lit a fire in his desires, which had stagnated and been left to languish. He would complete the new model and use that achievement to become the next director of the national lab. If Gaizka thought about this calmly, he'd realize that there were many holes in this plan since his thinking was shallow, but at the time he had tunnel-visioned so hard he couldn't even see that. Though considering that his passion had been what created the Kaldatoah Dash, it might not have been totally fruitless.

And, on the stage where he should have revealed his Kaldatoah Dash to the nation—he appeared, bringing along a centaur knight and several other new inventions besides.

Even the Kaldatoah Dashes, which Gaizka had pinned everything on, were based on his inventions. At first, he'd fallen into confusion. He'd even gone so far as to become deranged, then mad. In the end, what had torn him away from the grip of such madness had also been *him*...and what he'd said. It had turned out that *he* was filled with a foolish kind of intelligence, which only wanted to single-mindedly create as it pleased, without hesitation or doubt, following its own very different definition of common sense. Gaizka, having witnessed

someone as bright as the burning sun, realized that what he had been aiming for had been nothing but a mirage brought on by the fading shimmers of real heat.

The eyes he had closed opened once more; and he slowly moved his body, which had become stiff, to raise his hand and look at that appendage, so covered in wrinkles. It was trained and tempered by the forge, but his palm was already carved with the scars of old age.

Even if he were to wield his hammer once more, he would probably lack the power he did in the old days. But he had the experience and knowledge that he'd piled up over his many years. The Kaldatoah Dash was proof that if he made use of those, he could aim for higher peaks. *I'll use my subordinates, teach them my skills. By doing that, they might also be able to aim for that shining peak*, Gaizka thought.

For the first time, the old dwarf was thankful for his position as a workshop chief of the national lab.

"I won't lose just yet...you youngsters..." he spontaneously spoke, but now it had a completely different ring from when he had said it before.

Chapter 23: Graduation Day

It was spring of the year 1280 O.C.

The clear ring of a bell came from the clock tower located at the center of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. It gradually disappeared into the clear blue sky.

It wasn't the short clang that marked the start and end of classes for the day. This long, reverberating series of sounds marked this day as special. Today was graduation day.

Students dotted the academy grounds wearing a specific badge that served as proof of their graduation.

The students were of all sorts of ages and departments. After all, Fremmevilla Kingdom's education system in general allowed for a lot of freedom. There were some among the graduates who hadn't even nailed down their educational focus.

No matter if the person was graduating the elementary, middle, or high school levels, this day was a send-off for everyone that would be leaving, or at least ascending to the next level.

There was a group of middle school graduates among the crowd as well.

These graduates were treated as somewhat special. The custom of this world was to treat those of the age of fifteen and above as adults. Most third-year middle schoolers were turning or had turned fifteen, so graduation from middle school could also be taken as a sort of coming-of-age ceremony as well.

"A lot's happened, and the clouds were looking a little ominous for a while, but I'm glad we managed to graduate middle school without any trouble."

"I almost didn't think we'd be allowed to actually graduate after all that we did."

"It did kind of feel like we were being shooed out, huh?"

“I mean, I don’t even really remember taking classes in the second half of the year.”

This group of middle schoolers stood out even among the other middle school graduates. At the center of the quartet was a small boy and a dwarven boy, who were flanked by a tall pair of twins. It was Ernesti, Batson, Archid, and Adeltrude. They could also be referred to as the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix and his associates. Today, they became adults.

They were feeling pretty emotional looking back on their graduation, which in a sense was only natural.

Thinking back, they’d acted completely selfishly, doing whatever they pleased, and it was very hard to say they were anything like normal students. Taking completely unrelated classes was only the start; the group was responsible for the sudden creation of an entirely new silhouette knight, using school equipment as they pleased for whatever they wanted, and finally taking over an entire school department (a high school one, at that). They had committed too many ridiculous acts to count.

No wonder they were considered the biggest problem children in the academy’s entire history.

“You’re right. It’s already weird that you’re leading a knight order, but we ended up on the side of the teachers when we had to teach the use of the silhouette gears too...”

Though they were problem children, the achievements they’d managed were also unprecedented.

The greatest among these achievements was likely to be the creation and spread of work-use silhouette gears. Silhouette gears had made a large impact in many different fields. Thanks to them, not just Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, but educational facilities across the country reformed their curricula.

That was why the Order of the Silver Phoenix, they who’d birthed such a wondrous invention, were in high demand all over as instructors on the silhouette gear’s use. Even before graduation, it had become unclear whether they were students or teachers.

All this was why the teachers had given up and allowed their graduation, thinking that there was no point in keeping them in the academy.

The graduation ceremony went well. All that was left was for the graduates to leave through the academy's front gates, with the students who weren't graduating seeing them off.

Tomorrow, the graduates would all split and begin walking the paths of their own lives.

Some looked back on their lives at the academy, while some felt anxious about the future. With all sorts of feelings in their hearts, the graduates slowly walked toward the gates. As they did, they heard the sound of heavy footfalls coming from somewhere.

There was no need to look around to see where it was coming from, though. The source immediately became clear as a group of silhouette knights showed themselves. This event had not been planned for the ceremony, which gave everyone pause.

The group of silhouette knights spread out as the graduates were bewildered.

The knights had formed two neat lines from the gates to the town square, standing ramrod straight while in that perfect order and facing each other to create an alley. Right after, the knights all drew their swords.

With their right hands holding their swords and left hands left on the scabbards, they raised the swords high into the air, pointing them slightly forward toward the one they were facing so that both sides crossed swords. Then, they silently withdrew their swords and held them in front of their faces. All the silhouette knights stopped in a pose that looked like they were praying to their swords. This happened to create a "road" between the silhouette knights.

The graduates were still bewildered when a voice came from one of the nearby silhouette knights.

"Congratulations on your graduation, underclassmen. We will also be leaving this place soon, but we wanted to send you all off as well."

To the graduates, it looked like they were in a hall lined with statues. The

sight was impressive, and this unexpected happenstance had the graduates flushing in happiness. They passed through the passage made by the giant steel knights; many would remember this year's graduation ceremony for years to come.

Of course, it needn't be said that the silhouette knights were operated by members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

The reason why they'd done this was walking slowly, bringing up the rear of the pack of graduates. Their captain, Ernie, was smiling from ear to ear and humming as he walked. Addy's smile matched Ernie's as she held his hand. A little behind them, Kid and Batson puffed up their chests excessively as they followed, cackling laughter on their lips.

Just like that, the stormy six years of these kids' school lives had come to a close.



After passing through the school gates, Ernie spun around. He could see, past the gates, the academy's expansive grounds stretching out in front of him.

So he sucked in a breath and shouted, putting a lot of feeling into his words, "Thank you so much for taking care of me all this time, Laihiala Knight Runner Academy! Well then...Order of the Silver Phoenix, withdraw!"

Having received an order from their captain, the knights acted quickly.

All at once, the silhouette knights started moving. That wasn't all, though; they were also followed by carriages and carts. The members of the order not in silhouette knights were riding in these carriages, and the carts carried the tools they used. Putting that all together, it was as if the entire order were moving.

That was *exactly* what they were doing, though.

Along with the captain's graduation, the Order of the Silver Phoenix formally separated from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and now was about to start their activities as an independent organization in earnest. Their new base would be Fort Orvesius, built on the outskirts of Laihiala Academy City. But, their activities would stretch across the entire country.

Today was the day they set off on their journey, in two senses of the word.



The Auvinier Mountain Range was a series of steep peaks that separated the Occidents in the west of the continent and Fremmevilla Kingdom in the continent's east.

Weaving through these dangerous mountains to connect the two sides was the Occident Road. This horizontal highway was made following the valleys to make it relatively easier to travel. It was quite well maintained for a road, but because the area itself was rather dangerous, any who traveled along the road would have a hard time anyway.

There was currently a group of carriages traveling down the Occident Road.

This group was being escorted by silhouette knights, so their numbers were actually fairly high. These weren't merchants; what they brought with them wasn't goods for sale, but supplies and materials they needed to sustain them on their journey. The carriage in the center was also larger than those around it.

While this carriage was ornamented rather simply, its solid, quality construction indicated that whoever was inside was of fairly high status.

The group made their way forward solemnly, but around the time they passed the most difficult part of their journey, a loud and gruff voice could be heard coming from inside, directed toward the driver.

"Hey, stop the carriage!"

The signal to stop was immediately raised, and the carriages stopped one after another. At the same time, the escorting silhouette knights took positions so that they could cover the entire caravan. Even though the stop was called on a selfish whim, everyone else adapted flawlessly. They had probably done this multiple times already in the course of their journey.

The carriage creaked as someone exiting it caused it to shift and wobble.

The man was dressed well, in clothes that used expensive fabrics liberally. However, it was regrettable that he was a little *too* physically gifted. He was almost two meters tall, and his body had clearly been trained heavily. The

words *wild* and *overpowering* fit him to a T. His neat dress was at odds with the impact his body made, creating a strange atmosphere right from the outset; it was tragic.

But the man himself didn't seem to care at all.

He sucked in a deep breath, filling his large lungs with air before slowly letting it all out. His built body expanded with the filling of his lungs, straining against the fabric of his totally clean, pure-white shirt, to the point that it even elicited a noise. Sadly, even clothes that had been custom-made for him were like candles in the wind, in the face of his overwhelming musculature.

"Mmm! The air of this great mountain range is perfectly clear! This just makes me realize how suffocating it was to stay in that cramped little castle."

The wind blowing across the peak ruffled the man's gloriously long hair. His blond locks were tinged with red, and they spread wide like a lion's mane.

"It really is, *Your Highness*. This one here is feeling better than usual too." Behind the man, one of his escorting silhouette knights mimicked taking a deep breath as well and manipulated the ether reactor to winding up its intake in concert to add to the illusion.

"Ha ha! Right?! Ohhh, look! My nostalgic homeland!" From his vantage point, a vast panorama of green spread out below, occasionally broken up by gaps that were probably roads. Down there lay the capital, Konkaanen, with Schreiber Castle at its center, while Laihiala Academy City lay far beyond, its small silhouette hazy.

"Ohhh, Fremmevilla seems wonderful. Well then, Your Highness...we're almost there, so let's hurry on to Konkaanen."

"Aw, don't be in such a hurry. This cramped carriage—not to mention the *boredom*—is a lot for me to put up with, you know! I need to stretch every once in a while, or I'll be all stiff and unable to move by the time we get there!"

The man was the opposite of timid as he stretched his entire body, causing a button to go flying off his chest with an audible snap. It almost sounded like the scream of a seamster or seamstress in the capital.

"Agh, these clothes may be expensive, but they're all so fragile. I know it was

a gift, but the trends of Kuscheperka don't suit me." The man—Fremmevilla's first prince Leotamus's second son, Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla—complained as he once again got into the carriage.

Part 6: Alfheim Disaster Arc

Chapter 24: Heir of the Lion

She was falling asleep. It *was* sleep, or possibly meditation, or simply deep thinking. It was how her people became one with the great flow.

Through sleep, she traveled. Her senses stretched infinitely, filling the entirety of the roots that crept through the earth as her shape spread. A vein or liquid, unlike the flow of blood, whispered in her ear, tickling it. She continued to spread, becoming her people, her ancestors, and the earth itself.

Her consciousness, as she drifted about this infinite overlapping, snagged on something. It was an anomaly, one that prevented her sleep. This small piece, divorced from the great flow, was grating. She could feel surely, instinctively, that whatever it was must not be allowed to exist.

The next moment, she opened her eyes. The woman, being old even among her people, spent most of her time sleeping in order to achieve assimilation. This awakening hadn't been planned, but she wasn't even slightly bewildered. She knew she needed to eliminate the obstacle to her great sleep.

"Is something wrong, *Elder*? Now is not your time to awaken."

Only the woman's eyes shifted as she looked over at one of her still-young brethren. White skin, soft blonde hair, slender frame, and most of all, protruding knifelike ears. Those were the features all of them shared.

"Something obstructing the *journey* has appeared." Though she directed her gaze the other's way, the woman remained otherwise perfectly still as she spoke. Her body did not move; it didn't need to. Eventually, her body would join those of her ancestors, so there wasn't much meaning to movement for her anymore. "Chittering malice has descended upon this forest. It must be excised."

"Understood. I will bring *riders* with me to do so."

No questions were asked; her compatriot simply left quickly.

The woman didn't return to sleeping. Unless the anomaly was eliminated, sleeping would not achieve the right meaning. That meant sleeping at the moment was meaningless.

She continued to wait. She waited for her prediction to come true. No matter how long this took, to her it would only be the blink of an eye.

That was the start of the calamity that would befall the "forest." Their "home."



It looked as if a battle had just taken place.

There were parts scattered all over which had been sliced, crushed, and were barely recognizable as having once been humanoid. There was an open hand reaching up to the sky, so ruined that it was barely in its original shape, and the eye inside a helmet had lost all its light. Rust had robbed the armor of the luster it'd once had, leaving it a dirty red brown as it assimilated into the field it had been left in.

The term for what these wrecks had been originally was "silhouette knight." Some were old, but there were also many newer wrecks present. The pile of wrecked machines was the embodiment of the place's history—a sign of the passage of time and also the result of it.

This scene was inside the first development workshop located in the headquarters of the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory in the fortress city of Dufort.

"Hmmm...I suppose we should clean up, at least a little."

While looking at the wrecks had taken up a not insignificant portion of the very large workshop—they were the result of trial and error—the chief of the workshop, Gaizka, heaved a sigh. As a result of not only the development of a new mass-produced model—which was a massive undertaking of its own—but also a sweeping technological revolution, trial and error had piled up to a tremendous degree, resulting in a large pile of rejected parts. The pile of wrecks had swelled to around twice its usual size, becoming too big to ignore. The chief

secretly made his determination; to clean up the pile once mass production started.

While worrying over the cleanup of his progress, Gaizka left the darkness of the workshop. After leaving, he flinched for a moment in the brightness of the sun, but soon enough his eyes became used to the light, and his smile deepened.

What lay before him was a troop of giants, all kneeling with their torso armors open to expose their cockpits.

These weren't Kaldatoahs, nor were they Kaldatoah Dashes. These were the crystallization of the national lab knightsmiths' efforts, the cutting edge of official mass-produced units: the Kardetolle.

These used the previous prototype, the Kaldatoah Dash, as a base, and incorporated adjustments that included compatibility with the Order of the Silver Phoenix's Option Works. Furthermore, it now used capacity-specialized crystal tissue, which had finally been made practical, to form its capacity frame and dramatically expand its mana pool. With that, the Tellestarle's chronic problem with operational time had been completely eradicated. The Kardetolle was at the cutting edge given how new model development went, and this was its final form.

These units had been left with their dull metal coloring, with only a rust-proofing coat, and it was in keeping with Fremmevilla Kingdom's custom of being sparse with its silhouette knight ornamentation. In exchange, its outer skin, which has had its ease of production and defensive might thoroughly researched, gave the silhouette knights a functional beauty.

The Kardetolles had already undergone enough testing, and could start mass production at any time. The nation's nobles had been notified, and invitations for education on the new model had been circulated to the nation's knightsmiths. Now, they would slowly transition the nation's silhouette knights with these models. The biggest job the knightsmiths of the national lab had taken on had reached a milestone.

Gaizka rotated his stiff neck and shoulders, lamenting the state of his body, which had recently stopped listening to him. He and the workshop he led had

dove into the development of the new unit with high spirits, but thanks to that, they had spent a long time pushing their bodies too hard. It was high time for him to rest, and he started planning his proposed rest days as he made his way toward where the director would be.



King Ambrosius and his family—in other words, the Fremmevilla royal family—almost all lived in Schreiber Castle. Behind the audience chamber, through a maze of passages and several rooms, was their private area.

This was the deepest part of the castle, referred to as the inner palace. The castle was made to rise the closer you got to the center, so that was also where the building's tallest tower could be found. The tower was a later addition, though. That was why durability had been prioritized during its construction, and it was lacking some showiness for being a place for royalty to live.

Thanks to those origins, this area had a lack of windows, and thus natural light, and needed expensive oil lamps to be lit day and night. The soft lighting matched the not-flashy-but-precisely-carved furniture inside, lending a calm atmosphere to the interior.

"I have sent a messenger to Martina of Kuscheperka requesting she allow Emris to return home."

There were two people within the room. One was King Ambrosius. The other was younger than the king, a thin man who looked like he might've been related.

"Hm, I haven't seen him in a while. How long ago did he leave for Kuscheperka?"

"Around three years now."

"I see... That reminds me, the last time I saw him was before I met *that*, wasn't it? It hasn't actually been that long, but it feels like forever ago." Ambrosius looked down at the glass in his hands, gently swirling the liquid around.

"But, Your Majesty...I do believe this was a little hasty."

“Stop with the ‘Your Majesty’ stuff, Leo. It’s not like anyone else is listening in a place like this.”

“I understand...*father*.” Ambrosius’s oldest son, first in the line of succession, Leotamus Haalce Fremmevilla, breathed out and released the tension in his brows.

“Don’t worry, I think this is a good time. I’ve been told that the new model the national lab and Order of the Silver Phoenix have collaborated on has finally been finished. By the time Emris returns, the announcements will have spread through the whole country. This will be a turning point, one big enough everyone will be able to feel the coming of a new age.”

Leotamus opened his mouth for a moment, wanting to argue back, but he quickly closed it. He had thought better because Ambrosius had an expression like he was enjoying himself, or was plotting something. He knew from experience that whenever his father got that look, nothing he said would matter. Also, Ambrosius had a point. There needed to be something that made such a big change easy to see.

“There’s only one thing left to do. Or rather, an agreement left to fulfill.”

“You mean...to that boy from the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Are you sure that it’s okay to bring that boy to *them*? It’s not just about their ‘laws’—they themselves are also pretty difficult.”

Though the two of them may look similar, they had opposing airs about them. It seemed Ambrosius’s son had not inherited his characteristic fortitude.

“Khwrfrh... Jeez, you’re too much of a worrywart.” Ambrosius had to bite down on a laugh; something Leotamus had said must have hit his funny bone.

“Of course, things being what they are... In fact, I think you’re the one being too careless, father.” On the other side, Leotamus had to hold back a sigh.

“You need to look at the bigger picture, Leo. If all you do is sweat the small stuff like that, you’ll invite hardship in the future, you know?”

“And I told you that you’re way too sloppy, father!”

This conversation between parent and child, which made it seem as if they

somehow got along both famously and terribly, continued on for a while. Though, no one was present in the deepest parts of the castle to hear.



A few days after that, a lone man walked down the passageways of Schreiber Castle.

“Being home really is calming! It’s like the cramped conditions I had to endure until yesterday were just a dream!”

It was Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla, fourth in line for the throne of Fremmevilla. He made a full-body stretch to express the freedom he was feeling, before continuing to walk happily with his long stride.

At the moment, he was wearing the highest class of armor, made of tough but hard-to-process monster leather. This type of armor was called black scale leather, and over it he wore a pitifully sized but sophisticated mantle. At his waist hung a plain sword, clearly chosen to be pointedly practical. The armor he wore had been custom-ordered to fit his huge frame, so while it was certainly expensive enough, it was still a little too rough to be worn by one of the royal family. The fact that it looked *right* on him was a feat of his personality.

At any rate, he was clearly in a good mood.

Up until the other day, he’d been studying abroad in another country, and so had to wear clothes that were fashionable there, no matter how stifling they were to him. And while the tailoring was first-rate, they did not fit his stout frame. Not to mention, they were nowhere near his tastes. Unfortunately for the royal side of him, he greatly preferred his clothes to be tough and easy to move around in; his tastes leaned extremely toward the functional. In that sense, the specially made armor he wore now was very light and easy to move in, and also extremely tough. It suited his tastes perfectly.

The feeling of wearing armor so well fitted to his body lifted his spirits as he crossed the castle with heavy steps. His smile was bright as he flung open the door to a certain room—the audience room—inside of which waited Ambrosius, the one who’d called him here; the rest of the royal family; and Duke Dixgard, along with the rest of the high-ranking nobles. Emris’s smile widened as he looked around the room.

“Yo, dad! Gramps! It’s been a while! I’m ba— Ggwhff!”

Before he could finish, Ambrosius had hurled his scepter and clocked Emris right in the skull with it, causing him to fall over, unconscious.

Seeing Emris clutch his head and cry out in pain, Ambrosius put hand to head. “Emris, you idiot...still as rough-spoken as ever, I see. Did you learn *nothing* abroad?!”

“My apologies, Your Majesty. I have warned him over and over, but...”

Emris’s father, Leotamus, seemed really embarrassed. His first son, Uther, was quiet and composed and had the dignity of a royal, but his second son was totally different. He had no idea who Emris took after, but rather than hearty or heroic, the man just came off as rough and crude, and he showed no signs of changing. They had sent him off to study in another country as a last resort.

“Given Martina’s personality, there’s no way they cut corners with his education... So even that was a bust,” Ambrosius muttered, thinking of his daughter, who had married into the Kuscheperkan royal family.

Martina was Leotamus’s little sister, which meant she was Emris’s aunt. As said before, she had married into the Kuscheperkan royal family, making them related to Fremmevilla’s royal family and thus strengthening ties between the two nations. After Emris had turned fifteen, she had been asked to take care of him, so he had spent the last three years studying abroad. However, judging by the present scene, it seemed nothing had come of it.

“Hmmm...I wonder who he took after...”

“You, Your Majesty.”

Ambrosius turned back, surprised at the answer that he hadn’t expected to come, and he came face-to-face with an impassive Cnut.

“It’s *you*, Your Majesty.”

Ambrosius averted his eyes, pretending that nothing had been said.

After a while, Emris stood back up with a nonchalant look on his face.

“Emris, tell me you have not been gallivanting around Kuscheperka with that attitude.”

“Ah, oh no. Of course I wouldn’t do anything like that. I totally... Even I know how to differentiate an appropriate time and place. I was just excited before because it’d been so long since I saw... Since I’d seen all of you.”

It seemed tricky for Emris to fix his speech, and doubtful gazes gathered to him from all around, but the subject of those gazes puffed out his chest, seemingly indifferent. In a rare show, Ambrosius raised the white flag.

“I suppose we should talk about that more later... Now then, as for the reason I have gathered you all here today...”

The mood in the room had relaxed thanks to the actions of the royal family’s problem child, but with one clearing of his throat, Ambrosius got things back on track.

“It has been thirty-six years since I succeeded the crown. It is about time; I am thinking of retiring. The next king will be my son Leotamus.”

Everyone in the room gulped. What Ambrosius had said hadn’t come out of nowhere. Everyone present had sort of expected it.

Fremmevilla’s kingship was hereditary, passed usually to the eldest son. Starting with the first son as first in line, the order extended to everyone else in the family, regardless of gender, from second in line onward. For a grandson of the current king, the eldest grandson would be placed in line, with the others following him.

The most common reason for conceding the throne was retirement due to old age. In the past, just after its founding, when the country had still been in chaos, the custom had been for the king to retire before he could age too much because a young and powerful leader was more desirable. Ambrosius had turned sixty this year, and was quite old by the standards of this world. In that sense, it was only natural for him to bring up succession.

However, while everyone present understood their decision, they weren’t quite satisfied with it—Ambrosius was, after all, still overflowing with vigor and spirit. He had been a very effective ruler, and their strength of feeling was proof that he was a great king.

Leotamus stepped forward, breaking the sentimental silence that had been

dragging on. He straightened his posture before turning to the man that was both his father and his king, and bowing deeply one last time. After he succeeded the crown, Leotamus would never bow again, even to his father. This was the last time, and he put the greatest respect he could into the bow before he straightened back up.

“I will accept the crown, Your Ma— I mean, father.”

“Good. Once you sit on the throne, make sure never to give way to carelessness, and to never stop working hard for the people. Now then, the official ceremony will be held later. For now, I would like all of you to support this country together with my son. I’m counting on you.”

Ambrosius swept his gaze across the room, and the assembled nobles all took to their knees and bowed their heads.



It was summer of the year 1280 O.C.

The next day, news of the “Lion King” Ambrosius’s retirement was spread to every corner of the country along with the news that Leotamus had ascended to the throne. Many citizens extolled the former king’s many deeds, and were full of hope for their next king. Around the same time, the new model of mass-produced silhouette knight began its spread throughout the country.

A new king and new knights. Fremmevilla Kingdom was experiencing the biggest change it had ever seen since its founding. Everyone hoped that an age of even greater stability and dreamlike progress was upon them.



A month had passed since the crowning of the new king. Around this time was when the various festivities surrounding a new coronation would end, and the kingdom would regain its usual calm.

Tracing the West Fremmevilla Highway east some ways from Laihiala Academy City, a forest could be found. This forest was unremarkable, with no real importance behind its location or geography.

But it was where Fort Orvesius was located.

The fort almost seemed worthless as a base, but in a sense, it was actually extremely important, and also extremely peculiar. The reason for this was not the location, but the knight order garrisoning it. Their name: the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Terrifyingly, the fortress had actually been built entirely for the knight order's captain, Ernie. After all, a location as half-baked as the one that was chosen had only been arrived at after taking into account Ernie's need to not be away from his family.

Inside Fort Orvesius, one could find the newest model of silhouette knight that had just been announced, Kardetolles, lined up. Setting aside the national lab, who was the manufacturer, there was no other knight order that could obtain so many Kardetolles at the moment. Part of the reason was that the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been involved in their development, but mostly they had been provided to Ernie as an investment.

