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Knight's & Magic

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Knight's & Magic ⁴

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the “Festival.”

Sorry to keep you waiting!

Finally, it's time for the appearance of **Ikaruga**, the personal silhouette knight of our protagonist—Ernie.

“A shadow loomed over them. A silhouette knight was flying through the air.”

“The silhouette knight seemed to be the work of a **madman**, as it had **four extra arms** stretching out from its back.”

“Its eye crystals swiveled around behind its strangely human visor.”

—Just these snapshots of Ikaruga's first scene are enough to get anyone excited. Even people who aren't Ernie would probably max their excitement meters out.

“Let's go, Ikaruga... It's the **start of the festival!**”
The “**true**” Knight's & Magic starts here!

Prologue

The continent of Setterlund—a vast swathe of land inhabited by people and magic beasts, better known as monsters.

This continent is split vertically down the middle by the Auvinier Mountain Range. The western side is packed densely with human countries, which people refer to as the Occidents. Meanwhile, the eastern side is occupied by only a single human country that shares its space with the Great Borcuse Forest, a territory of monsters. This country, the Kingdom of Fremmevilla, serves as both shield and sword for the rest of humanity.

At the foot of the Auvinier Mountains lay a city containing Fremmevilla Kingdom's greatest academic institute: Laihiala Academy City. Right by this city lay the base of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Fort Orvesius.

Actually, it wasn't quite geared for battle enough to be called a fort; the inside was basically one big workshop. The spacious parking area was occupied by the order's various silhouette knights, all lined up. There were the machines of the first company led by a pure white knight, the machines of the second company led by a crimson knight, and the centaur knights of the third company. Behind all of those units, representing strength few in Fremmevilla Kingdom had access to, stood the knight captain's machine—an armored warrior with six arms and two hearts.

These were silhouette knights, humanoid weapons that usually stood about ten meters tall. These knights of steel that were made to fight against monsters looked like exquisite statues as long as they didn't move and, when arrayed in neat lines as they were, seemed like mere decoration. However, that had nothing to do with the furious activity that was going on at the silhouette knights' feet. The perpetrators of this activity were knightsmiths, people charged with the knights' maintenance. They ran around carrying raw materials and tools, going every which way in their machines shaped like suits of armor—silhouette gears—in a hurry to complete their work. One person in particular

was going around shouting orders at those knightsmiths. His muscular build and rugged features, along with his magnificent beard, marked him as a dwarf.

“Jeez, seriously? So many of our silhouette knights are selfish little whelps.”

The dwarf complained with a wry smile as he windmilled his arms around in an attempt to loosen up. For a certain reason, the Order of the Silver Phoenix boasted the most unique lineup of silhouette knights in the entire kingdom. Every different machine was powerful, but the maintenance needed to preserve that strength took a lot of time and effort. Naturally, that meant the knightsmiths had a lot of work to do.

“Boss! We’re done with maintenance on the Tzenndrimbles’ legs! We changed out all the crystal tissue.”

“Got it, good work. It sounds like our next outing will be quite the long trek, after all. We need to pay special attention to the Tzenndrimbles’ legs.”

The man who was shouting orders—David Hepken—nodded in satisfaction after receiving his subordinate’s report. He was the chief of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s knightsmith contingent, and his nickname of “Boss” had followed him from his school days, brought along by the other knightsmiths who had known him for a long time. He himself was used to it, and in truth he was in fact the boss when it came to the order’s foundry, so the nickname stood.

“Boooooss, we’ve finished the maintenance on the machines’ armor and equipment load.”

“Got it. Nice work, Li’l Bat. That should take care of almost everything.”

After the report from David’s subordinate came a younger dwarven boy. His name was Batson Termonen, and he was a somewhat strange knightsmith who was more familiar with silhouette gears than silhouette knights.

The boss proceeded to field many more reports of things being finished. The Order of the Silver Phoenix’s equipment was truly diverse, from silhouette knights to silhouette gears, and even carriages that were towed around by the Tzenndrimbles. Trying to perform maintenance on all of it at once was a rather large undertaking.

“So we’re finally ready. Right, this is shaping up to be a pretty lively trip. You guys better put your backs into it!”

The boss, smiling in satisfaction, spoke to put some fire in the bellies of his people, to which the other knightholds all raised their hands and cheered. Behind them, the steel knights stood silently, but they seemed like they were shining with pride.



Meanwhile, as for what the knight captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier, was doing... He was not in Fort Orvesius. He was at his home located in Laihiala Academy City, spending time with his childhood friends.

“Uhhh... We’re pretty much done packing now, I think.” Ernie emerged from his room hugging a too-large piece of luggage in both hands.

Archid Alter tilted his head, puzzled. “Didn’t we leave our luggage over at the fort? Are you really planning to take all that stuff with you?”

“Almost all of it’s my design notes for silhouette knights, tools for drawing schematics, and textbooks.”

“Ahhh... Yeah... I don’t think we’ll have a leisurely enough trip to allow any of that, but whatever.”

Even though they were about to sortie, it seemed Ernie was planning to take all his usual things with him. It was so like him that even Kid was astounded.

“Now wait a second, Ernie. Are you sure you aren’t forgetting anything? Do you have your silhouette knight with you?” That was when Ernie’s mother, Selestina Echevalier, jogged after him.

Listening to their conversation from the outside, one could tell that there was something off about this mother-and-child dynamic. Kid, who was actually listening, couldn’t help but pratfall.

“Yes, of course! This is a big chance, so I’m having the order do thorough maintenance. The plan is to meet up with them later, since we’re all going together.”

“That’s reassuring. Ernie... It’s going to be lonely here while you’re gone, so be

careful not to get hurt out there. I wish you the best at your work!” Tina sorrowfully hugged Ernie in parting, and the boy returned the hug before nodding confidently.

“I will! It’s going to be a pretty long trip, so you should take care of yourself too, mother. I’ll bring back lots of souvenirs from the other side, so look forward to it!”

Ernie’s father, Matthias Echevalier, appeared behind Tina with a chuckle and a wry smile. “I don’t really care about souvenirs, myself, but... I just wanted to say that working hard is important, but you’d best make sure you come back safe.”

His son was usually rather laid-back, but tended to do the most ridiculous things every once in a while, so he couldn’t stop feeling a vague sense of danger. The boy had the ability to get through any scrape, but as a parent Matthias couldn’t help but be worried. He mussed with Ernie’s hair as Tina turned to the twins who were with her son.

“Addy, Kid, you two should be careful too. And take care of Ernie for me, please.”

“We will! Leave Ernie to me, Tina! As the captain’s aide, I’ll do my work perfectly!” With that, Adeltrude “Addy” Alter put her hands on her hips and proudly puffed out her chest.

“I’m pretty sure Ernie’s going to be fine no matter what happens, but sure, got it.” Kid shrugged noncommittally.

Neither of them said anything about the fact that if Ernie were to go off the rails, the two of them were likely to be right there with him.

“Then let’s be off! First we need to head for the capital and meet up with the order!”

Now that their goodbyes were complete, Ernie ran off energetically, still hugging his luggage. The twins ran after him, and his parents saw them off. They didn’t go back inside until the children’s lively figures disappeared into the distance.



It was the year 1281 O.C. With the onset of early summer, the weather was pleasantly warm.

Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla, second in line for the throne of Fremmevilla Kingdom, took large strides down a hallway of Schreiber Castle, located in the center of Fremmevilla Kingdom's capital of Konkaanen. His large and solid figure was in a great hurry, and as he proceeded down the passageway, he slammed open a door in his way as if he was just about to kick it down.

"DAD!" he yelled. "I mean...Your Majesty. I'm going to head for the Kuscheperka Kingdom! You know the reason, I know you do!"

They were in the space set aside for people to have an audience with the king, otherwise known as an audience chamber. In the rear of the spacious chamber sat the king, Leotamus Haalce Fremmevilla, on his throne. He let out a probably resigned sigh as he waved his hand, motioning for the shocked people around him to leave the two of them alone.

"Good grief... So you heard. Wait just a second, you fool. I'm pretty sure I know the answer already, but I'll ask just in case: why do you suddenly want to go to Kuscheperka?"

As always, Emris was completely unaware of how much his father grieved over his son's ignorance of etiquette. He raised a clenched fist and yelled, "The answer is obvious! I won't let you say that you don't know already, dad. Kuscheperka Kingdom... Aunt Martina's country... It's being invaded!!!"

Seeing the second prince shout so passionately, King Leotamus grumbled somewhat resignedly, "Agh, I knew this would happen. This is exactly why I tried to keep it a secret. Where in the world did you hear about this from? Emris...we haven't received any sort of request from them. What reason would you give for intruding on their battles?"

"Why would I need a reason?! My aunt, my *blood*, is there! Going to save her is only natural—that should be enough!"

Leotamus understandably groaned. "Right. But I can't give you any forces. Did you forget? It's true that our country has quite the number of silhouette knights, but they exist to maintain our large amount of territory and protect our people. I won't send them off to foreign lands so trivially."

With how sizable the kingdom was, Fremmevilla could be counted among the largest countries of all humanity. Thanks to the kingdom's rather remote position, the countless number of monsters across the nation was a significant problem. In order to preserve the peace, a large number of silhouette knights had to be constantly available. Knowing that, Emris, who had charged in on pure momentum, couldn't help but gum up. Though he had a tendency to be impulsive and thoughtless, he was a fundamentally chivalrous man. He wasn't the type of person who would put many people in danger to save his aunt. That was why what he said next was likely inevitable.

"I see... I get it... Then I'll go and save her myself! You have no objections to that, right?!"

Since Emris tended to act very quickly upon deciding on a course of action, he had already turned around to leave. Leotamus reflexively brought his hand up to his forehead, feeling a headache coming on as he shouted after his son.

"And what do you expect to be able to accomplish by yourself?"

"I don't know! But...she took care of me for a long time. There's no way I could leave her alone to her fate!"

Leotamus forced himself to maintain his calm as he narrowed his eyes. "So, Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla... Are you saying you will go off to make war in another country with that name? I know you know what such an action would mean."

As if struck by lightning, Emris stopped on the spot. "W-Well..."

"I'm sure you aren't *that* foolish. My little sister is already there—what do you think would happen if I let my son go there as well? It might be taken as a declaration of war."

"But that doesn't mean—! Right, Kuscheperka Kingdom is directly west of us across the Auvnier Mountains. If they're being invaded, that might mean we'll be next! We should lend them our strength before that happens..."

"You might be right. But that doesn't mean you should go and give our enemies an excuse to do it before they even need a pretext. The actions of a king are the actions of the entire nation. That goes for those in the line of succession as well. So knowing that, answer me, Emris. Are you prepared to

involve the citizens of this kingdom because of your own selfish decisions?”

Emris was silent for a while, but his feelings were obvious as his body shook and he clenched his fist so tight it drew blood.

“Then, Your Majesty...dad...are you saying that you’re going to leave my aunt to die?!”

“Of course not.”

Because the king’s answer was so flippant in contrast to the flow of the conversation up until now, Emris was taken aback and was a little late to respond.

“You wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything by going on your own. If you want to lend significance to your efforts, then you need a corresponding amount of strength. I can’t move much of our country’s fighting power, but that just means we need a small force that is the equal of thousands on their own...”

A certain knight order popped up in the back of Emris’s mind. Out of the many orders in Fremmevilla Kingdom, they were the most likely candidate to have that power. He reflexively tried to say the name, but at that moment, *they* appeared in front of the king.

“My apologies for our late arrival, Your Majesty. The Order of the Silver Phoenix has prepared all three of our companies for sortie and they are mustered here.”

Ernesti appeared in the audience chamber with Kid and Addy in tow, politely taking a knee in reverence. Seeing Emris, the embodiment of the unconventional, lost for words, Leotamus bit back a throaty laugh that threatened to come up with a smug “Gotcha!”

“Are you unsatisfied, Emris? You know their strength. They have brought low both a behemoth and a queen shellcase—our strongest knight order, who have saved our country several times over.”

Emris scratched his head, the disappointed look still on his face. “I know that very well, but... Didn’t you just say that you wouldn’t interfere so that the country could keep its hands clean?”

“Yes, exactly. That is why you must avoid mentioning the name ‘Fremmevilla’ as much as possible while on the other side, Emris. Act like you have nothing to do with our country, and you will give no one just cause to invade us.”

Emris crumbled to the floor with a thud, the power leaving him. Even though his own forte lay in high-handed and brute-force methods, he found this shockingly blunt.

“Dad... Isn’t that, like...just a bold-faced lie?”

“No. In this case, the one who makes the first claim wins. Listen here, Emris, it’ll all work out if you just force people to accept the story as truth.” Leotamus cleared his throat and resumed his serious expression before continuing, “Our country is currently trying to step forward into the future as one. We can’t afford interruptions from ‘behind’ us, which this latest fuss is threatening to be. We need them to quiet down peacefully. And you see, peace means balance. Kuscheperka is a famous large country in the west. Allowing them to be ravaged would be out of the question. Well, that, and I must ask you to take care of my idiot of a son, Order of the Silver Phoenix.”

“Understood. The Order of the Silver Phoenix has received and accepts your royal decree,” Ernie said.

Beside them, Emris had been wondering what he should say this entire time, but it seemed he gave up and deemed it as too much trouble, as he simply started to walk off.

“Okay, whatever! It’ll be reassuring to have you all with me. Let’s go, Order of the Silver Phoenix!”

The king shouted after him as he left, “You would do well to witness what war is like. The times are changing. No longer will we be able to merely sit back and pay attention to monsters. Also, make sure to save Martina... I’m counting on you.”

Emris turned slightly to give his father a confident nod.



Just like all the other cities in Fremmevilla Kingdom, the capital, Konkaanen, was surrounded by sturdy walls. In front of its west gate, which was gigantic so

silhouette knights could pass through, the Order of the Silver Phoenix had mustered with full resources.

The core of the force were the order's prided centaur knights, the Tzenndrimbles, which made up the third company. The Tzenndrimbles were connected to carriages, allowing them to exhibit incredible transport capabilities. They were perfect for long sorties, which was why the order had made such thorough preparations. On top of the carriages were kneeling silhouette knights—Kardetolles, the cutting edge of mass-produced units. These belonged to the first and second companies.

Of course, there were more than just silhouette knights present. There were also regular horse-drawn carts, packed with the food and supplies needed to repair and maintain silhouette knights. All of it together made for quite a large group.

"This is shaping up to be a pretty big thing, huh?" Helvi Olbarri, commander of the third company, sounded impressed as she looked around the gathering.

"Saving a friendly country might sound good on paper, but we're basically going to war, after all," replied Edgar C. Blanche, commander of the first company. "There's a lot we'll need."

Up until now, the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been asked to travel all over the place thanks to their forces' high mobility and strength. However, all of that had still been within the confines of the country, and they had been able to rely on supplies and support being on hand wherever they went. Now, they would be far more weighed down with a need to bring a lot of matériel on this expedition—a first for the order.

"We don't know what's happened on the other side. It looks like that's a big reason for all this too. Now then, you two, our venerable captain is here. It's time for us to load up and ship out."

That was when Dietrich Künitz, commander of the second company, appeared. He then moved on to pass the message around further. The members of the order, who up until then had been spending their time leisurely, quickly returned to their stations.

Ernie, with Emris in tow, appeared and passed through the gates. Emris saw

the Order of the Silver Phoenix with their full loadouts and was reminded of the incident that was colloquially known as the Shellcase Calamity. On top of a peculiar carriage being towed by two Tzenndrimbles was a flashy silhouette knight that reflected the sunlight thanks to its golden color.

“Oh, Goldleo... The time has come for you to show your full power, for my aunt’s sake.”

Emris looked up at Goldleo, full of emotion, as Ernie slipped by him to get out in front of the knight order and turn around. At some point, everyone there had gathered and were looking to him.

“Your Highness. Your orders, please.”

“Awwwright, Order of the Silver Phoenix! In order to save my aunt, quell the fires of war, and send the idiots who started this war flying along the way, we shall sally forth!”

In a lot of ways, Emris’s briefing had been far too violent, and the members of the order who had been standing at attention couldn’t help but crumble in a united pratfall. Emris paid them no mind as he clenched his fist and thrust it forward. “Our enemies are not monsters! I don’t know what kind of hardships we’ll face. But with all our strength combined, I’m sure we’ll triumph!”

“Okay! Well then, everyone, let’s get psyched up and head off to ‘war’!” Ernie’s smile was somehow warm and happy, as if he were looking forward to this, as he wrapped things up with that rather vicious line.

The order roared, which was followed by the shrill cry of silhouette knights.

And thus the Order of the Silver Phoenix took their first steps into the storm blowing through the Occidents. This would be the first campaign perpetrated by the Kingdom of Fremmevilla since its founding; it marked the beginning of a period that would go down in Setterlund’s history, one involving both the east and the west.

Part 7: Grand Storm of the West Arc

Chapter 29: Beginning of the Black Storm

The earth was dyed black. A cold black with a dull shine. A hard, heavy, metallic black. The responsible party was giant knights armored in black steel—silhouette knights. It was a massive group of them, large enough to give the impression that they were blanketing the earth, arranged in neat lines.

Here was the capital of one of the greatest countries of the Occidents, known far and wide: the Jaloudek Kingdom. The center of the city was occupied by a massive and magnificent palace, in front of which was a wide outdoor space paved with stone. A balcony jutted out of the front of the palace, from which a person could see the entire space that was currently covered by a carpet of black steel.

There were several figures on the balcony: two men and a woman. They had been imperiously gazing over the pitch-black knights, but soon enough one of the young men stepped forward. He looked to be in his midtwenties, and he gave off a very masculine impression.

In response to the man stepping forward, the giants' hearts quieted down a bit from their previous low buzz. This meant their ether reactors' intakes were being suppressed, and their crystal tissue lay completely still. The space fell silent, as if everything present had died. Looking down at the black knights, frozen like statues, the young man nodded in satisfaction before speaking in a calm voice. There must have been some device at work, as his voice carried easily to every corner of the area.

"Brave men of the Black Knights, the pride of our country, and of the Occidents. I feel moved to be able to witness this day, and this time."

The speaker, Carlitos Enden Jaloudek, first son of King Bardomelo Bilt Jaloudek, stopped to gaze around the area. Though his eyes were usually nearly closed—long and narrow eyes that belied his clever nature—they were wide-

open now, as he made his strong proclamations to the gathered crowd.

“As you all know, our king and my father, His Majesty King Bardomelo, is bedridden from disease. Our lands have been split, taken from us by despicable rebels long ago in the time of our ancestors. And now, on the eve of our attempt to reclaim them, he cannot be with us! It is too much for me to imagine how mortified father must have felt at this. We must carry on his will!”

Thunk, thunk! The silhouette knights rapped their weapons on the ground, showing their wordless approval.

Carlitos’s satisfaction flashed across his face before he continued, “In times long past, this western land had only one country, under one king. I’m sure you’ve all heard that the name of that country was Fadar-Abahden. The nations that stand today...our Jaloudek Kingdom, Kuscheperka Kingdom, the Confederation of Lokahl, and the isolated Eleven Flags... All of them are but dregs, split off from that great nation.”

A sense of zeal started to overtake the man’s words, and his gestures were becoming more exaggerated. All of that was being aimed directly toward the black steel knights in front of him.

“Fadar-Abahden was an ideal country—its power so great that it could exterminate monsters! However, thanks to the fires of ambitions nurtured by fools, this paradise was put to the flame. How wretched! But I tell you now, we, the Kingdom of Jaloudek, are that great country’s rightful successors, the ones who have inherited its blood. *We* have a duty to wipe away my father’s regret!”

Matching the timing of when the man swung his arm up, the black silhouette knights all revved up their hearts at once. The knights revived from statues to soldiers in black steel as they stomped the ground and banged on their shields, cheering at their leader’s speech. The sounds were made in perfect coordination, and they reverberated through the stone-paved plaza to shake the earth in all directions.

Carlitos once again raised his arms to still the intimidating commotion. The swarm of steel quickly quieted down.

“The time is now.”

While his utterance was quiet, it was somehow still filled with a zealous heat that seeped into the hearts of all who listened. Each one of the knight runners piloting the machines of black steel had, at some point, become carried away by this passion as they stared at their holomonitors in rapt attention.



“The great country of the past, Fadar-Abahden, was ripped apart by a multitude of regrets. But the time has come to return all to its unified state once again, under our banner!”

The knights’ singular cry combined with the roar of their charges’ ether reactors to shake the very air. At this point, no one was able to tell what anyone was saying. But the wild fervor was able to burn through it all and drive the people into a mad frenzy.

“You Black Knights will muster all your forces and take back our rightful lands! March, soldiers!”

Carlitos ruled as his father’s regent. His words were the words of Jaloudek’s king, Bardomelo. Though there was no way the knight runners in their large silhouette knights would refuse such an order, whipped up into a conquering fervor by his words as they were. They immediately set forth, shaking the land as they did.



It was the year 1281 O.C. Along with the arrival of spring, Jaloudek Kingdom declared war on its neighbor, the Confederation of Lokahl. A week after that declaration, the armies of Jaloudek—of which the Black Knights, the Bronze Claw Knights, and the Copper Fang Knights made the larger part (a total of six hundred units)—marched across the border.

What followed was an all-out war waged by the Occidents’ largest national army. The curtains had been raised on the conflict that, in later generations, would be referred to as the Grand Storm of the West.



“To think that the Confederation of Lokahl wouldn’t even last a month...”

The location was Kuscheperka Kingdom’s capital, Dervankhul. Inside the palace situated at the center of the city, there lay an audience chamber that was especially large. The throne was decorated with delicate carvings, and upon it sat the king, Augusti Valio Kuscheperka, muttering bitterly.

The reason for the deep creases in his brow lay in the report that had just

come in, originating from their western border this morning. The report stated, in direct terms, that the Confederation of Lokahl had been destroyed. Kuscheperka Kingdom had been tracking Jaloudek Kingdom's actions ever since the nation had declared war, and the speed of their victory had been far greater than any expectations.

"The Confederation of Lokahl is just a collection of small nations in the end. The difference in power between them and Jaloudek has always been clear... Still, they should have had many years of experience at protecting themselves."

"According to the report, Jaloudek fights through simple brute force. They flattened their enemy without any strategy of note."

"So Jaloudek has that much power. No matter how large a country they are, that's..."

King Augusti listened to all the lords gathered in the audience chamber without a single change of expression. The two greatest nations of the Occidents were the Jaloudek Kingdom and Kuscheperka Kingdom. Neither nation bordered the other, as the Confederation of Lokahl lay between them. Lokahl was small enough that it seemed like it would collapse if either major power blew on it, but it had survived for so long because it had effectively served as a buffer zone.

Still, they'd done their best as a confederation, banding together to become more than the sum of their parts and using the tensions between their neighbors to check the other. They had been quite cunning.

"So that means something happened in Jaloudek. Their strength suddenly spiked somehow, reviving the flames of their ambition."

King Augusti's muttered conclusion had the assembled lords giving each other looks. They hadn't had the opportunity to look into the reason for this spike. Furthermore, that wasn't the only question that was worrying them. There had been no reports of the Jaloudekian army stopping after the Confederation of Lokahl was crushed. In fact, the reports said the exact opposite.

"So they are going to wage war against us immediately after a preceding war on another nation, though a small one. No matter how much power they have now, this seems a little too heavy-handed."

Setting the confederation aside, Kuscheperka Kingdom should have been a formidable enemy to Jaloudek Kingdom, given their similar sizes. It could be said that the west had been stable all this time because even a nation of Jaloudek's size found it impossible to wage war against Lokahl and Kuscheperka in quick succession. That meant some change big enough to overturn that assumption had occurred within Jaloudek.

In a corner of King Augusti's mind, a doubt sprang forth—would Kuscheperka be in danger as long as they didn't know what that change was? Though this doubt was impossible to ignore, he nevertheless could not show weakness as king.

“At any rate, since they are aiming for a war regardless, we must push them back.”

The king's determination had the gathered nobles nodding in tense agreement. From among them, the nobles with territories in Kuscheperka's western reaches were especially pale. Before long, their lands would be facing the oncoming tides of Jaloudek Kingdom's Black Knights.

“Hurry and gather our forces at the Shield Trider. Teach those invaders of their hubris, and the downfall that comes with it.”

Shield Trider—the defensive line that stretched along Kuscheperka Kingdom's western border. This group of fortresses promised absolute protection to Kuscheperka, and they would use it to intercept the Jaloudekian army. The nobles received the king's order to follow this fundamentally solid strategy and hurried to fulfill it.

Still, Jaloudek should know of Shield Trider, given how famous it is in the Occidents. Up until now, no matter how many numbers they gathered, they've proved unable to breach it. Does that mean they have the confidence to do so now? Augusti thought privately as he watched the nobles scatter to their duties.

With a smothering haze in his heart that would not go away, his gaze then fixed in space, as if he could see through the palace's walls far off to the west, where sturdier and even larger walls stood.



Having destroyed the Confederation of Lokahl in the blink of an eye, Jaloudek's army kept that momentum going and immediately marched upon the Kingdom of Kuscheperka's borders.

An area of smooth terrain called the Vastor Plains lay on Kuscheperka's western border, the one shared with the Confederation of Lokahl. Because it was so open, the area was perfect for armies to march through, which also made it a real problem to defend. To solve this, Kuscheperka had leveraged its strength to construct an immense bastion across it. This fortification was one of the pieces that formed Shield Trider, and it was named Shield Yuxia, the first shield.

Its walls stood several times taller than a silhouette knight and were extremely tough. Behind them stood an entire fortified city. With all this, Shield Yuxia's defenses were so strong it could withstand an assault from a full thousand silhouette knights and not take any significant damage.

In the face of such an impregnable fortress that put the power of the great nation of Kuscheperka on full display, Jaloudek's army was spread out in their silhouette knights. Both sides were holding nothing in reserve right from the start.

Amid the massive Jaloudek formation that dyed the plains black, a man watched the giant stone walls that broke apart the scenery as he spoke.

"This truly lives up its reputation as one of the legendary three fortresses. Though it stands as my enemy, I have to give its impregnability praise," the man said.

"Hmph," scoffed another younger man. "It just shows how afraid they are, all holed up in there for fear their land will be taken."

The younger man who'd just spoken looked a lot like Jaloudek's first prince, Carlitos. Yet he was somewhat younger still and had an unconcealable arrogance to him. His name was Cristobal Haslo Jaloudek, and as his name implied, he was Carlitos's younger brother, making him Jaloudek's second prince.

The man who'd spoken first, who stood beside the prince, was older and possessed a brawny build. His name was Dorotheo Maldness. He had no

standing in the knight orders and was instead here as Cristobal's military advisor.

While both armies were glaring at each other across the distance, feeling the tension of the situation, these two men were evaluating the fortifications as if they were merely making small talk. They could clearly see that the Kuscheperkan army was constructing a defensive position in front of the fortress. Even with Shield Yuxia's famed toughness, it would eventually fall if it were to sustain a continued assault. The Kuscheperkan army couldn't just sit inside the walls and allow that to happen.

Cristobal smiled a brutal, vicious smile, not unlike a predator about to jump on its prey.

"So the other side decided to set up a forward defense. It's exactly as you expected, Your Highness," Dorotheo said.

"The result of half-assed educations, I'm sure. Isn't that just sad?" Cristobal mused. "Now then, we *could* just continue to sit and glare at each other, but...it would be unpleasant to make them think that we're hesitating. Let's start off with a bit of war to see how things go."

"As you will, sir."

The prince's order was put into action the next day. As the sun rose, the Jaloudekian army started to advance. Neat lines of knights in black steel moved forward, spurred on by the sounds of trumpets and war drums. The army was formed up into a multitude of ranks that marched forward in silence. To the Kuscheperkan side, it looked like a huge black wall closing in on them.

The Kuscheperkan knight runners watched their enemy advance from inside their Lesvants—Kuscheperka's mass-produced silhouette knight model—and gulped.

"So those are Jaloudek's new silhouette knights... They're huge..."

The enemy silhouette knights were indeed very large. Their new, cutting-edge silhouette knight, the Tyrantor, was an entire head taller than a Lesvant. Tyrantors boasted both staggeringly thick armor and an unbelievable amount of strength, quite literally swelling up with power almost to the point of bursting.

Seeing the Jaloudekian army on the move, the Kuscheperkan army quickly responded. They started with long-ranged attacks from atop Shield Yuxia. This came in the form of a rain of boulders launched from catapults. These missiles would have been able to crush a Lesvant, shield and all, but Tyrantors were easily able to withstand their force and bat them aside just by holding up their shields.

Just how powerful are these new silhouette knights from Jaloudek? the Kuscheperkan fighters thought, shivering even harder now that they realized the boulders were having little to no effect.

Eventually, the Jaloudekian army advanced far enough to be within range of silhouette arms fire. Immediately, both sides started to attack each other with spellfire, which changed the terrain around them. The Tyrantors simultaneously continued to approach the Kuscheperkan army's forward defensive point. Because there was danger of friendly fire at that distance, the catapults stopped their barrage of boulders.

The Tyrantors threw aside their shields and charged in for close combat. The sounds of clashing blades rang over the simple defensive position that had been built in front of Shield Yuxia.

"Ugh, what the hell... They're so tough! My weapons aren't working!" one of the Kuscheperkan knight runners yelled.

"Damn it, my sword... It just bounces off! Gwaaarghh?!" yelled another.

The battle didn't take long—it was far more one-sided than anyone had expected. The Tyrantors had proved to be invincible on the field.

Their unparalleled armor was able to easily turn aside any attacks from a Lesvant's sword, and their unmatched strength allowed their heavy maces to pulverize said Lesvants with a single swing. And because the black silhouette knights marched in such densely packed formations, the Kuscheperkan army had no recourse; they were utterly smashed and scattered.

The Jaloudekian army's new model was far more powerful and dangerous than King Augusti had feared. There had been no marked difference between the two nations' silhouette knights previously. That meant Jaloudek must have undergone a serious technological revolution recently, though that knowledge

wouldn't prove to be any solace to the Kuscheperkan soldiers being slaughtered.

"Damn those Jaloudek bastards... They're already here!" a Kuscheperkan soldier swore.

"At this rate, the forward point won't hold... Fall back!" their leader ordered. "We'll defend from atop Shield Yuxia's walls!"

A few hours later, the Vastor Plains were a barren land of nothing but black armor or red fire. Wrecked Lesvants were strewn across the ground, with only enough black knight corpses to count on one's hands. The Kuscheperkan army had been dealt a painful, one-sided blow and were forced to retreat. Luckily, the Jaloudekian army's prided Tyrantors paid the price for their heavy armor and high strength in mobility. They were unable to chase down the retreating Kuscheperkan army, and their enemies were narrowly able to evade the ends of the Tyrantors' heavy maces.

Kuscheperka's soldiers, meanwhile, were anxious to the brink of despair as they looked at the enemy army large enough to bury the plains under them from inside the absolute walls of Shield Yuxia. Jaloudek's new model had exhibited overwhelming strength, and in front of the tidal wave of black, it was a question of *when*, not if, the walls would fall, despite how famously impregnable they were. For the first time, Kuscheperkan soldiers doubted the safety of Shield Yuxia's defenses. A fast horse was immediately sent to the capital. The rider was carrying a report of their dire situation, carrying the hopes of all the soldiers left behind.



The Jaloudekian army did not hurry as they moved up to the base of the fortress and prepared for a siege. Compared to the Kuscheperkans' agitation, their actions seemed so indifferent to the situation that it actually felt creepy to the defenders. There was no passion or will to corner them to be felt, nor was there the impatience of a predator right in front of its prey.

In the midst of this, Cristobal, the force's supreme commander, broke out into a broad smile accompanied by a laugh from his position in the army's rear headquarters. "Ga ha ha ha! How fun! I'm sure that right now they're foaming

at the mouth in their hurry to send out a messenger horse.”

“I would assume so as well,” Dorotheo responded. “Now what should we do, Your Highness? Even the Black Knights, as powerful as they are, would find this fortress a little tough to chew.”

“No need to state the obvious. As planned, let’s at least make it look like we’re attacking. Soon enough, they’ll come out to meet us in battle. Without knowing they’re doing the work of exposing their weak point themselves, of course.”

Cristobal’s sinister smile implied a dark future for Kuscheperka, and Dorotheo did nothing but respond with a somewhat worn smile of his own.



Thanks to the report brought with all speed by running several horses to the point of exhaustion, Kuscheperka’s royal palace was once again wrapped in a tense atmosphere.

“Jaloudek’s forces have proved to be incomparably powerful to what they were in the past. Even at the cost of our lives, we could not match them... If this continues, Shield Yuxia may soon fall!” the messenger pleaded, kowtowing so low his head was on the ground.

All of Kuscheperka’s leadership paled. King Augusti fell into a melancholy after realizing his premonition had come true, but he made sure to seem calm on the outside.

“Damn you, Jaloudek... I knew they were acting confident, but I never imagined that confidence would prove so well-founded,” Augusti cursed. “So their silhouette knights are that fearsome, I see.”

“Yes, they are terrifying armored monsters,” the messenger replied. “When we challenged them head-on, the tables were easily turned on us... Furthermore, their basic tactic is to overwhelm with numbers, so we can’t find any weakness in their formation to strike at.”

The king heaved a deep, heavy sigh and sank into his throne. To the people of the nation, Shield Yuxia was an invincible wall. Because it was only part of Shield Trider, there were still two more fortresses by the names Shield Kaxilla

and Shield Colmeda, but neither of them were as solid as Yuxia. What's more, the fact that they lost in a straightforward battle was another point of trouble. To assure Shield Yuxia's continued existence, they had to assume that there was a larger gap between them and their enemy's strength than it seemed. That meant that there were only a few limited options to break their siege.

"Your Majesty, I believe we should hurry and send notice to the fifteen western territories to have them gather their forces!" shouted a noble with territory on Kuscheperka's western side.

Augusti groaned in response, a serious, pondering look on his face. Gathering numbers was, while simplistic, a very reliable and sound solution. This was especially true since Kuscheperkan Lesvants had proved to be far inferior to the Jaloudekian Tyrantors. If they didn't amass a numbers advantage, it would be near impossible to oppose the enemy.

The Tyrantors were most effective in heavy infantry formations at the beginning of battles, like shock troops. It had already been proved that breaking through them head-on was not possible, so Kuscheperkan forces would have no choice but to attempt to isolate and destroy them one by one. One possible method was to lure them into the fortress city that lay behind the walls to split apart the enemy forces and destroy them bit by bit that way. Of course, that would incur heavy civilian casualties. The conversation after that dragged ever longer, but in the end no one had come up with a better plan.

The meeting disbanded with a heavy mood still in the room, and King Augusti retired to his personal quarters. He was known for normally being mild-mannered, but he couldn't stay that way in this situation. The moment he was alone, he dropped his calm mask and slammed his fist onto a desk.

"Thanks to a long period of peace, our nation was finally welcoming an age of prosperity. Yet something like this *had* to be waiting in the shadows..." he muttered to himself.

The Kingdom of Jaloudek had always been putting out rather disquieting signs, but they'd been lying low for the past decade. Now that the king thought about it, that should have implied to him that they were preparing for an invasion. He knew he wouldn't be able to escape criticism for not being able to

spot that.

“But I will make sure to end this,” he swore to himself. “I will never let *her* inherit a war like this!”

With his resolve firm, King Augusti straightened his posture. Though he should have been alone in his room, someone was nevertheless there to call out to him.

“Father?”

Augusti gasped and turned around to find a beautiful flower in human form—his only daughter and first in line for the throne, Eleonora Miranda Kuscheperka. A somber expression clouded her face as she slowly approached her father.

“I heard, father. Jaloudek’s attack is strong, and the defenses in the west are wavering...”

“There’s no need to worry, Eleonora,” Augusti comforted her. “Our Shield Trider is invincible. And the lords of the west are banding together to face the enemy. I’m sure they’ll drive those preposterous invaders back quickly.”

The king’s expression, which had until just now been twisted in grim contemplation, instantly melted into a gentle one. He was acting not as a king who wanted to maintain his dignity, but as a father who wanted to soothe his anxious daughter. Eleonora was turning sixteen this year. Having been raised in a peaceful environment ever since she could remember, she had a gentle personality, like a lady raised in a gilded cage. She seemed extremely ill-equipped to deal with more violent matters like war, and Augusti doted on her, so the king had avoided saying anything that would worry her.

“Thank you, father,” she said. “Your words have put my heart at ease.”

Eleonora would never doubt her father, so she once again smiled a gentle smile like the springtime sun. After that, father and daughter continued their conversation for some time before he saw her off, muttering to himself as he watched her receding back. “Yes, it’ll all be fine. I *will* end this war. Only over my dead body will this burden be forced upon you.”



The staring contest between the two armies over the walls of Shield Yuxia, perhaps unexpectedly, seemed to have settled into a stalemate.

Though the army from Jaloudek had shown they could drive back and scatter the Kuscheperkan army with overwhelming force, it seemed they weren't nearly as motivated to try and take the thick and sturdy walls of Shield Yuxia—even though with the power of their Tyrantors, breaking the walls shouldn't have been that impossible a prospect. In the first place, there were no longer any Kuscheperkan positions outside the fortress walls, so there was basically no one around to protect them from siege. Still, Jaloudek was moving slowly. And though this slowness was inscrutable to the Kuscheperkan forces in the walls, since they lacked the strength to oppose their invaders head-on, it was clear to them this extra time was a good thing. To the defenders, this was time for more forces to be hurriedly raised from inside the country to reinforce Shield Yuxia.

About a month had passed since war had encroached upon the border. That meant about two months since Jaloudek had first initiated their offensive on their neighboring countries. Up until now, though they were acting slowly, what attacks the Jaloudekian army did make were sure to damage Shield Yuxia, and now the walls that were the pride of Kuscheperka were coming apart at the seams. They seemed like they could collapse at any time.

Behind the walls, a great Kuscheperkan battalion had been amassed, allowing the defenders to breathe a sigh of relief as they had managed to gather their forces before the walls had been destroyed. Naturally, everyone could feel the decisive battle approaching. On both sides of the walls, silhouette knights were deployed, numbering over a thousand total units, a number rarely seen in the entire history of the Occidents.

"It's about time. Summon the Steel Wing Knights," ordered Cristobal. "Keh heh, we'll sortie with them. Let's smother them in one blow!"

"Yes, Your Highness! Right away!" responded Dorotheo.

Indeed, the Jaloudekian army, with all its power, had actually desired this stalemate against Kuscheperka's massive forces. The Kingdom of Kuscheperka lost out in terms of silhouette knight ability, but they did boast numbers, and Cristobal had been waiting for them to gather an excessive force in one place.

It happened during the dark of night, one with many clouds blocking the moonlight. A new weapon of Jaloudek's blended into the darkness as they started their incursion, one that the Kuscheperkan army would never even notice.



The capital of Kuscheperka Kingdom, Dervankhul, was located at the center of the nation, and so was a ways away from the western border. The kingdom boasted significant might due to its size, and since it had spent so long at peace, its culture was flourishing. Thanks to that, Dervankhul's size and magnificence was among the greatest of all the settlements in the Occidents. Its streets lined with stylish brick buildings were unfortunately now lacking their usual liveliness as a thick, dark cloud of anxiety had settled over the city—the knowledge of the looming Jaloudekian threat had filtered in. This, coupled with the news that the battle wasn't going well, had put a damper on the comings and goings in the street.

Later that day, a certain soldier who had been on patrol on the walls surrounding the capital felt a strange premonition brought on by how oddly quiet the night was. All he could hear were the snaps and crackles of the torches that had been lit to provide light along the walls. The soldier thought he saw a cloud moving strangely and stopped. Properly perceiving the movements of a cloud with only moonlight to go on was not easy, especially when the moonlight was being regularly obstructed by said clouds. So he quickly gave up on the notion, assuming that he was just being jumpy because of Jaloudek's invasion. The soldier scolded himself in his mind for being so weirdly nervous before returning to his patrol.

However, his instinct had been correct.

The sound of wind blowing through cloth and making it flap could be heard coming from somewhere. This sort of sound only came from wind traveling unnaturally quickly for this night, and that was what had triggered the soldier's unease. From on top of the city's walls, which were quite a bit higher than ground level, *there was no wind*. So where did the sound of flapping cloth come from?

Suddenly, a shiver ran down the soldier's spine. He produced an alarm whistle from its container and put it in his mouth as he looked around warily. He was determined to catch even the slightest movement, and before long he was met with an incredible and abnormal scene.

His gaze, which had flitted busily every which way, went up into the air last and froze.

It was complete coincidence; the great hand above saw fit to part the curtain of thick clouds, revealing a path of bright moonlight. In the midst of this glow, a large black shadow advanced through the air. The soldier's mouth dropped open, releasing the alarm whistle and allowing it to drop to the floor. At first, he doubted his own eyes, and then he doubted his own sanity. The huge shadow that moved through the air followed by swirls of wind could only be described as a *ship*. His common sense was being tested—it positively shrieked in alarm in response to this absurd sight. Ships were supposed to travel through water, not air. In the first place, there was no way something that large should be able to fly.

The soldier then realized that the ship looking black wasn't because it was shadowed by the light of the moon, but because it had been painted that way so as to blend into the night. Even the ship's sails, which extended out to either side of the hull, were carefully painted black. Thus it hadn't been detected until it had gotten very close.

While the soldier was busy being dumbstruck, the flying black ship's sails swelled as it approached. It was unnatural how, in this windless night, there happened to be good wind just around the ship itself. At this point, there was no disguising the ship's form as it had gotten close enough that anyone could see it clearly. One step away from total panic, the soldier acted upon his last bit of reason.

While shaking so hard it felt like his teeth would be knocked loose, he shouted as loud as he could in place of the whistle he'd lost, "S-SOMEONE! I- INVADERS! NO, I MEAN, A SHIP! A BLACK SHIP IS COMING FROM THE SKY!!!"

The soldier broke into a run, his legs cramping underneath him, as the flying ship was about to sail over the walls. Was there only one? No, there were two,

no, three—several more of the same followed after the first black ship, bringing the total up to ten. It was a large fleet. Pandemonium spread out in front of the ships like a bow wave as their appearance sowed fear into the hearts of many. No one could believe what they were seeing, and when faced with the reality in front of them, they were utterly lost for words. Eventually, the people on the ground noticed what faintly looked like the Jaloudek flag painted on the sides of their hulls, and they regained their voices in the form of screams.

This was Jaloudek's trump card: the true form of the Steel Wing Knights. They were a strange knight order, composed of the world's first practical flying ships, aptly named "levitating ships."

These levitating ships were shaped strangely, like a regular ship turned upside down. Sails stretched out to either side of the hull, which caught the wind and propelled the vehicle forward. The levitating ships' rounded upper decks—which would be the lower decks on a regular boat—had bridges, the ships' command centers, jutting out of them. These bridges were cluttered, filled with all sorts of devices and instruments.

At the center of one of these bridges was a seat on a raised platform. This seat was normally reserved for the ship's captain, but its current occupant was rather unexpected: the second prince of Jaloudek, Cristobal, who should have been far away at the western border trying to bring down Shield Yuxia.

"Feh, Kuscheparkan fools," he scoffed. "They're panicking like pigs who've been whipped on the ass!"

"I believe this is the natural response to people who do not know of levitating ships," Dorotheo responded, before he paused to receive a message. "What? Hrm... Your Highness, a report from the underside lookout. More lights are appearing in the city below; they're likely preparing to intercept us."

"Futile," said Cristobal dismissively. "We've already got our swords at their throats. Okay, let's get this started. Slow the ships!"

At Cristobal's order, the soldiers in the bridge opened a bunch of metal lids lined up on the walls, revealing tubes into which they shouted their orders. These were speaking tubes, which were placed throughout the ship in strategic locations to relay orders.

“Figurehead, come in. Reverse the Blow Engine and slow the ship. Furl the sails and prepare for attacks from below.”

“This is the figurehead, understood. Reversing Blow Engine.”

There was a figurehead of half a knight sticking out of the levitating ship’s prow. It was a bit overdone for a ship’s figurehead, but looking closer, one could see the head squirming and shifting around. The part of the ship referred to as the figurehead wasn’t just decoration; it was an actual upper half of a silhouette knight that had been implanted into the front of the ship. It activated the silhouette arms that were connected to both hands, changing the direction of the wind that was being whipped up around the ship. This was the true identity of the sounds of wind that could be heard on this otherwise windless night.

The levitating ship gradually decreased its speed as it slid through the air, easily crossing the city’s walls and coming over the nation’s capital in truth.

In the palace that lay at the center of the capital, the royal guards who were supposed to be defending it were in disarray, moving about meaninglessly. It was only natural—no one knew what to do to combat a ship that *flew*. So while the fleet’s path was unclear, they simply followed what they were trained to do in case of a nighttime attack. In other words, they lit extra bonfires. What they didn’t realize was that this just made it easier to see the palace from above, which was their enemies’ goal.

On the bridge of the levitating ship he was in, Cristobal was doubled over, laughing at his enemy’s foolishness. He then unsheathed the sword at his waist, unable to maintain his patience, and stood on top of the captain’s seat.

“This is a declaration to all of our proud Steel Wing Knights! Tonight, we bring down these fools’ capital! Rouse yourselves!”

With that, the soldiers sprang into action. The communications officer shouted orders through the speaking tubes in rapid succession, and the rest of the levitating ship also sprang to life.

“Orders! I have your orders! We will be dropping the Tyrantors! Prepare for deployment! Knight runners, to your stations!”

“Starting deployment procedure!” came the reply. “Starting atmospheric circulation in the Etheric Levitator!”

At the center of the levitating ship was a giant device, which allowed the ship to float in the air—the Etheric Levitator. There were a multitude of soldiers milling around it at the moment, and they were manipulating the many levers that were lined up on panels as they stared at readouts from various sensors. The Etheric Levitator was a powerful machine, but it was extremely sensitive as well. If it were to malfunction now, it was possible for everyone to fall to their dooms along with the ship. So the knightsmiths on duty had to work toward their objectives as quickly and as carefully as possible, wiping the sweat from their palms along the way.