A young dwarven man weaved his way through the line of Kardetolles in the parking area. He was looking around, seemingly searching for something, and when he saw the small boy buried in a mountain of papers, he raised his voice in a shout.

"Hey, so that's where you were, Ernesti! Aldirad's tuning is pretty much done. As for Guairelinde, say something to that fool, Dee. I can't even count how many times I thought he was *trying* to break the thing during tuning!"

Ernie had been spending his time until this drawing schematics, but now he looked up, responding to the voice of his head knightsmith, David.

"Hmm...I guess even Dee is having trouble with the Magius Jet Thruster. I heard some really loud crashing sounds earlier... It seems he's slowly getting more used to it, though, so could you let this pass?"

"This is happening because you put some weird ideas into his head. Jeez, one idiot who's willing to get sent flying by that thing is enough." The boss lamented while scratching at his head. Then, he turned around.

Ernie followed suit and looked over to where the boss was now facing. The two were looking at two Kardetolles that had been painted differently.

“I’ll admit he’s working hard, but it looks really bad for a company commander’s personal unit to be falling over like that all the time.”

Of the company commander units, one was the pure white knight belonging to the first company commander, Edgar C. Blanche, named Aldiradcumber. It had originally been one of the new cutting-edge Kardetolles, but its outside had been customized to resemble Earlcumber. It had also been modified somewhat to fit its knight runner Edgar’s tastes, but on the inside, it was basically factory standard. Kardetolles were naturally blessed with high performance and were easy to pilot, so most of Edgar’s demands had been met out of the box.

The other unit was the crimson knight belonging to the second company commander, Dietrich Künitz, named Guairelinde. It was also originally a Kardetolle, but as a result of Dietrich’s requests for modification, it had become an entirely different beast.

It was a total attack specialist, and didn’t bother with a Flexible Coat or even a shield. Furthermore, though the functionality was limited, it had mounted a Magius Jet Thruster. As a silhouette knight, it was quite a novel thing. As a machine, it was a very hard machine to get a knack for in terms of piloting, but it seemed Dietrich liked that.

The two personal machines were basically opposites of each other, and they directly reflected the dispositions of the companies they would lead. The first company was very defensive, while the second company was very aggressive. These two companies made up the very flavorful core of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

“Oh, also...the guys from the *third* are screaming again.”

“I should have left them to Kid and Addy, though?”

They were referring to the biggest change that had occurred after the Order of the Silver Phoenix had moved to Fort Orvesius and become a proper independent knight order: the addition of a third company.

The third company had an even more pronounced character than the other two. The reason for that was the silhouette knights they would be using. These machines were much larger than normal silhouette knights, and looked like a fusion of man and horse—they were piloting Tzenndrimbles, the proud centaur

knights of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

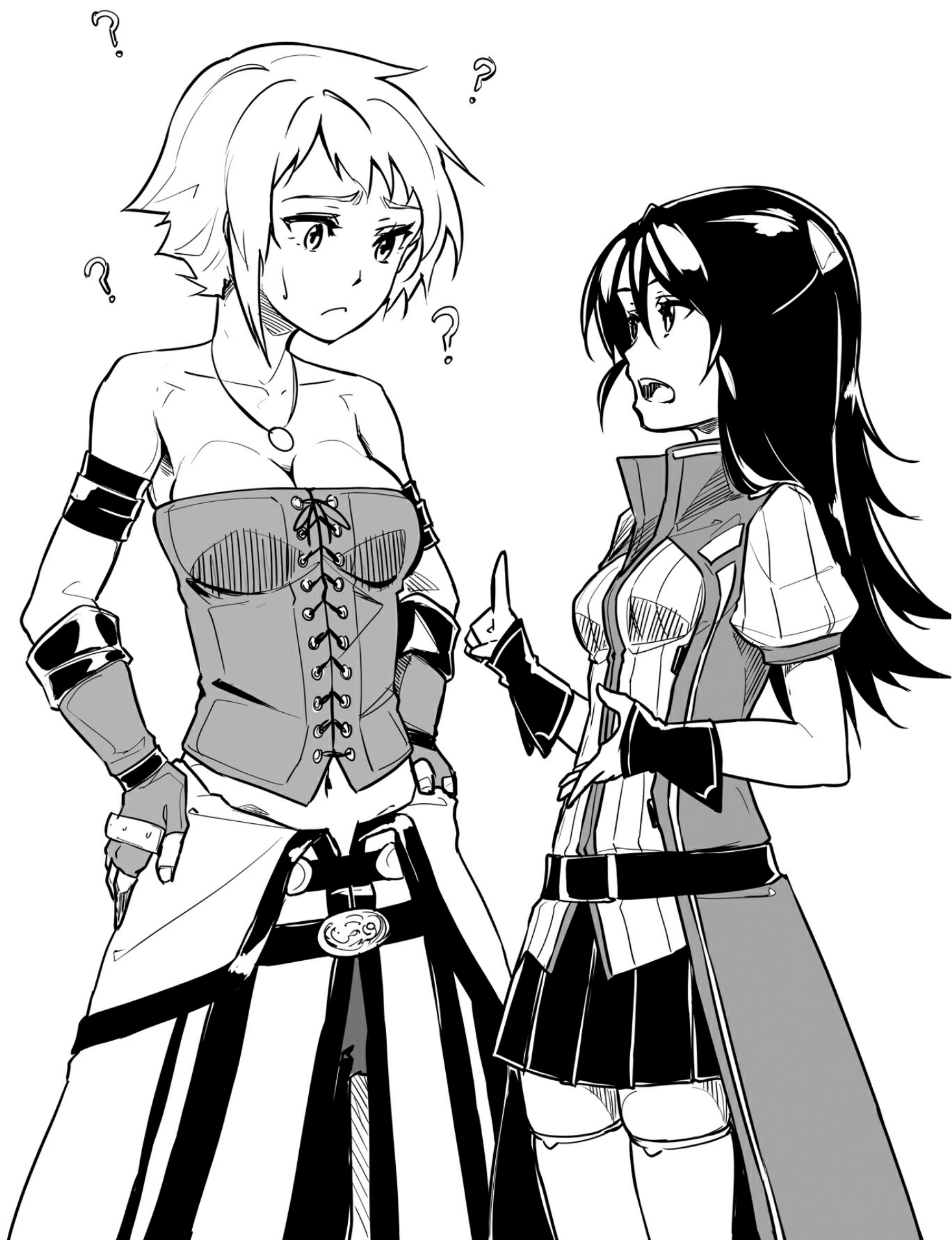
Tzenndrimbles were built based off of the centaur knight prototype, the Tzenndorg. They were once again single-seaters, and had also incorporated many other adjustments in their redesign to make them more palatable for mass production. However, while they had been adjusted for mass production, the fact that they were extremely expensive to produce, owing to requiring two ether reactors, hadn't changed. Because of that, there were very few of them made, and were even less widely spread than the Kardetolle. In the first place, while the Order of the Silver Phoenix used them, they had almost no foothold on the rest of the country.

"Just shut up and look at that," the boss pointed at the feet of a Tzenndrimble, which was taking up a lot of space due to its size.

There, Ernie could see a gathering of knight runners of the third company. They seemed to be arguing over something.

"Look, I get that when we're maneuvering, we need to use the Flexible Coat to aid us, but couldn't you teach us how to do that in more detail?"

"Um...well, when you turn, the machine leans to the side, right? You need to sync up with that and make a really solid, like, *Gah!* And then make it go back!"



“I’ve told you this over and over and over, Addy. That doesn’t work as an explanation, like, at all! First off, don’t use sound effects when you’re trying to teach someone!”

“Urghhh...help me, Ernie!”

The reason why use of the Tzenndrimble wasn’t spreading was partially because of its price and how strange it looked, but the biggest reason was because it differed so greatly from existing silhouette knights, and thus were extremely hard to control. While the two-seater Tzenndorg was out of the question, even after it became the Tzenndrimble, effort was being made to simplify the machine’s controls. The model’s magius engine was a special one, and its controls had been adjusted so that maneuvering it would feel just like riding a horse, which was as intuitive as it could be made. Furthermore, some parts of movement had been made automatic, and secretly that involved some really advanced concepts, but the results were currently being witnessed. In the Order of the Silver Phoenix, training for the third company required way more time than the other two. And even then, it was hard to say that was enough.

“You should go help her. Third Company Commander Helvi, I mean.”

The fact that the twins, who had been appointed substitute instructors, were awful at teaching others made the situation worse. While Ernie focused on logic, the two of them relied totally on feeling.

“This is training for them as well, as adjutants to the captain. They need to be able to repeat the things I teach them to other people.”

“I’m telling you, those two aren’t the only ones having a hard time.”

Helvi, who had been selected as the commander of the third company, had been struggling a lot recently over how to translate the twins’ explanations. It would’ve been nice if she could have found the answer herself, but unfortunately, being as experienced with the silhouette knights as she was, the centaur knight wasn’t something she could so easily tame.

“Yes...well, I’ll do something about it once I reach a good place to stop with what I’m working on at the moment.”

Seeing Ernie refuse to leave his schematics, the boss sighed.



After seeing off the boss, who went back to his maintenance work, Ernie took his mass of schematics and retreated to the deepest parts of the fortress. He passed through the closely packed silhouette knights into an area just past the workshop. There stood a single silhouette knight maintenance table. This table, shaped like a huge chair, contained something that was bizarre even by the standards of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, for which it could be said that peculiar things were already a matter of course.

It was shaped like a human, but because it was in the middle of being worked on, its outer skin had been removed. If someone with a specific type of knowledge were to look at the machine, they would immediately know that there were things wrong with it. A strange lump could be seen on its back, along with a large amount of metal tubes running all over its bare torso. Furthermore, most of these metal tubes were connected to its back, further emphasizing the distorted shape of its upper half.

Regardless of the fact that it had pretty much no outer skin, it still had armor around both shoulders and its waist. But that wasn't all; there was a crystal plate embedded inside with an Emblem Graph carved into it. It was a special version of the Magius Jet Thruster.

"I've messed with it a lot at this point... I suppose this is the limit."

Would anyone have been able to notice that the machine that now could've been described as a mass of metal entrails had once been a Kaldatoah?

What started all of this was the Magius Jet Thruster test a few years ago. The Kaldatoah that had been chosen as a test platform back then had been nearly destroyed by the test's failure, then repaired. After that, it had continued to be used as a test bed for the Magius Jet Thruster's later iterations. It had reached its limits and started to fall apart once, so it had been rebuilt as a Tellestarle, and had also appeared during the Tzenndorg's unveiling as the silhouette knight Ernie piloted.

Meanwhile, everyone had recognized the unit as Ernie's—and it had finally fallen into the role of the machine that got equipped with whatever the boy thought of. The other members of the order, who saw it continuously get

saddled with nonsensical functions and equipment, dubbed it the “Toybox.”

Even something with as much history as the Toybox had its limits, though.

“The mismatch of retrofits has placed a lot of burden on the entire thing. Thanks to that, the physical strengthening spell requires a lot more mana than usual... Even though I added an extra reactor, it’s not having much of an effect.”

The bizarre lump on the Toybox’s back was, in fact, an extra ether reactor.

Given how bad the fuel efficiency of the Magius Jet Thruster was, the subject of mana supply was a necessary problem to take on. The method of using multiple reactors had been proven possible by the Tzenndorg. Ernie had thought it would be fine to use it for the Toybox as well, but the result was, obviously, not good. The reason why this method had worked on the Tzenndorg was the size of its body, which gave it enough room for the extra burden. A standard humanoid shape was too small to fit two of them.

The Toybox could in fact be operated once its outer skin was put back on. However, its mana supply was unstable, and it wouldn’t output as much power as expected. Not only that, but it was hard to move because its balance was so bad, and even ignoring the problems with its mana efficiency, it performed at a far lower bar than the Tellestarle.

“As I thought, I’ll have to start from scratch and design something for it specifically.”

Ernie lined up the numerous schematics he had on the floor, comparing the drawings with the real thing. It was clear to him that existing designs would not do. In order to mount two reactors without harm and operate a Magius Jet Thruster, he needed to use all of the know-how he’d gained up until now to design something completely new.

“Yes...this will be a mech just for me...” Ernie muttered to himself as he opened his eyes wide.

In the back of his mind, he remembered what he had lost in the past. Those relics from a different world that he could no longer touch, no matter how far he reached.

“Since that’s the case, I can make what I didn’t have the chance to back

then...right?"

"Ernie! Errrniieeee!"

The voice of someone calling for Ernie reached his ears as he stood deep in thought. He gathered his wits and turned around to find Addy jogging toward him.

"Addy... You didn't...toss your work to the side and run away, did you?"

"Huh?! N-No! I've been doing my job—I mean, look! There's someone here for you, Ernie! I came to tell you that."

Addy clearly averted her eyes when asked about her job, but Ernie decided not to pursue that, instead opting to head toward the meeting room. Almost all of the space in Fort Orvesius was devoted to things involving silhouette knights, so all the other facilities were kept to a minimum. There were no meeting rooms for more important guests, so the single meeting room that existed pulled double duty.

At any rate, a single soldier was waiting for Ernie when he entered. The soldier was carrying a message, and after some formal greetings, the soldier got straight to business.

"I have a message for you, Captain Echevalier. You have been summoned to the royal castle."



The high-pitched sound of a bell rang out across the main street of Konkaanen, the capital of Fremmevilla Kingdom, as it was filled with a throng of people coming and going. The sound came from a person on a horse that was moving while ringing said bell.

The crowd parted to either side of the main street quickly when they heard the bell. The rider was there to announce the passing of a silhouette knight in the capital. The ten-meter-tall giant weapon needed a large enough avenue to walk through, one just like the main road the people were currently occupying. At the same time, though, streets tended to be used by citizens. So the custom was to herald the coming of such giant machines with riders just like what was currently happening.

Choosing to use the main street carried an added bonus of showing off the silhouette knight to the people.

A little after the precursor rider, a half-human half-horse silhouette knight—a Tzenndrimble—appeared. At first, the strange form of the machine had caused the people of the capital to tremble in fear, but now they were used to it. Because it was inside the capital, it did not hold any weapons, but it was sent on its way with waves from the citizens, as the centaur knight, exceptionally larger than any normal silhouette knight, went on its way with heavy footfalls.

The Tzenndrimble walked boldly through the main street until it reached Schreiber Castle, and it immediately proceeded into the newly established parking area specifically designated for the centaur knights. Once it was in its parking spot, the knight runner inside jumped out. Two people appeared from the cockpit: Ernie and Addy.

“Aaand we’re here!”

“We are, thank you. But Addy, I’m perfectly able to pilot the Tzenndrimble, so there really wasn’t any need for you to bring me here.”

“No. Tzenny is mine, so I won’t lend him to anyone—not even you, Ernie!”

“You say that, but you just wanted to ditch training the third company, didn’t you?”

“No— No way... Not at...all...?”

Addy averted her eyes in a very obvious show, causing Ernie to chuckle wryly.

“I’ll allow it just this once. Do your job properly from tomorrow on, okay?”

Once she heard that, Addy happily dove in for a hug, and Ernie had to drag her inside the castle, since she wouldn’t let go.



“Captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier. I have come responding to a summons.”

“Captain’s adjutant Adeltrude Alter, from the same order. I’ve also come!”

Having entered the castle, the two were shown to a different room from the

audience chamber. The one who had summoned him wasn't the current king, Leotamus, but the former one, Ambrosius.

"Indeed. Well met, Ernesti, Adeltrude. To start things off, feel free to make yourselves comfortable."

Ernie and Addy took to their seats after a bow. A shadow stretched over their heads once they did so. When the two looked up, they saw a tall man standing imposingly, his arms crossed. He was very well built and seemed full of vigor, which explained the sense of pressure and intimidation he was throwing about the entire room. His hair stuck out wildly at all angles, and he greatly resembled a lion. Immediately Ernie noticed that the man somewhat resembled the one sitting behind him, Ambrosius.

"So you're the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier. I've heard the rumors, but you really are tiny!"

"Yes, well...that is true, Your Highness Prince Emris."

Fremmevilla Kingdom's second prince, Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla, had a large smile form on his sun-kissed face. Ernie's small stature made it so if he wanted to lock eyes with Emris, he had to do way more than just look up; he had to basically bend backward just to get a good enough angle. Seeing that, Ambrosius adopted a wry smile.

"Just sit down, Emris. You're making it difficult to talk standing like that."

The former king Ambrosius had three children. Two were boys, and one was a girl. Among them, the eldest son, Leotamus, had succeeded the crown and was now the current king, and his sons (grandsons to Ambrosius) were now the princes in the direct line of succession. In other words, Emris, Leotamus's second son, was now also second in the line of succession. And yet, up until a mere month ago, he hadn't even been in the country.

"I have heard that you've been studying abroad in Kuschepërka Kingdom, Your Highness. So you returned."

"Of course I returned—my father was going to become king."

Ernie had, in fact, overheard that the man had returned from abroad. Before, there were many different extenuating circumstances with royal succession,

which meant he didn't have the chance to meet the man. So this was their first time seeing each other.

"Still, I never would have expected for a new silhouette knight to be made in the short time I was away! Not only that, but the thing is wonderful! What's it called, the Kardetolle?! I only gave it a short try, but it's powerful yet subtle, as expected of a knight from my country!"

"Yes, indeed! It was a collaborative effort between my Order of the Silver Phoenix and the national lab!"

"Thought so—well done!"

Ernie gave a strangely proud response, which had Emris suddenly slapping his thigh.

"That reminds me. Speaking of new, there was that horse thing too! That one's interesting; I like it! Lend one to me next time. I want to try taking it for a ride."

"Whaaat?! Uhh, errr... Ah, Tzeny is, well, really hard to pilot, so I can't lend them out so casually, um..."

"I'll figure it out once I get to trying it. Most horses work the same way; it's all about spirit!"

"Uhhh..."

"It's not really the same as a horse... I don't think it's something you can solve with just spirit..."

For some reason, Ambrosius was not actively participating in the conversation, so for the past while Emris had been carrying it by himself. It didn't seem like he was warmly watching over his grandson; rather, it was as if he were watching to see how Ernie would react to Emris, who was overflowing with enthusiasm. As proof of this, Ambrosius's expression was easy, and it looked as if he was having a lot of fun. In a weird sort of way. While making sure to keep the former king in his peripheral vision, Ernie responded appropriately to whatever Emris was talking about. Meanwhile, Addy was desperate not to let her Tzenndrimble get taken away, and Emris seemed to be a never-ending font of enthusiastic chatter.

“Leaving that aside, I heard I was called here today for a specific purpose?” Ernie cut straight to the heart of the matter, once he saw a chance. If he went with the flow, Emris seemed like he would have gone on talking forever.

“Whoops. Yeah, you’re right. The reason I called you here is to ask you to make me a personal silhouette knight.” Ambrosius finally broached the main topic of this meeting, which had Ernie tilting his head, puzzled.

“But don’t you already have a wonderful silhouette knight in the Reides Ol Veera?”

“You’re a bit mistaken there. That is the king’s unit. Because it belongs to the king, as soon as I ceded the throne to Leotamus, I became unable to take it out on a whim. So I need to procure a new one, which is how I got the idea of asking you to make one for me.” Ambrosius switched to muttering under his breath after that, saying that retirement was boring.

Hearing that, Ernie secretly wanted to ask him how he planned to liven up his retirement, then, but he managed to just barely stop himself from following through on the urge.

“I understand. If that’s the case, I’ll do my best.”

“Make one for me too, while you’re at it! It’s not fair that only gramps gets one.”

“Hmm...what do you think, Ernesti? Can you prepare two?”

“As you will. One or two doesn’t make much difference. So, what kind of machine would you like? I will try to fulfill your desires as much as possible.”

Ambrosius opened his mouth to answer, but Emris beat him to the punch. He slammed his hands at the armrests of his chair to propel him to a standing position.

“First off, it must have POWER!” he declared, his voice full of the strength he requested.

Ernie took a small notepad from a waist pouch, as well as a pen and ink. They were all of portable size so he could jot down any ideas he thought of no matter where he was. Emris continued counting off requirements as the sound of

Ernie's pen scratching on paper filled the room.

"And next most important is more POWER!"

At this point, Ernie was still taking it seriously and nodding along while taking notes.

"Furthermore, the last thing I need is more POWWERRRRRR!!!"

In the end, Ernie had just written "muscles for brains" in large letters. He then turned the page and asked, "Yes, of course, I understand perfectly well what you want. Ah, and do you have any preferences for how it looks?"

"Let's see...something strong looking... Like that *thing*, err, something super strong like gramps's Lion, something I can use to give myself a name!"

Ernie went back and circled his entry on the previous page. Then he circled it again. The man was overflowing with strength.

"I'll leave all the decisions to you. As long as it isn't too imbalanced, you can do whatever you want."

"Understood. I will prepare silhouette knights that fit you two perfectly, former king, Your Highness."

Addy, who had been listening beside her childhood friend, had a face on like she wanted to ask what Emris meant with all of that, but she barely managed to stop herself. However, Ernie, having received such a wonderful order, was all smiles; he seemed to be having fun.



About a month after that exchange, a Tzenndrimble towing a cart appeared in the capital. The cart's luggage was covered in a cloth, obscuring two giants. They were Ambrosius's and Emris's personal units-to-be.

As soon as they were notified of the arrival, Emris showed himself immediately, as he had been waiting very impatiently, and even Ambrosius seemed unable to hide his intense interest as he followed after his grandson. They weren't the only ones to appear either. Some Royal Guards, who had been guarding Schreiber Castle, showed up interested in what was in the cart.

Under the rapt gaze of all those people, the cloth covering the cart was

removed. The two silhouette knights were revealed, and as soon as they were exposed to the light of the sun, they spread their brilliant shine for all to see.

“You really...had fun, didn’t you, Ernesti?” Ambrosius muttered, trying to fight down a laugh. As his statement implied, the two silhouette knights were truly bombastic in design.

One had the visage of a lion. The entire torso including the chest hatch was formed into a relief of a lion’s face. The edges of the armor seemed to be shaped like its mane, as it twisted like flowing hair. Furthermore, the entire thing was finished in gold, so it stood out a lot.

The other had the visage of a tiger. This one’s torso had a tiger face relief. Everything else was rather plain, but it was finished in silver with black stripes, so it stood out just as much as the gold silhouette knight next to it.

Confronted by the striking appearances of the two machines, the crowd was left speechless. Beside them, Ernie seemed satisfied as he started his tour of the silhouette knights’ functions with exaggerated motions.

“What do you think, Your Majesty, Your Highness Prince Emris? This is the Goldleo and the Silvatiger. I have followed your wishes, and both units place a special emphasis on power. Furthermore, I have made their defenses high as well.”

For the past while, Emris had been as still as a statue, his mouth agape.

Meanwhile, Ambrosius was placidly stroking his beard as he asked, “I see. I understand power, as my fool of a grandson Emris has been howling about it, but why defense?”

“That was my personal decision... The two of you are important people, after all.”

“That makes sense. Good; Reides was also rather geared toward defense. That is just how it is for leaders, it seems.”

While Ambrosius nodded, satisfied, Emris belatedly regained his senses. The younger man raised his arms and howled at the two beastly machines.

“WOARGH! This is even better than I expected! Ha ha ha, this is good, silver

captain! I like it!”

Emris was like a kid in a candy shop, a smile stretched wide across his face as he pointed at one of the machines. At the same time, Ambrosius compared both units and nodded before pointing at one as well.

“Gramps, Goldleo is...”

“Well then, Emris, I will be taking this Goldleo...”

Both of them stopped on the spot and looked at each other. A tense silence fell between the two.

“Gramps...you should think of your age a little. A silhouette knight this flashy doesn’t suit you at all.”

“What’re you saying, Emris? You lack experience; you’re way too green to try and make yourself out like a lion. Especially since I was once called the Lion King, that one was made for me.”

Invisible sparks ran between the two. Neither side was willing to back down, and the strength of their spirits made the very air seem to waver. Seeing the pair unexpectedly glare at each other seriously, the Royal Guards that formed the crowd around them hesitated, lost as to what they should do. They couldn’t be relied on to arbitrate.

“I’ve got a good idea, gramps. Why don’t we have a spar? I’ll show you what I learned on the other side of the mountains.”

“Oho, so you plan to use your strength to wrest it away from me? That’s the spirit! We’re going to the training grounds—someone bring some swords!”

No one stopped them as the two charged toward the training grounds with incredible speed. Ernie—with a dazed expression on his face—and the Royal Guards were left behind.

“I’ve heard that His Highness resembled Ambrosius. But...that’s way more than just ‘resembling.’”

There was no doubt that everyone there shared the same opinion.



A while later, in the Royal Guards' training grounds that were annexed to the castle:

A hot wind blew through the area, across the reddish-brown ground. Two Kardetolles faced off against each other, weapons in hand.

"Why are they in silhouette knights, after shouting for someone to bring them swords?"

Of course, the two silhouette knights were being piloted by Ambrosius and Emris. News that the former king and prince were having a mock battle spread through the castle like wildfire, and at some point things had gone out of hand, and now they were doing so in silhouette knights. It happened so fast that Ernie had no idea what was going on.

"Sorry, gramps...I'm not good at holding back."

"Oh, shut it. You talk so much about what I should and should not do, but you still take your life into your own hands all the time... I'll finish you off myself—be ready!"

"Your former majesty...I think you're starting to forget the original purpose of this..." Strangely, Ernie sounded very nonchalant, and it didn't seem like what he said reached the two at all, as the blood had rushed to their heads.