“Confirming that all knight runners are in their Tyrantors! Okay to drop!”

“Speed is now 5.21! Maintaining vessel stability... We are at dropping speed!”

Reports were flooding in one after the other, and Cristobal listened to his soldiers’ voices, the smile on his face deepening. Soon enough, he heard the final report that he’d been waiting for.

“Report from the underside lookout: We have reached distance 30 from the surface! We are at dropping height, and there are no attacks coming from the ground!”

“Perfect,” Cristobal replied. “You have the honor of being the vanguard! Open up the bay doors! Go, Steel Wing Knights!”

The underside of the levitating ship was covered in flat armor plates. These now opened, revealing only pools of black. Immediately, though, the silhouette knights jumped out, accompanied by the jangling of chains. No matter how tough Tyrantors were, they wouldn’t be able to withstand dropping to the ground from so high up. To prevent that, the ship had lowered its altitude, and the silhouette knights were attached to chains that connected to cranes. These lowered the machines as close to the ground as possible.

Having gotten close enough to the ground to not destroy themselves, the Tyrantors were released from their chains, dropping to the ground with plumes of dust marking their landing. Given the levitating ship’s carrying capacity, the knights had been arranged into a somewhat strange formation of two platoons

(six units) to each ship. Though this meant their force was far smaller than the one at the border, there were a total of almost sixty jet-black silhouette knights that suddenly appeared within Kuscheperka's capital. This was the first example of an airborne assault in history, carried out by levitating ships. This attack, which defied common sense, had caught Kuscheperka completely unguarded.



A small amount of time had passed since Jaloudek's Steel Wing Knights had started their assault. Dervankhul, a city which boasted a magnificence few could match even in the Occidents, was now starting to burn as panicking citizens frantically ran about. The streets lined with brick buildings were now occupied by jet-black giants, and all the knights that had deployed to defend their capital were being destroyed. Though there were a good number of royal guards stationed around the capital, they had of course never expected a direct assault from the sky. Because of that, only a battalion (sixty units) had detected the assault early enough to quickly run to the capital's aid.

"Damn this thick armor!" shouted a Kuscheperkan knight runner. "These Lesvants stand no chance!"

Every swing of a black-armored Tyrantor's heavy mace saw a Lesvant go flying, shield and all. Having heard news of the front lines, the royal guards had expected Tyrantors to be formidable enemies, but what they found had far exceeded expectations; the Tyrantor's power was unassailable. It was as if they were fundamentally different from a normal silhouette knight somehow—that was how large the gap between a Tyrantor and Lesvant was proving to be.

Even so, the royal guards did not give up. There was a group that attempted to surround a lone Tyrantor—as the Jaloudekian force was operating in small groups—and kill it. The idea was to make up for the difference in strength with numbers. The moment they tried to trap and surround one, a strange shadow that had been running across the rooftops came to its rescue. The shadow had sharp claws at the ends of its fingers, and it swung those claws down at a Lesvant's head. The shadow's size made it clear that it was a silhouette knight. However, while silhouette knights were usually made to resemble a human in armor, this one was strangely thin and had oddly long arms.

“What the hell?!” a royal guard shouted in surprise. “Is this one an agent of Jaloudek too?!”

Though they showed some confusion over the shadows’ consecutive surprise attacks, the force of Lesvants attempted a counterattack. The shadows easily avoided the counter, seeming to laugh derisively as they did so. These were proving to be fearsomely nimble. The moment the Lesvants, who had to follow the momentum behind their attacks, stumbled due to their misses, the shadows’ arms *extended* with incredible speed. The claws at the ends of these arms bore into the Lesvants, who in their surprise were unable to dodge, and silenced the knights for good.

“Damn you, you bastards! How dare you!” one of the surviving royal guards shouted before driving his Lesvant into a rage-filled charge at the shadow, which still had his comrade stuck to the end of its arm.

While the shadow was nimble, it likely wouldn’t be able to make full use of that agility with such a heavy weight at one end of it. The royal guard couldn’t allow this chance to slip away.

However, another figure stepped in between the shadow and the Lesvant. This one was also thin and smooth—a black silhouette knight that was also like a shadow. The Lesvant’s knight runner clicked his tongue in frustration at the interruption as he slashed at this new interloper. As the angry swipe approached the new shadow, several objects flew from the shadow’s back faster than the knight runner’s blow could reach its mark. These things, which only reflected a little light in the darkness of night, stabbed into the Lesvant all over. They destroyed the crystal tissue inside the machine, and the Lesvant abruptly stopped like a puppet that had its strings cut.

“Hmph, too easy.”

And thus the Lesvants’ numbers dwindled until there were no longer enough of them to attempt to surround the Tyrantors. Soon enough, the Tyrantors struck out against the Lesvants as well, their heavy maces feeding on the Kuscheperkan knights. There was no hope for the Lesvants to prevail, and as they were crushed one by one, the shadows once again melted into the darkness of night.

“This marks the end of Kuscheperka. All that’s left is to score as many honors as possible!” That was said by one of the thin silhouette knights—the one that seemed to be the leader.

The others nodded in response, and they moved out to find their next prey, nimbly running atop the buildings. This black force which blended into the darkness of night was moving for the center of the capital—the royal palace.



Faint vibrations had started to reach inside the palace and the throne where King Augusti sat. That told him the battle had reached his doorstep. For the past while, he had been getting constant reports full of bad news. Nobody had grasped the full picture of what was going on in general. In fact, it was very possible that there was nowhere in the capital that *wasn't* a battlefield by now.

The Kuscheperkan army had been frantically throwing their forces into the fray without grasping the full situation, and as a result, they had made the most foolish mistake of scattering their forces too much to be effective. They were now being treated like defective toys to be trampled over and destroyed by the small but elite force of Jaloudekian knights.

King Augusti couldn't help but imagine the worst outcome in the back of his mind. His expression became even more clouded as a soldier with an even paler face than the last came with another report. “Another flying ship is approaching, Your Majesty. A size larger than the rest.”

It seemed the enemy was planning to finish the war here and now. “So this is it...” Augusti muttered.

The king's tired utterance disappeared into the tumult surrounding him. While feeling somewhat thankful that he was lucky no one heard him, he stood. “It seems we must prepare ourselves for the end, men.”

This was the capital, so naturally there was nowhere to retreat. If this place were to fall, that essentially meant the end of the nation. That was why even the lowest-ranking of soldiers had chosen to desperately resist, putting their lives on the line. However, the battles happening in the streets had almost all ended with the Kuscheperkans' defeat, and the noose was tightening. They still held the palace itself, but everything had been built assuming the walls around

the city would hold in an emergency, so the palace did not actually function that well as a defensive structure. Holing up in it would just be refusal to admit defeat. Kuscheperka had lost—King Augusti had no choice but to bear the crushing weight of his emotions in his heart as he admitted that.

However, there was still one thing he had to do. He quietly walked over to his beloved daughter, Eleonora, who was clearly worried. The words he then spoke were surprisingly calm, even to his ears.

“The palace is already surrounded. As things stand, all the royal family will fall into their hands. Before that, you need to use the hidden passages to escape.”

“But... What about you, father?!” his daughter argued back.

“I...must stay and fulfill my final duty, as king of Kuscheperka,” he replied.

Eleonora teared up immediately, and she threw away the self-control of a princess that had been strictly drilled into her in favor of leaping into her father’s arms. “No... You can’t, father! Escape with me! We can still make it...”

“I can’t do that, Eleonora.” Augusti slowly separated himself from Eleonora and crouched down so he could look straight at her. He then spoke as kindly as he could to make her understand. “If I were to turn my back at the first opportunity and run, I wouldn’t be able to face all the knights giving their lives for us as a king. And it would be the shame of a lifetime to hand over the *royal knight* unscathed.”

“But—” Eleonora tried to protest, but she was stopped as King Augusti hugged her close, and she cried unabashedly in his arms.

Then, the king turned to look at the woman standing beside them. “It will be hard, but I’m counting on you, Martina.”

“You needn’t worry. I will protect Princess Eleonora with my life.” Martina Alt Kuscheperka, daughter of former Fremmevillan king Ambrosius and wife of King Augusti’s younger brother, Fernando Nevaless Kuscheperka, responded resolutely with a nod. She then turned to the other girl who was present—her daughter, Isadora Adalina Kuscheperka. “Go on ahead, Isadora.”

“Yes, mother,” Isadora said. “Let’s hurry, Eleonora. There’s no time.” She pulled the still-sniffling Eleonora along with her as she moved to leave. Eleonora

wailed and resisted, but Isadora pulled no punches.

King Augusti saw them off, a tinge of regret coloring his face. "Sorry, Martina. I always end up troubling you."

"It's no trouble at all, Your Majesty," Martina replied. "It could never be. But while I wouldn't word it like Eleonora did, I also believe you should escape with us. The royal knight is just another silhouette knight. Compared to you, it's—"

"You may be right, but have you seen the enemy, Martina?" Augusti asked. "Those flying ships are absolutely unprecedented. Being able to travel through the sky is truly a fearsome ability."

King Augusti looked out a window to the night sky. He saw a black levitating ship, floating above the city and reflecting the light given off by the multiple fires raging on the ground. This ship was larger than the rest, and upon further inspection, he could see a large flag flying atop it. There was no mistaking it; the flag belonged to Jaloudek Kingdom.

Augusti continued, "If they were to find the palace completely empty of royalty, they would immediately send those ships out to conduct a search. If they use the skies, it'll prove hard to get away, even with the use of secret passages. So this place needs a king. It needs someone to draw their attention and stop them here."

"Brother..." Martina knew from Augusti's unusually quiet manner that he had prepared himself for death.

"But by doing this, I will be placing a heavy weight upon that girl's shoulders..." August trailed off sadly. "I suppose that means I have failed to be a good king, and a good father."

"Of course not" was all Martina could say.

"With my wife gone, I couldn't help but spoil her. While peacetime is another matter, I wonder if she'll be able to stand up to the adversity of war... Martina, please, support her."

"Yes, I swear to you I will. One day, we will drive those invaders out of our lands."

“I’m counting on you. Now then, this conversation has grown long, and we’re short of time. Tell my younger brother, Fernando, that I’m leaving the rest to him.”

Martina bit her lip hard, but she quickly straightened herself and bowed before hurrying off after their daughters. Now, all that was left in the room was a single man and a throne. King Augusti closed his eyes for a while, but when he noticed that the levitating ship had gotten closer, a neutral smile spread across his face.

“Invaders they may be, but I have to say their skills are impressive,” he said to no one. “But I’ll teach them not to underestimate me so...”

The king then issued his last decree. “I am going to battle! Prepare the royal knight!”



Since the start of the flying ship assault, the sounds of battle had continuously reverberated throughout the capital. But now, all of a sudden, the quiet of night had returned. Already the Kuscheperkan army’s presence in the city had been nearly eliminated, and there was no fighting to be seen in the capital. The black-armored knights tightened their cordon on the royal palace while the flying ships did the same from the sky.

That was when the front gates were thrown open, revealing a line of Lesvants. They were still wearing multitudes of decorations, as if they were about to conduct a ceremony of some sort. Given that they’d been stationed inside the royal palace, they likely weren’t meant to be counted on as a combat force, and the fact that they’d been forced into battle like this spoke of how dire the situation had become for the Kuscheperkans.

But from the Jaloudekian army’s perspective, the Lesvants were irrelevant; all their attention was focused on the machine in the middle of the line. There stood a silhouette knight that was markedly more ornate: Kuscheperka’s royal knight, the Cartoga Ol Kuscher. Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult to make out most of its elegant design given that the night was so dark even moonlight was in short supply, and the only reliable sources of light were the fires. Even in such a situation, though, the silhouette knight served as a good

marker for the levitating ships in the air.

In the midst of so many Lesvants that couldn't hide their nervousness, Cartoga Ol Kusphere—with King Augusti in the pilot's seat—quietly looked up at the largest flying ship.

"I heard that King Bardomelo has recently taken ill. So there's no way he's in that ship, but..." he muttered to himself.

Though it seemed reckless, Cartoga Ol Kusphere stepped out on its own. No one attacked it. Instead, one of the levitating ships landed on the pathway leading to the royal palace. Surprisingly for its size, the ship touched down quietly, prompting the king to watch on curiously.

"Thank goodness; it seems they're accepting my proposal. And that's just perfect..." Once again, the king was speaking to himself.

The king's silhouette knight, painted with ocher as its base color, shone dully in the night as it smoothly drew its sword. It then pointed the tip of its weapon up to the sky ahead, as if it were praying. Next, it took the sword, twirled it so it faced down, and stabbed it into the ground. The Jaloudekian knights nearby gulped. This was a formal challenge, following ancient customs. And there was only one opponent present that would be worthy of facing the king's Cartoga Ol Kusphere in single combat.

King Augusti smiled fearlessly from his cockpit, his boldness a vast departure from his normal demeanor. "My name is Augusti Valio Kuscheperka! Ruler of Kuscheperka Kingdom! I believe your general is in that flying ship; can you hear me?!"

A single machine stood up on the deck of the ship in response—the only pure white silhouette knight in a sea of black Tyrantors. "I hear and answer!" came a voice from inside the white knight. "I am Cristobal, son of King Bardomelo Jaloudek! I am in charge of the forces here! And I will be your opponent in the place of my father, King Augusti!"

"Oh? To think King Bardomelo would cede command of the front to his son. But if you lead these forces, then you are worthy to taste my blade! Take my challenge!" Augusti barked.

“Of course, King Augusti. The time for words is past—all that’s left is to speak with our swords!”

The pure white machine, the standard-bearer of the Jaloudek forces known as Arkelorix, jumped into the air. As it landed, Arkelorix readied its sword and shield and faced off against Cartoga Ol Kusphere.

“Here I come!” Cristobal declared.

“Let us duel!” Augusti shouted.

All the Lesvants and Tyrantors that had been left by the wayside stopped to watch the two machines fight. The greatest weapons of this world were giant humanoid machines by the name of silhouette knights. Likely because they were modeled after knights, a lot of inefficient conventions and traditions had been carried over from olden times. One among them was the duel between leaders—an especially inefficient tradition. This was because the duel meant two organizations betting the fates of their entire nations on a single fight.

The Cartoga Ol Kusphere had a very ornate appearance. And yet because it was built sparing no expense for luxury, this royal machine was also the most powerful available in the country by a wide margin. Even with King Augusti at its helm, the machine should have been strong enough to fight off Tyrantors as well. However, Arkelorix, Cristobal’s silhouette knight, was easily more powerful.

Arkelorix gave off a very vivid impression given how it was clearly decorated using gold. It was all Cartoga Ol Kusphere could do to receive the blows that were coming its way. The king was disadvantaged in all aspects, and was being pushed back one-sidedly.

So we stand so little chance even after bringing this into a duel?! Augusti thought. Damn you, Jaloudek... What exactly did you discover to add flying ships to your armory?!

During the course of many clashes, Cartoga Ol Kusphere’s movements clearly dulled. It had taken several blows from Arkelorix, which boasted fierce strength, and the machine’s crystal tissue had started to break down. What’s more, the difference in personality between the mild King Augusti and the belligerent Cristobal put their abilities into even starker relief.

Cartoga Ol Kuschere resisted desperately, but finally the fight was reaching its end. The royal knight made a large swing out of desperation, and its sword was repelled. Such a large opening allowed Arkelorix to slip in with its own blade and sink it deep into Cartoga Ol Kuschere's belly. The stricken unit's armor bent and warped, its crystal tissue was severed, and the damage reached its heart. The intake and exhaust mechanisms were damaged, destabilizing the machine's mana supply. Unable to maintain its own power, Cartoga Ol Kuschere quickly folded, its defeated form obscured by clouds of dust.

"Grk! W-Well struck, Prince of Jaloudek. You win. Now, finish it." Though King Augusti had been hurt by the strike and the resultant fall, and his consciousness was hazy, he shook it off and spoke proudly and confidently. Even though he was telling the man to end his life, he couldn't afford to act disgracefully as Kuscheperka's king.

"Though the victory lies with me, King of Kuscheperka, you fought marvelously! Farewell!" Cristobal's words were humble, but they oozed with self-satisfaction. Along with his answer, Arkelorix activated the back weapons it had refrained from using up until now to blast Cartoga Ol Kuscheperka continuously.

The spellfire loosed from point-blank range covered Cartoga Ol Kuscheperka in explosions. The destroyed silhouette knight's armor glittered and sparkled as it was scattered, catching the light as it was blown to pieces. The royal knight had been completely destroyed, with everything in its cockpit burnt to a crisp.

Faced with the flaming carcass of the royal knight, the soldiers of the Kuscheperkan army didn't hesitate to scream and let loose their grief, but they still obediently laid down their arms. Their leaders had dueled, and their morality dictated that the result of such a thing was absolute. Not that the Kuscheperkan army had a choice, though.

By the time dawn broke, Kuscheperka's capital, Dervankhul, had fallen. That meant the fall of the kingdom, one of the largest of the Occidents. Such shocking news circulated throughout Kuscheperka's lands first and foremost before reverberating out to the rest of the Occidents.

After that, the "old" Kingdom of Kuscheperka was embroiled in chaos and

confusion. The center of the nation had lost its king, so it was understandable, but the highest-ranking nobles that were staying in the capital had also been caught up in the attack and wiped out. Thanks to that, the mayhem spread to those nobles' territories as well. And the situation only continued to get worse as the people that were meant to bring such chaos under control became confused themselves.

As if weaving themselves into the gaps in the defenses left by such disorganization, the Jaloudekian army took bold actions that would have been unthinkable outside of the current situation. Even though the former capital had fallen, they were still isolated and in the middle of enemy territory. However, instead of holing up inside Dervankhul, they used their levitating ships to launch surprise attacks all over the country. The strategy was an extreme one not unlike walking a tightrope, but it resulted in a string of great victories.

Thanks to the appearance of levitating ships, a new weapon that allowed the Jaloudekians to strike anywhere without warning, the nobles of old Kuscheperka had no choice but to revise their standard tactic of defending important points along the boundary line. The countermeasure they took was simple: concentrate defending forces in important cities. However, because they were so wary of attacks from the sky, their forces lost all their mobility. That was how the nobles of old Kuscheperka lost their ability to move freely.

Now that the kingdom had lost its king, it started to wander aimlessly and quietly. The nobles in their individual territories, who wanted more military strength to oppose the Steel Wing Knights that were running rampant throughout the country, finally decided to recall the forces they'd sent to defend Shield Trider—even though there were starving beasts right in front of them, sharpening their ravenous fangs and claws.

Then a final great blunder was made: the knight runners in the fortresses actually heeded those calls to return. A big reason for this was the loss of the king, who had been a spiritual pillar for them. The knights' concept of a "country" had started to waver, and in their unease they reverted to simply wanting to protect their homes. In the end, they just couldn't stand the idea of their homes being attacked behind them.

At this point, the situation was past the point of no return. Shield Yuxia had lost much of its fighting force without even fighting. It wasn't long before Kuscheperka's vaunted Shield Trider was broken.

Chapter 30: The Wandering Princess

News of the fall of Dervankhul and the subsequent invasion of Kuscheperka traveled back to Jaloudek quickly.

The first prince, Carlitos, who was acting in the place of his sick father, Bardomelo, sat on the throne in the center of the palace and spoke to the assembled nobles with a pleased look on his intelligent features. "According to the reports, after we gained control of Dervankhul, the rest of Kuscheperka is falling in short order. All of Kuscheperka's territories will belong to us before long. Once that happens, we will essentially be in control of the entirety of the Occidents. It will be the birth of the greatest nation since the fall of Fadar-Abahden... The rest of those pathetic nations are nothing but gnats before our might."

A stir ran like a wave through the crowd of lords. Putting together Jaloudek and Kuscheperka (not to mention Lokahl), two nations that were already very large for the Occidents, resulted in a huge country that indeed covered most of the western half of the continent. Ages had passed since the fall of Fadar-Abahden, and finally the dream of once again uniting the western half of the continent was no longer just empty ambition.

"As you all know, we have committed to this course after thorough preparations. Even so, my younger brother, Cristobal, is acquitting himself admirably. His ferocious temperament makes him worthy to be called Jaloudek's greatest weapon." The good mood radiating off of Carlitos rubbed off on the lords arrayed in front of him.

A young girl split the sea of satisfied, smiling faces as she made her way forward. Her sharp features resembled Carlitos somewhat, as did the clothes she wore.

"It sounds like Cris is doing well for himself," the girl said. "If the occupation is proceeding as planned, things will soon be too much for the boy. As we discussed, I will be heading out to act as his aide in governmental affairs."

The girl was the king of Jaloudek's first daughter, Catarina Camilla Jaloudek. Her brother Carlitos put on a wry smile but nevertheless nodded magnanimously. "Indeed. While Cristobal is good at making war, he lacks the talent for rulership. That is why you are needed. Support him well."

The second son, Cristobal, was naught but a battling fool. That was the common perception of everyone but the man himself. On the other hand, while Catarina wasn't suited for violence, she was extremely skilled at politics. Her skills were perfect for keeping control of the large amount of territory they'd just gained. Having received such encouragement from her older brother, Catarina curtsied and left.

"With that, the invasion of Kuscheperka should proceed without issue. So, how are the surrounding nations reacting to this?" Carlitos asked.

In response, a man that looked the very picture of a military officer stepped forward. He was the leader of a knight order that had been left behind to defend the homeland. "Roger, I will give my report. There has been chatter among those of the Eleven Flags desiring to deal with us while we are distracted, but the offenders have been taken care of by the Lead Skeleton Knights. Please proceed as you wish."

"Well done," said Carlitos. "Tell the Lead Skeleton Knights to muster their courage, for they are the lynchpin of our defense."

The knight captain bowed deeply and immediately left. After that, Carlitos continued listening to several more reports keeping him updated on the state of things and giving words of appreciation to every one of the people in charge of those fields. Soon enough, the line reached a man that had been standing in a corner of the chamber with a sour look on his face.

"Sir Kojass! Your work is greatly appreciated," Carlitos said. "The levitating ship you created has truly been the vehicle of our victory—a guiding ship, if you will."

"It is a great honor to have contributed to the fortunes of this kingdom and you, Your Royal Highness," the man replied. "I will continue to devote my meager talents to the cause."

The man bowed his head, but the sour expression never left his face, causing

Carlitos to give a small snort. It was very slight, and the prince quickly returned to his usual smile.

“As expected. Continue working hard to support our black knights.”

After a pause, the sour-faced man assented. “As you wish. Given that, I would like to return to my workshop immediately to continue my attempt to birth new power for our black knights.”

The man made an awkward bow before quickly leaving the audience chamber. His words aside, his attitude was not one a man should take toward a regent. In truth, it raised the brows of several nobles in attendance.

“That man... Don’t you think he was a bit too rude, Your Royal Highness?”

“It’s fine, leave him be,” Carlitos replied. “It’s true he conducts himself rather thoughtlessly, but his talent is worth ignoring the mores of etiquette. He must continue to work hard for the sake of this kingdom.”

A wide smile split the prince’s well-ordered features. The surrounded nobles didn’t look happy, but they couldn’t contradict the regent, and so they settled for letting the moment pass with vague mutterings.



Horacio Kojass continued briskly down the passageways of the palace while roughly tearing off his coat and loosening his collar so that he could finally catch his breath. Formal dress looked refined and elegant, but it was also constricting and uncomfortable, enough that he found it hard to breathe. Tearing off the coat revealed a body of medium build, one that looked a far cry from being trained or tempered, which clearly indicated he was neither a knight nor a smith.

“My word, His Royal Highness the ‘Prince Regent’ is as threatening as always. Though it’s thanks to his backing that my levitating ships were able to take flight in the first place.”

Horacio ruled at the very top of Jaloudek’s technological development sector at the tender age of thirty, having gained the position of chief of their central development workshop. In short, he was wildly successful.

He—or rather, his clan—had obtained this position through their theories being used to create revolutionary weapons, the most significant of these theories being the “Pure Ether Effect.” It was a body of study that delved deep into the properties of ether, the precursor to mana—one of the foundational powers that moved the world. The many technologies derived from this, after receiving tremendous support from Jaloudek Kingdom, boiled down to one decisive result: the Etheric Levitator. The completion of this machine that made use of the essence of the Pure Ether Effect was what enabled the creation of humanity’s first flying machine, the levitating ship.

“I’m certainly grateful to you, Your Highness,” Horacio continued to say to himself. “But it’s getting to be a bit hard to breathe in here as well.”

The fact that the levitating ship’s arrival coincided perfectly with the completion of a new silhouette knight seemed to everyone like the work of a guiding will from above.

The royalty of Jaloudek had a certain ambition that had been passed down from generation to generation. They desired to recreate the legendary great country that once stood in control of the entire western half of Setterlund. The creation of humanity’s first air force thanks to a newly discovered theory, as well as a new model of silhouette knight that far outstripped the previous generation, poured oil onto the fires of that ambition.

“It’s all blown up so big, and now I have to deal with the stares from all those damned nobles. I swear they actually sting.”

Taking the Pure Ether Effect theory that his clan had been researching so passionately in almost absolute hiding and presenting it to the world around them had been entirely Horacio’s decision. He had a dream, and he needed a massive amount of funds to make it a reality. In other words, he needed the backing of an entire country. That was why he went as far as to betray his clan to tie himself to Jaloudek Kingdom. So far, his plans had been progressing swimmingly.

“Good grief... I wonder where in the world my levitating ships are flying right about now? I just want to get this gloomy little war over with already so I can be free to soar through the skies as I please.”

For a while after that, Horacio simply stood in the hallway and stared up at the sky through a window, a sullen look on his face. Finally, he put some motivation back in his expression and started walking again. He was making for the levitating ship port so he could return to the Central Development Workshop, which was basically his home. They hadn't made enough levitating ships for widespread adoption quite yet, but since he was the developer, he of course was free to use one to travel.

"Oho? What's this? Do I spy...?"

Upon reaching the port, Horacio spotted someone he recognized—the princess, Catarina, who was about to board a levitating ship to make her way to Kuscheperka. Horacio was reminded of the conversation they'd just had in the audience chamber before he was struck by a revelation like a bolt from the blue.

Right away, he jogged up to Catarina. "Excuse me, Your Highness Princess Catarina. May I have a moment of your time?"

"My, if it isn't Sir Kojass?" said Catarina as she turned to face him. "Did you need something? Your ship is over there."

Catarina looked at Horacio, who had come up to her rather suddenly, with suspicion as she pointed out his ship, which was in the next bay.

"I am aware," he replied. "I just have something I would like to ask you, Your Highness."

Catarina thought for a moment. "I must make haste for Kuscheperka. Make it quick."

With a brief word of thanks, Horacio launched into his spiel. "As you have heard from His Royal Highness Prince Carlitos, my job is to strengthen the Black Knights and the levitating ships. However, that isn't something I can do while cooped up in my workshop the entire time. I need information in order to fulfill my duty...which brings me to the idea I had. The best place to gain such information would be the very battlefields where the Black Knights fight and the levitating ships fly... In other words, Kuscheperka."

Catarina's well-maintained eyebrows shot up.

Horacio continued, “Please, allow me to accompany you to Kuscheperka; allow me to be of further service to my country. Make use of my meager abilities.”

He bowed his head courteously, hiding the smile that had crept up on his face.



In a forested area at the center of the former Kingdom of Kuscheperka, a towed carriage and a host of horses made their way slowly between the trees as sunlight gently filtered through. The ground was bumpy, not having been worked by human hands, which placed a lot of strain on the carriage and slowed them down. Though, regardless of that, the masters of this caravan needed to avoid drawing attention and so needed to go slow anyway.

The people inside the carriage made the reason for this caution obvious. One of them was a girl. Heavy exhaustion showed on her face, making her look go past haggard and into expressionlessness. She was Kuscheperkan royalty—Princess Eleonora. Sitting in front of her was the king’s sister-in-law, Martina, and next to her sat her daughter, Isadora, looking very concerned for Eleonora.

“Pull yourself together, Eleonora,” she pleaded encouragingly. “I’m also mortified at leaving His Majesty like that...but you need to be the one to support this country from now on. We have to drive them out.”

Eleonora didn’t react to Isadora’s words; her head just lolled around in time with the shaking of the carriage like a broken doll. Martina’s brow creased as she adopted a stern look in response. Eleonora had been like this during the entirety of their flight from the capital. Her beauty, which had once been like a flower in full bloom, was now but a hollow shell of its former self—there was no vitality to her. Unable to stand that, Isadora had tried many times to call out to her and wake her up, but it was all in vain.

The night of the Steel Wing Knights’ attack on Dervankhul, the girls had been forced to sacrifice the king to barely make their escape. Originally, they had planned to make their way east to the archduke’s lands and Martina’s husband, Royal Prince Fernando. By their reckoning, there was no better place for an escaped princess to hide.

Unfortunately, the Steel Wing Knights' levitating ships stood in their way. The now deceased King Augusti's plan had worked for a time, as the Jaloudekian army let their guards down after killing him, but soon enough they realized that there were no other royalty present in the palace. In the Occidents, where blood succession was the most common practice, leaving blood relatives of the king alive would only create problems down the road. As the invaders continued their progression through Kuscheperkan land, they persistently searched for the missing royals.

Martina and the girls' journey had necessarily become a stealthy one, as they spent their time watching the skies for ships. They had in their hands the last hope of Kuscheperka: the precious royal bloodline. They couldn't afford to leave things to chance, and the knights that were their guards were as cautious as could be. In order to not leak any unnecessary information, they kept contact with settlements to a minimum and made large detours through forest to avoid paved roads, trading in supplies and stamina for stealth. In this situation where hope and sheer strength of will were the only things propping the group up, no one would blame Eleonora, a girl who had been raised in a gilded cage, for having her spirit break so quickly.

As things stand, even if we successfully make it out, this girl won't last, Martina thought to herself.

This escape attempt was filled with so many problems there was no one part that could be singled out as fixable, but Martina was most worried about Eleonora's condition. Once they reached the archduke's territory, the banner of Kuscheperka's revival would have to be raised around her, as she was the direct successor. But the girl decisively lacked the strength necessary to stand at the forefront like that.

Without really meaning to, Martina looked over to her daughter, who was sitting next to her. Isadora had maintained her elegance even during these trying times. Though she was clearly worried about Eleonora's well-being, there was no sign of her succumbing to the same state. She was normally a tomboy who liked to pretend she was a knight, but that headstrong nature was proving to be a valuable quality in this situation. Martina couldn't help but wish that Eleonora had even a fraction of her daughter's strength.

The carriage continued along, carrying everyone and their worries, until it suddenly stopped. The girls inside the carriage could hear and feel the knights outside moving quickly to action.

Martina gasped and moved to open a window. Then, she asked the knights outside pointedly, “What happened?!”

A knight on horseback turned back to her and said, “Excuse me for answering while on horseback. One of our scouts reported an abnormality up ahead.”

“Enemies?” Martina asked shortly.

“I don’t know any details, but we can’t be too careful. We’ll be making another detour...” The knight turned around as he spoke, and that was when it happened. Everyone heard the sound of something sharply cutting through the air, and immediately after an arrow drove its way through the knight’s head. Martina’s breath stilled in her throat as the knight fell from his horse right in front of her.

“Attack! It’s an attack!”

“That can’t be! They should’ve been farther ahead!”

“That doesn’t matter, just *move*! We’re sitting ducks like this— Gah?!”

The sudden ambush had caught the knight escort completely off guard. While they were trying to regroup, soldiers with crossbows started appearing from the brush one after the other, mercilessly slaughtering them. These ambushing troops were all wearing similar-looking armor bearing the Jaloudekian crest.

The ambush was steadily thinning the escort knights’ ranks. Meanwhile, the carriage driver whipped the horses into action, throwing them into sudden acceleration. He had also received a knight’s training, and his quick decision was worthy of praise. Unfortunately, it was already too late.

Out of nowhere, a bright orange light came flying, impacting on the ground in front of the horses before exploding. The intense gout of fire and wind that was whipped up killed the horse and flipped the carriage two, then three times before it settled on the ground.

Heavy footsteps sounded from ahead. This was accompanied by the noise of

metal armor clanking together, the shrill melody of moving crystal tissue, and the mutter of an ether reactor sucking in air. Its identity was obvious, and before long a knight in pitch-black armor emerged from the trees—a silhouette knight.

But it wasn't alone. More continued to come out from the surroundings until a total of six silhouette knights in heavy black armor were surrounding the caravan. They were Tyrantors, the very same model of silhouette knight that had just the other day run rampant inside the capital. Weapons stuck out from their backs, with one still having a faint trail from having been fired.

Regular soldiers swarmed around the Tyrantors' feet, and now the overturned carriage was completely surrounded. A man in armor then came forward, parting the line of crossbows and staves before him. He was the leader of these men, and once he confirmed that there was no one left to resist, his face warped into a smile.

"Everyone inside the carriage, show yourselves! Resistance is futile." He was met only with silence.

This was understandable, as their ambush and the use of silhouette arms had inflicted a large number of casualties. However, the man still snorted unhappily before speaking up again. "We aren't especially attached to keeping you alive. Blasting you away is still definitely on the table."

Obviously it was just a threat, but the Tyrantors still responded by readying their silhouette arms.

"Wait," a voice replied after a sigh.

The man raised an eyebrow at that, but right afterward the door to the turned-over carriage burst outward. This caused the Jaloudekian soldiers to once again aim their weapons in surprise, as a single figure crawled out from inside. It was Martina, and she stood imposingly on top of the carriage as she glared down at the surrounding soldiers.

"Hmph," she snorted derisively. "You even brought silhouette knights. What an overblown response. So? Are you people so cowardly that you can't converse with a lone woman without your weapons at the ready?"

She was tall for a woman, and since she'd been trained she was able to seem bigger than she was as she looked imperiously down at the soldiers from atop her carriage. Though she was somewhat dirty due to the long journey, she still didn't lose any of her dignity or impact, which made the soldiers flinch. The leader's face also stiffened a little, but he quickly remembered what situation they were in, and he regained his superficial veneer of politeness.

"Well if it isn't Her Royal Highness Archduchess Fernando. It is a great pleasure to be able to see your esteemed personage."

"Such impudence." Martina's face scrunched up with disgust, but she managed to ignore the man in favor of looking around at her surroundings. They were completely surrounded by soldiers, with silhouette knights lying in wait a little farther out. Meanwhile, all of their escorting knights had been killed. Things were looking extremely bad for them. Even if Martina used herself as a decoy, it was a toss-up whether Eleonora and Isadora could get away. She chewed on her lip, unable to decide on a course of action.

"His Highness Prince Cristobal has ordered your arrest," the leader opened. "So that you don't get any ideas about unnecessary resistance, I've been told it doesn't matter what state you're in as long as we can confirm who you are. But if you're obedient, I promise I won't treat you too badly."

The way the man spoke made it clear he wasn't even going to bother hiding just how much of an advantage they had. Martina scowled, but understandably she wasn't defiant enough that she would choose to resist anyway. After all, there was a group of giant, silent knights intimidating her with the power to turn any human into minced meat in an instant. Resistance was, clearly, futile.

"To think they got ahead of us... What a failure. No matter what we do, those silhouette knights are a problem," Martina muttered in frustration.

The leader heard this, though, and he smiled a truly heinous smile. "Whoa there, I almost forgot to tell you. Judging from the direction this carriage was going, it seems you were heading for the eastern territories. I assume you were attempting to meet up with the royal prince? Too bad, though. We just happened to come from there."

Up until this moment, Martina had remained stouthearted, though frustrated,

but that statement caused the first large change in her expression.

“No, that can’t be... You bastards!”

“I believe you’re smart enough to know why, right? It’s all thanks to the levitating ships that are the pride of our country! The Steel Wing Knights have managed to take control of Fontanie before you could get there!”

Martina felt the ground drop from under her, and she could hear her blood rushing loudly in her ears. While enduring the terrible premonition welling up within her, she wrung out the last dregs of courage she had to glare at the man.

He feigned an exaggerated falter in response before dealing the coup de grâce with his next words. “Oh, right. I believe I heard the royal prince died during our takeover. That means the last bits of royal blood remaining are you girls. There’s nowhere left for you to run.”

Finally, Martina fell to her knees. Despair had taken over her heart, as all the hope that had been propping her up had been dashed.

Ah, I see... I’ve already lost everything. Neither Augusti nor Fernando are around anymore... So who’s even left to take back this country?

The soldiers, seeing that she’d given up resistance, gathered around her. There was no escape and no fighting back. The soldiers captured Martina as well as the girls who were still shivering in the carriage.

The final hope of the former Kingdom of Kuscheperka, Princess Eleonora, had fallen into the hands of the Kingdom of Jaloudek. That news was enough to completely eradicate any thoughts of resistance from the rest of old Kuscheperka’s nobles.

This happened in the year 1281 O.C., during a time when the first whiffs of summer were in the air. The Kingdom of Jaloudek annexed the entirety of the Kingdom of Kuscheperka’s lands, completing its invasion.



The peaks of the tall Auvinier Mountains were shrouded in clouds. A highway stretched between these tall mountains which marked the border to the Occidents. This highway was aptly named the Occident Road, and it led east

toward the Kingdom of Fremmevilla—one of the few paths there. Fremmevilla Kingdom was located in a dangerous area where giant monsters freely strutted about, but at the same time it boasted immensely fertile soil thanks to the nearby mountains. Merchants crossed this severe mountain range regularly seeking such boons.

Today as well, a merchant caravan was traveling west across the highway. The road snaked to ease the slope at which it lay, and a great number of carriages and carts traveled in a line, stretching a great length. The goods they carried were all gigantic, which indicated that the owners of this group were no normal merchants.

Up until this moment, the line had been moving just fine, but suddenly the lead carriage gave the signal to stop.

“Is something the matter, *young master*?” said a voice.

“Something’s off. The flag flying at the checkpoint is...wrong.”

Ahead of them on the road was a checkpoint built at the foot of the Auvinier Mountains, protecting the entrance to the Kingdom of Kuscheperka. However, the flag flying over the checkpoint was not Kuscheperka’s. The identity of the new flag was clear to anyone who knew what was going on in the country. Still, this was a great shock to the merchant caravan that was trying to enter the country.

“That flag, you say? So what do you want to do?” the first voice asked.

The answer came after a short pause. “Start negotiations over our ‘business,’ obviously.”

The “young master” furrowed his brow. The owner of the other voice, who was small like a child, nodded before turning around and sending orders down the line. Soon enough, the caravan resumed its trek forward to the checkpoint.

“Jeez, we really drew the short stick, didn’t we?” One of the soldiers guarding the checkpoint’s gates from their vantage point on top of it complained as he looked up at the mountain peaks. Their armor was stamped with a crest that marked them as part of the Kingdom of Jaloudek. Said country’s control had already stretched to the far east of “old” Kuscheperka’s territory.

“Hey, does the fact that there’s a checkpoint here mean there’s something on the other side of those mountains?”

The plans of the kingdom itself didn’t matter to the common soldier, to whom this area of forests, mountains, and a single road seemed very boring. Because they were so bored, they resorted to small talk while looking up at the series of steep peaks in front of them.

“What was it called... Err... There should be some backwoods country over there. I think it was like Flamberge or something?”

That elicited a sigh. “The other side of the Auvinier Mountains isn’t just out in the sticks, right? It’s basically way out at the end of the world?”

In this age, almost all of humanity lived in the Occidents—so most civilians and soldiers regarded said Occidents as the entirety of the world. The only exceptions were those in power and merchants. Such a worldview meant the Auvinier Mountains essentially marked the edge of the world itself.

That was why the soldiers, who had been forced into the job of watching over “the edge of the world,” were less than enthused about their job. The checkpoint and road meant the existence of travelers. The soldiers understood this in their heads, but that didn’t stop them from considering whatever lay outside of their world to be outside of their interest as well.

“Seriously, why do we gotta protect a place like this? Hey... Wait, what’s that?!”

The soldier was about to continue griping, but he suddenly noticed an anomaly: a dust cloud rising high into the air from the forest that covered the mountainside. The thundering of horse hooves could be felt through the earth, coming at regular intervals. It was a familiar sound and feeling to the soldiers, but for some reason the horses sounded far too *heavy* to be normal. It was as if they were hearing silhouette knight-sized horses.

“Are those...horses? No, they can’t be—these are way too fast! At the speed these things are running, they’ll get here right away. Hurry! Close the gates! Agh, I don’t care if you have to drop them!” the soldier shouted, having lost his head in panic.

This checkpoint was equipped with a gate that had to be lowered or raised, which could be dropped quickly during emergencies by cutting the supporting ropes. The soldiers on guard responded to that shout, hurriedly running over to the emergency drop apparatus and cutting the ropes that connected the gate to the weights with axes. The gate slammed down into the ground with the rattling of a pulley system.

While the steel gate dropped, the knight runners who'd rushed over after hearing the commotion prepared for battle. The cutting-edge silhouette knights of Jaloudek, Tyrantors, stood and prepared to fight while hidden inside. Immediately afterward, the source of the anomaly appeared before them on the road before coming right up to the checkpoint.

"What the hell?! It's not a horse—it's a...person? No, a silhouette knight?!"

What came out into the light of the sun had a humanoid upper half but the lower half of a horse; it was a bizarre thing that was best described as a centaur. Judging from its steel armor and the familiar sounds of active crystal tissue it was emitting, it was definitely a silhouette knight. However, its form was so *out there* that the soldiers' mouths hung open in frozen shock.

The things that nimbly ran down the road—centaur knights called Tzenndrimbles—stopped once they noticed that the gate was closed. The already bizarre centaur knights were actually towing a gigantic carriage which also braked, letting out a shrill sound and producing sparks as it did so. The strange carriage just barely managed to stop short of the gate, kicking up dust and creating a large furrow in the ground.

A terribly nonchalant voice called out to the soldiers, who had frozen on the spot, their minds unable to keep up with the scene in front of them. "Greetings! We are the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company! We have come bearing goods from across the mountains. Please let us pass!"

"What an obvious lie! As if merchants with such ridiculous horses exist!" a soldier managed to quickly retort.

But that retort was only greeted with an exasperated sigh. "Do you seriously not know? The land on the other side is crawling with monsters. These special horses are necessary!"

“The word ‘special’ doesn’t cut it! You’re way too suspicious! All of you, disembark immediately and form a line. We’re going to inspect your cargo and your persons!”

Behind the scenes of this exchange, the Tyrantor squad readied their weapons so they could launch into action at any time. It didn’t matter what these people who claimed to be from a mercantile company were; the soldiers couldn’t imagine they’d obediently disembark given how heavily they were armed.

“Right... Before that, may I ask a question? That’s not Kuscheperka’s flag, is it? Where are you people from?”

The soldiers didn’t notice that the voice asking the question had grown slightly lower in timbre. One of them simply replied with the obvious truth. “You’re really out of the loop for a merchant—that makes you even more suspicious. The Kingdom of Kuscheperka is long gone! This place is under the control of the Kingdom of Jaloudek!”

There was a long pause. “I see, already? Then we don’t have the time to be playing question-and-answer with you all.”

The shrill sound of flowing air started to come from the carriage: the sound of an ether reactor, the heart of a silhouette knight that sucked in air to convert the ether within to mana. Immediately, the steel wires that had been holding down whatever was in the cart snapped, and the covering cloth was thrown aside to reveal something golden that now shone in the light of the sun. It was Goldleo, the silhouette knight with golden armor and a lion theme. From his position in the cockpit, Emris focused his gaze full of bloodlust through the holomonitor in front of him toward the checkpoint.

“If you won’t open up willingly, I’ll just have to force it open!” he shouted.

Goldleo jumped off the carriage and ran as its back came alive with activity. Having received orders, its back weapons activated as its shoulder armor opened up at the same time, revealing the silhouette arms within. A massive amount of mana flowed into the Emblem Graph, which was shortly released as a magic phenomenon.

“You’re in the way!”

The atmosphere *roared*. Multiple silhouette arms had been activated in concert to put out an absurd amount of power. That was the true form of Goldleo's finisher: Blast Howling. An overwhelmingly powerful shock wave that had been generated in exchange for such an absurd amount of mana flew toward the gate. The steel gates were solidly built, and would likely withstand anything up to a charge from a duel-class monster, but they were unable to bear the pressure being placed on them now and warped. Right after its base warped and cracks started to run up the walls connected to it, the entire gate area was blown backward with great force, right at the Tyrantors that had been prepared for battle.

The situation was so unexpected that none of them could dodge. The giant gate directly impacted a Tyrantor, and while they had heavy enough armor to withstand a rock flung by a catapult, a metal gate was too much to ask for. The Tyrantor's torso caved in, meaning it had been immediately destroyed in one blow.

"Wha—?! No way, you're telling me a gate that can easily withstand a tackle from a silhouette knight got destroyed?! Do silhouette arms with such ridiculous power really exist?!"

"Th-That's insane!"

In the face of an attack that far outstripped their expectations, the Tyrantors' knight runners were, of course, shaken. Taking advantage of this, the centaur knights took action. The Tzenndrimbles separated themselves from the carriage and ran for the now open gate. Since they were equipped with two ether reactors, they made a rather unique sound. It sounded like screaming, but also like a horse's neigh, which was only accentuated by the swelling beats of their hooves that seemed heavy enough to split the earth. Once they slipped through the gates, the Tzenndrimbles thrust their long lances forward and adopted a posture that said they were about to attempt a mounted charge.

"Grk! Damn!" one of the Jaloudekian knight runners cried, as he and his black knight were charged.

The centaur knights had kept their momentum as they positioned for the charge, and now the attack from one of them bit deep into the Tyrantor's torso,

flinging bits of armor and crystal tissue everywhere. However, while the Tyrantor had suffered immense damage, it didn't fall. Instead, it grabbed a hold of the lance and kept it in place.

"What?! Why is it so tough?! Hey, let go of my lance!" The protesting female voice coming from the centaur knight sounded surprisingly young.