Silhouette knights were machines, but surprisingly they expressed the emotions of their knight runners really well. Even without seeing the expressions of the two as they sat in their cockpits, watching both machines gesture smoothly accompanied by the sounds of mechanical muscles flexing, one could tell they were rather cheerfully raging at each other. By the time the noise they made reached its peak, a trumpet sounded throughout the training area. It was the starting signal, and both machines ran forth.

It was a fight between a young lion climbing up the steps of growth, and a somewhat over-the-hill old lion who sported polished skills. Their fighting styles could be said to be the complete opposite.

Emris used momentum and strength as weapons, taking a bold stance as he slashed at his opponent head-on. Ambrosius's skills were precise; sometimes he turned blows aside and sometimes he pushed right back, but he never gave any

ground as he fought back. The footwork of the giants shook the ground, and every time their metal weapons clashed, it rang in people's ears. Neither side was holding anything back; this was an all-out fight.

While both were lions, they fought differently. At first, the battle seemed even, but soon enough the situation started to tilt in Ambrosius's favor. The weapon Ambrosius had chosen was a spear. It was longer than a silhouette knight was tall, and the head had been blunted for training purposes. It was said that opposing a sword with a spear on foot required the spear user to have thrice the skill of their opponent. These basic theories also applied to silhouette knights, as they were essentially an extension of human movement. Through a swift combination of footwork, arm movement, and spear positioning, Ambrosius's machine freely controlled the range of the spear. Emris's unit, using a sword, couldn't help but be toyed with.

Once again, Emris's unit tried to conquer the space between them and make an attack, but was repelled by a sweep from the spear's haft. There was no mercy, as the spear came thrusting in at Emris's unit in the small opening when its stance was unstable. Emris's machine twisted so that the thrust hit a section with thicker armor, and thus bounced off. However, the recoil from that impact still allowed Ambrosius's unit to swiftly withdraw, creating more space between them, sealing off any chance Emris's unit had to retaliate. Ambrosius's machine immediately spun its spear around, throwing out a storm of merciless thrusts. The weight of attacks was overpowering, as if Emris's machine were facing an entire infantry line of spears, and it was forced into a defensive battle.

"I knew it, gramps! You're as strong as ever!"

"This is only natural for those who would stand above others!"

"No, I don't think that's true." Ernie didn't think that his voice would reach the two, as he was watching from some distance away, but he couldn't help but retort anyway. "Still, the former king's spearmanship is a force to be reckoned with. I have to wonder, is he really sixty years old?"

"His former majesty was the same back when he was a general. How should I put it... He liked to lead from the front. I heard he got his start mingling with the common soldiers and using his spear, but...when I think about how he is still

going strong at his age, I have to wonder what he was like back in his prime.”

“I suppose he was unrivaled in the country, then.”

Other than Ernie, the spectator seating was packed with Royal Guards. They couldn't help but groan while watching the fierceness of the mock battle. Even though the kingdom was famed as a country of knights, that didn't mean their royalty needed to be strong as well; still, the two combatants' strengths were far above a normal knight's. That was especially true from Ambrosius, whose martial skill was so famous in the past he had been known throughout the country as the Lion King; the fact that he retained so much power in his old age was nothing less than astounding.

Furthermore, his grandson who had inherited his blood was challenging the former king, making use of all the strength overflowing from his body by changing it into momentum. His bold fighting style inspired deep feelings of respect in the people watching him.

While the Royal Guards were admiring the martial skill of the combatants, the mock battle had intensified to white-hot temperatures. Ambrosius's unit had seized a vantage on the flow of battle, making sure that Emris's unit couldn't attack as it pleased. Emris wasn't weak, but the matchup between the weapons they were using and their difference in age were showing.

“You move pretty well, but the way you approach is still soft. Not a single swing of your blade will reach me.”

“You're one to talk, gramps! I can hear how hard you're breathing! What's wrong, can't win against your age?!”

“You sure can bark! But look, you've stopped paying attention to your feet!” Out of nowhere, Ambrosius's machine deployed its back weapons and shot a round. Though the weapons were weakened since they were for training, the impact was still enough to make Emris's unit flinch back and weaken its footing. That was when Ambrosius's unit mercilessly launched a follow-up attack with its spear.

“I'm not done yet!!!” Emris could instinctively tell that he couldn't dodge the blow. So he ordered his machine to take a surprising action. Using its upset balance, Emris's unit forcefully turned its forward fall into a shoulder tackle.

This allowed it to slip past the spearhead, the metal point sending sparks flying as it scraped against the surface of the silhouette knight's armor, and Emris's unit finally managed to get on the inside of the spear's range. Furthermore, Emris's unit grabbed a solid hold of the spear it just avoided. The spear was capable of so much because it had been free to be swung however it needed. So Emris just needed to stop it from doing so.

"How about this?!"

"I told you—"

With that, Emris's machine managed to get in sword range, where it had the advantage—Emris probably wasn't the only one who'd thought of that. As if to blow all those expectations away, Ambrosius's unit—without any hesitation—*let go of its spear*. What was more, having been freed of its equipment, it moved even farther forward, inside of sword range. Having had his maneuver turned around on him, Emris felt shock, which dulled his decision-making for a moment.

In that instant, Ambrosius's machine sank low. It looked like it was trying to slide across the floor, but it was actually making a lightning-fast attack—an attempt to sweep the legs of Emris's silhouette knight. Emris's unit actually had its options restricted now that it was holding on to an extra spear, so it couldn't react in time, and was easily knocked to the floor.

"—that you've stopped paying attention to your feet."

Ambrosius's unit seized the opportunity that presented itself while Emris's machine fell to the floor, and reclaimed its spear.

Once again, it struck out with a storm of thrusts. Emris's unit forced itself into a roll to dodge the attacks before wildly firing its back weapons. The desperate spellfire was calmly turned aside by Ambrosius's machine. Emris's machine took that opening to create some distance and slowly stand back up. Now, they were back to square one.

"Oh wow, you're amazing, gramps. I love it!" Emris's silhouette knight's outer skin was damaged in places, and was also bent somewhat from its fall and subsequent rolling. The back weapons were still usable, but because of the impact of the roll, the zero of the reticle was off. The one silver lining was that it

hadn't taken any damage to its crystal tissue. Even though it looked a little worse for wear, Emris's unit was still perfectly able to fight. Emris checked the feedback from his control yokes and smiled.

"Good, good. This really is a nice machine. I can still...have fun!"

Though their motivations had shifted away from the original goal of the fight, Emris's will to fight hadn't waned at all. In fact, it could've been said that he was even more fired up than before. Feeling Emris's fighting spirit through his machine, Ambrosius adopted a ferocious smile from inside his cockpit.

"Hm, it seems your determination is first-rate, at least. But if you can't turn that into results, it doesn't mean anything."

After hearing that come out of his opponent's megaphone, Emris forced his frenetically rising excitement down, calming himself. Now wasn't the time to respond to taunts. He needed to conquer Ambrosius's spear, or he had no chance to win. The advantage of the spear wasn't only reach—it also allowed its wielder to react freely whenever he was within that reach. While continuing the staring contest, Emris continued to spin his mind's wheels. Eventually, he reached a decision.

"Aaggh, I quit! I just quit! Thinking isn't getting me anywhere. The answer lies in my sword!"

It was a swift decision; he felt that the answer lay in action instead of thought. That was the kind of man Emris was. Ambrosius had expected his grandson to do exactly that, and when his opponent sprang into action, he smiled wryly in secret, unbeknownst to Emris. Meanwhile, Emris's unit charged recklessly, and it was looking to the spectators like this would just be a repeat of the previous exchange. Ambrosius's almost protean-seeming spearmanship would surely push Emris back; everyone could see the same result on the horizon.

However, reality betrayed those expectations.

Ambrosius's unit thrust with its spear in an attempt to stop Emris's unit's advance. Emris's machine was still far out of sword range, giving the spear free rein to one-sidedly attack. Emris's unit wasn't content with that, though, so it held its sword in both hands and swung. The next instant, sparks flew and a shrill noise could be heard all throughout the training grounds as the sound of

their clash reverberated. Of course, Emris's machine was still out of range to strike at its opponent with its sword. What it had aimed at was the spear—Ambrosius's machine's weapon. The sword swing pushed the spear's point out of the way. With the spear diverted far to the side, Emris's unit was able to start sliding into range. Ambrosius reacted, turning the long-handled weapon around with unbelievable speed and thrusting the butt at Emris's machine. While advancing, though, Emris's unit once again slapped the spear to the side. It single-mindedly, persistently, unceasingly continued to advance as it swept the spear away.

If the advantage of a spear lay in its reach, the sword's advantage lay in its flexibility. The swings made by Emris's unit were compact, sharp, and most of all fast. Emris used his unimaginable simplemindedness and honesty to continue advancing. At that time, he had absolutely nothing else on his mind. In a sense, his wholehearted advance that didn't mind appearances was starting to pressure even the likes of Ambrosius.

“Wooooaarrghhh!!!”

“Nwhoa?!”

At this point, the weapon Emris's silhouette knight was using wasn't its sword, but its entire body. Emris's unit barrelled into its opponent, which Ambrosius's unit had to take head-on. Emris's unit held its sword in both hands as it swung down, and Ambrosius's unit blocked the strike with the haft of its spear. Both sides ramped up the output of their ether reactors, the sounds of air intake winding up into a roar. Crystal tissue flexed, groaning and creaking as it did, and both combatants converted large amounts of mana into power in an attempt to push their opponents' attack even a little further.

In the case of two completely identical silhouette knights getting locked into a competition of strength, what determined the winner? It was the spirit of the knight runner. The one with less drive, even if only by a little, would find themselves pushed back, ultimately resulting in a loss of the clash. Both sides concentrated their strength on one point, with both machines trying to squeeze as much power out as possible to outdo their opponent. Pairs of legs braced on the ground and dug into it.

“Wooarrrrraaaaaggghhhhh!” Emris howled and stepped forward with all his might. The strength that had pooled in between both sides was released explosively—and in the next instant...

A spear flew through the air.

As a result of both sides trying to turn the other’s weapon aside, Ambrosius’s machine had lost. Emris’s unit held its sword up to the throat of Ambrosius’s unit, now empty-handed. The battle had been decided.

“Mm, well done. It seems you have trained well.”

“Did you...hold back just now, gramps?” What spilled from Emris’s mouth was more assertion than question. Because he had directly clashed weapons with the man, he knew with his whole being that his grandfather wasn’t someone he could win against so easily. It was only natural that he immediately came to the conclusion that Ambrosius had gone easy on him.

“You fool, as if I need to hold back against someone like you... But I *have* grown old; to think I was pushed back like that. Well, it’s fine. You showed the results of your training—take whatever silhouette knight you please.”

With that, Ambrosius’s machine turned around. Could he even be called a loser? There was no shade of gloom in the man’s dignified manner. Silently, Emris’s machine made a deep bow to his opponent’s back. Immediately after, the Royal Guards in the vicinity all fixed their postures and saw the man off with salutes.

Having left the training grounds behind, Ambrosius disembarked the Kardetolle while trying to tease out the stiffness he was feeling all over.

“My word, my shoulders are so stiff. It *was* my first match in a long while. I really am getting dull, it seems I’ll need to train myself up again. Still, that idiot Emris...coming at an old man full force like that. Where did he get that foolish straightforwardness from, I wonder?”

“Definitely from you, your former majesty.”

“You too? Now then, Ernesti...I assume that even though I gave him the Goldleo, the Silvatiger is just as powerful, yes?”

“There was never any need to worry. In fact, if I’m to be honest, they’re exactly the same outside of the appearance.”

“That’s a relief,” Ambrosius said before letting out a cackling laugh. Watching the man’s back get farther and farther away, Ernie let out a rare sigh.



“Ooohh...”

With the fight over, Emris also left the training grounds, and now he was standing before his prize: Goldleo. The machine, which had the relief of a beast on its front, combined flashiness, power, and wildness in one while still maintaining a sense of refinement. Furthermore, because the armor was made thicker to enhance defense, the sense of weight lent a stronger presence to the silhouette knight.

“Good...very good...”

On top of that, Goldleo wasn’t just a silhouette knight to Emris; it was one he had won from his grandfather Ambrosius. It was like proof of his name. Thinking of that blew away all of the exhaustion in Emris’s frame and filled him with power.

“I won you off of gramps; I can’t afford to let you look lame. I’m getting fired up!”

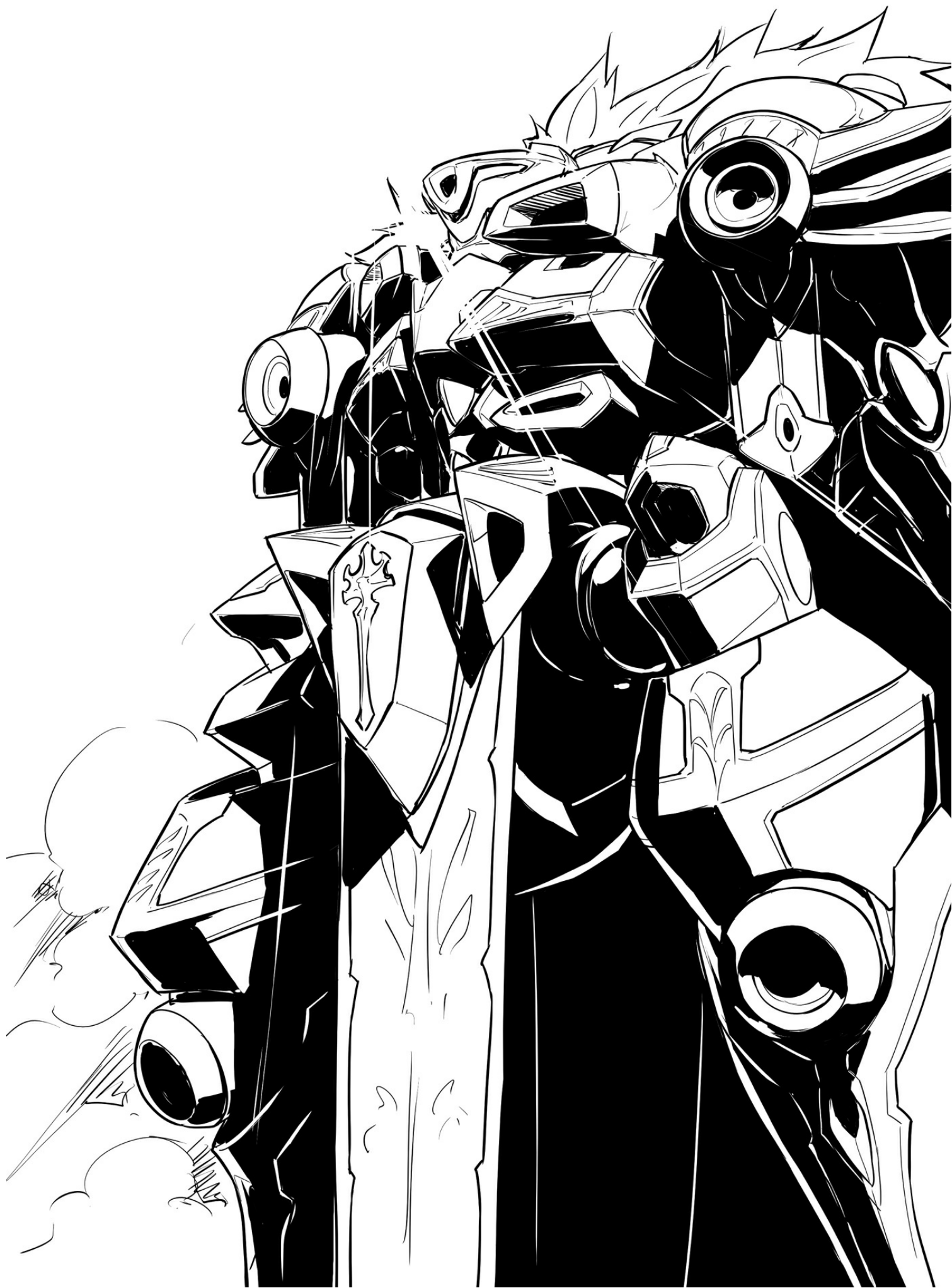
Did the former king predict this? Did he know that whether he won or lost, it would be for Emris’s benefit? Ernie wondered as he watched Emris shiver with emotion.

Though they hadn’t talked much, from what Ernie could see, Emris had an extremely straightforward disposition. So straightforward, it would probably be to his detriment as part of the royal family. On top of that, no matter what excuses he made, all of his words and actions stemmed from the respect he had for Ambrosius. If someone like that managed to win something from the one he respected so much...

His Highness’s own pride will cause him to shape up, huh? I don’t know if it’ll go as well as he thinks, but... At any rate, I’m just happy that he likes his silhouette knight. Ernie nodded to himself as he quietly left. Though all the fuss

was unexpected, he had in fact managed to achieve his goal of handing over the personal units.

Having won a personal silhouette knight, Emris would now show up at Fort Orvesius from time to time in his Goldleo, but that's a story for another time.



Chapter 25: Omens of Disaster

In the southwest of the kingdom of Fremmevilla, on a patch of land at the foot of the Auvinier Mountains, existed a strange forest. Those who lived in this place called the forest, “Gigantes Garden.”

The name came from the huge trees that made up most of the trees in the forest, a species that on average grew to over a hundred meters tall, the Gigantifir.

These enormous trees, which seemed like they pierced the heavens, created a thick and lively canopy. They broke up the sunlight, so the floor of the forest was dim even at noon.

Furthermore, Gigantifirs tended to spread their roots across a wide area in order to support their enormous trunks. The forest floor was dominated by a bed of thick, strong roots. This, coupled with the fact that sunlight was blocked by the canopy almost everywhere, made it so almost no other vegetation could grow at all. In this forest, nothing could survive without the Gigantifir’s permission.

“Everything looks good... The forest’s as peaceful as ever today, jeez.”

A platoon—three units—of Kaldiarias proceeded through this forest, wary of what was going on around them. Given how widely Gigantifirs spread their roots, they physically could not grow too close together. There was enough space between the trees that a silhouette knight could easily pass between, and even though it was dim underneath the tree cover, their sight was essentially unhindered.

“Oh, don’t be like that. Peace is for the best.”

The platoon stopped and looked around, but no matter how much they searched, nothing in the forest moved; all they could see were the gigantic, still trees, looking almost like tombstones. The longer they stayed in this seemingly empty forest, the air seemed to stagnate, and started to feel somehow sullied.

“Then how long do we have to keep patrolling like this?”

Once again, the platoon started walking. The Gigantifir roots didn't budge even while taking the weight of a silhouette knight, but as they walked, the minute vibrations of their passing was communicated from the roots into the ground, spreading throughout the forest like a ripple.

“I mean, we're here because of what the Elder said after her sleep was interrupted. Even if it's not close, something definitely happened. That's why we Alvans have to play sentry.” A wry chuckle could be heard coming out of the Kaldiaria's megaphone.

Zercuse, the person in charge of this platoon of Alvans, shrugged at the words of the one next to him, Tsuva.

Some time had passed since they started their patrol. It was only natural to become discontent after going through the boredom of so much unchanging scenery. Because Zercuse understood that, he didn't stop Tsuva's complaining.

“That doesn't mean we have to be the ones to guard Althusser, our ravine stronghold, though...”

“Wait. There's something ahead of us to our right.”

Tsuva was about to continue grouching, but the third member of their platoon who had stayed silent up until now, Yunfu, interrupted him.

“I see...the idle chatter stops now. I'm going up ahead. Tsuva, take the flank. Yunfu, our rear.” Instantly, Zercuse pulled it together and gave his orders at lightning speed before advancing.

Tsuva and Yunfu also spurred their machines on. They were wary as they advanced, but it didn't take long for them to reach the “abnormality” that Yunfu had found.

“What's this, a rock? No, it's not...but it's on top of a root? It's got to be mimicry.”

There was a large piled mass that looked like it was sticking out of the ground, only it wasn't. At first glance, it looked like a boulder, but the fact that it was on top of a Gigantifir root ruled that out. It was something large enough to require

a silhouette knight to pick up mimicking a boulder. With that much clear, it was easy to guess what it was.

Zercuse immediately saw through the monster. “I see, it’s a shell. Which means it’s a shellcase. You don’t see many of those in Gigantes Forest. Is it a stray that wandered in?” He furrowed his brows.

This forest, made of the special species called Gigantifir, also supported rather unique fauna. As mentioned before, Gigantifirs did not allow other plant life to exist alongside them. However, they were also far too tough to serve as food for other life-forms. As a result, the only things capable of surviving in this forest were a small subsection of special bugs. Meanwhile, the shellcases were carnivorous. There was only a single one of them here, in a place that had no food for it. Not to mention, their kind *swarmed*. It was extremely unnatural.

“What do we do, Zercuse? If it’s just a stray, we could just leave it alone,” Tsuva opined from behind their leader.

Zercuse grunted a vague reply.

“Over there, Zercuse.”

Yunfu’s unit was watching their back, but at some point he’d come forward. His unit slowly raised its arm. Zercuse and Tsuva looked to where their platoonmate was pointing, and were immediately lost for words. They had noticed that the shellcase wasn’t alone. There were other boulders all around them.

“No way... There are so many. This is bad—it’s not a stray! This is a swarm, and not only that...”

A clacking sound could then be heard. It was the sound of hard carapace scraping against more hard carapace, and it was almost like a groan. After the first, others followed like a flood.

Of course, the ones making the sounds were the rocklike monsters all around them.

“Just like us, they’re here on reconnaissance! Tsuva, Yunfu—it’s time to retreat. There’s no doubt now; there’s a huge main swarm somewhere near!”

The rocklike shells slowly raised. Legs too thin for the shell's size appeared, and then a body crawled out of the shell.

“Congrats, Yunfu, you hit the jackpot! We need to report this to Althusser no matter what. I mean, a shellcase swarm? As things stand...”

The eyes of the shellcases that started moving around them spun around, putting the Alvans platoon squarely in their sights. The tree roots creaked as the monsters approached their enemies.

“Gigantes Garden will become like a paradise to them. When it does, there's no doubt harm will come to Alfheim!”

The Alvans platoon was already running at full tilt. They never even considered fighting; reporting this anomaly was the highest priority. Immediately afterward, the sound of the mass of monsters coming alive was loud enough to erase even the noisy sounds of running Kaldiarias.

The quiet forest instantly fell to chaos.



It was the year 1280 O.C.

The piercing sunlight softened as the heat of the day left. The season was turning to autumn, and in this time, though it may be a bit too dangerous to be called a remnant souvenir of the departing summer, a single horse rider arrived in the capital, Konkaanen.

King Leotamus received the rider's report in the middle of one of his regularly scheduled meetings with the country's nobles.

The meeting's purpose was to report on the activities of monsters in every region, and discuss budgets and martial strength available to nobles in each region. This was especially necessary now that the new mass-produced model, the Kardetolle, was being disseminated throughout the country; the discussion on how the new models should be spread had stymied the meeting more than once.

Up until then, the meeting had been relatively calm, but then a messenger had appeared out of nowhere. The messenger made it seem like a great

emergency, and so was allowed to act with some impropriety.

Still, seeing how panicked the messenger was, Leotamus scrunched his face; he had a bad feeling all of a sudden. Then, after he read the paper the messenger had handed to him, his expression froze. When he opened the message, the top line read, “Designated Top Secret, First Class.” Out of those words, “Designated Top Secret” was reserved only for problems within the country, ones that were highly classified. Among that classification, first class was only for the most urgent emergencies, or the most dangerous of problems. Either way, whatever was on the paper was definitely nothing good.

The rest of the message did not disappoint: Alfheim was in imminent crisis. Leotamus read on and forgot about who he was with as he immediately got up from his seat.

Having excused himself from the meeting, Leotamus immediately called for his father, the former king Ambrosius. The words on the page referred to the capital in the forest, which was an extremely high-level secret. The king couldn’t afford to consult just anyone.

As soon as everyone else was shooed away and they were the only ones in the room, Ambrosius said, “There could not be a more troublesome piece of news.”

Leotamus hunched over and clutched at his head. “According to the report, the threat approaching Alfheim is a swarm of shellcases. They have already made contact with part of the Alvans. But the problem is the scale of the swarm...”

“There is a possibility the swarm is extremely large, it says. As for the reason a shellcase swarm has appeared...it would have to be a *split*, wouldn’t it?” Ambrosius was calm on the surface, but he couldn’t hide the bitterness in his voice.

Shellcases were a somewhat peculiar monster. Swarming monsters weren’t especially rare, but out of them, shellcase swarms tended to be far and away the largest. Also, it was known that their swarms had the same social structure as ants or bees.

In the center of a swarm full of countless soldiers was a queen shellcase,

whose entire purpose was to multiply their numbers.

Queens tended to switch out every few hundred years, and normally when that happened, there were times when all of a sudden a swarm which usually only had one queen suddenly had two or more queens. In those cases, the swarm would *split*. The queen that couldn't wrest away control of the swarm would strike out for new lands.

"The worst part is that we don't know the full scope of the swarm. It'll be hard to estimate the strength needed to exterminate them."

The threat assessment of an individual soldier shellcase was barely duel-class. The problem was the threat of a swarm. After all, everything depended on the size of the swarm, which could actually reach up to division-class in threat level, the same as a behemoth. Normally, it wasn't wise to take on such an enemy without any idea as to its full scope. So, the first move would be to investigate the size of the swarm, but the complication in that move lay in the location; that being the *capital in the forest*.

The land they were in carried with it an important role for certain reason, and it had a secret area not known to the general public. That was why this place had a dedicated guardian order, the Alvans, who were kept at an adequate size to do their job. However, there was a possibility they were outmatched this time.

"That doesn't mean we can afford to sit on our hands. We might need to send reinforcements, even if it breaks the *law* we share with them. The most important thing is to prevent their destruction."

With the scale of the enemy swarm unknown, they would probably need to send a large amount of power to reinforce the threatened city. If they did, though, it would become impossible to control the flow of information. The question was whether to keep the secret, or prioritize safety. Leotamus faced what was probably his first big trial since his succession and was trying to make a bitter decision.

Seeing his son worry so much, Ambrosius sank into thought as well.

What was necessary was to send in a force that had a lot of strength, could move right away, and would not be a threat to the place's secrecy. Was there

something so convenient? Even with all the experience from his reign, Ambrosius could not think of a clear answer.

The situation came to a grinding halt even though a swift hand was needed. The mood in the room started to feel suffocating when suddenly an intruder appeared.

“Excuse me! I heard gramps was here for once!”

It was the second prince, Emris. He, knowing nothing, was totally carefree. Having been shocked into letting go of all of their pent-up frustration, both the king and former king let out long sighs.

“Now’s not the time for whatever you want. We’re trying to solve a troublesome problem right now.”

“Oh...sorry. Hmm...I wanted to challenge gramps to another mock battle in my Goldleo, though...”

Instantly, Ambrosius turned to Emris with astounding speed. *Goldleo*—that word was the trigger for a flash of inspiration.

“It exists... The perfect force...it does exist! Small in number, but elite. Has the experience of bringing down a division-class monster, as well as huge swarms of smaller ones. And with them, we have a way to work around the secrecy.”

The instant Leotamus heard the former king’s muttering, he arrived at the answer as well. Though the kingdom of Fremmevilla was large, there was only one group that had such an intense experience. He spoke the name of the group as hope started to well in his chest.

“The Order of the Silver Phoenix!”

“Huh? You gonna have that silver captain, Ernesti, make something new again?”

The only one who didn’t understand what was happening, Emris, tilted his head in puzzlement after he saw how excited his father and grandfather were.



An unscheduled visitor appeared in the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s base, Fort Orvesius, the same day bad news arrived in the capital.

The sun was setting, and it was right before the veil of night descended. A single silhouette knight came running in at full tilt. When the people in the parking area saw that, every one of them, without exception, was shocked. After all, the silhouette knight that had come to them shone a dull silver and had a design modeled after a tiger. It was Silvatiger. Of course, they all knew who the Silvatiger had been gifted to.

Ernie was immediately notified and came running over. When he saw the former king Ambrosius disembarking Silvatiger, he was of course also clearly surprised. Even though he was free now that he was retired, a former king coming personally all the way to the fort had serious implications.

“Your former majesty?! What could be the problem, to bring you all the way out here in person?!”

Instead of replying to Ernie alone, Ambrosius swept his gaze around the area. The members of the order who heard the commotion were steadily gathering round. Soon enough, a big enough crowd formed, and Ambrosius finally opened his mouth.

“Ernesti, no, this concerns the entire Order of the Silver Phoenix! What I am about to say is royal decree given directly from the current king himself! Be aware of that as you listen!” Ambrosius shouted, an intense expression on his face.

When they saw him so impressive, a state they had last seen right after the Casadesus Disaster, it ramped up the young knight order members’ already existing nervousness to the limit, and they straightened their postures as they waited for what would follow.

“I’ll say this now. What I am about to tell you is to be kept an absolute secret. Got it? Allow me to get straight to the point: shellcases...are a monster that form large swarms, and there’s been a sighting. I can’t give any details, but they’re heading toward a place that’s extremely important to the country. This place must be protected no matter what. However, we have been caught on the back foot, and we will need swiftness like a coursing river and strength like a raging fire to save it! Oh, Order of the Silver Phoenix...your proud Tzenndrimble is exactly what we need!”

After that speech, Ambrosius walked up to Ernie, putting his body between the boy and the crowd, and whispered so that only the boy could hear, “The place the monsters are attacking is named Alfheim. That place, you see, is where we make our ether reactors.”

Ernie’s eyes widened to their limits.

The small captain’s trembling gaze asked a question, to which the former king replied with a nod. Before anything, even the surprise at the revelation that he had just been told a national secret, Ernie was furious. *Monsters were attacking the production site of the most necessary part of a robot, its heart*—to him, an avatar of his hobbies, that knowledge literally rubbed him the wrong way. Immediately, he gave orders in a pointed tone that not even his childhood friends had ever heard.

“Order of the Silver Phoenix, prepare for a full sortie! Prepare type two carriages, and red number one for equipment. Once that’s done, we’re rolling out! Our objective is the defense of our destination, or the extermination of all the monsters!”

After a moment of shocked silence, everyone sprang into action as someone else relayed the orders. The appearance of the former king, the tension displayed by their captain, and—more than anything else—the equipment he’d specified all gave the order members a premonition of a hard fight to come.

Chariots of type two and red number one called for Tzenndrimbles to take supply carts and move at maximum combat speed, as well as equipment and weaponry meant to exterminate a monster or monsters higher than brigade-class. Specifically, it meant to bring equipment expecting to fight a behemoth.

Normally, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was wrapped in a rather lax atmosphere, but they were also fearless veterans of numerous battles.

They moved swiftly and precisely. Before long, the parking area was filled with the roaring sounds of active silhouette knights.

“We’re going to start connecting the carriages! Back, back, back, good! Moving on!”

The first thing to be prepared were the main force, the third company’s

Tzenndrimbles. Under the instruction of the knightsmiths, the Tzenndrimbles that were lined up in the hangar were connected to their carts one after the other. Knightsmiths wearing silhouette gears were running all over the place, accomplishing various detailed tasks.

While the cart's preparations were proceeding, the first and second companies of silhouette knights were fitted with their individual Option Works. The machines donned the equipment they had made personally and were so proud of under the prescription of red number one, revealing Kardetolles that had been equipped with the heaviest or strongest weapons available. Here as well, silhouette gears showed their worth by transporting and attaching the equipment. Before this, such tasks had to be done one silhouette knight to another, all while painstakingly adjusting minute inputs. Now though, all that was handled by silhouette gears. This application of the machines was part of what their inventor, the Order of the Silver Phoenix, was best at.

Among the tumult of the parking area, Ernie came to the side of the boss, who was shouting out orders. The Order of the Silver Phoenix was preparing the most force they could muster. Of course, the captain also planned on using all of it to its fullest.

"Boss! I'll be sortieing in the Toybox. Also, connect the Type 3 chariot to Kid's and Addy's Tzenndrimbles!"

What the young captain had said surpassed the boss's expectations. Up until this point, he had never ceased yelling out orders, but now he stood still in shock.

"The Toybox and the Type 3? Are you insane, bringing out a toy that can barely move *and* a prototype? I didn't think I needed to say this, but we have no idea if either of those can withstand the rigors of real combat."

"I know there'll be problems. But, the Type 3 is necessary to bring out the advantages of the Toybox. If it works, we can sweep away a hundred, even two hundred, monsters easily," Ernie replied confidently.

Even so, the boss hesitated a little, though in the end he decided not to stop Ernie. The two of them had known each other for a few years now, and the boss had realized that Ernie, who was usually all smiles, was truly enraged.

“Gah, fine! Hey, connect the Type 3 chariot to the brats’ Tzenndrimbles! Hunhh?! You don’t need to tell me; just do it! The silver kid’ll do something about it!”

The boss still managed to make the preparations proceed with wonderful speed, even while fitting in some offhand exchanges here and there.

The first and second companies’ silhouette knights jumped onto the third company’s carts once they were finished preparing for the load. Each Tzenndrimble could carry two Kardetolles at full load. Knightsmiths in silhouette gears swarmed around the pairs of Kardetolles that had taken a parking position inside the carts, threading steel wires around them, pulling the wires taut, and securing the silhouette knights in place.

The captain’s seething, burning ardor must have transferred to the rest of the order, as they executed their orders even more skilfully than they had in training. By the time a quarter block (or thirty minutes) had passed, Ambrosius was standing in front of a well-prepared horse-borne armed troop. The Order of the Silver Phoenix, consisting of three companies, was a mighty and unparalleled cavalry force.

“Oho. I was already expecting a lot, but...this is above and beyond even that.” The former king was feeling somewhat concerned and frightened after being faced with the sight of the Order of the Silver Phoenix going above and beyond his expectations so grandly.

Even though this was the only knight order that currently used Tzenndrimbles, he had wondered how they could come up with the application they were putting to use at the moment. Suddenly, a question rose in the back of his mind, but he forced it to the side and mounted his Silvatiger.

Before his eyes, a giant cart, towed by two Tzenndrimbles, rode forward. On top of it was a warped Kaldatoah with outer skin that looked like it had been forced on. It was Ernie’s Toybox.

“The full three companies and change of the Order of the Silver Phoenix have prepared to sortie. Your former majesty, please give the order.”

With such overwhelming power manifested before him, Ambrosius fought to keep the laugh that was welling up within him down as he directed his Silvatiger

into a carriage. Then, he drew his machine's sword and proclaimed in a loud voice, "Splendid! In that case, men, the fate of our country rides on this battle! Take that to heart, and I hope it spurs you to great heights! Our destination lies southwest; let's go!"

Hoofbeats resounded as all the Tzenndrimbles ran off at once. Under the former king's guidance, the Order of the Silver Phoenix headed straight for the kingdom of Fremmevilla's southwest.

After that, the boss, Batson, and the rest of the knightsmiths left behind in the fort gathered together. They saw the brave knight runners off with a cheer.



An inhuman rattling reverberated through the forest. There were so many sources of this rattling that they combined into a single sound that seemed like it would never cease.

Much like the wooded areas of old Adashino in Japan, Gigantes Garden was a land where nothing moved. Now, it was about to be overrun by a countless number of shellcases.

The Alvans sent knights to intercept the seemingly endless soldier shellcases spawning from deep in the forest. These soldier shellcases were, frankly, basically giant hermit crabs. They had six limbs for walking, two more front legs, and torsos that were covered in a shell, which tended to be very large. It was also very hard, able to quickly turn swords and the like into useless blunt objects. Because of that, all the Alvans units were equipped with hammers to crush the shells instead. Even so, it took some work to take down an individual shellcase. This difficulty only multiplied because there were so many of them.

"Aarrgghh! There's no end to them, no matter how many we kill!"

"Move your hammer instead of your mouth, Tsuva. Complaining won't solve anything."

"I know, but it's just so frustrating!"

The final line of defense protecting Alfheim, the ravine fortress Althusser, couldn't afford to let a swarm of monsters that had appeared so suddenly besiege them. So they sent out knight runners like Zercuse and his platoon to

intercept the attackers. They were basically challenging the swarm head-on. Since their objective was the defense of their stronghold, they couldn't afford to carelessly give too much ground, making the situation rather tough. Furthermore, the size of the swarm was much larger than they had predicted. It was like trying to fight a tsunami.

Even so, the Alvans were putting up a good fight, gradually pulling back and setting up a new defensive line. There was nothing that could be done about the difference in numbers.

"Still, it's annoying how *hard* each one is! If we knew this would happen, we should've gotten some of the new models from the national lab. With the Dash's strength, this would've been way easier!"

"There's no point in pining for something we don't have!"

Zercuse's platoon were thinking of the prototypes they once had the pleasure of piloting. They were more powerful than the Kaldiarias they were currently using, and so would've made things easier.

The ravine fortress Althusser was not equipped with Kardetolles, the most cutting edge of mass-produced silhouette knights. No matter how important the fortress was, there just weren't enough of the machine yet to pass around.

"At any rate, we need to concentrate on killing the enemy in front of us!"

Though they were stuck in a ghastly battle of attrition, the Alvans continued to resist. Their strong will did not seem to help, though, as they were slowly being pushed back. The world was merciless too, as another threat was about to assault them.

The sound of swinging hammers mixed together with the sound of countless legs clacking against the ground, becoming a piercing, reverberating cacophony that seemed to split the air. Before the knight runners could sense that something was wrong, a shrill sound followed. Suddenly, a piece of Zercuse's Kaldiaria's armor was sent flying as if it was repelled off of him, and his stance crumbled.

"Wha— A ranged attack?! From where? Zercuse, are you okay?!"

"It hit my shoulder! There's no...problems. I'm fine. It didn't hit anywhere

bad, just took some armor with it. I can still move my unit's arm!"

It was an attack that was clearly impossible for a soldier shellcase. If they'd been able to make ranged attacks like that, there was no reason for them to only have done so now. Tsuva and Yunfu raised their shields and positioned themselves to cover Zercuse and his machine as they searched the area. The one that launched the attack couldn't have just disappeared into thin air. Right afterward, Yunfu shouted and pointed with his hammer, "Center rear, everyone! There's a thin and long one!"

The others looked toward where Yunfu pointed and squinted. On the other side of an annoyingly thick wall of shellcases was a strange shellcase with long spear-like pincer legs. Its shell was also long and stretched backward, likely to balance the weight from its too-long forelimbs, giving it an overall thin and long impression. Because of that, it was easy to figure out its true identity.

"Crap...that's a deadly shellcase!"

While Zercuse and his platoon were shocked, the deadly shellcase once again thrust its forelimbs forward in attack position. The protruding forelimbs acted as a barrel. The payload was a thorn bullet that had been internally generated. Some of the air it breathed in was sent to its forelimbs, where magic to compress it was activated. It had this magic because it was a monster, and when the compressed air exploded out of its forelimbs, the pressure launched the payload packed inside.

The dry bursting sound heralded the coming of a thorn bullet. It was impossible to see the attack and dodge it in the dimness of Gigantes Garden. A Kaldiaria not in Zercuse's platoon took a direct hit and fell over. It wasn't the only one; deadly shellcases were appearing here and there, dotting the forest. Ranged attacks were being added in quick succession, and the Alvans's defensive line crumbled all at once.

"Damn, this is bad!"

The defensive line had been somehow managing to stand against the horde of soldier shellcases, but the addition of deadly shellcases and their powerful long-ranged attacks was making that come apart by the seams. Soldier shellcases flooded these seams until the Alvans were unable to recover and were forced

to fall back.

They needed to find a way to defend against the deadly shellcases' attacks, or they would have no choice but to retreat all the way back to Althusser. That outcome, however, needed to be avoided, and Zercuse desperately spun the wheels of his mind as panic and impatience rose up within him.

The Gigantifirs growing around them were sparse and hard to use as shields. Still, there was nowhere else to hide in the forest. That was when Zercuse's Kaldiaria stepped on something hard. It was the dead carcass of a shellcase. The next instant, he was struck by divine revelation, and he reflexively shouted, "We'll make a wall...pile up the carcasses of the dead shellcases! That should stop the long-ranged attacks from the deadly shellcases! We can still deal with the soldiers!"

Hearing that, the Alvans knights around him all got to work. They grabbed the carcasses at their feet and started piling those up, even as they continued to put down the soldier shellcases that continued to rush them. Thorn bullets continued to assault them in the meanwhile, but they just had to deal with that as the wall was gradually built. The knight runners weren't strapped for materials; they were surrounded by carcasses.

Eventually, a wall of carcasses stood high in front of the Alvans's silhouette knights. Deadly shellcase firing sounds rang out, and the pile of bodies jumped accompanied by the sound of a hard impact, but the wall stopped the attack just as planned. This time, they were the ones being protected by hard shells.

Having escaped from the threat of long-range attacks, the Alvans climbed on top of the wall and returned to killing soldier shellcases while being careful of the deadly shellcases. Zercuse felt satisfied at the results of his idea as he listened to the thorn bullets frustratingly impact the shell wall. If not for the long-range supporting fire, the soldiers weren't very scary. Now, they had come back from being cornered to having some leeway. Immediately, though...

"What's this...an earthquake? That can't be. But then, what is it?"

He could feel vibration coming up the ground through the Gigantifir root, and it indicated heavy footsteps. They clearly weren't from a soldier shellcase, much less a deadly shellcase. The vibration and sound were coming from something

with extreme mass. The sound, coming from beyond the wall, had Zercuse forgetting his previous good mood and clicking his tongue. The makeshift wall was stopping the long-range attacks, but it also obstructed his vision.

Meanwhile, the vibrations were steadily coming closer—the Alvans reflexively braced themselves, and the next instant, the wall in front of them was blown away by what almost seemed like an explosion. The impact of whatever it was crushed the carcasses and scattered them like buckshot, raining pieces down on the Alvans forces. Shellcase monsters weren't capable of using explosive magic. So the question was, what happened? Once the cloud of dust and dirt that had been kicked up cleared, the answer was in front of them.

“A demolition shellcase?!”

In front of them stood a much larger shellcase monster. It was several times larger than a soldier shellcase, and even larger than a silhouette knight. Its legs and body were abnormally swollen compared to a normal shellcase, and its shell had more rough lumps on it than normal. In exchange, the shell covering its cut was smaller and almost entirely fused into its body. It was essentially a huge lump of rock.

The demolition shellcase scraped the maxillipeds of its trophi together, eliciting an unsettling sound meant to intimidate the Alvans knights. Its goggling, protruding eyes locked onto its enemies, and something cold ran up Zercuse's spine.

One more unsettling jolt ran through the forest. A shaking of the earth that felt like a tsunami. There was no need to confirm; the wriggling form of a demolition shellcase appeared in the dimness of the forest. Actually, there were over ten of them. These monsters parted the surrounding soldier shellcases around them as they made their way to the Alvans's line. When they reached it, that would be the end of the resistance.

“Do we really have no choice but to fall back to Althusser? But how long can our walls hold against demolition shellcases? Alfheim is right behind the fortress!”

Zercuse groaned. The ravine fortress Althusser was the final bastion of defense for Alfheim. It was best to avoid exposing the fortress to danger, but

the situation was getting so bad they couldn't afford to mind that.

“The swarm is just too big. Between deadly shellcases and demolition shellcases, this is not a split swarm. It can't be, but could this be a migration of a mature queen shellcase?!”

When a shellcase swarm split, the one making a new swarm would nearly always be the weaker queen. Of course it would be, as the stronger would lead the original swarm. Such a thing naturally limited the size of the weaker swarm, which often also limited the types of shellcases to soldiers only.

But the shellcase swarm that had appeared in Gigantes Garden was both phenomenally big and had multiple different types. That could mean, against all expectation, the migration of a swarm rather than the splitting of one. The only certain thing was that the fate of the Alvans and Alfheim were like candles in the wind.

With those despairing thoughts plaguing them, the Alvans force made their retreat back to the ravine fortress. Behind them, the demolition shellcases broke down the wall bit by bit, allowing deadly shellcases to crawl through and start bombarding them with ranged attacks again. As thorn bullets flew through the air around them, Zercuse's scream echoed out.

“Run! Make it back to Althusser no matter what!”



Althusser the ravine fortress was located on the outer edge of Gigantes Garden, and was built as a defensive point plugging the space between two mountains that stuck out from the Auvinier Mountain Range. Most of it was made up of an overwhelmingly large set of walls, making it completely specialized for defense. Because it was meant to defend Alfheim, one of Fremmevilla Kingdom's most important locations, it was given walls even more solid than the capital.

The Alvans force left Gigantes Garden and streamed toward the fortress gate. The force was still outside of the walls, so Zercuse's platoon turned around to act as a rearguard, fighting hard against the shellcases that dogged them. A demolition shellcase had an incredibly damaging charge, and were deceptively fast despite their size, so it was clear that if they were left alone, they would be

able to catch up and destroy them.

The platoon fired their Culverins at the shellcase's feet, aiming to have the explosions curb their advance. If they had aimed for a direct hit, even if they managed one, the spellfire would just bounce off their shells without dealing much damage. They instead opted to spread as much fire as possible to serve as a smoke screen.

"Can we pull back yet?!"

Though the demolition shellcases flinched in the face of spouting fire, it wasn't going to be so easy to stop their advance. Also, soldier shellcases pressed into them from behind, meaning the effectiveness of their dissuasion measure was quickly reaching its limit. Zercuse's platoon was now alone, most of the intercepting force having made it inside the fortress. They were the only ones left, and once they made it within the walls, they would be safe for the time being. The fortress itself was keeping its gates open, waiting for them to enter as the final stragglers.

"Yunfu, Tsuva, you two pull back! Hurry!" Zercuse shouted. Then, he turned around and, after a pause, muttered, "Still, dragging these guys along behind us wouldn't be a good move..."

Zercuse and his platoon had planned to run after putting some distance between them and the swarm, but the surging numbers of enemies wouldn't allow that. Zercuse's two subordinates followed orders and fell back, and he watched them out of the corner of his vision as he stood tall, acting as a wall to block the advance of the monsters.

"Zercuse! It's enough—you need to retreat too!"

"That would be difficult from where I am. There wouldn't be time to close the gates."

If they allowed him in, the avalanche of shellcases would arrive before they could close the gates. At this point, Zercuse couldn't afford to run. A single rearguard wouldn't be able to buy much time, but he was resolved to do as much as he could.

In the face of the approaching demolition shellcases, Zercuse threw away his

silhouette arms to ready his hammer. All that could be heard around him was the sound of shellcases skittering across the ground.

“If I can at least take one leg with me, I will have bought some more time...”

With what will to fight he had left, Zercuse actually stepped forward. The rumbling of the ground came up through his machine’s legs and was communicated to him, and once he heard a low growl like distant thunder in his ears, he focused all his attention on the one monster in front of him in order to put out as much strength as he could.

Right before silhouette knight and shellcase clashed, Zercuse suddenly noticed something strange behind the incoming monster. It was unlike any of the shellcases he’d fought so far—something brightly colored fluttered in the wind. Instantly, he understood what was going on, and his gaze fixated on the sight.

The object he saw was, in fact, a flag. There was no mistaking it; it was the flag of Fremmevilla Kingdom itself, with a leaf that represented vegetation, a sword, and a shield represented on it. Below that, a coat of arms of a silver phoenix grasping a sword. There were no monsters that would raise a flag, which meant the ones under it were...

Zercuse quickly regained his senses and started to move resolutely. He dodged the demolition shellcase that was attempting to destroy his Kaldiaria, turned his silhouette knight around, and ran full tilt. He was going for the gates, and he could hear the demolition shellcase’s footsteps hounding him from behind. But then, suddenly, the sounds around him gained some variety. The sounds were most closely described as hoofbeats, and belonged to giant horses boasting fearsome weight that were likely running forward right now.

The Alvans watched all this happen from inside Althusser. They watched the new arrival rip through the swarm of shellcases. It looked like a cart being towed by two horses. However, the horses pulling the cart were too oddly shaped to be real horses. A person’s torso had been placed where a horse’s neck and head would normally be, making them half-horse and half-human in shape. Both of these hybrids swung around huge lances, shredding soldier shellcases as they went.

These strange things ran with fearsome speed. They continued tossing the small fry aside on their way forward, and at some point they burst through the front line of the shellcases, coming beside the demolition shellcase that was trying to catch Zercuse's Kaldiaria and striking at it. The sudden attack got the demolition shellcase to slow, which allowed the towed cart an opportunity to circle ahead.

This small bit of leeway allowed Zercuse and his machine to jump into Althusser. Immediately afterward, the gates closed. Zercuse turned around and managed to catch a glimpse of what was going on outside in the moment before the gates closed completely. He saw the half-human, half-horse knights standing between the fortress and the shellcases, as well as the huge cart they towed behind them.

He knew what he was seeing. After all, he'd fought against something just like it. He thought back to that fight, and muttered in a relaxed voice, "I see, so you guys were the ones that came. That's a relief."

As if to answer that, he could hear the sound of intake and exhaust that sounded like an intense horse's whinny. The knight order that answered directly to Fremmevilla's king, the Order of the Silver Phoenix, had finally reached the battlefield.



"Hah! Hah! Looks like we made it just in time!"

A silhouette knight that had been packed in the carriage that was now stopped tried to move. The steel wires that secured it in place were released, and the knight, now released from its bonds, stood up. It was the second prince Emris's Goldleo, with its vivid gold armor and lion-themed torso plates. Having heard that there would be a large battle, he had found himself unable to stay still, and had hopped onto the Order of the Silver Phoenix's caravan halfway.

Emris turned to look at the demolition shellcases in front of him and picked up the bastard sword that had been placed in the carriage before taking a casual stance with it. He didn't flinch at all when faced with the huge monster; in fact, he seemed like he was having fun.

"Okay. You there, gigantor! You'll do as a test for Goldleo's abilities! Think of

it as an honor!”

Though there was no way it had understood the man’s words, the demolition shellcase in front of Emris assaulted Goldleo. The thing, like a humongous boulder, bellowed as it charged the small knight in front of it in a bid to crush it underfoot. Goldleo faced the monster head-on instead of trying to get out of the way. It used all the strand crystal tissue spread through its body to swing the heavy bastard sword and produce an explosively fast slash. Both sides went straight at each other, so the only result available was a direct impact. A dull smashing sound resounded, and the demolition shellcase’s front legs were sent flying. Since Ernie had followed Emris’s instructions and designed the machine to emphasize power exclusively, Goldleo was like an avatar of ridiculous strength. Of course, that went for the knight runner inside as well.

“Ha ha! Looking good! I’ll show off this thing too, while I’m at it... Roar, Goldleo! Take this—Blast Howling!”