Unfortunately, the black knight stubbornly refused to let go of the lance, even after it lost its balance and fell to one knee. That was when the other Tzenndrimble came to the first's rescue. It brought up its own lance and thrust it into the Tyrantor. Not even something as tough as a Tyrantor could withstand a second wound of that magnitude. The cavalry lance bored into the silhouette knight's torso, pulverizing armor, crystal tissue, and inner skeleton alike. The two lance hits managed to completely split its torso in two, and the pieces fell to the ground with heavy thuds.

"D-Damn you all! Merchants, my ass! Don't think you'll get even a speck of mercy from us!"

The rest of the Tyrantor squad recovered from the shock of the initial attack and were clearly furious. The checkpoint was equipped with a complement of two platoons (six units) of Tyrantors. It seemed too much for a checkpoint out in the middle of nowhere, but two had already been destroyed.

The Tyrantors' knight runners were wary of the golden lion and twin centaur knights that had achieved this, so they held up their heavy maces and shields as they closed in. They knew that as long as they hardened their defenses, the Tyrantors' armor would be able to fend off any attack. Even monstrous enemies like the ones in front of them were nothing to fear in the face of that.

That was when pure terror rumbled through them. It was a *roar*, or at least something that could only be described as such—the roar of a massive beast meant to let everyone know of its strength and size. It shook the ground and the trees as the intense sound of the Behemoth's Heart sucking in air rang out.

"You're all so *mean*, leaving me behind and starting the fight on your own! Let me and Ikaruga in on this!" Another piece of "luggage" stirred from the carriage that had been left before the gate. Crimson fire suddenly sprouted outward, burning the cloth covering it and continuing to swirl about. In the center of all

this, something jumped into the air.

The soldiers that had been watching from above the gate finally completely lost their minds. A shadow loomed over them which was neither bird nor beast. It was a gigantic humanoid—the shadow of a silhouette knight dropping from the sky. Indeed, a *silhouette knight* was currently in the sky. The walls of the checkpoint had been built thirty meters tall so no silhouette knight could easily scale them, but this one had managed such a feat and more in a single jump.

“Impossible...”

Even while falling into disarray and confusion, the soldiers noticed something right away. The shadow was lingering over them—which meant it would be landing right on top of them. They panicked and ran off, immediately after which it landed on the stone wall. The sunlight shone from behind the tall figure, casting a long shadow that reached the feet of the Tyrantors. The Jaloudekian soldiers, unable to keep up with the situation, had frozen while still right beside the figure, which slowly stood up.

It was an awfully bizarre silhouette knight. It stood around ten meters tall, had armor of a strange design, and held two equally unusually shaped greatswords in each of its hands. However, what drew the eye most was what was on its back. After all, the machine had a crazy extra four arms sticking out from behind it. The centaur knights had been plenty shocking, but this was on a whole other level. The Jaloudekian soldier shivered in the face of the personal unit of Ernesti Echevalier, captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. The demon-faced, six-armed armored warrior, Ikaruga, scanned the area with eye crystals hidden behind a weirdly human visor.

“Let’s go, Ikaruga... It’s the start of the war festival!” Ernie sounded like he was having fun, and his machine’s reactors, Queen’s Coronet and Behemoth’s Heart, roared in agreement.

The surge of mana, produced by two hearts from two massive monsters running wild, obeyed Ernie’s orders and flowed into the unit’s Magius Jet Thrusters. These devices were placed all over the body and created what looked like a crimson cloak that launched Ikaruga into the air.

Ikaruga put its back to the sun and was thrown into shadow. For an instant,

one of the Tyrantors' knight runners locked eyes with it through its visor, and felt an incredible, fathomless fear. "It... It's a monster..."

Having taken to the air, Ikaruga dropped toward the distracted Tyrantors and swung its greatswords down, taking advantage of its momentum. The thick swords probably weren't that sharp, but they still managed to bite into a Tyrantor's shoulder armor and pulverize both its arms thanks to sheer momentum and power. Ikaruga's power output was fearsome, and the greatswords passed right through to gouge holes in the ground underneath, explosively throwing up dust clouds. Under the influence of the blow, the Tyrantor lost its balance and somersaulted backward before collapsing completely.

"One!" On the other side of the fallen Tyrantor, Ikaruga slowly stood. A shiver of fear ran up the spines of the black knights after seeing one of their own instantly dispatched despite its heavy armor.

"Guh, damn iit! What the heck is that thing?! S-Stay back! Shoot it!" After one soldier let out a desperate cry, the black knights somehow managed to recover from their stupefied state.

In the face of such an absurd enemy, they no longer had the leeway to mind how they went about things. Ignoring the fact that they specialized in close-quarters combat, they resorted to their back weapons. But they were beaten to the punch, as the sound of an explosion reached the Jaloudekian soldiers' ears. Bright red fire fountained out of its armor as Ikaruga ran forth with aberrant speed.

"Eep!" one of the knight runners yelped. The Tyrantors reflexively fired their back weapons, which Ikaruga evaded with a slight jet of thrust. The next instant, it had gotten into sword range. Ikaruga swung its weapons, putting all its momentum into the blow, and it was only by sheer coincidence that the Tyrantor it was aiming at managed to raise its shield in time. The greatswords hit the shield, the power behind the blow warping it and forcing the Tyrantor's feet to sink into the ground. Many bits of crystal tissue shattered and flew out from the arm that had supported the shield, enough that it looked like a miracle that the Tyrantor's legs hadn't broken under the strain. The Tyrantor struggled, trying to push its assailant back, but it found itself pushed back instead. The

knight runner inside doubted what he was seeing. To him, it was impossible for his heavy machine to lose in a contest of strength. The enemy was abnormal, as it surpassed the Tyrantor that had no rival in all the Occidents. Unable to understand what kind of enemy he was facing, the knight runner could do nothing but try to endure the fear.

While the Tyrantor was being overwhelmed, Ikaruga mercilessly moved on to its next attack. The four arms folded on its back writhed and unfolded. These new limbs were holding two halberds, with two arms paired to each one, and they described circles as they attacked the Tyrantor. The strikes, bearing the power of centrifugal force, whistled through the air and impacted their target, relieving the Tyrantor of its arms. Having lost its means of attacking and defending itself, the Tyrantor simply stood still in a daze, which allowed Ikaruga to make a second strike with its greatswords. The scathing slashes hit the Tyrantor, breaking it at the waist and causing it to fall on the spot.

“Two!” Ernie declared, and with that there were now only two Tyrantors left standing.

The enemy knight runners fell into complete panic. They were members of the Bronze Claw Knights and had been given Tyrantors as a mark of their excellence. They were veterans of more than a few battles, but the enemy they faced now was just too much. In the face of a threat that far outstripped anything they could imagine, they could not come up with any way to grasp victory. Even so, they continued to fire their back weapons wildly while they still had the distance to do so, throwing out attacks recklessly. Their aim, however, was too careless to be effective, split as it was between the armored warrior, the centaur knights, and the golden lion.

Spellfire flew through the air accompanied by a sound that resembled screaming. Ikaruga swung its halberds, easily batting the attacks aside. The Tyrantors single-mindedly continued their barrage as Ikaruga thrust out its greatswords in their direction, even though it was clearly out of range for a sword swing.

“So you want a contest of our long-range capabilities!” Ernie shouted in delight. “Great idea, I’ll take you up on it.”

Of course, Ernie's—or rather, Ikaruga's—greatswords weren't just swords. The moment Ikaruga pulled a lever on its swords' handles, the thick blades split in two. As they did so, they revealed parts that were clearly unnecessary for a sword. On each blade was a silver plate, a steel frame, and a catalyst crystal. A large amount of mana flowed from Ikaruga into the swords, and the catalyst crystals set at the tips glowed. That meant the swords were also functioning silhouette arms. It was another cutting-edge weapon that was basically a gigantic gun-rod. Its name: the Bladed Cannon.

Mana ran through the Emblem Graph, activating the overspell transcribed within. Bright, vivid spellfire flew toward one of the Tyrantors, and the black knight couldn't dodge. It could do nothing but blankly stare at this attack so far outside the realm of sensibility.

The Bladed Cannons were outfitted with the same overspell that the Chariot had been equipped with: Falconet. Overwhelming firepower that had been designed to combat a division-class monster blew the Tyrantor away, heedless of its armor. More of the same overspell impacted it, and the black knight disappeared in the midst of explosive flame.

"Three!" Ernie exclaimed, and the remaining Tyrantor just *ran*.

In a sense, it was a wise course of action, as there was no way the strange demon in front of it was an opponent it should be fighting. The complement of two platoons (six units) had been destroyed in the blink of an eye; it no longer had any friends to rely on.

Of course, Ikaruga wouldn't simply let the enemy go. Its armor opened up, and hellish flame spurted from the gaps. Ikaruga disappeared as the Magius Jet Thrusters exhibited their overwhelming thrust. It didn't *actually* disappear, but it had gained an incredible amount of speed in an instant from a full stop, which it used to approach the running Tyrantor. The Tyrantor didn't even have enough time for last words. Ikaruga struck out with a Bladed Cannon, stabbing into the enemy silhouette knight's back and destroying its back weapons. Then, while still stabbed into the enemy, the Bladed Cannon opened up. After a few overspells exploded directly inside it, the Tyrantor was nothing more than a pile of scrap.

“Four... Huh? It’s already over? That wasn’t enough...and Ikaruga agrees.” Ernie sounded unsatisfied, like a child begging for more candy as he spurred Ikaruga on, still basking in the afterglow of the explosions. Ikaruga swung its rear halberds back and forth in agreement.

“Oh well...” Ernie muttered, sounding utterly disappointed.

At the same time, Ikaruga folded up the arms on its back and the weapons equipped there. Next, it twirled the Bladed Cannons it had in each hand before storing them at its waist. That meant a tiny sub-arm had grabbed onto the scabbard and was locking it in place. The mech finally roared, and the arguments that were breaking out all over stopped. Now that the skirmish was over, its Behemoth’s Heart ceased activity and its Queen’s Coronet switched over to normal function.

The Tzenndrimbles exchanged looks, suddenly realizing that the roar of battle had stopped.

“That was quick. All I remember was Ernie joining the fight, and then it was over,” Addie said.

“Of course. No matter how tough those black ones are, they won’t be able to stop Ernie and Ikaruga,” Kid reasoned.



The Tzenndrimbles of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s third company traveled in a line down the Occident Road. Beside them, silhouette gears were quickly restraining the remaining Jaloudekian soldiers in the checkpoint. The soldiers had surrendered without putting up any resistance to speak of, shivering with fright, after seeing their two platoons of Tyrantors destroyed so utterly.

“You guys, come get a look at this.” The “young master,” Emris, had found a map in the checkpoint and gathered the order’s leaders. “Damn it all, the situation’s worse than I thought! This checkpoint is the easternmost point of Kuscheperka Kingdom. The Kingdom of Jaloudek is on the western side of the Occidents. These two kingdoms were the largest nations in the west, and Kuscheperka’s just gone now! I don’t get it. What happened to the king, then? And what about my aunt?!”

As he spoke, his expression twisted in pain, and everyone else's faces clouded as well. It was common knowledge that Emris had stuck his nose into this conflict out of concern for his aunt. That meant she was one of the order's objectives in this mission.

"There's too many things we don't know, so I think it'd be best to start by gathering information," Ernie said as he looked around at the group. With that, several members of the gathering nodded and left quietly. The Order of the Indigo Falcon, an order of spies, had come as well to support the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They were perfect for such a duty.

"Information is important! But our enemies are already spread throughout this land. I refuse to sit here and wait," Emris muttered with a groan.

Ernie folded his arms together, a serious look on his face. "A lot of our plans have been ruined, haven't they? We were supposed to pretend to be merchants and gather information while stealthily going about our activities."

"I've been wondering this the entire time, but... Were you *actually* planning to act like merchants while boldly marching around in Tzenndrimbles?" Dietrich jabbed, but he was naturally ignored.

"Then how about this? While we wait for more information, we can gather supplies and 'goods' from the area," Ernie suggested.

"You're seriously going to go on with that story?" Dietrich asked. "So? What do you mean by 'goods,' exactly?"

Ernie answered that exasperated question with a truly ominous smile. "Why, silhouette knights from the Kingdom of Jaloudek, of course!"



With their plans for the foreseeable future settled, the Order of the Silver Phoenix decided to use the checkpoint as a temporary base. The transport and supply corps carried in their supplies and matériel while people in silhouette gears hurried about busily setting up camp. They would be using this place as an origin point to carry out their sabotage in the name of obtaining "goods" for sale.

"Doesn't this just make us rebels or dissidents? We ought to call ourselves

bandits instead of merchants, at this rate,” Dietrich griped, but as usual he was ignored.

While the silhouette gears were busy setting up the base, the silhouette knights were clearing up the Tyrantors’ remains. These carcasses would be later dissected by the knightsmiths to research their enemies’ strength.

“This... No way, that would mean...” Edgar, who had been participating in the cleanup in his pure white silhouette knight, Aldiradcumber, suddenly stopped as he caught sight of the wreckage through his holomonitor. He opened up his cockpit and jumped down, heatedly staring at the remains of a silhouette knight.

“Hey, wait, what’s wrong, Edgar? We’re still in the middle of cleaning this stuff up.”

“Look at this, Helvi. The structure of this enemy silhouette knight... Doesn’t it look familiar?”

Puzzled, and with her head tilted to show it, Helvi disembarked from her own machine to get a closer look at the remains of the black silhouette knight. It didn’t take long for her to come to the same conclusion Edgar had. “Hm, I see. It’s got back weapons and strand crystal tissue. His High— I mean, the young master was talking about how Jaloudek and Kuscheperka were evenly matched. Well, we might know why Jaloudek managed to gain such a large advantage.”

“Was that about silhouette knights? You’re talking about silhouette knights, aren’t you? Let me in on this too!”

“Wagh! E-Ernie?! Where did you come from?!” Helvi yelled, as Ernie had shown up beside her without anyone noticing while she was staring at the wreckage with her arms crossed. The boy’s motto was to be anywhere silhouette knights were.

“You came at the perfect time, Ernesti. Tell me, what do you make of this?” Edgar didn’t seem surprised.

Ernie got closer, following Edgar’s gaze, and understanding quickly dawned on his face. “These black silhouette knights they use... The technologies inside are *the same as ours*. They’re already using the new techniques we invented. It’s

likely as you imagine. This must be because of the stolen Tellestarle.”

Memories from a couple years ago came to the forefront of Edgar’s mind. This was where the silhouette knight that had destroyed his Earlcumber and made its escape ended up. The past and the present were now connected. “Then these invaders are our foes as well! They’re the ones who destroyed my Earlcumber and stole Helvi’s Tellestarle!”

Edgar clenched his fist. The Casadesus Disaster—the event that led to the formation of the Order of the Silver Phoenix—was not something he could forget. He clenched his fist so hard he drew blood, but then, someone gently took his fist in her hands.

It was Helvi. “Calm down. I know how you feel. I’m angry too, and I can’t forgive them either...but you’re a commander, aren’t you, Edgar? You can’t let yourself get worked up so easily.”

Edgar let out a short groan at that. He then took a deep breath and slowly unclenched his fist. “You’re right... Sorry. To think I’d be brought back to reason by the one I made the promise to... It seems I still have some growing to do.”

“You’re welcome. Still, though, I was a little happy to see you get mad for my sake. Thanks.” Helvi gave Edgar’s cheek the faintest of brushes as she returned to her Tzenndrimble, leaving the now frozen man behind.

“Ah, what is this feeling? I feel like I need to go find an enemy to destroy right now.” Meanwhile, Dietrich and the rest of the knight runners, who had been working this entire time beside them, seemed...incensed. The company commander threw the wreckage he was picking up to the pile and looked up to the sky, trying to dissipate all the feelings he was experiencing at the moment.

“We’ve got a lot of enemies to fight, so please, go ahead,” Ernie said.

“Oho, so you get jealous of that too, Ernie! Then you can have a kiss from me!”

“Addy, Dee’s expression is getting more *amused* by the moment, so please calm yourself.” Addy had at some point come up behind Ernie and latched onto him, and the boy had to gently chide her.

Dietrich, who had been making a bitter, sullen expression this entire time,

now looked like he had just stopped caring about anything and everything. He just shrugged and let it all go before saying, “Well, anyway, what do you think about all this, Ernesti? You’re basically the one who made all this stuff. And now it’s coming back to bite us.”

“Yeah... It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

That unexpectedly cheery answer got Dietrich and Addy to look at each other skeptically.

“These are silhouette knights not made by our order, or the kingdom at large. I’m very interested to see what they took from the Tellestarle, and under what philosophy they built their new models. Also...” Ernie smiled like a predator in front of its prey, calling into question just what he was imagining. “These things have been made based on our technology in the first place. So it wouldn’t be going too far to say that they’re basically ours. They’re enemies anyway, so it’s okay for me to crush them and take their stuff, right? It’d be more fun to have more silhouette knights. I’m sure.”

“No, that logic is weird. It’s definitely weird, but...” Though Dietrich didn’t like that the boy had said something so ferocious with a smile, he hadn’t noticed that he was making a similar expression. “I guess when I think of them as the allies of the people that stole the Tellestarle, I’m pretty short on compassion. Edgar’s totally raring to go, and of course our young master is too. I guess we should do as our lord captain here says and make them into sacrifices.”

Dietrich swept his gaze over Kuscheperka’s lands, which spread out in front of him from the foot of the Auvinier Mountains.

In the far reaches of the east, a flag emblazoned with a silver phoenix flapped in the wind. Thus, the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company resolutely started to act, sowing seeds of conflict in the midst of the storm that had enveloped the land.

Chapter 31: The Captive Princess

Recently, in the eastern parts of what was formerly the Kingdom of Kuscheperka, a strange rumor had been circulating among the Jaloudekian soldiers. The rumors told of a demon-faced grim reaper riding around on a gigantic, bizarrely shaped carriage hunting silhouette knights.

At first, most of the soldiers had laughed at these rumors. After all, how could such a fearsome threat exist in Kuscheperka, when it had crumbled so easily and proved itself to be naught but a paper tiger? The men of Jaloudek's army were brave and had absolute confidence in themselves. That was why they let their guards down, and ended up meeting the source of the rumors.

"If we spread out, we'll just be taken down one by one! Group up and solidify your defenses!"

"I-It's no use! That won't save us! Not against that god of death—" The rest of the soldier's sentence was cut off by a neigh that reverberated through the area.

The group of Tyrantors hurriedly grouped up as the stuff of their nightmares appeared before them. With hoofbeats that sounded heavy enough to crack the earth, the aberration advanced toward them. The Tyrantors' foe was actually two Tzenndrimbles towing a giant armored carriage, the Type 3 chariot. On top of the Chariot rode the six-armed, demon-faced Ikaruga, whom the Jaloudekians called a god of death or grim reaper.

In the face of a foe who was as fearsome as the rumors said, or actually more so, the Tyrantors were heavily shaken but remained resolutely standing. After all, Tyrantors were slow, so they wouldn't be able to run anyway.

"I'll be taking those silhouette knights you're riding." What came out of their adversary was neither question nor demand, but simply an announcement.

While there was still some distance between the two parties, Ikaruga brought up four Bladed Cannons from where they were stored on its back. Surging

crimson spellfire quickly reduced one of the Tyrantors to ash from the explosions. Once the formation crumbled, the Tzenndrimbles began their charge. With the help of momentum and weight, this attack sent the black knights flying despite their shields and armor. The last remaining Tyrantor stubbornly faced them, but one of the beast slayers attached to the sides of the Chariot slammed into it as they passed by, folding it in half and breaking it. The thick blade, which had once buried hordes of shellcases, performed just as well against the Tyrantor and its armor.

Once the grim reaper's Chariot finished its destructive sprint, all that was left behind were piles of wreckage. The Chariot turned in a large arc as it bled off speed and returned to the wrecks.

"Good, good. We've secured a lot of goods today as well," Ernie said happily. "Let's hurry and bring these back so we can use them in negotiations!"

"Ernie looks like he's having so much fun..." Addy said with a sigh.

"He's getting to go wild in Ikaruga and get more silhouette knights on the way. I guess this is what they mean when they say someone's experiencing the prime of their life," Kid muttered.

After that, the third company caught up with them, and they carried the Tyrantor wrecks back to base. There was nothing left of the battle other than the fact that a patrol had disappeared.

That was how multiple patrols of Tyrantors went missing in the eastern territories in quick succession. Instead of fading, rumors of the grim reaper's Chariot spread farther, seeding fear into the hearts of soldiers on the front. Unfortunately for them, these rumors misled the army of Jaloudek, making it so that they took a while longer to realize there was a deadly enemy in their midst than normal.

The carriage continued onward, making hoofbeats that resonated in one's gut. The reason the carriage was making such abnormally heavy sounds was because it was a silhouette knight-sized carriage towed by a Tzenndrimble. It was being escorted by Kardetolles, who were protecting both the carriage and its cargo.

"Incredible. So the rumors were true!" A noble of the former Kingdom of

Kuscheperka, Baron Modesto Letonmarquis, stared wide-eyed at the “goods” arrayed in front of him. This was natural—the “goods” were actually silhouette knight wrecks, and Jaloudekian Tyrantor wrecks at that.

The armies of many of the area’s lords, not just the baron’s, consisted of old model Lesvants. And it had already been proved many times over that Lesvants couldn’t hold a candle to the Jaloudekian Tyrantors.

“How do you like our company’s wares? Are you still on the fence even after seeing them in person?”

Emris showed off the fruits of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s efforts to “stock up” proudly with a puffed-out chest. The truth behind the ridiculous rumors of a demon-faced god of death going around making a bloodbath out of Jaloudek’s army was now revealed to the baron. However, while he was shocked and excited at first, his expression quickly clouded.

“Right... You all have definitely shown me enough. These are wonderful ‘wares,’ and I must praise you for being able to fight against Jaloudek’s army, something none of us were able to do in the slightest. Still... That’s all. Even if we were to stand by your side, and even if we were able to win some local victories, that will just lead to an even larger force bearing down upon us.” Baron Letonmarquis’s shoulders drooped gloomily. “No matter how strong you all are, that doesn’t mean we can also win. In which case you’d all be cornered in the end as well, I’m sure... That’s why you’re running around doing all this, yes?”

Emris almost clicked his tongue as he wondered where the man’s initial good mood had gone. Instead, he roughly sipped at his tea. The Order of the Silver Phoenix had been going around destroying so many Tyrantors that they’d raised some eerie rumors, but now they felt like they were hitting a wall. Their forces were powerful, but they still only numbered three companies, a total of thirty units. In terms of numbers, they were far inferior. Even though they were great on the attack, they were in no way suited to defend any gains they made.

“So you’ll suck up to the enemy, just because they’re powerful?” Emris asked.

“Minor nobles like us have needs as well. Why would we resist when we know we can’t protect ourselves, let alone our people? Not only that, but the royal

lineage is gone... There's no going back to the way things were now, anyway."

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had been trying to make contact with surviving nobles of old Kuscheperka to solve this problem, but the replies they'd been receiving hadn't been favorable. There were a lot of reasons given, but the most common was that there was no banner for the nobles to unite under.

"So my aunt is really...?" Emris trailed off.