Emris depressed the trigger that was on his control yoke. Goldleo’s shoulder armor opened up as it received its orders, revealing the Emblem Graph that had been engraved inside. At the same time, its back weapons deployed, and everything fired at once. This combination of several overspells coming together to unleash a large-scale spell made up Goldleo’s special silhouette arms—Blast Howling. The overspell that had been engraved into its shoulders was for air manipulation. It would gather air in front of Goldleo and swirl it around. The difference in the density of air would bend light and warp how the attack looked. The converged and compressed air would then immediately be released directionally, turning into a violent shock wave. The unleashed roaring gale would sound just like a roar from a king of beasts. Emris’s aim was spot-on, and it hit the demolition shellcase in front of him.

Goldleo’s design concept of pursuing power at all costs was alive in this aspect as well. The weapon abandoned all consideration of versatility to maximize the strength of Blast Howling, which pulverized the demolition shellcase’s extremely strong carapace like spun sugar. Its limbs, which should have been supported by extremely thick cords of muscle, were bent at wrong angles before they were finally torn off completely, spraying bodily fluids everywhere. The impact of the shock wave alone was able to send a body larger than a

silhouette knight flying. Of course, the demolition shellcase was dead.

“Heh heh...HAHHAAA! This is great, just great! I love how powerful it is!”

“I’m glad you’re so satisfied, Your Highness. Now then, there are still more of those large ones left, so please continue promptly blowing them away.”

Emris, having just buried a large monster in one hit, laughed heartily with the utmost satisfaction. Behind him, Ernie in his Toybox stood up slowly.

“Heh hah hah! Leave it to me! Goldleo and I will... Wait, what the hell?! My mana pool’s already so low!”

“Well, just call that the price for power. I mean, with how powerful that attack was...”

Emris took a long pause before moving past it. “Whatever, then. I’ll just shoot it as much as I can! Where’s the next big one?! Heh heh heh, just wait!”

Emris and Goldleo then ran through the crowd of soldier shellcases, scattering the ones in the way to the wind.

“Hmm...I didn’t expect to get here so fast. Totally above expectations. I’d been giving those centaur knights a wide berth because they’re so expensive, but it looks like we really should make more of them.”

The Type 3 chariot being towed by the twin Tzenndrimbles had a surplus of load. That was why it was able to transport three silhouette knights at once, which was only seen in the initial model of carriage. This one had been transporting Ernie’s Toybox, Emris’s Goldleo, and lastly Ambrosius’s Silvatiger. The older man muttered something unrelated to the battle at hand as he turned around to look at the fortress.

“Ernesti, I need to talk with the ones behind us first. I’ll leave the monsters to you, so rampage as you please. That’d be better for you, wouldn’t it?”

“Understood. Thank you for your consideration... We will go and exterminate these insolent monsters immediately.”

After letting Silvatiger off, the Tzenndrimbles took off with the Type 3 in tow. They went, crushing more soldier shellcases on the way. Ambrosius watched until they got to the middle of the swarm, and let out a wry chuckle.

“From the sound of it, he totally intends to completely eradicate them. Not that that’s a problem... Anyway...”

Ambrosius noticed that the sudden intervention by the Order of the Silver Phoenix had the defenders in the fortress at a loss as to how to react, so he ordered them to open the gates.



After the brutal towed chariot that had contained Ernie, the knight order’s captain; the former king Ambrosius; and the prince Emris left for the fortress, the main force of the Order of the Silver Phoenix stormed into Gigantes Garden while borrowing the speed of Tzenndrimbles.

“Whoa, there’s tons of them!”

The third company’s commander, Helvi, scrunched up her face as she looked at the swarm of shellcases that was so large it threatened to carpet the entire forest. She’d heard that there would be a large monster swarm, but seeing it in person had her already fed up with the work that was to come.

“Well, whatever. Let’s start doing our jobs! All units, deploy for battle when we’re right in front of the enemy. Prepare to release the carriages!”

The Tzenndrimble company followed their commander’s orders and spread out to the sides, making sure to space themselves so that the carts wouldn’t crash into each other when they were cut loose. The coupling mechanisms on the horse bodies all released at once, cutting the carts loose in quick succession. Sparks flew from under the carts as the sound of metal scraping on metal was raised. The Tzenndrimbles continued on, leaving behind the carts that had to work hard to drop all their speed.

The ten carts stopped in a line, and though they’d been silent up until now, they suddenly let out a shrill noise. It was the sound of air intakes that were connected to ether reactors winding up, which was why the sound increased so dramatically. The generated mana spread throughout the machines they were mounted in, waking up steel knights.

In the dimness of Gigantes Forest, a machine in shining pure-white armor appeared. The muscles made of crystal all moved together, making sounds like

a string instrument in a unique mix of high and low tones to create a melody of movement. As steel wires securing the thing in place were released, and the first company commander Edgar's personal unit, the pure white Aldiradcumber stood up.

"First company, advance toward the fortress; we're going to push up the front line! Dee, I'll leave the cleanup of our route to you and your second company."

The first company formed up around him. Their machines were marked by a large white cross drawn on a background the color of bare metal.

"Hm, okay then. Second company will split into platoons and adopt ram formation. We'll clear a path to the fortress to start, but after that, just kill as many as you can!" Beside Edgar, a machine in striking deep crimson armor appeared.

It was the personal unit of Dietrich, the commander of the second company, in his deep crimson Guairelinde. The Kardetolles of the second company that followed had a large red cross mark on them. Each one had their own weapons and silhouette arms including longswords, spears, bastard swords, hammers, halberds, and maces. It was amazing how the second platoon only had weapons equipped. Their equipment was why they were called the assault company of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Of course, the company commander was the one to lead the charge. Along with the enhancement of the silhouette knight, his swords were also changed to something a size thicker and heavier. His machine, with higher muscle strength made for fighting, was able to swing it around lightly to pulverize soldier shellcases, shell and all. The second company followed Dietrich through the hole he'd made to widen it, paving a road of monster corpses.

The first company ran through this path where the enemies had been cleared, and they were able to make it to the ravine fortress before long and set up a defensive line in the way.

"Think of this as the start of the real fight! Don't let your guards down as you exterminate the monsters. Push the line forward while remaining in formation! We're pushing these bastards back to the forest!"

Edgar's words elicited an affirmative shout from the first company. To them,

defense didn't just mean to protect themselves. Just like when Edgar would strike with his shield, their tactic of clashing with the enemy and pushing the line of battle up created a strong defense that was also a sort of attack.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix, which used the powerful new models of silhouette knight, was able to exhibit far more strength than the Alvans with fewer numbers. Once they clashed with the shellcases, immediately ending more than ten of them, the swarm finally recognized this new arrival as a troublesome enemy. Thanks to the communication the monsters were capable of to each other, demolition shellcases were called forward to eliminate this new enemy. As soon as Edgar spotted these charging giant monsters, his expression stiffened and his eyebrows raised slightly.

Before he could move to deal with the threat, someone else came forward.

"Hm, quite intimidating... Well, it still seems far less tough than the behemoth. Just leave that thing to me." With that one-sided line, Dietrich ran forth in his Guairelinde.

The armor on its shoulders and waist opened up and pointed to the rear. Instantly, the loud sound of air being sucked in could be heard, followed by a flash of a halo of explosive flame coming from Guairelinde's back. In the blink of an eye, it dissipated into a haze, but that blink was enough to see Guairelinde shoot forward with fearsome speed.

Guairelinde had used the Magius Jet Thruster that had been mounted on it. It was a downtuned version with lower output and abilities, but depending on how it was used, it would have plenty of effect.

A shellcase's speed couldn't even compare. Much faster than a demolition shellcase could get going, Guairelinde had closed in on it. The silhouette knight continued to feign passing beside it, but instead it shot its Lightning Flail out of its gauntlet into the monster's head. The tiny lump of metal benefited from the incredible acceleration of its wielder, allowing it to be much more powerful than its small size implied. The weapon impacted the root of a stalk that one of the demolition shellcase's eyes were mounted on, crushing both eye and shell as it stabbed inside.

"Here, a tip. Keep it."

Right afterward, the silhouette arms hidden inside Guairelinde's arm roared. The overspell generated a lightning strike which traveled through the metal wire to the demolition shellcase. The humongous monster, which had trampled all over the Alvans forces, took the attack directly to its head and was unable to withstand it. Its entire body spasmed violently as it died.

"Too easy, jeez..." Guairelinde muttered pretentiously.

That was when Aldiradcumber came forward, its Flexible Coat spread wide. Immediately afterward, a thorn bullet impacted the deployed armor and was deflected. Guairelinde stopped in spite of itself as Aldiradcumber focused its cold gaze on it.

"Carelessness will be the end of you, Dee. I know your silhouette knight is very capable, but the enemy isn't weak either."

"Y-Yeah...right. You're exactly right. Grrr...okay, you saved me!"

While they had that extraneous exchange, the shadows wriggling in the forest—deadly shellcases—once again readied to attack. Along with a dry bursting sound, thorn bullets once again flew through the air. With a grudge in his heart, Dietrich deflected the bullets with his bastard sword and tried to immediately run forward to kill the threats, but he was stopped by Edgar.

"Leave those to me. It's my specialty."

This time, Aldiradcumber charged forth instead of Guairelinde. As it ran, the Flexible Coat equipped to its shoulders moved. Thorn bullets continued to fly at it, but as they impacted the acutely angled armor plates, sparks flew and the bullets were deflected elsewhere.

Deadly shellcases boasted powerful ranged attacks, but their other abilities were low to compensate. Their strangely shaped bodies made them slow and utterly unsuited to melee combat. These monsters were only allowed to show their worth when protected by a thick wall of soldier shellcases. However, Aldiradcumber didn't care about these ranged attacks at all as it continued to plow forward. Truly, it was the natural enemy of the deadly shellcase. The specialized monsters, even with their low intelligence, were capable of panic and shot as fast as they could, but not a single round had any effect.

Soldier shellcases formed a wall in front of Aldiradcumber, though whether it was to protect the deadly shellcases or just to eliminate an enemy was unclear. Edgar quietly manipulated his Flexible Coat. The new and improved version of the Flexible Coat he was equipped with had silhouette arms mounted to the underside of the armor plates. The weapons were now aimed at the monsters using the movement of the Flexible Coat, and shot spellfire according to the aiming reticle's guidance. Fireballs with orange trails flew forward, striking the soldier shellcases true. The overspells pierced into the monsters, exploding inside their bodies. The resulting explosive flames pulverized their insides, rendering them to pieces, shell and all, and sending those pieces flying.



In the face of Aldiradcumber, who never stopped running at them, the deadly shellcases gave up resisting and tried to run, but Edgar wasn't the type to let that happen.

It only took a moment for Aldiradcumber to close in on the waddling deadly shellcases, and it swung the small shield it had equipped to its left arm upward. The shield was shaped like a kite shield, only smaller, thinner, and sharper. It was basically an arrowhead. The momentum from its approach and the spring of the strand-type crystal tissue combined to make a scathing blow that hit one of the deadly shellcases. The shield was made to be tougher than a sword, and it stabbed into the monster's head, the hard shock of it making the monster's body tremble. The sound of something breaking could be heard, and the deadly shellcase died while spouting all sorts of bits and fluids.

"We need to move our companies up! There's some troublesome enemies ahead, but nothing they can't deal with."

"Understood. Second platoon! Surround those big lugs and take them down one at a time!"

Since deadly and demolition shellcases were ineffective, all the swarm had left was its mass. Soldier shellcases flooded forward in an attempt to push their enemies back, but interference came as if they'd been waiting for this opportunity, turning their attempt into a painful experience. It was the third company of Tzenndrimbles.

While the first and second companies had been throwing their weight as they pleased, the third company had been running through the forest in formation. The orderly line of centaurs made for a deadly united horse charge. All the monsters in their way were, without exception, shredded to pieces. It was a one-sided trampling.

Tzenndrimbles were unparalleled in the strength of their charge, but what was most incredible about them was their mobility. They moved freely through the battlefield, striking and leaving without allowing the shellcases the chance to attack back. And just by running, their hooves trampled monsters and added to the pile of carcasses. The swarm, having had its center thoroughly shredded, could not effectively make use of its numbers. At this point, every strength the

swarm had, had been taken away.

The appearance of the Order of the Silver Phoenix had cornered the shellcases all at once.

The flow of the battle had changed dramatically.

Chapter 26: Shellcase Queen

After dropping the former king Ambrosius and prince Emris off at the ravine fortress, the twins in their Tzenndrimbles took off with Ernie in his Toybox in tow to the depths of Gigantes Forest.

Shellcases continuously got in their way as they went. The twins' Tzenndrimbles used their charging strength to scatter them as they went, but then the number of enemies coming for them increased. The existence of a fearsome enemy with the exceptional ability to break through their horde had the shellcases feeling endangered.

"Agh, this might be too tough! There are still more coming!"

"What do we do, Ernie? I absolutely do not want to be surrounded. Should we change headings or go back?"

No matter how powerful the Tzenndrimble was, it was still only a single machine. As things stood, they would be surrounded and crushed with numbers. But while the twins hesitated, Ernie unwaveringly told them to advance. Unfortunately, as things stood, they would be unable to.

"Keep to our current heading, I'll use the Type 3. We'll break through in concert with the bombardment."

"Awwwright!"

"Got iiiit!"

The carriage they referred to as Type 3 wasn't just a huge luggage cart. It was a prototype weapon made after thoroughly considering what being a mounted unit meant.

"Then let's go, Ernie! Releasing the lock... Start battle deployment!"

The moment activation was ordered, the back half of the chariot the Tzenndrimble had been towing detached itself. While riding the remaining front half, Ernie in his Toybox grabbed onto the pin used to connect the two halves

together. The Toybox was mechanically connected to the chariot, and once it sent some mana and a script command to its surroundings, the armor plates all started stirring at once. Most of the chariot itself was made of mobile armor plates linked by sub-arms. Having received orders, the sub-arms raised their plates, changing position to surround and crowd the Toybox which was its passenger. At the same time, numerous pieces of equipment which had once been covered by the armor now showed themselves. Dully shining, heavy blades deployed, and two silhouette arms were raised and positioned to the left and right of the Toybox.

“Battle deployment complete. Now then...it’s time for the Type 3 battle equipment, Chariot, to enter the fray!”

It no longer looked like a luggage cart, though it was still towed by twin Tzenndrimbles. The armor plates made for a complete defense, it was equipped with a beast slayer for charges, and twin Falconet silhouette arms stuck out of its sides menacingly. It truly was a battle chariot now.

With an especially large neigh of exhaust, the Tzenndrimbles raised the speed of their charge. They ran with the heavy chariot behind them, and they ran fast. The Falconets were raised and turned to the shellcases standing in the way. The Falconets were large, high-output, powerful silhouette arms that had been made with the premise of mounting on the Chariot so they were able to ignore all questions of handling and weight.

An intense scarlet light was unleashed, the spellfire traveling straight toward the monsters. Roaring flames incomparably larger and stronger than ones resulting from a Culverin shot spouted, searing through shellcases with ease. The one supplying the Falconets with mana wasn’t either of the Tzenndrimbles but the Toybox. While it was quite defective as a silhouette knight, because it was equipped with multiple ether reactors, it was easily capable of supplying mana. By mounting it on the Chariot, it could lean on the mobility of the Tzenndrimbles while using almost all of its mana to attack. Though it was named Chariot, it wasn’t just used as a chariot, but also a mobile fire platform much like a modern tank.

Like that, the Falconets were used to greatly decrease the number of monsters walling them off, allowing the trio to break through at high speed. The

enemies in front of them were all dealt with by the lances the Tzenndrimbles had equipped, while the ones around them were nothing but feed for the beast slayer blades that stuck out to the sides of the Chariot. The beast slayers were more blunt weapon than blade, having clearly abandoned all thoughts of sharpness. Instead, as a thick lump of steel, they slammed into monsters using the incredible speed and momentum of the Chariot. Not even shellcases with their hard defense could withstand such a blow.

The farther the Chariot went, the more carcasses were mass-produced. At this point, the Chariot's procession was invincible, as everything was dealt with in one swift blow.



The Chariot continued deeper into the forest, crushing monsters all the while.

Gigantes Garden was a rather monotonous place. Humongous trees stretching endlessly into the distance, which numbed the group's sense of time and place. Addy was the first one to get bored of such an unchanging environment.

"Hey, hey, Ernie, how far do we have to go?"

"Well...why do you think the shellcase swarm attacked, Addy?"

Addy tilted her head, puzzled after her question was replied to with another question. Instead, Kid opened his mouth.

"It's that thing, right? The split thing, where the new one goes away from the old."

"Exactly. From my rough knowledge of the shellcases' social structure, there is always a queen at the center of a swarm. After all, a split only ever occurs as a result of a new queen being born. That's why the secret to solving the problem of this invasion is to kill the queen. I have heard that a queen shellcase is a lot more trouble to deal with too. That's why we're in charge of killing it with this type three."

"I see. Fine by me. The thought of facing something big gets my heart pumping!"

The Tzenndrimbles continued on without losing any speed as they had their easygoing conversation. There was nothing to get in their way, and because they had maintained a speed that no normal silhouette knight could hope to match, at some point they had pierced through the thick horde of soldier shellcases.

Suddenly, though, something abnormal appeared. A noise that sounded for all the world like a scream—the sound of something being destroyed—pierced through the forest. The trio witnessed something shocking happening ahead of them on their path. A Gigantifir, which rivaled the average monster in toughness, was snapped in two mercilessly and left to fall, tiny pieces scattering about as it did.

“Does this mean...we hit the jackpot?”

Snapping a Gigantifir was not an easy feat, even for a silhouette knight. It was more natural to assume it wasn't the work of a human. Of course, there weren't many potential answers for a monster nearby that could break such a large tree.

The shadow of something massive could be seen stretching forward in the dust and smoke that had been thrown up by the felling of the tree. At first, Ernie and the twins thought it was the trunk of a Gigantifir, since the trees around it were of basically the same size. However, it didn't take long for the shadow to move, and they realized what it was. The identity of the thing that could be mistaken for a giant tree's trunk was a monster's leg.

“Ernie! There's something huge there!”

“Yes, I believe it's the queen shellcase, but...it's much bigger than I thought it would be.”

Not even Ernie could hide his shock. The monster that emerged from the smoke was unexpectedly large. What's more, the upper end of its body was tall enough to touch the canopy of the forest. Most of that height was taken up by long legs about as thick as a Gigantifir. There was no way for the trio to mistake its identity.

From far away, it appeared to have six legs and two pincers, which was the same as other shellcases. Its shell-covered body was curled, just like a shrimp's.

Another standout feature was its abdomen. It wasn't covered in shell like other shellcases'; instead, the abdomen gave way to a sphere several times the size of its body.

The sphere was called an incubating shelter. It was the shellcase's spawning organ. Eggs produced by the queen would be dropped into this sphere to incubate and hatch, and after spending their larval stages inside the organ, the shellcases would pop out as adults. The queen shellcase was the leader of a swarm, the only one capable of producing more of their kind, and the hive all at once. In other words, it was the swarm itself.

I see. Those long legs are there to prop up that enormous body. Ernie had an out-of-place realization.

They had no way of knowing this, but normally a queen that split off from a main swarm wouldn't be mature enough to have its own incubating shelter. Not only would such a large organ get in the way during travel, it was also a weak point. A queen that had cultivated the organ and could fulfill its function as a hive splitting off was a complete irregularity according to the ecology of a shellcase, and it was the reason this swarm was so large.

"Oh well, its strength is more important than its size. Let's try hitting it first."

Even after they saw such a large monster, the trio's will to fight did not wither. The Chariot changed course to get close to the queen shellcase's feet. Either it didn't notice them or didn't care, but the queen was simply continuing to walk slowly, shaking the ground as it did. The incubating shelter was heavy and quite literally hindered the queen's movements. It seemed it couldn't go any faster than it was currently.

"We start by stopping it. Concentrate your attacks on its legs!"

The Toybox aimed the Falconets mounted on the Chariot. Once that was done, it fired, and scarlet rounds flew at the monster's legs, impacting one. It seemed that finally got the queen to notice them, as it stopped walking. In that opening, the Chariot advanced, sweeping by the monster to swipe its beast slayers across the queen's legs—it didn't inflict noticeable damage, though, and the recoil of the attempt caused the Chariot to jump up.

"Whoa! Hyargh! Aghhhouch?!"

The Chariot, which was very heavy, was lifted entirely up into the air and started to spin. In their Tzenndrimbles' cockpits, the twins opened their eyes wide in a panic. If things continued, they would surely be dragged down with the Chariot and heavily damaged.

Immediately after, a huge flame spouted from the Chariot while it was midair. Ernie had activated the Magius Jet Engine mounted on the Toybox. The thrust from the propulsion engines canceled out the Chariot's spin and righted the entire thing. The Chariot had nearly been sent flying away in a spin, but instead it managed a proper landing. For a while after that, everyone was silent as they continued running, as if nothing happened.

"Let's...not aim for the legs."

"Y-Yeah. Sounds good."

Ernie and the twins had broken out in a cold sweat, though they'd put some distance between them and the queen for the moment. The Chariot hadn't been destroyed, but the beast slayer's base had been broken by the impact of the attack. If they tried the same thing again, it was guaranteed to be ripped off.

"I should have known that its toughness would be far more than average, with the sheer mass those legs have to support. It might be impossible to break them."

"Then what do we do, Ernie? If even the type three's weapons get deflected, aren't we in a really bad spot?"

"Well...let's just obediently aim for its weak spots."

The Chariot drew a large arc and turned around to charge the queen shellcase once more. By now, the queen had finally recognized that something small and foreign was running around her, and so it took an intimidating stance. Seeing that the Chariot would crash into her with its current heading, the queen raised her forelimbs to attempt a reckless slam.

"Tuuuurrnnn!"

The Tzenndrimbles leaned greatly to the side to affect their turns, avoiding the legs that were slamming down on them. The Toybox in the rear used its

thrusters to forcefully help the change in course.

Seeing that the queen shellcase had stopped walking, Ernie immediately rapid-fired the Falconets. This time, he didn't aim for the legs. Instead, he went for the extremely large weak point, its incubating shelter. Although the cluster of shots was rather messy, it didn't matter with such a big target. The scarlet over spells stabbed into the hanging organ in quick succession. Right afterward, the huge masses of fiery mana obeyed their script and turned into a raging flame, causing fire to bloom in the belly of the queen.

Up until then, the queen shellcase had been rather calm, but now its stance crumbled and it screamed in agony; the flames were more than enough to burn its incubating shelter to a crisp. Here and there in its belly, the fires spouted even more violently, and the queen fell to the ground.

"Oh, that was unexpected. Was that it, maybe?"

"Wouldn't it have been better to just do this from the start instead of charging in, Ernie?"

No answer came to Addy's sideways comment.

"Well anyway, if this settles things, then we should go back to where everyone..."

Kid's speech, which seemed rather nonchalant in response to their unexpected achievement in battle, was interrupted by a quaking of the earth behind them. Though the queen shellcase had stopped moving for a time thanks to the incineration of its egg sac, it wasn't actually dead.

The queen shellcase spewed a mass of bubbles from its mouth as its eyes darted around, and it started moving once more. Soon enough, the queen's eyes locked on to its hated enemy and were dyed with rage.

Following a noise that sounded like fibers snapping, the queen shellcase stood. The source of the sound was the point where the destroyed incubating shelter was attached to the rest of its body; it was the sound of the muscle fibers that supported the sac being torn off. As the monster stood up, the sound only got louder, until one final extra large snapping resounded, and the incubating shelter came off entirely. While the organ was an important part of

the queen, losing it wouldn't kill the monster. As long as its main body survived, it was possible to regenerate the sac. However, because it would need a very long time to do so, it could mean death for the swarm as a whole.

“Whoops, looks like Her Majesty is angry. Let's give her some space.”

Quickly after Ernie's utterance, the twins moved their Tzenndrimbles in an attempt to break away from the queen. Seeing that, the queen shellcase lurched forward.

Now that the incubating shelter, the weight that had been limiting the queen's movement, was gone, it was as if the monster's slow speed earlier had been a lie. Its long legs provided even faster speeds than the Chariot. The queen quickly caught up and raised its legs to wind up a slamming attack with its full weight behind it.

“Grk! Crap!”

Like a bomb going off, the legs fell on the Tzenndrimbles' path accompanied by a shaking of the earth. The attack was so powerful it burst tree roots along with earth. If they crashed into the leg, it would all be over, so the twins hurriedly bent the heading of their Tzenndrimbles. The Toybox's Magius Jet Thruster roared, and both sources of propulsion made an impossibly sharp turn possible. The team spun around left and right, making movements that seemed abnormal for such a heavy set of machines as they continually dodged the rain of queen shellcase limbs.

The queen's tenacity was incredible. It continued to rampage in an attempt to crush the towed Chariot by whatever means possible. Normally, this situation would have seen a team flipped over and crushed to bits, but this trio managed to scuttle their way through.

“We're through!”

“Keep going! Deeper into the forest!”

They weaved the Chariot between the trees. The queen shellcase, however, was unable to proceed so smoothly. Its huge body had betrayed it: the Gigantifirs were unavoidable obstacles instead of something to detour around. While using the landscape to gather some distance between them and their

foes, the trio of childhood friends discussed how to deal with the queen.

“This is bad! It’s super fast. It’s also tough, making it a bad match against the type three. What do we do?!”

“You’re right. Toughness aside, its speed was a total surprise.”

They could hear the loud sound of the queen shellcase felling trees behind them. It had not given up on destroying the Chariot even a little, and seemed prepared to chase them to the ends of the earth.

“Hey, Ernie, aren’t we in, like, real trouble? If we continue dragging the queen shellcase around like this, won’t it put everyone else in danger?”

It seemed to them that even the Order of the Silver Phoenix would have trouble against a monster like the queen shellcase, one that could fell even Gigantifirs. Even if the order would be fine, the Alvans were around too. Just imagining what would happen if the trio brought the queen to them was scary.

“You’re right about that... Okay, change of plans. The two of you continue to run around inside the forest like this and draw its attention. If it stops, you can feel free to attack it as much as is safe.”

“Okay! What’re you gonna do, Ernie?”

“I’ll...see if I can get an audience with Her Majesty.” With that, Ernie undid the Toybox’s connection to the Chariot. Once he had done so, the armor plates opened up, and the Toybox became able to act independently from the Chariot.

Next, Ernie removed a Falconet that had been mounted on the Chariot and equipped it to his Toybox’s back sub-arms. The silhouette arms were a size larger and harder to wield, but the silhouette knight was able to equip one of them by using both sub-arms.

In the meantime, the Tzenndrimbles pulled around and hid in the shadow of a Gigantifir. The giant plant obstructed the queen’s sight for an instant as Ernie and the Toybox got off the Chariot. He stayed hidden in the Gigantifir’s shadow as he observed the queen shellcase. As always, its attention was solely on the Chariot, and it didn’t seem to notice that something was different with its target.

“Now then... From here on out I’ll be winging it, but...”

Ernie activated the Magius Jet Thrusters mounted on his Toybox’s shoulders and waist. The machine’s eye crystal was locked onto the trunk of a Gigantifir that stretched far above. With an explosive roar, the Toybox accelerated. It went up, the thrust of its equipment allowing it to directly run up the trunk. The silhouette knight was literally trying to run up a tree by using its Magius Jet Thrusters. As usual, every action he took seemed deranged.

Because it was a mass of steel and crystal, the machine was very heavy, but the outputted thrust was able to support all that and allow it to zoom up the tree. However, his fortune only lasted until halfway up. Suddenly, something went wrong with the thrust of the equipment, and the Toybox lost horizontal balance, causing it to waver greatly.

“Wha—” But Ernie reacted quickly. “This is nothing!”

He kicked off the trunk so it could crash into and cling onto a nearby branch. Though it broke several thin branches, the Toybox somehow managed to arrest its fall, saved by a branch that could actually support its weight. It was a testament to the toughness of Gigantifirs. It wouldn’t have been strange for the Toybox to have just fallen all the way down.

“Using so much mana in quick succession is leaving me worried. It might have been a good idea to put in a Wire Anchor just in case, for situations like this... I’ll think about it once I get back.” Ernie couldn’t help but complain a little.

The abnormality in the Magius Jet Thruster was due to inadequate control of the ether reactor, which arose from defects in the Toybox’s construction. Short bursts aside, long periods of use had substantial risks. As things stood, he had no choice but to proceed carefully instead of going all at once. Ernie let his silhouette knight rest a bit, and once he judged that the ether reactor’s output had stabilized, he started climbing once again. This time, instead of running directly up the trunk, he jumped from branch to branch.

Meanwhile, the queen shellcase had drawn right up to him. Its eye stalks rolled around, following the giant that was jumping around it among the trees. However, the queen didn’t pay the giant much attention; it simply sent a leg to destroy the tree it was using as a platform in case the thing would obstruct it.

The Toybox faltered greatly, its footing suddenly destroyed.

“You really don’t hold back! But with how far I’ve gotten...!”

The Gigantifir’s roots cracked, and it fell over. Ernie activated the Toybox’s jets and stabilized the machine before urging it into a full-tilt run. The giant tree was gradually tilting over, and the Toybox used that time to run up and buy some more height.

The silhouette knight turned its head, filling the holomonitor with the form of the queen shellcase as it calmly continued on while destroying Gigantifirs. The Toybox kicked off the tree it was on and activated its Magius Jet Thrusters at full power to make a huge jump.

This was so unexpected that the queen wasn’t able to react in time. While it was unable to move, the Toybox had leaped forth with explosive speed and managed to land splendidly on the queen shellcase’s back. The queen swiveled its head that was small compared to the size of its body to glare up at the foreign object that was on it.

“Well, well... Nice to see you’re doing so well, Your Majesty. This may seem a little rushed, but your little monsters dared to damage my toys... Hope you’re ready for the consequences,” Ernie said.

Before the queen shellcase could make a move, Ernie and the Toybox charged. The aim was the monster’s head. Against large monsters protected by solid shells, no half-baked spell could deal damage, so there was no choice but to concentrate on weak points. The head was the most obvious weak point, common to any and all living things. This was especially true for the larger ones, as their size made it all the easier to aim for.

However, the queen shellcase wouldn’t just meekly allow such an action. It used one of its massive pincers to try and eliminate the foreign object from its back. The Toybox used its Magius Jet Thrusters in short, repeated bursts to get through the queen’s fierce attacks. It continued on for the head, aiming the Falconet it had on its back as it closed the final stretch.

In one more step, it would reach the head. After getting that far, Ernie suddenly reversed the thrust of his Magius Jet Thrusters, braking at max output. The intense propulsive force put a lot of strain on the Toybox’s structure,

eliciting creaks and groans from the entire body.

Meanwhile, something swept in front of his eyes at high speed, accompanied by a small scraping sound.

It wasn't a pincer. Looking closer, Ernie could see something stretching out from a spot near the queen shellcase's head. It was sharp, like a blade—it was an appendage meant to carry food to its mouth. The appendage had been swung by using the muscles like a spring, giving it the power to cut apart steel. As proof, a straight line had been carved into the Toybox's chest armor.

"You seem to have quite the repertoire of tricks! I should have brought a bunch of different equipment as well!"

The Toybox leaped back, creating some distance between it and the head, and now the pincer was attacking again. Before this powerful double-layered defense, even someone like Ernie was troubled as to how to act. The queen's back also made for rather unstable footing, so it didn't seem like he would be allowed to approach easily.

The queen was starting to get fed up at having something that didn't belong crawling around on top of it. It must have realized that swinging its front pincers around wasn't going to accomplish anything, as it changed tack. Suddenly, a great quake assaulted the Toybox's footing. The queen had lowered its stance and was violently shaking itself. It was easy to imagine what would happen should something as large as the queen shellcase start moving like that. The Toybox was turned into something akin to a leaf in a storm, and making sure it wasn't thrown off was the best it could do.

"This...might be a little tricky!"

With how much it was moving the queen shellcase's entire body had turned into a lethal weapon. Ernie had to make use of every bit of his machine's flexibility and the Magius Jet Thrusters to make minute adjustments so he wouldn't bump into anything by jumping up and down on the back to get through the worst of the shaking. It was clear to him that this method would quickly bring the Toybox to its limits. So he continued trying to look for a way to counterattack, but the situation wasn't looking good.

What ultimately changed the tides was neither Ernie nor the queen shellcase.

A scarlet overspell flew in from between the trees, stabbing into the queen shellcase and creating a flashy fountain of explosive fire. Though the shell protected it from being damaged much, the impact was enough to knock the large monster off-balance, stopping its movement.

“You okay, Ernie?! We’ll help too!”

The attack had come from the pair of Tzenndrimbles that had turned around. They described a large circle around the queen shellcase as they fired the remaining Falconet on the Chariot wildly. Seeing them, the queen shellcase let out a high-pitched cry. The Chariot was its hated enemy, the one who had destroyed its incubating shelter. Though shellcases had a dubious amount of intelligence, this was important enough that the queen had still memorized the form of its sworn enemy.

“That’s right, look here! We’ll dodge anything you throw at us!”

Once they drew the attention of the enemy, the Tzenndrimbles dashed off between the trees. The queen shellcase quickly decided to leave the thing on its back for later in favor of chasing the Chariot.

Having gained the perfect chance, Ernie had his Toybox move discreetly. Aiming at the head would be difficult, since the attack would be intercepted by the queen’s maxillipeds. So he changed his aim to the leg joints. The rules for destroying giant weaponry were still alive and well within him.

The sub-arms adjusted the position of the Falconet they were grasping, pointing it at the base joint of one of the monster’s legs. The two ether reactors mounted in the Toybox roared intensely as they spun up to maximum output, sending mana to the silhouette arms. The overspell, fired at close range, let out savage flames as it stabbed into the leg joint, but the queen shellcase was no exception to the rule governing all giant monsters; it was constantly being supported by a casting of Physical Boost, so a single volley wouldn’t have much effect. Ernie shot a second, then third round into the same spot, and after confirming their impact, he immediately jumped back. Right after, the queen shellcase’s base leg joint was consumed by a violent pillar of fire.

The queen let out a shriek as it contorted its body. No matter how sturdy its armor was, it wouldn’t be able to cover the joints as well. If it did, that would

render the monster immobile. So even something as tough and large as the queen was vulnerable to repeated hits from Falconet, which boasted great power.

Riding out the agonized shaking of its foothold, the Toybox settled its aim on the leg next to the one that had been severed. Once again, spellfire stabbed into the joint, and several explosions fountained out. The queen squirmed then as well, but the movement was gradually getting weaker. With the legs to only one side of it being aggressively targeted, its large body was starting to lean heavily.

“Oh please, don’t mind me. Feel free to take another set.” Ernie slammed more shots into the side of the queen shellcase, who was already starting to lean over. The impacts ruined its posture further, and finally the limit was reached. With so many leg joints that supported it being burnt to a crisp, there was no fighting it. The queen sank to the ground, eliciting a great plume of dust and dirt.

The Toybox had managed to stay on its back until the end, and right before the queen hit the ground, the silhouette knight jumped into the air. It used its Magius Jet Thrusters to kill the speed of its descent, but its exertions from earlier must have left an effect, as the thrust coming from the equipment wasn’t stable, and the Toybox couldn’t slow down as it wished.

“Just a little more, Toybox! Show me your willpower!”

Ernie used his machine’s remaining mana to let out a sideways bit of thrust, forcefully changing his falling vector and allowing him to slide into the Chariot towed by the Tzenndrimbles, who were now passing by underneath.

“Leave it to me to catch Ernie!”

The Toybox fell into the Chariot like it was charging an enemy. In the moment of the crash, the Chariot used its mobile armor plates attached to sub-arms to cushion the machine’s fall, brute-forcing a catch on the Toybox. Every inch of the silhouette knight creaked ominously as that happened. The skeleton warped, and some of the crystal tissue snapped, but Ernie didn’t mind as he shifted his control to the Chariot. He mobilized the still-operable armor plates and beast slayers to immediately return the thing to a combat state.

“We’re going to go finish it off now! Addy, Kid, turn this thing around!”

The replies that came to Ernie were reassuring, and the Chariot towed by twin Tzenndrimbles ran forth at full speed.

The queen shellcase was there on the ground when the dust cloud settled. The legs on one side had been destroyed, so it had no way to move. What’s more, its massive body with all its height had backfired against it; the incredible impact from all its weight crashing to the ground had done a lot of damage. Even in that state, the queen shellcase struggled. Blood streamed from its mouth as it continued to swing the legs that still moved in an attempt to crawl away.

The sound of hooves reverberated through the area. The Chariot and the machines towing it ran back to finish off the queen shellcase, though it was already on its last legs. At this point, the queen had basically no options to resist them. Its maxillipeds had been broken by the impact of its fall, and though its pincers still worked, there was a limit to their range of movement while it was grounded. Meanwhile, the state of its legs needn’t be specified.

“This is checkmate.”

Ernie and the twins easily evaded the pincer that had been swung at them as a last bit of resistance, and the Chariot safely made it in range to use its remaining intact beast slayer to swipe at the queen shellcase’s head at full speed. The thick lump of steel impacted the monster with all the speed of the Chariot. The impact shattered the shell on the head—half pulverized already by the fall—to pieces. The head was snapped to the side by the attack, and its contents were spilled and scattered around as the queen shellcase finally breathed its last.

“We did it! It’s definitely gone this time, Ernie!”

“Yes. Well done, you two. Well then, we should hurry back and regroup with everyone.”

“Roger!”

Though they took a moment to seep in their emotions, after having taken down the queen, Ernie and the twins quickly made their return to the ravine

fortress Althusser.

With their captain at their side once again, the Order of the Silver Phoenix could no longer be contested. Also, having lost the core of their swarm—their queen—the shellcase swarm lost its cohesion, and sheer numbers they relied on so much were pushed back by the order along with a revived Alvans force. The fight after that was one-sided all the way through.

A week after that, the shellcase swarm had been completely eradicated.

Chapter 27: Alfheim

Thanks to the actions of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, the danger approaching Alfheim had been eliminated.

For a while after all the shellcases had been eradicated, Gigantes Garden remained a far cry from quiet and peaceful. Though they had been taken off of high alert with the end of the battle, most of the Alvans were still being deployed throughout Gigantes Garden to clean up the shellcase carcasses.

Considering the size of the attacking force, the total amount of damage taken by them was light in the end. Luckily, Althusser was almost untouched. However, the Alvans had taken great damage in both personnel and equipment, and their rebuilding would be a hard problem in the future.

As for the Order of the Silver Phoenix, they had suffered essentially no losses. At most, the Chariot had taken some slight damage due to reckless use. It would be stationed at Althusser for the next while to help rebuild. As an aside, the ones who contributed most were the Tzenndrimbles of the third company. They boasted an entirely different level of transportational power and speed compared to normal horse-drawn carriages, and proved to be a powerful option for transport. Today as well, they were running down roads with a full load of supplies.

Compared to them, the first and second companies found themselves with comparatively more free time, as they were only tasked with security. In the midst of their duties, a certain visitor came to the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

“You truly saved us. If you hadn’t come, I have no idea what would have happened. At worst, we could have been wiped out utterly.”

It was Arniesse, the commander of the Alvans.

“Oh no, please. No need for that. We were just doing our job.”

Arniesse had bowed deeply in gratitude, causing Edgar, who had come out to greet him, to shrivel in embarrassment. Since Edgar had crossed blades with

Arniesse and lost before, he held great feelings of respect for the leader of the Alvans.

“No matter what the reason, the fact that we were saved does not change. It’s not like we’re strangers; I wanted to give my thanks.”

“I...understand. If you’re willing to go that far, then...”

As always, Edgar was needlessly stiff. Seeing that, Arniesse bit back a wry chuckle. He had enough common sense in him to know that wasn’t the type of thing you did to your savior.

“While we’re on the subject, you certainly have a good knight now, don’t you?” Arniesse looked up at Aldiradcumber, who was parked off to the side, in an attempt to cover up his thoughts.

While the silhouette knight was as devoid of ornamentation as Earlcumber was, its capability to bury scores of shellcases—mostly deadly shellcases—was worthy of special mention. Having had his partner praised, Edgar honestly revealed his joy.

“Thank you very much. I’m proud to have Aldirad as my partner.”

“Good. Still, being shown those results makes me want the new model for our group too. Your entire order uses new equipment too, right? It was overwhelming.”

Arniesse thought back to the fight. Setting the Tzenndrimbles aside, the actions of the Kardetolles of the other two platoons could only be described as incredible. It wouldn’t have been too far to say that they had exhibited abilities tens of times greater than an equivalent number of older models. With a precedent like that battle, it was only natural for the Alvans to consider obtaining some of the new models for their own.

“I believe silhouette knights across the country will be replaced soon enough. I heard that this place is especially important. If that’s the case, you should receive priority on the supply.”

“You’re right. I’m looking forward to it.” Arniesse seemed happy at Edgar’s reply, a somewhat childlike smile blooming on his face.



After a few days spent in the same pattern, a single carriage left Althusser. The person riding it would be a rather unexpected one: Olvår Brommdall, the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory's director. Even if the national lab was an important national organization, it wasn't clear what the man's connection to this secret settlement was. When he disembarked from the carriage, he immediately went to Ambrosius's side.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting, your former majesty. First...allow me to thank you for saving our home."

"Well met, I've been waiting. And no need, this place is important to us too. That is why those 'laws' exist."

Olvår nodded before following Ambrosius's eyes, his own gaze settling on Ernie.

"So...he's the one?"

"Indeed. Given the situation, there would be none other."

Ernie, unaware of the circumstances, simply tilted his head and compared the two in front of him. In response to that, Ambrosius adopted a somewhat mischievous smile and said, "Hm, Ernesti...I believe I once exchanged a promise with you."

Ernie nodded. There was only one promise the former king could be talking about.

"The promise was that I would teach you the secrets of the reactor if you were to prepare the greatest of silhouette knights for me. The efforts of the Order of the Silver Phoenix this time were wonderful. That goes for your knight that defeated the queen shellcase and that Chariot too. All the knights you've made satisfy my conditions. So, it is time to fulfill my end of the bargain."

Ernie's expression got brighter and brighter as he listened. The reward promised him by that agreement was for him to learn how to create an ether reactor. An ether reactor—a silhouette knight's literal heart. It is a machine that converts the infinite ether in the air to mana. Its existence was what allowed silhouette knights to reign as the strongest weapons. It was also the only piece

in the puzzle of a silhouette knight's construction that Ernie lacked, the one he didn't know, the one he would never stop chasing.

“Are you really, *really* sure?”

“Keh heh, this is the second enormous monster you've taken down, after all. That fact alone is enough to qualify you. Even though I've retired, as the previous king I must reward your efforts. Not to mention, Leo's approved of this as well. Be proud and take your reward.”

After all that, there was no longer anything stopping Ernie. He immediately spun around to run for the Tzenndrimble he had ridden here so he could get his answers, but he was hurriedly stopped by Ambrosius.

“Aghhh, we'll take you there, so calm down a little! No military might whatsoever is allowed past Althusser. You aren't allowed to ride your Tzenndrimble there. It's part of the *laws*, you see. The only ones allowed on this land are those approved of by the Protector; those who he takes himself.”

“Protector? Then I need to meet that person. What is the identity of this Protector?”

Ambrosius pointed meaningfully at the person next to him, at Olv`r, who was standing there with his usual smile. The man came to stand in front of Ernie and gave a polite bow.

“Well then, shall we be off, oh Captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix? I invite you, the savior of my home, inside.”

With a heavy sound, the rear gates of Althusser opened. Rear meaning the side of the fortress opposite the one facing Gigantes Garden. It revealed a road leading back behind the fortress. Beyond that was what the fortress was built to protect, the birthplace of ether reactors and the holder of its secret. It was the road to Ernie's personal paradise.

After some preparations, the former king Ambrosius and Ernie got on the same carriage as Olv`r and made their happy way through the gates. After they departed, the gates closed once more, barring anyone from following.



Althusser was surrounded by a desolate mountainscape.

The carriage carrying Ernie and the other two proceeded along a road between the mountains. A thin mist of unknown origin hung over the area, so visibility wasn't great. However, because the road was well maintained, there was no fear of getting lost. Soon enough, they had gone far enough that the mist was being put behind them and their field of vision cleared up.

After a while, a mountain peak could be seen farther down the road. Once they got over the mountain, Ernie looked through the window at the scenery before them, at a loss for words.

A gently sloping flatland spread out from the foot of the mountain, most of which was taken up by a thick, vivid green carpet of trees. Past the trees were more mountains, meaning the forest was in a basin surrounded by these geological features. It was a natural stronghold protected by the tall peaks of the Auvinier Mountain Range. The readily travelable road to and from this place was protected by a sturdy fortress. As expected from one of the most important locations in the country, it sported a tremendously tough defense.

The forest at the bottom of the basin wasn't just a forest. What drew Ernie's gaze first and foremost was an enormous city that was built entwined with the trees.

A great spire jutted up from the center of the basin, from which the city radiated outward. The buildings were not built at the expense of trees. Instead, everything blended in, as if built to intertwine with nature. The buildings Ernie could see followed a strange style the boy had never witnessed before. At the very least, it was different from the buildings in all the places Ernie had been; Laihiala, Konkaanen, and Jantunen. That meant it clearly had a different culture from the rest of Fremmevilla Kingdom.

"That is our destination, the forest capital of Alfheim." Ambrosius's words brought Ernie, who had been entranced by the magnificent sight of the artificial interweaving with the natural, back to the present.

"Alfheim...so that is the place where the secret of ether reactors sleeps! I expected for the production area to be hidden along with the manufacturing method, but... Eheh heh heh... Finally...finally, I've reached it!"

Ernie glued himself to the carriage's window as he peeled his eyes, trying to take in everything about the city. It wasn't as if just looking carefully would reveal anything, but he was too excited to care.

"Alfheim is populated by the descendants who have inherited the secret, the alves." After Ambrosius's introduction, it was Olvår's turn to speak. And he did so while undoing the cloth covering his head.

Once the cloth was removed, his blond hair fell free. Furthermore, a pair of long and pointed ears were exposed. The ears, which were as long as the width of his palm, were very distinctive, and marked him as a member of a different race.

"Alves... Um, does that mean that you're an alv too, Olvår?"

"I am, yes. As the Protector, I serve as a mediator between my people and those of the ephemeral race and thus live outside of my homeland, but I am still an alv through and through."

As he listened to the man's talk on alves, a question suddenly popped into Ernie's head, causing him to tilt it, puzzled. "Now that you mention it, I haven't seen any alves before. Does that mean there are almost no alves living in the outside world?"

Olvår smiled and nodded. "Most alves decide on a home, such as Alfheim, and live in it always. Protectors like me wouldn't expose our true identities unnecessarily either. In the first place, those who would leave home are considered strange."

"Is that a measure to protect the secret of ether reactors?"

Of course, that was the focus of Ernie's attention. His interest in alves was more of an extra; an extension to his main interest. Olvår pulled back a bit, disconcerted by how Ernie leaned forward and got closer and closer to him as he asked his question.

Beside them, Ambrosius could no longer suppress his laugh. "Keh heh... Now, no need to rush him like that. He can't say for sure that's the only reason. For a variety of reasons, alves dislike moving too much. We have our own circumstances too, so these people have twisted what is exposed and what is

hidden to disappear from history.”

Ernie returned to his original seat and adopted proper posture, signaling that he was in total listening mode. His attitude spoke of how eager he was to learn about ether reactors.

“Ha ha... To be honest, I don’t know how ether reactors are made either,” Olvår hurriedly established, unable to bear the burning enthusiasm of the boy in front of him. “I’d love to get that over with already, but those secrets wouldn’t be told to a Protector in the first place.”

Such a thing would have been obvious to assume if Ernie had just thought about it a moment; doing so would mean letting the information they had gone to such lengths to keep secret out into the world.

“I see...but I’ll be able to learn about it when we reach our destination, right? I’m looking forward to it... I really am.”

“I’m sorry to rain on your parade, but...it’s not set in stone that you’ll be able to learn how to make ether reactors.” Olvår hesitated a little, but after a moment he made up his mind and continued to speak, “Try thinking about it. Why is it that we alves are the only ones who can make ether reactors? It’s not just to protect the secret... It’s because it’s a thing only alves can do.”

“I’d be fine with it, if that were the case.” Ernie’s answer was immediate. There was no hesitation or pause as he continued to speak with brilliantly shining eyes, “I want to hear everything, examine everything, expose everything, and if that’s not possible, find a loophole. If after all that it’s still no good, I’ll give up. But first, I need to start with hearing everything.”

Wisely, Olvår immediately gave up on trying to persuade him. “Well, if that’s how you feel, then it’s fine. Oh, I know, since we have some time left until we get there, why don’t I tell you more about us alves? By the way, Ernesti, how old do you think I am?”

Ernesti made a puzzled noise as he thought of the answer, not sure of why he was asked that. “I suppose in your midtwenties? I don’t think you’ve reached your thirties yet.”

Ernie’s gaze pointed at Olvår, and then to his pointed ears. The boy’s answer

came with a tilting of his head, and Olvår adopted a somewhat mischievous smile.

“Nope. The correct answer is eighty-seven.”

After hearing that Olvår was actually older than Ambrosius, Ernie instantly adopted a bizarre expression. One of them had white hair and was wrinkled with age, while the other had voluminous blond hair and no wrinkles at all. Seeing them lined up like that, no one would imagine that Olvår was the older one.

But Ernie knew better than to claim that they were joking. Youthful appearances that belied their actual ages; the fact that the race was named *alv*; and then the fact that they were a hidden clan of people... From all of that, Ernie came to a certain conclusion.

“Does that mean that alves...have a longer life span than us?”

It was Olvår’s turn to widen his thread-thin eyes in obvious surprise.

“Exactly... To think you’d immediately come to that conclusion. I thought you’d assume I was joking. That’s right, we alves are far more long-lived than those of the ephemeral races. We live around five hundred years. Also, alves don’t physically age much as we get older; I’ll look like this for another couple hundred years.”

Though it didn’t show on his face, Ernie was close to being fed up. The life span of a normal human, whom they called *the ephemeral race*, was about seventy years. In this world, living past eighty was a feat. Dwarves were in a similar situation; they were basically somewhat more muscular humans.

What would happen if a race that could live seven times longer than them mingled among them? Not only that, but alves retained their youth. It wasn’t hard to imagine how that would create friction between races, and the ones who would have to handle all the drawbacks of that would likely be the alves. Ernie quickly realized why Alfheim had to be located in such a remote place.

“So that’s why alves live in such an isolated place...”

Seeing Ernie’s eyebrows droop and his enthusiasm dampen, Olvår shook his head. “Hm? Ah, it’s not like that. The reason why alves live here is because we

alves find doing otherwise incredibly bothersome.”