"I don't know," the baron answered. "But from what I hear, they at least have her in their clutches. Which means things aren't looking good. Even if she's alive —"

Emris cut him off there. What lay at the end of that sentence wasn't something he could bear to accept.

Baron Letonmarquis immediately apologized. Emris's aunt, Martina, was the wife of Archduke Fernando, the greatest noble of the eastern regions. Everyone present knew what the baron had meant, and no one wanted to voice it aloud. In the end, he agreed to support the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company but would not promise anything further. All the other nobles were much the same; even if they promised to lend a hand behind the scenes, they refused to fight.

"This isn't working. No matter how many small fry we ruin, no one's taking action." Emris growled like a fierce beast. While he could understand their circumstances, he was still frustrated at the nobles refusing to take clear stances, which was further compounded by the still-murky whereabouts of the royal family. This unhappiness had been piling up over days spent in similar, fruitless activities.

"We've been shaving away at our enemy's strength at random up until now, but it seems it's about time for a change of plans," Ernie said. "Also, in order to get the nobles to help, we'll need something special that will allow them to fight... I'll try to puzzle that out as well." He also growled as he crossed his arms. Though in his case, it felt like the reason for his frustration was slightly different.

"So there's nothing left for us to do here?" Even Emris, who had endless amounts of enthusiasm to support him, was starting to be plagued by doubt. That was when a piece of news that would completely break the impasse arrived before the Order of the Silver Phoenix.



The former Kingdom of Kuscheperka could be generally divided into five regions. One was the central region, where the capital was located, and the other four lay in each of the cardinal directions.

Of these regions, the eastern region was where the territories of the king's younger brother, Archduke Fernando Nevaless Kuscheperka, once lay. Indeed, they "once" lay there—the archduke was killed during Jaloudek's invasion, and his territory had been seized. Fernando had been "demoted" to the rank of archduke and given his territory when his brother, Augusti, succeeded the throne. Also, because he kept his family name that indicated his royal status, his territory had been named after his first name, Fernando, instead. Otherwise, it was only called the "eastern territory." Even though he had already stepped down from the line of succession, the archduke was still of royal blood. Naturally, he had to be eliminated. Otherwise, he would have posed an obstacle to the invasion.

The eastern territory had its own territorial capital, Fontanie. After Jaloudek took control of it, something called the Eastern Protectorate Government was left behind to manage the land, and the city was garrisoned by a detachment from the Black Knight Order.

The archduke's old castle, Raspede Castle, had also been taken and occupied by the Jaloudekian army. It was marked by the four tall corner towers placed at each of the cardinal directions. These towers were previously used to keep an eye out in all directions, but thanks to the kingdom's period of peace, that original function lost its purpose, and now it was essentially an ornament. However, they've recently been used for a new aim.

Inside one of the tower's rooms, a listless-looking girl gazed around at her surroundings. Her name was Eleonora, and she had inherited the blood of Kuscheperkan royalty. She was an honest-to-goodness princess, and this room had been dedicated to confining her, so while it looked quite nice and well furnished, it was nowhere near at a level befitting royalty. She passed her unfocused gaze over the window fitted with iron bars and the abnormally sturdy door before sighing for the umpteenth time. It was a boring room, and it wouldn't change no matter how many times she looked at it.

After falling into the clutches of Jaloudek's army, she was imprisoned here in Raspede Castle. She was being held in the highest room of one of the corner towers, scores of meters above ground level. The only entrance to the room was at the end of a long spiral staircase inside the tower. On top of that, there was strict security placed over the entire area so that she would not be able to escape. Even if it were easy for her to leave, it was doubtful whether she even had the strength of will to try it in her current state.

Her days were filled with silent sighs. She had lost her father, the king; been forced into a harsh, difficult escape; and all that resulted in was her imprisonment, separated from her aunt Martina and cousin Isadora as well. Beset by a feeling of powerlessness, she had decided to avoid facing her inevitable future. It was only natural that she would become listless and lethargic.

One day, though, a sudden change was brought to her silent room.

A heavy knock came from the only entrance and exit to the room. This sudden change to the usual state of things surprised her and sent shivers down her spine. The maid, who had been waiting in the adjoining room and keeping quiet, silently moved toward the door. After a practiced exchange, the lock opened with a mechanical click. Once the maid moved away from the door, the visitor's identity became clear as a strong presence entered the room. The owner of this presence came right up to Eleonora, who had her head drooped, refusing to look at the visitor.

"How're you doing, *former* Princess of Kuschepka?"

She trembled slightly as she looked up fearfully. She came face-to-face with the second prince of Jaloudek and supreme commander of its invading army, Cristobal.

"Hmph. Looks like you've calmed down quite a bit."

When she had first been placed in confinement, Eleonora had gone to pieces. She'd seemed half mad as she cried and wailed. It had taken a while for her to calm down and become as devoid of life as she was now.

"I've come today with good news. Rejoice, we've decided on how to use you. It's time for your blood to come in handy; we'll use it to stabilize the land

formerly known as Kuscheperka.” Cristobal paid no heed to Eleonora’s lack of reaction. He simply grinned as he haughtily announced, “You will become my wife.”

“N-No... I don’t...want to...” Finally, Eleonora said something. Her voice sounded like it was being squeezed out of her, and since she was looking down at the floor, her voice was rather tiny. Yet she managed to clearly express her rejection.

Still, Cristobal’s smile did not fade. “I guess you wouldn’t agree so easily. But do you really think you have a choice?”

Cristobal bent forward and came right up to the girl, causing Eleonora to reflexively try to get away. He forcefully stopped her by grabbing her by the arm and pulling her close. “If you refuse,” he whispered, “you’re of no use to me. I’ll just kill you and use the other girl we captured alongside you.”

Cristobal’s sadistic smile was reflected in her wide eyes, and Eleonora froze.

“She may not be in the direct line of succession, but that girl is still royalty. There’ll be many uses for her. After all, I have her *mother too*. It’ll be easy to bend her to my will.”

“Agh... Please, don’t...”

Eleonora drooped powerlessly, and Cristobal let her go, his business finished. He immediately turned on his heels to leave.

“I can be merciful if I want to. I’ll allow you some time to come to a decision. Still, you should resolve yourself as fast as you can. I’m capricious and impatient.” With that he left, leaving behind a dazed Eleonora.

It took the princess a while to come back to her senses. “Sorry... I’m so sorry, everyone... I’m sorry, father!” There was nothing she could do other than lie on her bed, cover her face with her hands, and cry her eyes out.

Cristobal descended the spiral staircase as Eleonora’s door locked shut with a click once again. Out of nowhere, he let out a sigh. No matter how the decision had come about, he was about to marry a girl whose beauty was famed throughout the Occidents. And yet, he looked disappointed.

“Good grief, what a *damp* girl. I really can’t bring myself to like her type,” he said aloud.

“You cannot be planning to use that as a reason to reject the marriage proposal, Your Highness?” Dorotheo, who had been waiting outside the room, asked exasperatedly.

Cristobal’s face twisted further in displeasure. “Hmph, of course not. I would never ruin my sister’s governance plan. It’s just... I can’t stand her type. I’m allowed to complain at least, aren’t I?”

Dorotheo had been thinking that such a thing would actually be possible for his lord, as short-tempered and irritable as he was, and he breathed a sigh of relief in secret.

“That reminds me. Apparently this eastern region has been pretty lively recently. Right, Dorotheo?” Cristobal changed the subject, causing unpleasant emotions to well up within Dorotheo for a different reason.

He hadn’t wanted that information to reach his lord’s ears. However, he maintained his nonchalant expression as he replied, “Indeed. It seems there are still some fools who have yet to learn their lesson. I intend to put some effort into exterminating them now.”

“I see. I thought everyone in this depressing little country was weak and spineless, but it seems there are still some decent ones left. Hey, let me—”

“No.” Dorotheo shut him down immediately, causing Cristobal’s mood, which had up until now been trending upward, to come crashing back down. “I’m sure you intend to hunt them yourself,” Dorotheo said. “That cannot be allowed. You are our army’s leader, Your Highness. You must see to your duties as such, and leave trifles like these to us.”

Cristobal groaned, unsatisfied, but it seemed he understood. “Then hurry up and take care of it!”

Though his lord’s behavior caused him a fair bit of trouble as always, Dorotheo still gave a clear affirmative response as he followed Cristobal, whose pace was quickening.



Immediately after separating from Cristobal, Dorotheo called for his subordinates. They were all part of the forces under Cristobal's direct command and were tried-and-true soldiers that had accompanied Dorotheo for a long time.

"And so, we must clean this problem up quickly. Otherwise His Highness might start getting too interested for his own good," he said.

Since they had as much experience with Cristobal as Dorotheo did, they knew his personality well. The subordinates could easily imagine the exchange that had taken place and adopted the same strained smiles as Dorotheo.

"I need to stay and assist His Highness as his aide. I'll leave this task to you, Gust."

After receiving Dorotheo's orders, a young, lanky man stepped forward from the group. He had a great many leather belts around his waist from which hung swords of all different sizes. His strange outfit aside, he boisterously slammed his fists together in a show of confidence. "You got it! I've been waiting, old man. You can leave it to me, I'll get this done *right*!"

The man—Dorotheo's son, Gustavo Maldness—pounded on his chest as he guaranteed results. His father reacted to his rowdy reassurance with a somewhat vague but exasperated expression. Some stifled snickers could be heard among the rest of the group. This exchange between father and son was a usual occurrence.

Suddenly, someone intruded on this ominous but heartwarming atmosphere. "Mind if I get in on that job?"

Everyone turned, guarded, toward the source of the voice. The figure emerged from the shadows, heedless of the tension in the air. Dorotheo narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You're... Lady Hietakannes. What business does the master of the Copper Fang have with us?"

Even though she saw the clear mistrust in Dorotheo's attitude, Kerhilt Hietakannes smiled sweetly as she passed her gaze over the group. "No need to be so wary. Everyone who wrongs Jaloudek is an enemy. I was just offering to help in defeating them."

“I have the sneaking suspicion that allowing your help would just invite more trouble. So, what kind of help are you planning to give?”

“You know our trade, don’t you? We’ll find that troublesome little grim reaper for you.”

Dorotheo took some time to consider the offer. He weighed Kerhilt’s hidden intention and the enemy on a scale. Eventually, he concluded that not knowing the location of the enemy would be more trouble, so he accepted her offer.

“Heh heh heh!” Kerhilt’s laugh made her sound even more like a snake. “Then I’ll spread the order among my men. Look forward to some good news.”

With that, she left. Gustavo watched her go before he called out to his father, displeased. “Hey, old man, are you really sure about this?”

“The woman is an incorrigible she-fox, and you cannot let your guard down around her, but her work is reliable,” he replied. “Don’t worry, we just have to do our jobs. Once you get the information from her, move out.”

Gustavo’s men all saluted Dorotheo at once. A while later, they departed from Raspede Castle via levitating ship.



The report came to the Order of the Silver Phoenix as they were preparing for a sortie, as usual.

“Has this...been confirmed?” Ernie asked.

“Yes. It is probably meant partially to suppress any remaining Kuscheperkan resistance. They themselves have started to proactively spread this information. Also, we have obtained supporting evidence just in case,” Nora Frykberg, a member of the Order of the Indigo Falcon, replied in her usual expressionless manner with a nod. These were the results of the investigation that Ernie had ordered when they’d entered the former Kuscheperkan territory.

“I understand. Let’s go inform the young master about this. It...seems like everything will start moving all at once.”

Ernie immediately gathered the order to share this information that would likely affect their futures. “To start things off, I have news for everyone. By the

way, young master, I have both good and bad. Which would you like first?”

“I see. Then let’s start with the good,” Emris replied.

Ernie reacted to that somewhat offhanded response with a smile before answering. “Then let’s do just that. We now know where Lady Martina and the rest of the captured royal family are being held.”

Emris sucked in a breath in surprise. “Is that true, Ernesti?! I see... So she was okay!!!”

Emris turned around suddenly and howled to the sky as he raised both his arms in joy. He wasn’t the only one; a small wave of glee spread through the members of the order as well.

“Now that we know that, we’ve totally got this! Let’s go save them right now, Order of the Silver Phoenix!”

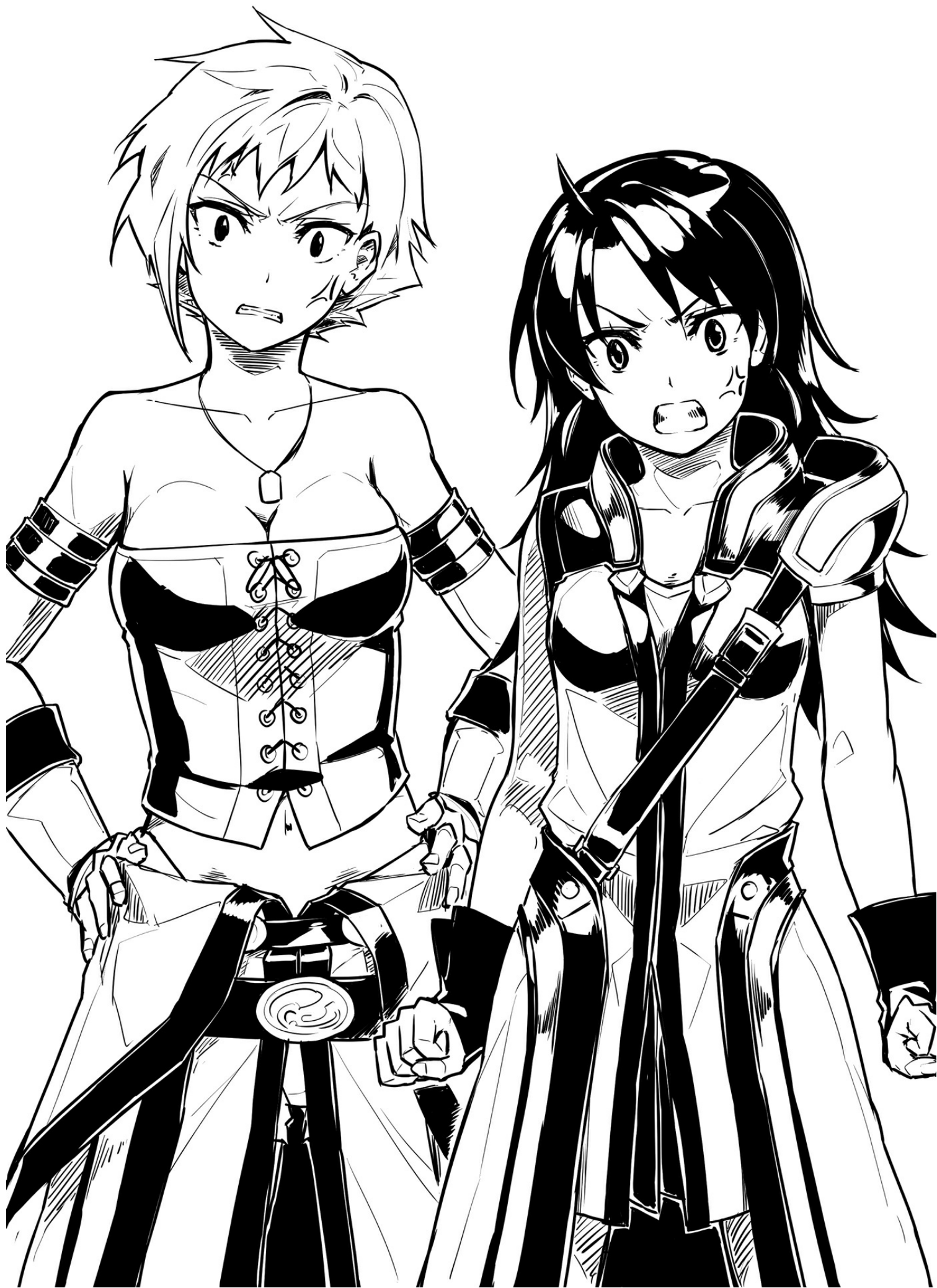
“Please wait. I’m sorry to stop you when you’re so excited, but I still haven’t told everyone the bad news. We know they’re alive...but it seems they’re in a rather troublesome situation.” Ernie stopped Emris just as he was about to run even wilder than usual before sharing his other piece of news: the princess and the other royals were being confined in Raspede Castle, and one of Jaloudek’s princes was planning to marry the princess.

Emris immediately responded exactly as everyone expected him to. “I see, okay. I’m gonna go murder that stupid little prince. How dare he try to make Princess Helena his after invading the country. There’s a limit to how brazen you can be!”

His face was so tense that his blood vessels were practically popping out. He looked like a mythological Asura. He was of course familiar with not just his aunt, Martina, but her daughter, Isadora, and Princess Eleonora too—though he called her Helena. The fall of Kuscheperka and the news that someone was making a play for the princess meant the rage had rushed right to his head.

“Seriously, that stupid prince is the worst! Trying to make a girl yours by force is unforgivable!” Addy said angrily.

“Yeah! Let’s rip that villain to pieces!” Helvi agreed.



The women of the Order of the Silver Phoenix were also enraged, especially Addy and Helvi. Since there were now three people with their arms in the air and angrily shouting, it seemed like the rest of the group had missed their chances to jump on the bandwagon.

Ernie then spoke with a nonchalant tone from behind everyone else, just as they were about to jump into action. “Now, now, don’t be in such a rush. We ought to not move just yet.”

“What? Then how do you plan on saving them?! Are you seriously going to tell us to just sit around and see what happens?!” Emris shouted, not caring how angry he seemed.

But Ernie replied without losing his cool, “The princess is being held in Fontanie—which is currently Jaloudek’s seat of power in the east. In short, it’s the enemy’s home base.”

“Tch! You’re right about that. I guess it wouldn’t be as simple as just marching there, even for the Order of the Silver Phoenix.”

It seemed the blood that had rushed to his head receded once he recognized the difficulties they were facing, so Emris had regained some sense of calm. Since the princess was in the enemy’s base, there would be an incomparably larger number of soldiers present than what they were seeing out in the outskirts of the territory. The reason the order had managed to claim so many victories was mainly because of the Tzenndrimbles’ mobility. Even though Ikaruga and Goldleo were powerful silhouette knights, there was a limit to what they could accomplish alone. When it came to assaulting bases, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was at an overwhelming disadvantage.

“And if the entire order mobilizes, we’ll stand out,” Ernie continued. “In the worst case, they could take the princess and run. Also, they don’t only have one prisoner. If we let them take hostages, we’ll be ending up in an even worse situation. Basically, we have to rescue all the captured royals without the enemy even noticing.”

Emris furrowed his brow, deepening the crease on his forehead. While it was great news that they had discovered where the royals were being held, it didn’t change the fact that they were still in enemy hands. Both Helvi and Addy also

lowered their arms, frustrated.

“So. While the rest of the order continues to fight here, let’s go steal them back.” Ernie was the only one in this situation that was smiling, like he was having fun.

“What are you planning to do? Of course we’re going to take them back, but we can’t do so without enough forces,” Emris said.

“That’s not true. You have to flip your thinking on its head. Let’s *use* this current situation instead. We’ve already managed to rack up quite the number of Jaloudekian casualties. They’re sure to commit more forces to eliminate our order—that’s our opening. It’s true—our main power lies in our silhouette knights, but we do have something else we can use...silhouette gears.” At some point during that, Ernie started looking like a young boy who just thought up a great prank. Either that, or a child bragging about his favorite toy. “While the enemy is distracted by the order’s main forces, we’ll form an infiltration team using the latest silhouette gears made for combat and steal back the captured VIPs. Batson! Now is the time to bring out our covert silhouette gear, the Shadowrad!”

Batson hurriedly nodded in response when the conversation was suddenly turned his way before checking behind him. There stood a silhouette gear that clearly was neither a Motor Beat nor a Motolift. Beside these silhouette gears stood Nora and the rest of the Order of the Indigo Falcon squad, who also nodded confidently.

Emris had been listening carefully to Ernie, but he could no longer resist the urge and burst out into laughter. “Khah! Heh heh...heh ha ha... HA HA HA HA HA! Ernesti, you—” He stifled another laugh. “Okay! I like this plan! Heh heh heh... Especially the part that involves invalidating all of their efforts!”

Now that Emris was on board, everyone else started moving. While the crowd was getting excited for what was to come, Addy quietly slipped next to Batson and whispered into his ear, “Hey, Batson. I know Ernie said all that, but he probably just wants to try using it, doesn’t he?”

“This is Ernie we’re talking about, so probably. I won’t say anything for sure, but I’m sure you know already,” Batson replied.

While Addy and Batson were whispering to each other, plans were solidified. As the captain, Ernie determined the outline of the operation and assigned roles to the members. “I’ll lead the reclamation team. The rest of the team will consist of them,” he said as he motioned toward the Indigo Falcon spies, “and Addy, Kid, you two should join us too.”

“What?! Us?” Addy shouted in surprise, having been suddenly nominated. Kid was equally surprised.

“Yes. You two are about as good as I am at piloting Motor Beats, and you also have experience piloting the Tzenndrimble. This will allow us to keep the numbers minimal while maintaining our ability to infiltrate and carry the hostages out.”

“I see... Okay, Ernie! Let’s go save the princess!” Addy was on board.

“Hm, well...” Kid muttered. “If you’re willing to go that far.”

Addy pumped her fist, more motivated than usual, while Kid shrugged as if such a conclusion was inevitable.

That was when Emris, who had been quiet up until now, grabbed the entirety of Ernie’s head in his huge hand. “Hey, Ernesti, I’m joining you guys in the reclamation team. It doesn’t matter what you say—I’m going. What do you think I even came all this way for?”

Emris had been shaking the boy’s head side to side as he talked, but Ernie escaped and heaved a sigh as he permitted Emris to join him. The prince’s suitability for the mission was dubious at best, but the young captain knew it would be useless to stop him.

“That will be all for the reclamation team. All that’s left is... Edgar, Dee, Helvi, I have an important mission for you three and the rest of our companies.”

The company commanders all fixed their postures and gathered in front of their captain. They knew where this conversation was going; their role would be to lure enemies in. It was dangerous, but their expressions radiated resolve. In the face of that, Ernie took a sheaf of paper from seemingly out of nowhere and handed it to them.

“I thought of a proposal to strengthen the Kuscheperkans’ Lesvants so they

can fight too. This is the blueprint.”

“Huh?! Just when did you... I guess I should have expected this of you,” said Helvi.

Though the company commanders were surprised, they gingerly took hold of the blueprints.

Ernie puffed up his chest proudly but quickly reeled it in to say, “I want all of you to take these plans and go convince the nobles. When the reclamation squad returns victorious, that will also mean the return of this country’s ruler. All that’s left after that is the fight. From then on, we’ll need others to stand with us. This is how we make sure that happens.”

All of a sudden, the papers felt much heavier. These blueprints could sway the future of this land, though in a different sense from the actions of Ernie and the rest of the reclamation team.

“Jeez, you say it like it’s so simple,” said Dietrich.

“Still, this is an interesting idea. I’m best when I’m protecting something anyway, so I’ll make sure to protect these plans. And I’ll give ’em a scare while I’m at it.” Edgar wasn’t the only one who sounded motivated. The rest of the order also raised their voices and arms in cheer.