Ernie had fixed his posture to face Olvår, after which the first thing he did was tilt his head, cross his arms, and pray internally that he had heard wrong as he asked, “Uh...sorry. Alves do what now?”

“Alves really hate bothersome things, you see.”

With that, he’d obliterated the deeply serious mood that had permeated the compartment up until now.

“Putting it like that may be a little misleading, though. Alves are a pretty fascinating race. The longer we live, the more our spiritual natures change. We aren’t much different from the ephemeral races for the first hundred years or so, though.” Olvår pointed at himself as he nodded. Certainly, he gave off much the same impression as any human.

“But after that, things change drastically. Alves who have lived two or three hundred years become much less active, lose their interest in their surroundings, and start to live between constant states of sleep and meditation. They begin to find things *bothersome*. And of course, alves who are nearing the end of their life span are said to be no different from a tree.”

Of course, Ernie would never have imagined that to be the case. It seemed the people who held the secret he wanted were a pretty unique race.

While they were engrossed in conversation, the carriage they rode approached the hidden city of Alfheim.



There was a well-maintained road between Althusser and Alfheim that wound between mountains.

At first, there was only a trickle of water. But at some point it became a large flowing river with a road following beside it. Both the road and the river stretched toward the center of the basin, connecting to the city.

Both the roads inside the city and the road the carriage was traveling on were paved with stone.

The water from the flowing river was diverted into several smaller channels,

to be distributed throughout the city. The thickly growing trees in the area were not Gigantifirs. Instead, they were trees only a little taller than a silhouette knight. These trees were heavily knotted, with greatly twisting branches. Their irregular and ununified looks seemed like it would give a subtle sense of unease to those who looked at them for long periods of time.

The buildings that could be seen between the trees were quite unique in structure. Almost all of them were adjoined to the twisted trees. Or rather, the buildings themselves were combined with said trees. The trees made up part of the houses themselves. Some were nestled in the tree's embrace, while others simply had the tree piercing through the middle of the building. The building materials were unique too. Unique plants were used in the frames of the buildings, while the walls were formed by both lumber and stone glued together with something similar to mortar.

"So this city coexists with the forest."

Buildings which entwined with the trees—a design philosophy that had been arrived at due to the elves' spiritual nature. It was quite literally the shape of their unique culture.

Soon enough, the carriage arrived at the center of the city. One of the buildings there that stood out as peculiar even among the other structures in the city that basically blended in completely with the forest.

"This is the nerve center of Alfheim, the Forest Protection Office."

The building stood out a lot in the middle of this city that overflowed with the colors of nature; it was a tower that was colored a pure chalk white. Overall, the building was all irregular, gentle curves, and it gave off the impression of something organic, like a snail's shell. The bottom of the building swelled out greatly, and the whole thing was supported by struts that stretched the entire width of the building like a colony of fungi. Though it was hard to tell what they were, the building was dotted here and there with windows and hallways.

Could this have been a part of a giant shellcase? Like, something queen shellcase-sized? Ernie thought, imagining an as yet unseen creature, but then he saw the gates opening, reminding him that it was a building made to be used by people.

From deep in the building came a slim figure, their movement only betrayed by the slight sound of rustling clothes. Olvår was dressed the same as anyone of the ephemeral race, but the alves living in Alfheim dressed according to their culture. They mainly garbed themselves in cloth dyed a pale green color like the nature around them and fastened those garments with ornaments modeled after flowers or other vegetation.

The alv came right in front of the party and gave them a rather distinctive greeting before leading everyone into the building. "Welcome, former king, Lord Olvår. This way... The elder is waiting for you inside."

Ambrosius, having disembarked from the carriage by now, nodded magnanimously. Ernie and Olvår followed him as he walked forth.

The interior of the building was lined with wood and the same glossy white material that was used for the exterior. Even though there was nothing inside that seemed like a light source, it wasn't dim at all, likely because the building had been masterfully designed to make use of natural light.

The walls sometimes shone in rainbow colors depending on how the light bounced, which had Ernie's interested gaze bouncing all over the place. The smooth texture of the materials made it hard to believe they were worked by human hands. *Maybe this building really did used to be a monster's shell of some sort.* Ernie continued walking with the group, such trivial thoughts in his head.

The center of the building was a large atrium. This area, directly under the point of the tower, saw no extra ceiling or partition. It went all the way up to the point of the tower.

The party reached this atrium. When he saw the area, the first thing Ernie was reminded of was an altar. Either that or a throne. After all, the center of the area was raised like a chair, and there was someone currently sitting on it.

"It has been too long, Great Elder Kitleigh. Last we met, I had just ascended the throne of my kingdom, so it would be about thirty years past," Ambrosius addressed the person sitting on a chair of what seemed to be marble.

Behind him, Olvår went down to his knees and bowed deeply with his hands entwined above his head. After that peculiar bow, he separated himself from

the group.

The elder who sat on the “throne,” Kitleigh Kilyarlinta, actually looked like a young maiden at first glance. As for first impressions, that could be summed up in one word: white. Her skin was as white as the exterior walls of the building, and her hair was nearly translucent. Her wide eyes were pools of deep silver—and the sight of them assaulted Ernie with an irrepressible feeling of discomfort at her too-inhuman features.

The clothes she wore followed alv custom, dyed to imitate the vivid hues of nature. On top of those clothes, she had several layers of a thin white gauze-like cloth, which lent her a sense of transience, like fresh snow piled on a branch or leaves of a bush.

“It hasn’t been *that* long, Ambrosius. But you have gotten old.” Her voice was pleasant, like a stringed instrument. However, those who listened to her would also feel a sort of anxiety. There was no emotion in her voice; it was extraordinarily flat and utterly devoid of any warmth.

If Olvår was to be believed, older alves stopped being interested in anything around them. Lack of interest in others meant a lack of emotion toward them as well. Even the rustling of trees in the wind was more passionate than her voice.

“What a greeting. Well, I suppose that is how those of the ephemeral race are.”

Alves prized accumulated age over youthfulness, given their race’s long lives. So the title of great elder was the highest in the tribe, but it was impossible to tell how long the person in front of them had lived just from appearances.

“Now then, let’s start off with the situation outside. The entire shellcase swarm that had invaded Gigantes Garden the other day has been exterminated. They will not harm Alfheim.”

“I see... I no longer feel that chattering malice. My thanks for eliminating the threat.”

After the initial pleasantries, they went straight into the meat of the matter. According to the agreement between the alves and the ephemeral race, they would ignore any differences in status between them. Any formalities and

observations of station would be omitted as much as possible so the conversation would proceed at a brisk pace.

“You’re welcome, though this was agreed upon by the Laws, so there’s no need for thanks. However, we had another, more personal reason for coming. You may have heard about it from Olvår already, but there is someone I would like you to teach the secrets of creating ether reactors to.”

Kitleigh listened without moving a muscle, but once Ambrosius was done and after an extra moment of silence, she muttered, “So *you* would ask for that as well...”

“As well, you say? It’s true that I have not been the only one to ask, but...”

“Almost all of your ephemeral kings throughout history have asked at least once. The ones they bring differ every time. From the best sorcerer in history, to knights, to academics... The kings have asked me to teach all of them. Every one has failed to acquire the technique; you people just don’t learn your lesson. Well, it is a new generation each time, so I suppose that is natural.”

Counting the times she did so before becoming the great elder as well, she had met a total of six kings from the ephemeral race. At this point, to her, this was basically a regular event.

“To a child, no less...” As she talked, Kitleigh’s expression did not change at all. She was extremely beautiful even by the standards of the ephemeral race, but it was surprising how the mere fact that those beautiful features did not move or emote could make them so eerie. Compared to her, Olvår was incomparably more expressive.

“No matter how talented he is, it will be impossible for him to learn. In the first place, those of the ephemeral race do not live long enough. No matter how much we try to polish you, you cannot rise to our heights. Everyone who has tried so far has no doubt been an excellent member of the ephemeral race, but even so, their time spent in this pursuit was fruitless. And now you are letting a mere sapling of a child attempt this? It beggars belief.”

“Come now, no need to be so narrow-minded. You might be surprised.”

“You were once a king of the ephemeral race, and according to the laws, your

words have weight. However, in the case your words are incredibly foolish, we still have the right to refuse you. You have done us a great favor this time, but your request is a different matter. I am not willing to indulge you in this obviously pointless endeavor.”

“I see, I suppose my words may have been a bit lacking. I did not bring him all this way to waste my time either. This one’s ability as one of the ephemeral race is, I would dare say, abnormal. After all, he was able to operate a silhouette knight without a magius engine. He already has enough magical prowess to achieve that... Do you still believe he has no chance?”

Kitleigh’s expression did not change, but there was a short pause before she replied, “The child did? Is that true?”

“What would I gain by lying? It was because he had the skill to do so that he was able to raise a number of great achievements. I should add that during this recent battle for Gigantes Garden, he was the one who slew the leader of the monsters.”

Ambrosius called Ernie to his side before pushing the boy forward toward Kitleigh. Exposed to Kitleigh’s gaze, though it was unclear if her eyes could even focus, Ernie felt an incredible sense of unease. Eventually, she made a decision after a long silence.

“As the laws state, I will believe your words, Ambrosius. Child, I thank you for protecting this settlement and the great meditation. You may attempt to learn the secret. With all the power you possess, you may be the most promising of any of the ephemeral race to have come for the prize you seek. However, the ephemeral race is quite mysterious. To think an unripe specimen would achieve this much when even grown ones find themselves wanting. Someone, come.”

“Right here.” A male alv responded to Kitleigh’s last sentence, quickly making himself known.

“Show these people to the inner area. One wishes to obtain knowledge on ether reactors. Teach him as much as he wishes.”

The male alv lowered his head in a peculiar reverent pose. He then proceeded to invite Ambrosius and Ernie deeper into the building. Understanding that he’d been accepted by Kitleigh, Ernie followed excitedly. Ambrosius followed the

boy, but as he passed by Kitleigh, he looked up at her profile.

“Thank you, Great Elder. It seems I owe you one.”

Kitleigh did not react; she didn’t even look at him. It was ironic that, pretty as she was, her unchanging expression made those features unnerving.

After a moment, “Meditation is an important thing to us. Protecting that time is worth much. We simply exchanged things of worth to each other.”

Ambrosius nodded and disappeared into the depths of the building.

Kitleigh, who was left in the room alone, closed her eyes as soon as the others left and returned to the great meditation. Her consciousness once again spread through the clear flow.



Several figures quietly walked down a passageway decorated in wavering colors.

The group was led by a male alv. Ernie was feeling somewhat bored of walking down this endlessly long passageway, so he looked up to Ambrosius and said, “That reminds me, you mentioned laws during the talk with the great elder. What did you mean by that?”

“Hm? In short, it refers to the way we of the ephemeral race live alongside the alves. In a broad sense, it is a set of agreements pertaining to our continual trade, among other things.”

“That seems like quite an important and yet sloppy thing.”

“According to them, alves are a people that feel it is their calling to explore collective existence. Olvår mentioned it too, didn’t he? They value being active during their youth to build experience, but as they grow older, they spend more time pondering things and meditating. It wouldn’t be surprising for the great elder to spend all day meditating. Once an alv gets that old, their sense of time might actually become different, after all.”

Ernie thought back to the earlier conversation with Kitleigh. Even while they’d talked, it didn’t seem like she’d turned her gaze to him. In fact, she basically didn’t move at all. She clearly had a different sense of the world.

“But, well, they’re still living things. They need to eat or they’ll die. Normally they’d need to hunt or farm, but...that’s where the laws come in.”

As they got to the heart of the matter, Ernie started to get a bad feeling about what the former king was going to say.

“As payment for the creation of ether reactors, which have so far been impossible for those of the ephemeral race to create, we must offer protection and food. That is the agreement.”

“So they really have no intention of moving away from this hidden city...”

“That is not necessarily true. As you can see, Olvår has been quite active. Well, most elders would be like Kitleigh, though.”

For a long-lived race, it was easy to see that they differed greatly from what they called the ephemeral race. That would make living with them hard. This current relationship was working out well for both sides, so Ernie was satisfied.



The male alv took them to a room deep in the building. Everywhere they went was surrounded by similar white walls, and Ernie, who wasn’t used to it, had already given up trying to tell the rooms apart. Like the atrium, this place was also softly lit and didn’t feel dim at all, but the room was also unadorned and dreary, with only lined up desks and chairs.

“As the great elder instructed, you are the one that is to be taught the secret of ether reactors, but...”

The man started talking in a somewhat stiff, formal tone, but he didn’t seem nearly as inhuman as Kitleigh had. It was likely that he was a skilled person over a hundred years old—at an age where he still had enough emotion left in him to not have trouble talking to those of the ephemeral race.

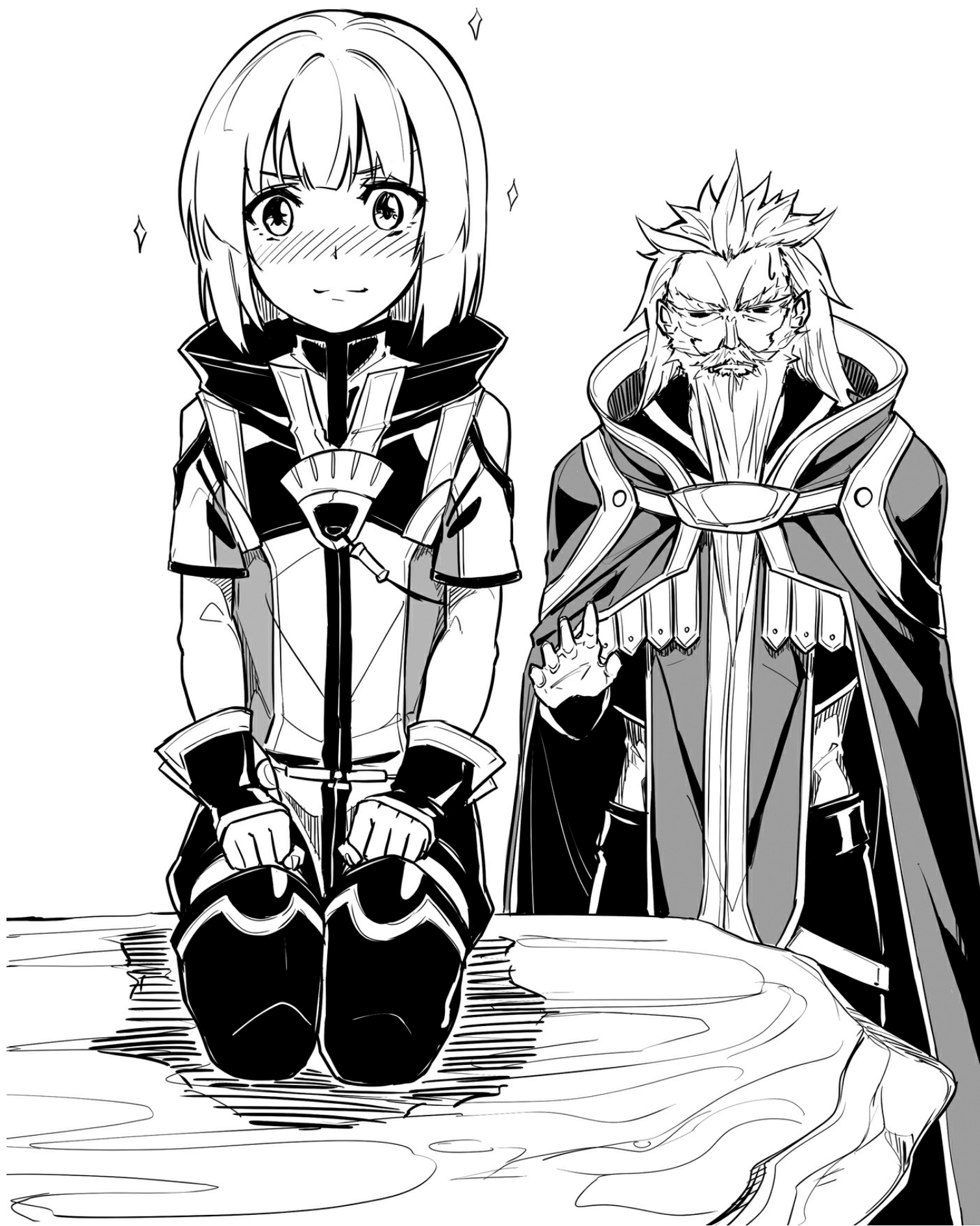
“Indeed. I am just a chaperone. I will leave all the talking to Ernie here.”

The alv’s gaze turned to the small boy who was so excited he seemed about to crawl on top of the desk. In fact, he was already more than halfway there, and the alv’s eyes wavered in bewilderment.

“O-Okay then, where should we start?”

“With everything. Tell me everything from start to finish. Please, I want to know literally everything to do with ether reactors!”

Finally, Ernie settled on sitting on the desk with proper posture, and while the alv was pressured by his enthusiasm, he nevertheless quietly resolved to fulfill his duty.



“Understood. Then let’s start with a summary of how the ether reactor came to be...”

Finally, the man spoke a wealth of information. What ether reactors were, and where its ability to convert ether into mana came from.

“What we call an ether reactor was originally the heart of a living thing.”

All living things in this world, without exception, stored mana within themselves. Even those who didn’t have catalyst crystals within their body and could not naturally cast magic did so. Furthermore, it was known that the organ that converted ether to mana was the heart. The ether that was breathed in with the air was sent there to be turned into mana.

“The core that does this conversion is the catalyst crystal in our hearts.”

“A...catalyst? I thought catalyst crystals existed to convert mana into magic?” Ernie’s question was only natural. People could only use magic by preparing a catalyst crystal as a tool. Once a magic spell was manifested, the spent mana would naturally return to being ether that drifted around the world. In short, catalyst crystals were the opposite of an ether reactor.

“That’s right. However, this conversion is not a one-way street. Under specific conditions, it can also convert ether to mana. In order to make this catalyst crystal do the opposite of its usual role, there are two necessary things.”

One was the blood that would endlessly circulate through the heart. With that, a certain feature of the blood would react with the catalyst crystal and convert ether to mana. The other thing was a script. An exceedingly special script existed in the brains of all living things, carved into instinct, that affected the being’s crystal. It was said that ancient alvan sages realized this secret long ago and used it to create the original ether reactors.

“It is said that the first ether reactor was a silver vessel that contained a massive script carved as an Emblem Graph onto it. Actual blood from living things had to fill it for it to function.”

Though it had succeeded in creating mana, it had failed as a tool.

The reason was simple: blood not supporting life quickly lost its vitality.

Obviously, a tool that constantly needed fresh blood to function was totally unusable. After this initial attempt, the ancient sages started a process of trial and error to find something that could replace blood.

“What they came up with is now a technological system we refer to as alchemy. A lot of chemicals were tested for their reaction to a catalyst crystal, and an amount of time even alves consider long was used in this research.”

The eccentric alvan sages’ experiments yielded a single result after a long period of testing. It was called elixir—an artificially, alchemically created blood substitute.

“Then there’s the script. It is a guiding formula to etch the beat of life into the ether reactor that we refer to as the ‘song.’ Its official name is ‘lifesong.’”

It was the primal script carved into the instinct of every living thing: the lifesong. By etching it into a vessel, it could be preserved in physical form. However, that was where the problems started. The script was just too large.

If an Emblem Graph were to be made of the lifesong in its original form, the silver plate would have to be bulkier than a silhouette knight to fit it. That was an inordinate amount of silver. A completely different method would be needed to render that into an ether reactor, a machine smaller than a human.

“That is where the most sublime of metals, born from being bathed in strong ether influence, comes in. I am talking about mithril. This is the reason why only we alves can make ether reactors.”

“It’s metal, right? Why would that make it so only alves can create one?”

“Rather than using words, it would be faster to just show you. Please wait a little.”

With that, the alvan man exited the room before returning with a lump of metal. Ernie could tell with one glance that it was different from any other metal he’d encountered until now. It at first looked like shiny silver, but surprisingly the light reflecting off the surface wavered a little upon closer inspection, creating a rainbow-colored sheen. This pattern never settled for even a moment; it was always changing into all sorts of colors. There was no doubt it held some sort of special power inside.

“Mithril... From what I researched a long time ago, a sort of legendary ‘stone’ was required to make an ether reactor...” Ernie was referring to the explanation on ether reactors he’d once read.

“A stone? Ah, we needed to change the name to send it out into the world, so that’s basically a convenient excuse. Mithril only exists in areas that have been heavily influenced by ether, and is an extremely rare metal. Its greatest trait is how it is both supremely hard and supple at the same time. It is hard enough to make even dwarves give up on working it.”

Ernie still didn’t seem convinced as he stared at the lump of metal. He couldn’t see how a metal so hard to work it made dwarves throw in the towel connected to alves.

Suddenly the alvan man stuck his arm out, this action attracting the attention of the two accompanying him. His was the hand of a completely normal alv with white skin. Without warning, his hand was wrapped in a faint glow. He was activating some sort of magic. With that, he grabbed the mithril lump and squished it like clay.

“Wasn’t it...supposed to be extremely hard?”

“You won’t be able to change its shape, no matter how much you pound at it. However, mithril is a metal that has been heavily influenced by ether. A certain type of magic will make it react and soften up like clay.”

Ernie gasped. “No way... The thing that only alves can do... Doesn’t that mean...”

Ernie looked down at the alv’s hand that was still wrapped in a faint glow. Then, he turned his gaze to the alv’s entire body. There was something clearly wrong. The man wasn’t holding anything. He was using magic, but didn’t have a staff.

Noticing the change in Ernie’s expression, the man slowly nodded.

“You seem to have figured it out. We have a catalyst crystal to use magic in our bodies. That is why we can use magic freely while working mithril. This is something neither those of the ephemeral race nor dwarves can imitate, our own special skill. Also, while this may sound rude, those of the ephemeral race

do not have the magical skill to spin the lifesong while activating several spells at once and working mithril. We excel in magical abilities as well.”

Alves had come up with a technique to fold the script at high density into the inside of mithril as it was worked by activating a special spell while they did it. Thanks to that, it was possible to etch the lifesong into the machine while keeping it incomparably smaller to the same thing worked into a plate of silver.

Even Ambrosius, who had so far remained silent, couldn't help but let out a loud groan. It seemed impossible to him for other races to imitate this. At the same time, he understood why the alves had never bothered to refuse to tell anyone about this. Their confidence lay in their very physiology.

“That is everything pertaining to the creation of an ether reactor. Are you satisfied?”

A catalyst crystal, elixir, and mithril. Now, the ingredients that made up an ether reactor were known to Ernie. As soon as the materials were made clear, Ernie started thinking of ways to solve the problems that came with those materials as he continued asking his questions out of interest.

“How is the output of a reactor determined? I am asking to find out what I should change to increase the output of one.”

“The main factor in ether conversion rate would be the size of the catalyst crystal. We already know that the crystal in a monster's heart gets bigger the larger and more powerful the monster is. As for the catalyst crystal itself, which is the core of the conversion, using one taken from a monster will raise the conversion efficiency. Depending on what kind of being it was in, the crystal will also have different properties.”

That was a much simpler answer compared to everything before, which seemed a bit anticlimactic to Ernie.

“And you haven't been doing something so simple?”

“No. Because adjustment and regulation are difficult.”

The current mainstream ether reactors used catalyst crystals that had been mined. The amount and quality was very stable this way, and so they were easy to use. As for catalyst crystals taken from monsters, it's generally said that ones

taken from a duel-class or higher monster are good enough. However, while the output of the reactor would rise, the quality of crystals taken from monsters is extremely unstable. Just using it as a reactor would require multitudes of small adjustments for each different crystal for its unique traits. Put simply, it would make crafting a single reactor take too much work. For a nation that wanted as many reactors as possible, it was better to opt for the steadily available and easy-to-produce ones over the ones that would be powerful but not nearly as plentiful or easy to build with.

Unfortunately, in the face of a mecha otaku who would go as far as to charge into a hidden village of another race, such ordinary logic held no meaning. Ernie turned to Ambrosius with tremendous vigor.

“In other words, on paper, if I use the catalyst crystal from the heart of the largest monster possible, I can make an extremely powerful reactor! I’m afraid, your former majesty, that I happen to have a very good candidate in mind for this!”

“What a coincidence; I do too. Hm... I wager your next question would be about the whereabouts of the heart? Of course, it’s still around. Ernesti...it’s true that if you use it, you’d be able to make an unrivaled ether reactor. However, making what you want will be unimaginably hard. Will you attempt this despite that?”

Ambrosius faced Ernie’s uncharacteristically serious expression head-on, but his expression quickly slackened in defeat. It was pointless to ask. No normal person would even think to attempt what he was going to, and if all the boy had was passion, then he would have given up long before they had gotten this far.

The fact that he had gotten here *and* had a concrete result in mind meant he was hopelessly crazed already.

“Very well. They were your kills in the first place, so show that you can use them. Take the behemoth’s heart.”

There was no need to hear Ernie’s answer to that.



A veil of darkness fell over Alfheim. By the time Ambrosius and Olvår left the

hidden settlement, the day had totally set, leaving the forest in a state of unnerving darkness. A lantern was mounted on the carriage as it traveled slowly back to the ravine fortress.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to leave Ernesti there, your former majesty?”

“Well, he clung to his desk and shouted that he wouldn’t go back until he’d mastered the manufacturing method for ether reactors. There was nothing I could do. I may be retired, but that doesn’t mean I can afford to stay with him for everything.”

After that, Ernie was taught the lifesong, but it was pretty tough going. After all, it was history’s largest script, even greater than the one used to control a silhouette knight. A book with a copy of the lifesong boasted an absurd size and mass. Even Ernie would need some time to learn all of it, and that resulted in Ambrosius having to leave him there.

“Don’t worry. I’ve arranged for both accommodations and his return trip already, so once he’s satisfied, he can come back at any time. We just need to arrange what he’ll need by then.”

Ambrosius didn’t doubt in the least that Ernie would be able to learn to make ether reactors. Since he didn’t, he was also sure that the boy would start making one the moment he came back. There was a need to prepare for that time.

“Let’s see what comes out of this, whether it be a god or a devil. This is fun, don’t you think?”

“I think it’s scary. I can’t help but wonder what is driving that boy so.”

Ambrosius crossed his arms and puffed out his chest as he declared, “I’m too scared to ask that as well.”

The pair’s return to Althusser kicked up a small fuss.

“If Ernie’s not coming back, then I’m going to wait right here!”

“He is our knight captain, your former majesty. Please allow us to wait for his return.”

The moment the Order of the Silver Phoenix heard the details of why Ernie

wasn't coming back (though details on the ether reactor were tactfully left out), they of course requested to stay and wait for him. Because they couldn't get any closer than Althusser, they would wait in the fortress.

“Very well; do as you please. I'm counting on you all to take good care of that madcap hobbyist in the future as well.”

At this point, the Order of the Silver Phoenix's members were truly bonded to each other. When Ambrosius gave them permission instead of censuring them, he and Emris left for the capital to clean up any remaining trifles from this incident.

It was about a month later that Ernie returned after learning everything about the alves' secret techniques, full of a feeling of satisfaction as well as burning desire.

Chapter 28: Descent of the Wrathful Deity

The morning sun was rising, warming the air slightly. During this time, a single Tzenndrimble could be found running along the West Fremmevilla Highway. Its destination was Fort Orvesius, the Order of the Silver Phoenix's base. Its bottom half, modeled after a horse, ran powerfully, which allowed it to reach its destination before long.

The Tzenndrimble, completely familiar with the place, entered the parking area. There, Kardetolles and other Tzenndrimbles could be seen lined up and stationary. The machine's knight runner made the silhouette knight wave at the knightsmiths running around its feet as it continued to its parking spot, stopped, and took a parked position.

A boy-girl pair jumped out of the cockpit. It was the twins, Kid and Addy. Normally, they lived with their family in Laihiala Academy City and used the Tzenndrimble as a means to commute from there to Fort Orvesius. While the silhouette knight was still the property of the order, it had been handed to them for their personal use, so no one batted an eye at them using it to commute from home. Such a thing showed how lenient the order could be in some respects.

At any rate, Kid and Addy peeked into the workshop that had been built next to the parking area. The sounds of hammers pounding and voices shouting never stopped inside, and people could be seen working hard. Once the twins found the boss, David, they trotted up to him.

"G'morning, boss! Hey, is Ernie in the usual spot?"

"Heyo."

"Hey. Yeah, the kid hasn't changed; he's in his usual spot. I have no idea what he's doing, but he's been messing with something this entire time." The boss pointed to a corner of the workshop.

Having heard that, Addy muttered, "I knew it," as she crossed her arms and

heaved a sigh.

“Jeez, Ernie’s been spending *all* his time here instead of coming home. Ernie’s mom told me she was feeling sad and lonely because she hasn’t seen him either! You should say something to him too, boss!”

“You’re right, that’s not good. It’s not, but... Sorry, just give up until *it’s* completed.” The boss crossed his arms as well, sounding unusually meek, but what he said was pretty heartless.

Addy shot a look at what the boss referred to as *it*.

It was a silhouette knight in development. Careful workings and evidence of a great amount of trial and error marked it as a completely new design. There was a crowd of knighthsmiths working in its vicinity, and it seemed like just this one machine was using all of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s resources.

The silhouette knight itself seemed quite unique in its construction. Already it was obvious that the inner skeleton was not in its usual shape, and there were thick metal tubes running around its torso. A seemingly unnecessary large space had been left empty in its belly, probably for some sort of large device.

“Yeah, I agree. After all, he’s been waiting for this for a long time. In the first place, even if you told him to stop, Ernie’s not the type of guy who’d listen,” Kid groused, a hint of resignation in his voice.

Addy ran to the corner after saying that she’d go say something, at least.

The boss saw her off, but it didn’t take long for him to turn back and resume shouting over the clamor of the workshop. “Aight, Li’l Bat, c’mere for a sec! The flow will be better if you connect the piping here like this...”

“C’mon, boss, no matter how important that point is, this is the tenth time you’ve changed it!”

Today as well, cheerful screams erupted from Fort Orvesius.



A strange room lay in a corner of Fort Orvesius’s workshop. Well, it couldn’t quite be called a room; a part had been sectioned off with boards, giving the “room” a distinct feel of having been constructed in a rush.

The space itself was fairly large. Bookshelves ran along one wall, chock-full of books. Most of the books were textbooks aimed toward knight runners and knightsmiths—literature that pertained in all sorts of ways to silhouette knights. In the center of the room was a gigantic worktable. Sometimes it played host to schematics, and other times it supported part of the actual machining process; it had a multitude of purposes. The surface was riddled with ink stains and scratches.

The plate at the entrance to the room read thusly: “Knight Captain’s Room (Temporary).”

Normally, a knight captain wouldn’t be given a room this crude, but in this case the order of things was backward. The knight captain Ernie had occupied that corner of the workshop and had for this entire time been absorbed in his work. Because he had asked for a large amount of documents to be carried to him and had essentially already made a nest there, it was decided to just go with it and make a room out of that corner.

That silly anecdote had led to the current Knight Captain’s Room (Temporary). The knight captain in question, Ernie, was absorbed in his work as usual today. If anything was different, it was that there was another person there as well.

“...And that concludes my report. And, this is just something I happened to overhear, but there is one more point to go over. It seems that recently there’s been a suspicious atmosphere hanging over the Occidents. There are rumors that sometime soon, one of the countries there will be making a huge move.”

The person speaking was slim, tall, and well proportioned. It was Nora, a knight of the Order of the Indigo Falcon. As always, she spoke in a matter-of-fact tone as she gave her regular report. The knight captain Ernie sat at his table (as it was a worktable rather than a desk) as he listened, and once she had concluded her report, his gaze sharpened a little.

“Does this have anything to do with those ‘thieves’? I was wondering why they did nothing after all that.”

“My apologies. I have only heard faint rumors, so I have no concrete information to give you on this subject. I just thought you should know that I heard about it.”

“Okay, I understand. Either way, it means we still have some time. So in regards to what you heard, if things get even more suspicious, tell me please.”

“Understood. Well then, I will be taking my leave. Excuse me.” Nora gave a salute and turned right around to leave.

Ernie saw her off, and for a moment he glared up at nothing, as if he were thinking of something, but soon enough he returned to his work.

Meanwhile, Addy had arrived just outside of the Knight Captain’s Room (Temporary). She didn’t try to enter right away. Instead, she stopped for a moment to take a deep breath, then also took the opportunity to straighten out her clothes and hair. She had started growing her hair out a few years ago, and now it was long enough to stretch down her back. She’d always had rather unruly hair, and it had managed to get out of whack during her walk. Irritated, she took a moment to try and straighten it out, but she quickly realized it would be useless and gave up. Instead, she focused her energy on changing tack quickly, psyching herself up as she was about to enter the room—

But that was when she ran into Nora, who had just exited that very same room. Seeing someone unexpected in an unexpected place caused Addy, who had only taken a single step, to completely freeze. For a while, Nora watched Addy expressionlessly, but then she suddenly got close enough to Addy to hug her and whispered in her ear, “It’s okay—there’s no need to worry. I would never do such a thing as go for Sir Ernesti.”



With that, Nora walked off, leaving Addy, who was once again frozen out of shock. It took a while for Addy to return to her senses, after which a smile bright like the sun spread on her face, and she enthusiastically jumped into the Knight Captain's Room (Temporary).

The first thing Addy saw as she got inside was a giant set of armor. It was painted blue and stood two and a half meters tall. It was Ernie's silhouette gear, a Motor Beat.

The Motor Beat looked ridiculously silly, its huge form hunched over skillfully so it could poke away at some small, detailed work on the table. Even though it had the use of five fingers on each hand, its huge form meant a lot of talent and skill was needed to do such delicate work.

Its pilot, Ernie, wasn't actually inside the Motor Beat. Instead, he was sitting in a chair to the side, staring at the tips of the machine's hands. Both his hands were holding on to the tips of silver nerve bundles that were connected to the Motor Beat. He was controlling the machine through those silver nerves from the outside.

As for why he was committing to this amusing feat of dexterity, it had to do with what he was having the Motor Beat work on.

The subject was mithril, a special metal that needed one to add magic to one's hands while working it like the alves did. Of course, such a feat was impossible for those the alves referred to as the ephemeral race. However, that only applied if the person was trying to do so directly with their own body.

A silhouette gear's hands moved through the use of crystal tissue, which was a type of catalyst crystal and could directly apply magic. In other words, it was possible to mimic an alv by using a silhouette gear. For that reason, Ernie had spent the last while watching over his silhouette gear as it essentially tried to do fine detail work with clay.

Addy was used to this strange sight already, so she pounced on Ernie at full speed without any worries.

"Ehe heh heh, Ernie! I see you're working hard today too, Ernie! Your mom, Tina, she asked me to tell you to come home every once in a while!"

“Mrgwah! Addy...if you jump at me from the front like that, I won’t be able to see. But I see... My mother... I think I may reach a good stopping point soon. When I do, I guess I’ll go home.”

Once Addy brought over her own seat and plopped down next to him, Ernie resumed his work as if nothing had happened.

His expression was nothing but serious. After all, even to him, processing the lifestream while having the silhouette gear manipulate the mithril was no easy feat. He was able to withstand the burden by slowing down his processing speed while maintaining the extraordinarily high concentration needed for the task. Because of the difficulty, he couldn’t work for long periods at a time; instead, he made slow progress every day. It was work that required maddening patience, but Ernie was the type of person who would happily accomplish it if robots were involved.

“So...this is an ether reactor, isn’t it?” Addy watched the silhouette gear molding the metal curiously.

The fact that Ernie was creating an ether reactor was kept secret even to the rest of the order. The only ones who knew were the twins, the company commanders, and the boss. The other members only thought that their boss had started something weird again. They weren’t that far off the mark, though.

“Yes, my ether reactor. A machine’s heart made by me, for me,” Ernie muttered ecstatically without ever stopping working. As long as he had an ether reactor made from the heart of a massive division-class monster, Ernie would be able to complete the machine he had always wanted to create. He had already drawn up schematics for the chassis and had asked the boss to create it. The construction was still proceeding even now.

“Hmm...you look so cute when you’re having fun, Ernie.”

Meanwhile, Addy looked like she was about to pounce on Ernie to wrap him up in a full-body hug, complete with cheek nuzzling like she always did. He wouldn’t move while working, so he would be hers to do what she pleased with, since he had no real reason to object. Ever since he had started working on the reactor, scenes like this were becoming a daily affair.

After a while more of enjoying how Ernie felt while he was working, Addy

suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

“That’s right! Hey, hey, Ernie, once this is done, why don’t we go play together again? And by play I mean fight. We can take out my Tzenny and the Chariot!”

“That sounds like a great idea. It would serve as a good test run once I’m done. I’ll go ask His Majesty if there are any troublesome monster nests we can go after.”

And thus an incredibly violent date was promised. It was hard to believe such a conversation was being had between a boy and girl of age, but they seemed to be seriously having fun as the conversation proceeded. Listening to it would make one regret the absence of anyone to call them out. As an aside, at this time Kid was busy doing maintenance on his Tzenndrimble.

The only other person who heard the conversation was the Motor Beat. It just continued working on the reactor silently without stopping for even a moment.



Now, the year 1281 O.C. had arrived.

About half a year had passed since the shellcase attack on Alfheim, the alves’ hidden settlement. As an aside, that incident was shrouded in confidentiality, so it hadn’t received an official name like the other incidents. However, the few who were in the know had taken to calling it the Shellcase Calamity in hushed whispers.

The kingdom of Fremmevilla was filled with the bright sunlight of spring. Green and life abounded in the hills and fields, spreading their branches vigorously.

In the midst of such pleasant weather, Fort Orvesius was instead filled to the brim with heat and excitement. Shouted orders flew through the air, and knightsmiths ran around the place in even more of a rush than usual. Something was about to happen.

The origin of all this lay in the rear of the workshop; it was a single silhouette knight.

It was covered all over with cloth, so it couldn't be seen in full detail, but from the general silhouette, it was quite the unique machine. Because of that, there was a large space left around it so nothing else would bump into it by accident. Furthermore, even its maintenance table had to be specially shaped. Just that would indicate to anyone how much work was being devoted to this machine.

“Okay, lower it just like that. Slowly! And make sure the place matches! Awwright, we're installing it now!”

The boss's orders were shouted at a volume that seemed like it would split the air in the workshop. Something in chains was being lowered slowly by a crane into the machine from above. The back of the machine jutted outward greatly, making the shape terribly warped from the normal human model. The thing was being lowered into an open space in the back of the machine. Immediately, knightsmiths on the unit's shoulders and all around the area started work in their silhouette gears, connecting metal tubes one by one to the object that had been lowered in.

“Are we done connecting the intake and exhaust system?! Okay, we're starting the base operation! C'mon, hurry up and get those silver nerves connected already! They'll start conducting mana soon!”

The device that had been lowered was large and egg shaped. It was the ether reactor that Ernie had taken so long to make. It was connected to the machine while still protruding greatly out the back, and was far larger than normal ether reactors.

Just like the Toybox, this unit had multiple reactors. One in the belly, and one in the back. Learning from past mistakes, they had completely redesigned this silhouette knight to mount them. Though its shape was strange, its structure was no longer strained by the inclusion.

Soon enough, the shrill sound of air being sucked in and thrown out filled the interior of the workshop. Even on a normal silhouette knight, those sounds would have been hard to ignore, but with the extra large reactors mounted to this unit, who could imagine the noise that was being created? The ether reactors spun up well, accompanied by the chorus of fierce air currents. Right away, the sound grew to a shriek that overwhelmed all other sound, forcing the

knightsmiths in the area to cover their ears.

Suddenly, the earsplitting noise softened. In exchange, a refreshing, bell-like voice came from the machine's megaphone.

"Beginning transmission from the reactors. Confirm start-up of the Behemoth's Heart. Setting output to minimum settings and transitioning to a dormant state. Switching control to the reactor, Queen's Coronet; starting up standard output."

The owner of the voice was Ernie. He was already in the pilot's seat.

There were two ether reactors mounted in the machine. One was a large reactor made from the heart of a behemoth, a division-class monster, quite literally named the Behemoth's Heart. The other was a midsize reactor made from the heart of the queen shellcase, a brigade-class monster, named the Queen's Coronet. Ernie had put his all into making both of them, and both were utterly unique in this world.

Both reactors made from humongous monsters' hearts supplied an overwhelming amount of mana, filling the silhouette knight with power as it awakened. The unit's crystal muscles contracted, eliciting a sound like a stringed instrument.

The first thing that moved were the arms. In order to cover the large reactor completely, bizarrely shaped arms had been added to the back... A total of four of them. That meant on top of the four limbs all silhouette knights were equipped with, this one had four extra arms for a total of six, making the silhouette rather aberrant. The chains that were wrapped around the machine to support it were released, and a strangely long arm stretched outward. Looking closer, one could see that the hand's fingers were long, thin, and sharp like a series of five blades.

Next, as the entire machine started moving, the cloths fell off it one after the other, revealing the machine that was hidden underneath.

It wasn't just the extra arms that looked irregular; the unit's outer skin was also strangely shaped. The armor plates were placed so they overlapped, which was also done on some other silhouette knights, but such a thing had been done far more on this one. On top of that, the unit's design and armor

placement in certain places were things that had never been seen before, marking it as even more peculiar.

The members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix held their breaths as they watched over the silhouette knight's activation. Addy was among them, and though she looked over the entire body at first, her gaze stopped on a certain point, the strange silhouette knight's head. There, what could be seen was—

“A person's...face?”

It was a mask with teeth bared intimidatingly. The thing was designed to resemble a human face.

Generally, a silhouette knight's head was just a device to allow sight, as it housed and protected the eye crystal. In order to do that, heads tended to prioritize defensive strength, and the face of most tended to be covered in an armor plate called a visor. Even if a silhouette knight's head were to have a design on it, in almost all cases it was painted on the visor. This machine instead had a human face-shaped mask that no one could imagine would serve as armor, and even had a helmet put on top. This design made it look awfully human, which Addy found a bit scary.

Ernie smiled from his position in the pilot's seat. Rather, he was full-on laughing. He wouldn't stop either. No matter how much he laughed, it seemed there was more welling up within him. It wasn't as if something especially funny had happened. He was just so incredibly and endlessly happy. Finally, he had obtained the thing he had spent his entire sixteen years of life pining for endlessly. A mech just for him existed here and now.

If it weren't for the fact that he'd hurriedly turned off the megaphone, his laughter would have been heard by those outside. For the past while, he had been constantly laughing and stroking or nuzzling the controls around his pilot's seat, a wide grin on his face as he looked through the holomonitor.

This was the cockpit that belonged to that bizarre machine. While the outside looked strange enough, the inside was on an entirely different level of odd. The seat—in which Ernie was sitting—was at the center of everything, and there were control yokes to either side of him. Furthermore, there was a mysterious machine that placed two sets of regularly spaced keys, like an instrument with a

keyboard, at his sides. There was no way Ernie would be putting on a concert from his silhouette knight; the machine was literally named the keyboard, and as its name implied, it was an input device for what Earthen civilization from his previous life would refer to as a computer.

The four extra arms weren't the only thing that had been added to the unit; there was a mountain of other special devices strapped to it all over. There were so many that a normal control scheme was no longer enough to control them all. That was why he had brought in a familiar machine from his previous life to this design. Not only that, but as a supplemental function to unite all these disparate devices, there were several miniature magius engines installed in the machine. The combination of all these engines, the keyboard, and Ernie's style of Full Control allowed this lump of abnormal devices to operate. The way things stood, Ernie was the only person in the world who could even make the thing lift a finger; it was totally defective as a product.

"Happy birthday, my robot. My partner. My—"

It was only natural for this unit to have a peculiar appearance. After all, it existed only for Ernie. Its abilities, appearance, everything reflected the boy's heart.

That was why Ernie had carved his origin into this machine. In other words, the machine was his soul, which connected him to another world—as his feelings, that in the past had never been able to reach their target. This was the only form the silhouette knight could take; Ernie couldn't even think of anything else.

This unit was what this world called a silhouette knight. However, its form was undoubtedly that of samurai from his home.

"Ikaruga!"

A demon-faced, six-armed deity of war raised its first cry in another world.

An avatar of power and destruction that surpassed the logic and causality of the world had now manifested fully.

—To be continued in *Knight's & Magic* volume 4

story by
**HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO**
illustrations by
KUROGIN

“Ernie,
you need
to reflect
on your
actions
a little.”

Addy
scolded
Ernie. His
actions this
time had
gone so far
as to
endanger
his life.

Knight's & Magic

3

He was almost two meters tall, and his body had clearly been trained heavily. The man was Fremmevilla's first prince Leotamus's second son, **Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla.**

“My nostalgic homeland!”



“Captain
Echevalier...”

Ernie looked up at the slender and tall girl. Her name was **Nora**, and she was a member of the Order of the Indigo Falcon who had entered as a new student of the knight runner department.



explanation

A bizarrely shaped silhouette knight made by the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Because its lower half is that of a horse, it is referred to as a centaur silhouette knight.
In order to accommodate its uncommonly large size, it mounts two ether reactors, making it an extremely expensive unit. Furthermore, it requires two knight runners to pilot, making it the first two-seater in history.

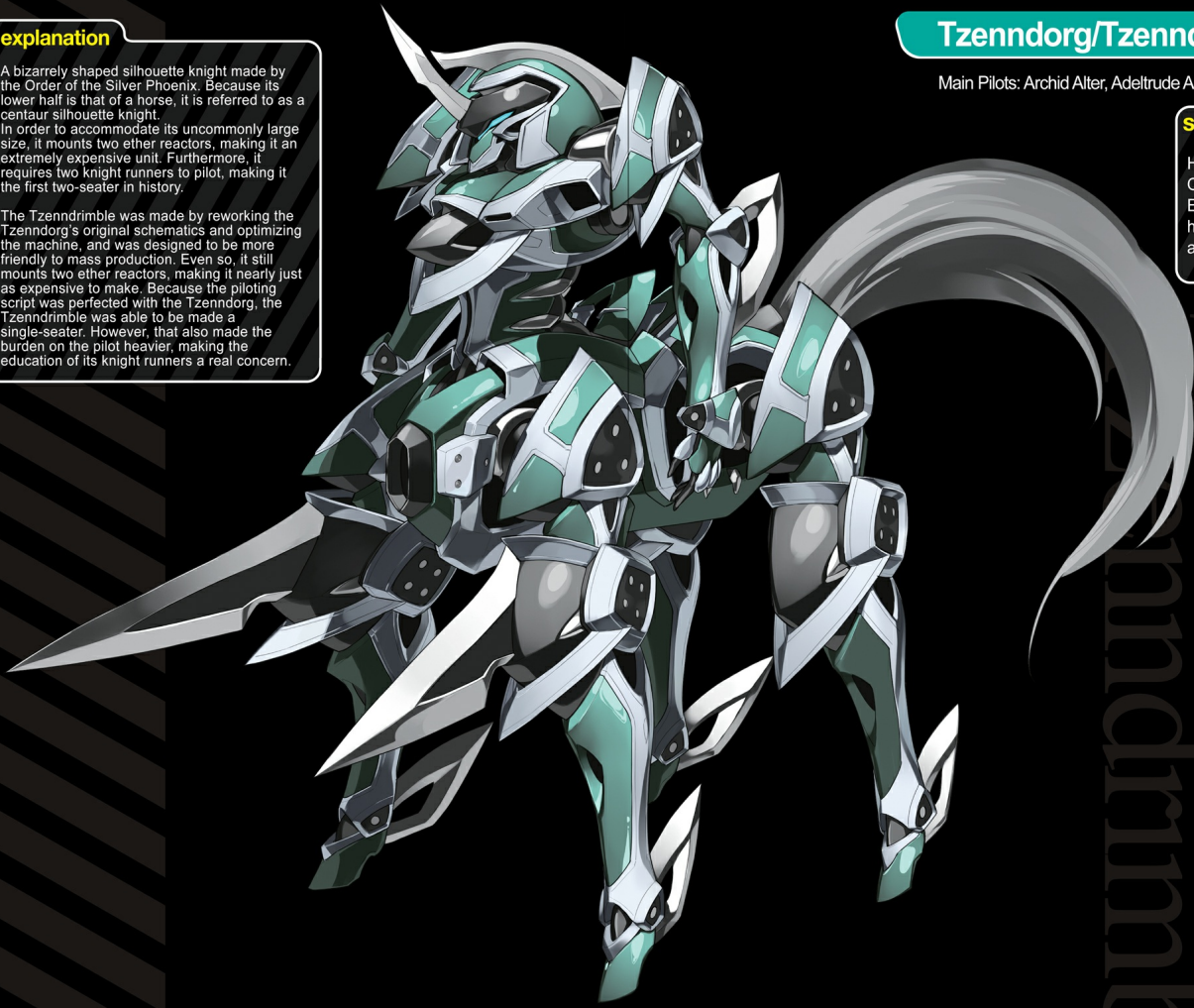
The Tzenndrimble was made by reworking the Tzenndorg's original schematics and optimizing the machine, and was designed to be more friendly to mass production. Even so, it still mounts two ether reactors, making it nearly just as expensive to make. Because the piloting script was perfected with the Tzenndorg, the Tzenndrimble was able to be made a single-seater. However, that also made the burden on the pilot heavier, making the education of its knight runners a real concern.

Tzenndorg/Tzenndrimble

Main Pilots: Archid Alter, Adeltrude Alter

specs

Height: 15.3 m
Operational Weight: 45.5 t
Equipment: lance, halberd, shield, towing anchor, Flexible Coat



Kardetolle

Main Pilots: Order of the Silver Phoenix

specs

Height: 10.1 m

Operational

Weight: 18.6 t

Equipment: all general equipment, all Option works and/or sub-arm equipment



explanation

The new officially adopted mass-produced silhouette knight of Fremmevilla Kingdom, and the cutting-edge successor to the Kaldatoah. As a result of mixing the new technologies of the Tellestarle and the accumulated knowledge of the kingdom's technicians, it possesses incredible abilities as a mass-produced unit. There will be many offshoot silhouette knights made based on this model.

Goldleo

Main Pilot: Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla

specs

Height: 10.5 m

Operational

Weight: 19.5 t

Equipment:

bastard sword,

silhouette arms

"Blast Howling"



explanation

The prince's personal silhouette knight, based on the mass-produced Kardetolle with some adjustments and customizations. Boasts high power thanks to the request of its pilot, and its armor is on the thick side as well. The lion motif exists throughout the body, and that, combined with its golden armor, makes it stand out a lot. It has a sibling unit that is identical in all but looks named "Silvatiger."









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