With that, both the reclamation team and the main force had their orders. Thus, the Order of the Silver Phoenix started to take action quietly but with the ferocity of a storm.

“Heh heh heh... Operation Take Back the Princess! It sounds good,” Addy muttered. “Ah, but I kind of feel a little jealous, since they get to have Ernie come save them...”

“Come on, lay off the stupid ramblings—we have an important job to do too. Let’s get ready.” In the midst of the bustling order, Kid had to drag Addy along by the sleeve, as the girl was lost in her delusions.



A couple of black ships flew through the skies over the eastern territory, which were calm with clouds shaped in gentle swirls. They were levitating ships,

the secret weapons of Jaloudek's army. These ships had left Fontanie and were making their way east carrying the group of knights led by Gustavo.

"Aha, they're really serious about this, to allow me to use two of their precious levitating ships," Gustavo said, clearly in a good mood. He had plonked himself down in the captain's chair.

One of his men responded, "It does seem like overkill for a band of somewhat strong bandits."

The man's contempt could be seen dripping out of his words, probably originating from the fact that they'd done nothing but face the Kuscheperkan army up until now. It wasn't an isolated problem either—almost all of Jaloudek's soldiery was trending this way.

Gustavo was a little exasperated, having noticed this trend rear its ugly head, but he quickly covered that up with a lighthearted expression. "You know, I heard that grim reaper, or whatever they call it, runs away really fast! That's why we're going to use the speed of these levitating ships to get around in front of them and stop any retreat by bringing them down! How do you like that plan? Sounds perfect, right? I mean, we need to take care of this as soon as possible, since taking our time for no reason would just smear mud all over my old man's face."

"Indeed, you're right about that. In the end, our true enemy is His Highness's patience. He's way more scary than some cowardly Kuscheperkan." The subordinate laughed as he left.

After seeing him off, Gustavo lazily adjusted himself to sit cross-legged on the captain's seat. "Ughhh. With how much the guys're underestimating them, things could get ugly if we don't do this right. That grim reaper's strong enough to warrant rumors, so I'm sure it's real annoying, at least. We'll have to do something about it no matter what, though."

Though he understood the problem, he was still full of confidence. Meanwhile, the ships continued to sail eastward.



A while had passed since Ernesti's silhouette gear squad left to take back the

princess.

The remaining forces of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, the first through third companies, were running all over old Kuscheperka's eastern territories. They had split into two units, shaped around the first and second companies respectively, both being transported by members of the third company and its Tzenndrimbles. Their aim was to spread the Llevant-strengthening proposal to all nobles in the area and convince them to help the cause. The most efficient way to do so would be to split into many smaller groups, but their current circumstances blocked this option.

The main reason was the frequent silhouette knight hunts orchestrated by their leader, Ernesti. The Jaloudek army had started to respond in earnest to the threat. They no longer took action in small platoons (three units). Now, they were required to move in groups of at least company size (ten units), and sometimes they even sortied in groups of several companies. Now that the Order of the Silver Phoenix was operating without their strongest unit, Ikaruga, they were facing that much more danger.

"It doesn't look like they'll just let us go wherever we want."

"It woulda been so much easier if they'd just kept on guard like that."

As a result, the groups were avoiding combat as much as possible. Luckily, thanks to the fact that the Jaloudek army had started concentrating their forces, they were easier to avoid. In exchange, because they made withdrawal their main strategy, their existence had been totally revealed to the enemy. The mythical horse-mounted group was no longer just a rumor; they were an established fact.

"At any rate, our advantage is our Tzenndrimbles' legs. Let's make a detour before we come face-to-face with the enemy," Dietrich complained from inside one of the carriages carrying the second company.

Unfortunately, his desire did not come true. The group of Tzenndrimbles towing the carriages really stood out. It was impossible to completely hide them, so it was likely only a matter of time until they were discovered.

"This is Revolving Deer. I've found the *meeting of horses*. Let the falcons fly, the hunt continues..."

There were black giants hiding in wait next to a road in a forest. In contrast to what their large builds may have implied, they were quite silent, with thin, ghostlike presences. The centaur knights running on the adjacent road never noticed them. Eventually, the black giants stealthily started to take action, accompanied by several soldiers on horseback riding out.

“Wow... They really are here, just like the message. That she-fox is competent, at least,” Gustavo grumbled while rubbing his chin from his seat on the bridge of a levitating ship. His gaze was locked onto a group traveling down a road that went through a forest—a group that could only be described as abnormal. “So that’s the rumored ‘Grim Reaper’s Horseback Brigade.’ No wonder they were so hard to find! What the heck are those horses?! They’re ridiculous! Well, whatever. It doesn’t matter who they are; they’ll just end up as rust on my sword anyway.”

The caravan of bizarre carriages running down the road was far more than the man expected. Still, he quickly regrouped and started to shoot orders to his subordinates, who had also been just as shocked. His quick recovery showed that his grit was not to be underestimated.

At the same time as Gustavo and his airborne force discovered the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s second company, the second company also spied the approaching levitating ships.

“What the heck is that? Am I...dreaming? I think I see...two ships flying in the air!”

“This is just crazy! Who would ever have thought that there would be someone other than our captain who could make such insane things. The world sure is big,” Dee muttered.

“Commander Dee, that’s not what you should be focusing on! Like, what’re we gonna do about those things?!”

In terms of shock at first sight, the people of the second company probably had it worse. Levitating ships were the world’s first practical means of aerial warfare. To the Order of the Silver Phoenix, whose knowledge told them that only monsters or the like could fly, levitating ships were mind-boggling. The Jaloudek army treated these levitating ships as precious resources, and they

had yet to use them in the east in any capacity up until now, when they had met a truly troublesome enemy.

“It really does look just like a ship, doesn’t it? Hm, and those are...sails? They’re sporting Jaloudek’s flag, which means they’re enemies, and they can fly. We have no choice but to fight, then. It seems they’re faster than us,” Dietrich muttered.

The reason the second company was able to recover this fast upon seeing an unprecedented flying weapon was because they belonged to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Earth-shattering events were daily occurrences for them, so sadly, they were used to it.

“All units, prepare for combat! Deploy your Outer Crusts and get ready to trade bombardments!” Dietrich shouted his orders, and each carriage deployed the armor plates they were carrying.

What he referred to as Outer Crusts were simple-to-use pieces of defensive equipment made for the transport-intended carriages based off of their totally combat-focused version, the Chariot. They resembled firing platforms for the cargo of these carriages, silhouette knights, and were made to enable a limited recreation of the Chariot’s capabilities.

All the Kardetolles looked up and pointed their back weapons to the sky from their positions atop the moving carriages. The knight runners all overlapped the reticles on their holomonitors on the black dots of levitating ships in the distance.

“Initiative wins! Fire!” The second company were aimed and ready, trying to judge when the range would be right, when their commander Dietrich gave the order, and they all unleashed fierce spellfire at the approaching levitating ships.

The levitating ships had dropped altitude and were approaching their target when they were suddenly exposed to spellfire from the ground. The crews panicked. Up until now, they’d been literally looking down arrogantly at everything, and they hadn’t expected their targets to be able to shift to the attack so quickly after seeing a levitating ship.

“Huh, so they aren’t scared by the sight of levitating ships? They’ve got guts! We’re paying ’em back! Ready the Catapults! And contact the other ship—put

'em in a pincer!" In the midst of this panic, only Gustavo remained calm, and he ordered his men to attack.

The calm of the leader spread to the subordinates, and while he was still a little flustered, the communications officer shouted the orders into a speaking tube.

Right away, the levitating ships' flanks opened up, revealing small ports from which wooden platforms extended. The weapons atop these platforms took aim at the dust cloud on the road. At the same time, the ships' Blow Engines started making adjustments to gradually slow the levitating ships. While wading through the bombardment of fire, the two levitating ships moved to pincer the Order of the Silver Phoenix detachment, keeping pace with the groundbound force.

"It's fine if you're not totally accurate—just shoot your hearts out!" Gustavo shouted.

Stones flew from the small ports accompanied by dull sounds. These "Catapults" were small stone-slingers mounted on the levitating ships. They were simple weapons that used clockwork to send stones flying, and normally they were weak enough for silhouette knights to withstand them easily.

But things were different from the height of a levitating ship. After all, the height enabled the absolute advantage of potential energy no one else could access. Even the small and weak stones thrown by these weapons could turn into lethal missiles by the time they reached the ground.

The stones whistled as they sailed through the air, and upon impact they disintegrated with a thunderous roars. These stones were thrown rapidly in response to the spellfire, causing the knight runners in the Tzenndrimbles to yell in panic. "This is bad, second company! The road is shot! If we keep going at this speed, we'll trip!"

"They're good..." Dietrich muttered. "All units of third company, cut the carriages loose. Once you're lightened up, head into the forest and escape the stone throwers!"

Suddenly, the sounds of braking filled the road. The carriages bled speed after being detached, throwing up sparks and huge clouds of dust. The second

company braced themselves inside the vehicles, trying to endure the feeling of inertia caused by the sudden braking. Though it wasn't their aim, the large clouds of dust worked well as smoke screens, hiding the mechs from the levitating ships.

“Ha ha! They've got tricks, the cheeky bastards! Nice, you guys gotta be at least this good! Knight runners, to your machines! Lower the ship—I'll be using my sword to finish this!” Gustavo jumped off his chair and out of the bridge, heading for the hangar and leaving his subordinates to hurriedly chase after him.

Meanwhile, the large ships approached the ground, whorls of wind swirling around them and throwing up even more dust. The descent was rapid enough to make one think they might have crashed. The sails that were used to catch the wind and propel the ship could also be used as air brakes to lower speed, all while descending far enough to touch the trees of the forest. The next instant, the bottom armor plating of the levitating ships opened up. Tyrantors attached to cranes jumped out one after another from the dark holes. The black knights touched down on the road, their heavy steel armor gouging out the ground accompanied by loud and intense vibrations.

The levitating ships didn't just sit there after deploying the Tyrantors. While winding in the chains, the ships advanced while skimming the trees, gradually building up speed and altitude as they left. Levitating ships were certainly powerful weapons, but that was only if they were high in the air. They had to descend to drop their silhouette knight complements, and because of that, they would be vulnerable for the duration of that action. That was why they made sure to go through the steps of slowing down, descending, and dropping the silhouette knights all in one smooth motion. What made such a ridiculous feat possible were the praiseworthy skills of the levitating ships' crews.

Tyrantors took formation on the road, blocking the way forward for the second company of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. There were a total of four Jaloudekian platoons, or twelve Tyrantors.

“Just when I thought we were only dealing with an attack from the sky, we get a bunch of black silhouette knights to deal with. Our enemies never let up, do they?” Dietrich grouched. “Still, we're used to silhouette knights. Don't

underestimate the second company.” His Guairelinde stood from where it had been stored in a carriage. He turned his machine’s head around, getting a grip on the situation before reflexively heaving a sigh.

The second company followed standard practice and formed up into ranks, facing off against the Tyrantors. The Tyrantors outnumbered them, but the black knights didn’t hurry; they slowly and surely closed the distance. Tyrantors had large frames which housed incredible power output, so the sight of them closing in was quite intimidating.

“I wanted to avoid combat as much as possible, but...I guess we have to at least brush off the sparks that land on us.” Guairelinde drew its swords. Its ether reactor spun up with a roar, filling its frame with mana in preparation for a fight. Beside it, Kardetolles with crimson crosses drawn on them all readied their own weapons.

“Also, I’m pretty angry about all this too, though not as much as Edgar. You guys are just unpleasant. Acting all arrogant while using technology you stole from us...” Dietrich stepped forcefully on his unit’s pedals, causing Guairelinde to flex and amass power. The crystal tissue inside went taut like a bowstring, the power stored within struggling to explode outward. “You’re going to pay for that. Dearly.”

Guairelinde powered forward, gouging out divots in the ground so forcefully as it went that it looked like spellfire explosions. It was immediately followed by the rest of the second company. They were also known as the assault company, specialized for offense and thus with no interest in having a tense stare-off. Their true value lay in the attack.

“Hmph! Challenging Tyrantors head-on? I’ll show you how conceited you are!” said a knight runner with a smile from his cockpit.

To Tyrantors, which boasted outstanding defense and strength, a head-on fight was just perfect. In truth, they had in fact been perfectly fine even when facing Lesvants more than twice their number. They expected the fight against the grim reaper’s corps to go exactly the same.

The Tyrantors met the Kardetolles’ head-on charge in kind. Their arm armor was as thick and durable as normal shields, which allowed them to defend with

their forearms and go for counters.

Huge bodies of metal crashed into each other at speed with dull, reverberating rings. The friction caused by the clash threw up metallic shrieking sounds and showers of sparks. That was when something completely unexpected happened to the Tyrantors' knight runners. Though Kardetolles looked ordinary on the outside, inside they were packed with cutting-edge strand crystal tissue, so they were also incomparably stronger than Lesvants. A strike with a bastard sword caused a Tyrantor's arm armor to crumple, allowing the weapon to also crush the crystal tissue that lay inside.

"Wha— No way! They did *that* to a Tyrantor's armor?! These things are totally different from Lesvants!"

"Aha, so I can't cut it all the way off. Your armor is better than it looks!" Dietrich said.

With shards of crystal tissue flying all over, the Tyrantor staggered back. Even Kardetolles found Tyrantors to be tougher than expected. Normally, a bastard sword would easily be able to kill a duel-class monster in a single blow.

"But no matter how tough your armor is, it's nothing compared to a behemoth!" Dietrich shouted as he broke through the middle of the melee. He was going after a pair of Tyrantors that were blocking his path forward.

Because the Jaloudekians had the numbers advantage, he had to take on two of the heavily armored black knights at once. *Even a company commander would have trouble with this role*, Dietrich thought, a cynical smile on his face.

However, he hadn't made this move without a plan. While urging Guairelinde to run forward, he prepared his secret weapons—the Magius Jet Thrusters that lay flush and camouflaged on his machine's shoulders and hips—and activated them at low power. The ones equipped to Guairelinde were far more limited than the ones on Ikaruga; they could only propel it forward, and had much lower thrust strength. Even so, depending on how they were used, they could become a powerful trump card.

Jets of air appeared with a dull, mumbling, and explosive sound, pushing Guairelinde *slightly* forward. That was enough. The Tyrantors' knight runners had responded to the crimson knight running toward them, dialing in on its

speed, but suddenly they found they'd missed their chance to intercept their enemy. They knew it was possible to slow down before the attack, and they had also been wary of feints, but acceleration had been nowhere in their minds. After all, how would a bipedal thing like a silhouette knight even accelerate that fast?

Having obtained overwhelming speed, Guairelinde's twin swords flashed. Its first attack caught the enemies off guard, allowing it to aim for their heads. The crimson knight had gone right for its enemies' eyes after a surprise attack, but not even a Tyrantor could shrug off losing its eyes, so the two shifted to defense. Both of them raised their armored forearms to block the slashes, but Dietrich had known they would react like that. Immediately, Guairelinde activated its back weapons, Shotels, and fired. The weapons shot atmospheric faults at the Tyrantors' arms. Not even the vaunted and heavily armored Tyrantors could withstand such a blow from up close, so they were unable to escape damage. Their arms' armor warped, and shards of crystal tissue were sent flying.

The Tyrantors had definitely been dealt a blow, but their knight runners wouldn't take that lying down. While gritting his teeth in anger, one of them pushed his machine to forcefully regroup and launch a counterattack. There wasn't much power behind it, but no silhouette knight could take a blow from a Tyrantor's heavy mace and come out the other side in one piece. But Dietrich went above and beyond the knight runner's expectations. Guairelinde used the recoil from its own back weapons to propel itself back and create distance between them faster than would normally be possible. The enemy knight runner yelled angrily, but couldn't stop its forced attack, and the Tyrantor's heavy mace hit nothing but ground. The blow cracked the stone pavement and sent pieces flying accompanied by a small dust cloud.

Even with a Tyrantor's might, it couldn't avoid a moment of vulnerability after an attack. Such a thing was fatal in front of the crimson knight, though. Lightning silently flashed in the wake of the Tyrantor's whiffed strike—or rather, Guairelinde's twin swords moved at such speed they could have been mistaken as lightning.

While gritting his teeth in an attempt to clamp down on his shock, the

Tyrantor's knight runner ordered his machine to fall back. As soon as he did, though, something that had been sent flying finally fell to the ground. It was a large arm, severed from the elbow down, still holding a heavy mace. The knight runner screamed, and his machine stepped back, pulling out a spare short mace with its remaining arm. Sweat slicked the knight runner's palms as he gripped the control yokes, and his heart was pounding in his chest. The skills needed to so cleanly sever a heavily armored Tyrantor's arm were insane. Up until now, he had thought the Tyrantor's armor was invincible, but now it just seemed unreliable.

"Hurry up and fall back! You guys can't do this. A situation like this calls for a sword user like me!"

Before Guairelinde could follow up, a lively young man's voice interjected, followed by another jet-black knight. This newcomer had been hidden behind the wall of black steel. This interference forced Guairelinde to back off from the offensive. Dietrich glared at the source of this interference, displeased, and noticed that it wasn't a Tyrantor, but something much stranger.

The new enemy had the average height and build for a silhouette knight, and at first glance it looked like an old model. But Dietrich was distracted by a much wilder feature of the machine. "Are... Are those all...swords? What are you thinking, putting all those swords on you?"

Swords were a standard piece of armament for silhouette knights, and so were commonly carried, but the mech in front of Dietrich had taken that in another direction. There were several swords equipped on every body part: its head, torso, shoulders, arms, hips, and of course, legs. These swords were of all sizes and lengths, and really the only way to describe the silhouette knight was "littered with swords." It was an extremely odd machine. Even though they were in the middle of combat, Dietrich understandably couldn't help but gawk.

"Huh? What kinda question is that? It's obvious! Swords are strong, so more swords equals more strength. See? Obvious, right?"

"Right, I see. So you're an idiot," Dietrich said, nonplussed.

"You've got swords on you too, but it's totally not enough! You won't be a match for my Sword Man with what you've got!" With that, the silhouette

knight Sword Man attacked Guairelinde.

Dietrich quickly snapped out of his funk and swung his twin swords in an attempt to intercept. “You’ve got a pretty shocking sense of humor! I think I’ll have to enthusiastically answer in kind!”

The crimson knight with twin swords and the black knight with multitudes of swords clashed. There was almost no time to breathe as they proceeded to exchange slashes at dizzying speed. Both sides were trying to gain the upper hand or deal a more powerful blow, and so neither of them ever stopped moving. Their fighting styles matched, in a sense. Both of them placed a heavy importance on offense, and they preferred a storm of continuous blows rather than a single refined, powerful strike. The duel was so fierce even the rough and rowdy members of the second company hesitated to interfere.

“You guys are running a bit *too* wild!” A Kardetolle tried to force its way into their battle, which was billowing with wind from the clash of blades.

In response, Sword Man sheathed its longsword, drew a dagger, and threw it at the interloper without even looking. All this was done with such speed and smoothness, it was like a magic trick. Even so, the dagger flew with scary precision and hit the Kardetolle. “Hey now, it’s rude to interrupt people. I only fight people with swords!”

Guairelinde didn’t miss the opening this made, for Sword Man was without a weapon for a moment. It shot its Shotels, but the blade-shaped spells only grazed Sword Man as it dodged. It spun that movement into a swing to Guairelinde’s side with the speed and force of a tornado, drawing a sword and slashing with it all in one motion. Guairelinde blocked the blow, and sparks flew as their swords clashed. Immediately, Guairelinde countered with the sword in its other hand. Sword Man used a dagger to defend against the strike, moving it around in a circular motion to entrap Guairelinde’s longsword and attempt to send it flying. Dietrich reacted on the spur of the moment, backing up and just barely avoiding that fate. Sword Man stuck with its opponent, though, and their close-range dance of blades resumed.

“Whoa there, I guess I gotta apologize. Being able to fight me this long means you’ve got some good swords, Red!”

“And you’re just annoying! I’d rather you weren’t so happy about this!” Dietrich shouted in response.

The black and crimson knights were monopolizing the center of the battlefield with their fight, continuing to exchange fierce blows with their swords. Every once in a while, Sword Man would take an opportunity to throw a dagger at a Kardetolle. These random daggers served to greatly sap the concentration of the Kardetolles’ knight runners in the midst of this confused melee, perfectly killing the second company’s momentum.

“Follow Sir Gustavo! How can we call ourselves Black Knights if we get pushed back by the likes of them?!”

Following the tide of battle created by Sword Man, the Tyrantors, who had been pushed back, rallied. Kardetolles had plenty of power, but their enemies’ heavy armor was a threat.

“Damn this sword-addled...” Dietrich trailed off. “It looks stupid, but it’s strong! And it’s even managing to attack the others while fighting me... Wait, no! *He’s* just keeping me contained!”

Dietrich couldn’t get rid of his bitter feelings even as he swung his twin swords. Not only was he a company commander, but he and Guairelinde were the strongest fighting force in the entire company. The fact that not only could he not win, but he was easily being *contained*, proved how strong his enemy was.

“Still, this is bad...and at a time like this! I let this fight drag on too long.” What’s more, Dietrich started to feel his machine’s responsiveness dulling. The reason was clear—the length of the battle saw his unit’s mana pool start to run dry.

“Ha ha ha! Hey, twin-swords! You’re getting *slow*! What’s wrong?! You won’t be a match for me with swordplay that sluggish!” Suddenly, Gustavo piled on the pressure from inside Sword Man.

While desperately trying to field Gustavo’s attacks, Dietrich felt an intense sense that something was wrong. This Sword Man *wasn’t slowing down at all*. If Guairelinde’s mana pool was getting low, then it stood to reason that Sword Man and the other Tyrantors, who had been fighting for an equal amount of

time, would also be suffering the same condition. That went double for the Tyrantors. All that extra crystal tissue would of course eat a corresponding amount of mana, and by estimating the size of their mana pools from their actual size, they should have already been on their knees.

“Huh?” Gustavo huffed. “You’re already exhausted? Oh well, it was fun. I guess it’s about time to end this!”

The creaking of Sword Man’s crystal muscles coming under tension was audible. It was unnatural how powerful the silhouette knight was. Meanwhile, Guairelinde and the Kardetolles were slowing down thanks to a lack of mana. The tides of battle had turned all at once, and now the second company was in a tough spot.

“It certainly does seem like we’re on the back foot. I’ll admit that...but it also seems like you’ve forgotten something.” Dietrich wasn’t acting afraid, even in such a situation, and his words had Gustavo furrowing his brow.

Was his opponent just putting on a facade? *No*, Gustavo thought, denying that notion. As a weirdo with an obsession for swords, he could naturally understand how his enemies thought from how it felt when they clashed blade to blade. The crimson knight that displayed such fierce swordsmanship like a blazing fire wouldn’t make such an unnecessary bluff.

“Gah! So that’s what he meant!” The next instant, Gustavo had arrived at the answer.

But it was already too late—the change had already occurred. Heavy hoofbeats reverberated through the forest. The sounds belonged to the third company’s Tzenndrimbles, who had escaped from the levitating ships’ bombardment. They had returned.

“So those horse-faces weren’t just for transport! And now all of a sudden we’re at a numbers disadvantage?! Oh crap,” Gustavo muttered.

The second company had the standard ten units to their name, and they were being transported by five Tzenndrimbles. That made a total of fifteen silhouette knights, which was more than the twelve of Gustavo’s squad. On top of that, the centaur knights were an unknown factor, and their effect on the battle couldn’t be estimated by conventional standards.

Encouraged by the reverberating hoofbeats, Guairelinde took a stance for a knockout blow, ready to pour its remaining mana into the strike. The intake sound of its ether reactor at maximum output was shrill and piercing. Their enemy's trump card had been flipped, and now it was their turn to play their own.

The Tzenndrimbles broke out of the forest and charged at Gustavo's squad, who were shaken to the extreme. Having had time to build up plenty of speed, the Tzenndrimbles' lance charge was deadly to the worn-down Tyrantors. After the centaur knights swept past, five of the black knights had been destroyed.

"Wha—?! Damn, those horse-faces are strong! Grah! How dare you!" Gustavo howled and readied his swords for a counterattack.

Yet at that moment, the unexpected happened, surprising everyone present. The disabled Tyrantors suddenly exploded with no warning. Everyone, friend and foe alike, had no time to react and was swallowed by the explosions. The explosions weren't very strong at all, though. Instead, they created a thick smoke screen where one wouldn't even be able to see a few steps ahead of them.

"A smoke screen?! So you've got tricks! Fall back, if we try to attack we could end up hitting friendlies. We need to get out of the smoke first!" Dietrich ordered a defensive retreat, wary of an enemy attack while they were blinded.

In this situation where no one could grasp the location of their allies, they couldn't afford careless spellfire. The same went for the third company's detachment. It would be too dangerous for Tzenndrimbles to charge into a field where they couldn't see ahead of them.

"What the heck... What's going on?" Gustavo, also bewildered, fell back. He had never heard of Tyrantors having such a feature. Thanks to the smoke, they'd managed to avoid a follow-up attack from the centaur knights, but the situation was still hard to swallow.

Both sides thus ended up quite a distance from each other. As if he were waiting for such a chance, Gustavo shot a blast of wind from his back, and the smoke was blown away.

"Wha—?! The flying ships are back?!" Dietrich exclaimed.

The second company was wary of an attack, but it never came. Instead, they were met with the Steel Wing Knights' trump card, the levitating ships. They appeared at such low altitude that they were touching the trees. Their bottoms were open, with chains dangling down from the openings. The purpose behind this was clear: the remaining Tyrantors and Sword Man grabbed onto these chains and were carried upward.

As he rose, Sword Man's knight runner called out, "Tch! Looks like this is it. Hey, Red! You've got some good swords. Don't you dare die until we get to fight again!"

Once the silhouette knights were fully embarked on the levitating ships, their Blow Engines roared and they raised both their speeds and altitudes. Of course, Dietrich wasn't going to just let that go quietly. The second company immediately fired their back weapons, but the levitating ships weren't affected by the few attacks that managed to graze them. With the equipment they had on hand, there was no way for the second company to stop them.

"They got away... I hate it, but I have to admit they got us. It looks like we're going to need some sort of weapon that's effective at sinking those ships. I'll have to ask Ernesti to whip something up," Dietrich muttered as he watched the levitating ships sail off.



"I see... So that was your doing. Just when did you set that up?" Gustavo looked unhappily at the person sitting in the captain's seat. At this point, their aerial withdrawal was safely underway.

"Before we set off, of course. It was just a small bit of kindness from me. It helped, didn't it?" Kerhilt answered with a nasty smile as she lazed on the captain's seat.

Gustavo was angry that his fight had been spoiled, but it was true that they'd been saved from a tight spot thanks to her interference.

"Just this once, I'll thank you. There won't be a second time, though." That was all Gustavo said after a moment's thought. He then left for the hangar to check on how his men were doing.

Kerhilt saw him off, her smile deepening.

Chapter 32: Infiltrating Raspede Castle

The city of Fontanie, the seat of the Jaloudek army's and the Eastern Protectorate Government's power and once the capital of Archduke Fernando's territory, was a bustling and prosperous place thanks to being on the trade route that connected to the Occident Road. A section of the city was divided into its own district where merchants opened and managed their stores, and in the past it was a busy place with throngs of daily visitors. But now that the city was in Jaloudek's hands, all that prosperous liveliness was gone, and the area had fallen silent.

What appeared in its place were the Tyrantors of Jaloudek's army. These black giants could be seen dotting the city, their eye crystals staring blankly out at the world, practically glaring at passersby.

"When I first came to this place, it was nearly impossible to get anywhere because it was so crowded with people. And now this is what it's become? Even though it used to be so filled with life..." groused a man dressed as a merchant as he walked along the far side of the street, as if he were shrinking away from the gaze of the Tyrantor on the other side.

The man didn't seem to have any fellow merchants with him, and the few residents that were walking in the streets as well were doing so with haste, their eyes focused down at the street.

"I see. No wonder Jaloudek wants to stabilize this conquered territory as soon as possible. At this rate, there'll be no positives left to having taken this place," responded a boy, the man's companion. He wore a hood over his eyes and seemed to be the older man's page or attendant. They walked into a back street, the man seemingly angry.

The pair continued down the deserted pathway until they eventually came upon an old abandoned warehouse on the corner.

"Seriously, to think I'd see the day where I'd have to avoid attention in this city." The merchantlike man plopped himself down and tore off his coat. He

then ruffled his hair, finally making him recognizable as the second prince of Fremmevilla Kingdom, Emris.

Meanwhile, the boy dressed up as his page was Ernesti. They had taken a bold line, using their cover as the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company to infiltrate Fontanie. Though, to be fair, such a cover didn't have much meaning given Fontanie's economics had been thrown into a whirlpool of chaos.

"For now, we at least know generally what's going on here. That goes for our objective, Raspede Castle, as well," said Ernesti.

"You can leave it to me to guide you when the chips are down. I know the lay of this city. It's taken good care of me, after all! So...how about it? We can make a move now, can't we?" Emris said, and his gaze shifted to the rear of the warehouse.

The warehouse used to be owned by a merchant with a fairly large store, so it was definitely spacious enough for their needs. After the group had moved in, the once-empty space was now filled with an array of large suits of armor that had been painted a dark green. These were the "goods" they had smuggled in under the cover of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company.

"You may give the order whenever the timing pleases you," Nora said, stepping out of the shadows and going down on one knee. "We've prepared twelve Shadowrads, a full four platoons, along with the lord captain's Motor Beat."

Several men and women followed her example. They had come here under the direction of the Order of the Silver Phoenix as part of the silhouette gear squad, but they were actually spies from the Order of the Indigo Falcon.

The dark green Shadowrads were a special model of silhouette gear that had actually originally been made for the Order of the Indigo Falcon's use in their main intelligence capacity. The one who had come up with the idea had been Nora, the liaison assigned to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. When she'd seen the order making use of their silhouette gears, she'd been sure that it would be useful in her job as well.

The silhouette gear, a potential new weapon, had all the information warfare specialists (starting with the Order of the Indigo Falcon) positively drooling.

Specifically, it was especially flexible and maneuverable, but it still brought a lot of power to the table while remaining quiet.

The biggest difference between a silhouette gear and a silhouette knight was not their sizes, but the presence—or lack—of an ether reactor. Not having a reactor might seem like a drawback at first glance, but it actually was the opposite. After all, ether reactors were very loud when active. Every silhouette knight that had been designed for covert operations up until now had a lot of their internal space taken up with mechanisms meant to keep the noise down, which not only squeezed against other necessary internal mechanisms, but also severely brought down the machine’s overall combat effectiveness. The silhouette gear, however, had none of those issues.

In the first place, silhouette gears were incomparably weak in combat compared to silhouette knights. However, they remained more than threatening enough for dealing with normal humans. For the Order of the Indigo Falcon, who mainly found themselves facing other people, this was just perfect.

Thus the Shadowrads were developed, and now they were going to serve as the core of this operation.

“Well then, everyone... We start Operation Reclaim Kuscheperka’s Royals at sundown.”

Everyone nodded resolutely in response to Ernie’s order. The world’s first special ops mission carried out by silhouette gears had now begun.



Before long, the sun set, and the city of Fontanie went to sleep. There were no longer any energetic merchants to be seen, and the residents had also returned home early, afraid of the Tyrantors. What was left was a quiet like death, broken only by the occasional footsteps of metal giants.

With a faint thrum of active crystal tissue, the Tyrantor on patrol surveyed the area. Eye crystals, a silhouette knight’s only means of sight, did not have a night vision function, which was why torches had been lit and placed at intervals along the streets. The flickering light illuminated no one, though, and the Tyrantor resumed its patrol.

That was a big mistake, however.

Shadows silently flitted across the roofs of Fontanie's buildings. In the lead was the only one painted a darkish blue. It was a Motor Beat, and it was being controlled by the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti. He was followed by Kid and Addy, also in Motor Beats, and behind them was Emris in a Shadowrad. The Order of the Indigo Falcon were also silently moving in concert in their own Shadowrads.

In the dim moonlight, they quite literally became shadows. The metal bones that supported their bodies and the crystal tissue connecting them allowed them to leap from building to building. The shadowy group continued running with single-minded purpose. Moving a silhouette gear required the user's own mana, so the fact that they were running smoothly despite how hard they were pushing showed how practiced they all were at controlling silhouette gears.

Eventually, they reached the center of town where Raspede Castle stood, surrounded by tough castle walls that soared over their heads.

"According to our intel, the royals are being confined in the towers in the four cardinal directions. The top floors of each have been converted into prisons. We know they're up there, but we don't know who's where. So we'll be splitting up to hit each one simultaneously."

Ernie, Kid, Addy, and Emris were lined up in their silhouette gears. The remaining members of the group formed into four teams, one behind each of those four.

"Our first priority is to safely secure the royals. If anyone stands in our way, I don't mind if you eliminate them all. But please—do it quietly, quickly, and surely. Let's begin!"

After receiving their captain's orders, the shadows split into four units and ran off without making a sound.



Soldiers and Tyrantors were placed at intervals along Raspede Castle's walls and its surroundings, but none of them noticed the silhouette gears running through the night. Still, it was hard to blame them. In order to reach Raspede

Castle, one would have to brave the city of Fontanie, with all its patrolling Tyrantors. Also, not many would be bold enough to go out of their way to sneak into the seat of Jaloudekian power.

The silhouette gears made use of the blind spots created by the darkness to leave the cover of the buildings and bound for the moat before leaping into the air.

Arrowheads spat out of the silhouette gears' arms with faint whooshes. They were weapons called Wire Anchors, made by propelling an arrowhead attached to a silver nerve through the air with a spell that made the air burst for thrust. Once the anchor's tip reached a wall, the arrowhead would change forms into something more scissorlike, fixing itself in place. Using this as a foundation, the silhouette gears swung like pendulums over the moat to cling to the wall one after another.

Silhouette gears were basically machines that supplemented a human's strength and mobility. This was especially true since the advent of strand crystal tissue. Now, it was possible to exhibit more strength than a monster of similar size. The moat, made in anticipation of defending against humans, horses, and possibly silhouette knights, was useless when faced with the threat of these new weapons.

The silhouette gears, having attached themselves to the castle walls, stretched out their four limbs to climb while being wary of their surroundings. Shadowrads were equipped with hands which sported a full five fingers, each tipped with sharp blades. These blades now scraped against small bumps and protrusions in the wall as the machines climbed with surprising dexterity. The walls of the castle stood thirty feet high, taller than any silhouette knight. The shadows, however, scaled that without breaking a sweat.

Sentries patrolled the top of the wall. Ever since Fontanie had been taken over by Jaloudek's army, nothing of note had happened. The soldiers on watch were clearly already lax in their duties, only expending the minimum necessary effort.

The faint sound of blowing wind reached the ears of one of these soldiers. He stopped and pointed his lantern around at his surroundings, but didn't find

anything amiss. He stayed surveying the area for a while longer, but eventually he just shrugged and turned around to continue on his patrol...

...but just as he pointed his lantern forward once more, he heard the reverberating, shrill sound of something spinning up, as well as the dull sound of something kicking off the stone wall. The light of his lantern captured the shadow of something large. Something bladed and painted matte black was silently thrust toward him.

After confirming the sentry, who had dropped his lantern, had died, the shadow threw the body over the wall. He wasn't alone—every sentry on top of the wall had been swiftly eliminated by the shadows one after another.

“No enemies in sight.”

“From here on out, it's a race against time. Come on, we're rushing for the finish line.” Ernie's Motor Beat turned to look over the inner courtyard from its position atop the walls.

He compared the security of the walls and the castle town, and made a perfunctory observation of the inside of the castle. There were few lit torches, and much of the courtyard was shrouded in darkness.

After he quickly took all that in, he casually jumped over the edge of the wall. He flew through the air from a fearsome height taller than a silhouette knight. If he were to land without doing anything, even in a Motor Beat, he would be pulped. However, Ernie was no normal person.

Right before landing, the Motor Beat stuck out an arm and activated a spell. Air was gathered and compressed to make a cushion: the spell Air Suspension. The cushion absorbed all the force of the fall and allowed the Motor Beat to land quietly in the inner courtyard.

The Shadowrads followed after, dropping one after another. The limbs of a Shadowrad were rather unique. They had a multitude of joints which were wrapped in powerful strand crystal tissue. This allowed them to flexibly absorb shock while also keeping noise to a minimum. The Shadowrads took catlike postures as they fell and safely landed.

There were sentries in the courtyard as well, but they hadn't noticed the

shadows at all. Because it was so dark, and because the shadows were almost completely silent despite their size, they had little effect on the world around them. There was almost nothing to sense, and there was a limit to how vigilant the sentries could be.

Besides the sentries, there were also a horde of soldiers inside the castle. However, none of them noticed the infiltrators either. They had let their guards down because they were sure the town and castle were protected. But more than that, they didn't know about silhouette gears, which created a blind spot that made all this possible.

As the groups ran through the night in near silence, they quickly arrived at their destinations: the four towers of Raspede Castle.

"This is it." Ernie looked up at the soaring tower as he shot his Wire Anchor.

Once he felt the arrowhead affix itself, he spooled in the wire and shot up. The Shadowrads of his team followed right after him.

Because the towers held the royalty of former Kuscheperka, they had especially tight security. However, that was only for the area around the top-floor rooms where they were actually held, and the tops and bottoms of the staircase leading to those floors. After all, who could imagine infiltrators climbing up the steep walls of the towers, which were taller even than the walls around the castle? Climbing such steep walls that had so little in the way of hand-and footholds would be a herculean task that required a lot of training. On top of that, even if such hypothetical infiltrators were to make it to the top floors, there wouldn't be any way to actually get in. The singular small windows for these rooms were far too small for a human to easily fit through.

Unfortunately for the guards, silhouette gears didn't subscribe to such common sense.

Having reached the top floor, Ernie had his Motor Beat shoot its Wire Anchor into the wall to fix himself in place before using his silhouette gear's great strength to break the wall around the window. The stone wall crumbled, making a hole big enough for the large suit of armor to get inside. At this point, all pretense of stealth had been thrown to the wayside.

"Forcing yourself into a lady's room in the dead of night? Outrageous. Name

yourselves!”

A quiet voice challenged Ernie before he could take stock of the room. He turned around to see a spot of light in the dimness. There, a woman with a book in one hand sat in a chair.

“Given where we are, please forgive my rudeness. By the way, would I be correct to assume you are Archduchess Martina?” Ernie replied.

“You would indeed. But I do believe I haven’t heard an answer to my question.”

The woman, Martina Alt Kuscheperka, was the wife of Royal Prince Fernando and Emris’s aunt. Ernie nodded, and after a perfunctory bow he quickly retrieved an insignia from his pocket. It was engraved with the crest of Fremmevilla Kingdom surrounded by a silver phoenix.

Martina had been very composed, but the sight of the insignia clearly surprised her. “That insignia... It can’t be! My brother’s men have come this far for me?”

“We have indeed. The situation necessitates haste, so let me be brief. We have come with His Highness Prince Emris to save you all.”

Resounding clanks from the door alerted them that the locks were being undone. Understandably, the guards had heard the commotion and were coming to investigate.

“My word, that fool. All the way here too! Okay, that insignia and that name is enough to get me to trust you. But the princess and my daughter are still their prisoners. I won’t escape alone.”

“I understand, but don’t worry. We have other teams going to save them. The plan was always to rescue everyone at once.”

Martina took a small moment to close her eyes and think. Once that was over, she snapped her book closed and threw it aside. “Okay. If that’s the case, I have no reason to stay shut in this cramped little place. Will you escort me out, my cute little knight?”

“As you wish. Things may get a little rough in our escape, so please forgive

me.”

“Ha ha! Perfect. Let us leave this place quickly, and bloody their noses on the way out!”

Martina’s choice of words reminded Ernie of her nephew, and he gave a small chuckle as he once again got in his Motor Beat. Then, he lifted Martina up in its large arms.

“Well then, allow me to do as you wish and escort you out. Hwup!” With that, he had his Motor Beat throw itself out of the hole in the wall without hesitation.

“What was that sound?!”

The door was violently flung open right after, and soldiers came flooding into the room. The solid locks that had been placed there to make sure the royals wouldn’t leave had worked against them. By the time the soldiers had made it inside, the room was already empty; all that they saw was a destroyed window, and all they felt was the cold outside air flowing in.

“No way... Escaping from this tower should be impossible! Agh, form a search party!!!”

The soldier’s whistle could be heard throughout Raspede Castle.



At the same time as Ernie in his Motor Beat had broken the wall and infiltrated his tower, the other silhouette gear squads had reached their destinations as well.

“It’s me, Emris! Is anyone in there?! I’ve come to rescue you!” the prince shouted.

That elicited a surprised noise from inside. “Is...is that you, Big Brother Ris?! I recognize this voice! It’s really you, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Isadora! Good, you sound like you’re doing fine.”

Just like Ernie, Emris busted through the window-side wall to get inside before getting off his Shadowrad and removing his helmet. Once Isadora saw his face, she recovered from the initial shock and quickly jumped into his arms.

“Whoa there. You’re okay now, Isadora,” Emris tried to comfort her. “Hey now, don’t cry. I guess even you get scared, huh? Makes sense, with you getting captured and all.”

“Y-You’re wrong! I just don’t like being confined... Um, that’s not it...” Isadora was nearly incoherent as she wiped the tears from her face, but Emris just happily mussed up her hair.

That got Isadora to hurriedly wriggle out of his grasp.

“Ha ha! Well, as long as you’re okay, it’s all good. Now that we’re here, we won’t let that idiot prince do as he likes. We’re escaping!” Emris returned to his Shadowrad and prepared to leave as he heard quiet giggling from behind him.

“Hee hee, you’re so funny. To think you’d ever be calling someone else an idiot!”

Emris quickly got inside the silhouette gear as he groaned indignantly. “What do you mean by that? Agh, whatever! We’re leaving. Come on, Isadora!”

Emris picked Isadora up in one hand as he gave the signal. His team members, who had been waiting outside the tower, quickly surveyed the area and moved to lead the way out.

“Things might get a little rough, so hang on tight!”

“Huh? Hey, wait, Ris! That reminds me, who did you get— Yeeeeeee?!”

That was when the questions finally started popping up in Isadora’s head. But she had no time to ask them, as they jumped out of the tower’s highest floor.



Princess Eleonora was also being held in one of Raspede Castle’s four cardinal towers, sitting blankly in her unlit room and aimlessly wasting away her time. She had lost all vigor, as if she’d been imprisoned for more than a decade, even though it had been less than a year.

In Eleonora’s current state, with all her willpower gone, she was like a wilted flower. The verdict that she had been handed, that she would be married to Jaloudek’s second prince, Cristobal—the very man who drove her country to ruin and killed her father—had been too much for a princess raised in a gilded

cage to take. There was no way she could accept such a marriage, but if she continued to refuse, she'd be killed, and her cousin Isadora would be next. She was cornered, which completely broke her heart that had languished into fragility in her country's peace.

Eventually, she gave up on the idea of fighting back, choosing to just spend her days wasting away in depression.

It's like I'm a potted plant...

In the past she'd been loved and admired like a big, beautiful flower, but now she had been cast away and was living like moss inching along the ground. Suddenly, she realized that she had never made a real decision in her entire life.

While still lying down on her bed, she slowly passed her gaze along the walls of her room—a dark and dreary affair. But her current state of mind matched it. The thick walls and lack of freedom were choking her. The tower may have looked impressive from the outside, but inside it was empty.

Tears ran down her cheeks, staining the sheets. Thoughts of regret ran through her mind: What could she do? What could she have done? But in the end, she wasn't smart enough to solve her own problems, and neither did she have the strength to resist. Feelings of powerlessness seeped all the way through to her limbs, leaving her without even the strength to stand up.

"Please... Someone, save me," she muttered quietly. The act of weaving words, proof that she had a human will, was the last avenue of resistance available to her. Her voice was slight, like the rustling of leaves, and it traveled through the air.

Instantly, the scene she was accustomed to burst apart with a thunderous noise. The iron bars fixed into the window bent and were knocked away as the stone wall, which should have been quite tough, was destroyed.

Did Eleonora's words hold within them some sort of mysterious power? Of course not. An unfamiliar knight in a large suit of armor came through the new hole in the wall. The incredible strength that had destroyed the wall had come from this armored knight.

Eleonora didn't get up or react in any way. She simply continued to passively

watch the scene unfold in front of her. In truth, though, it wasn't that she didn't react; she was simply too surprised.

“Awright! Heeey, is anyone in heeere? Right... Whoa?!” The armored knight spoke in a light tone that seemed awfully out of place for the current situation.

The knight raised its arm, making a sound like a bowstring drawn taut, and a flame manifested at its fingertips. Now that its surroundings were lit, Eleonora's frozen form on top of the bed was thrown into stark relief.

Kid had charged into the tower using his Motor Beat, and what he saw had him freeze on the spot. In the flickering light of his flame, he saw a small figure: a beautiful girl around the same age as him.

Wow... Does this mean I hit the jackpot? She's probably the princess, right? She reminds me a little of Ernie, like how small she is. She's really pretty too...

In truth, Eleonora was emaciated in both body and heart, so there wasn't even a shadow of the beautiful flower she'd been before. However, such details weren't obvious in the dim light, and to Kid it only made her seem more ephemeral.

The two, lost on how to react, spent a while in silence just looking at each other. Finally, Kid returned to his senses. “Uh, err. Um. Are you...Kuscheperka's princess?”

After a moment, Eleonora replied, “Yes. Um, and you are?”

Confused by his sudden appearance, Eleonora replied honestly without really meaning to. Her voice, sweet and like the chirping of a bird, tickled Kid's ears.

“I'm, uhhh... Well, look.” Kid anchored his Motor Beat and opened up the suit. The helmet and torso armor sprang open, followed by the belly, hips, and legs.

Freed from his armor, he took out an insignia from his pocket to show her. Eleonora had been imagining a burly knight, so the sight of such a young boy had her widen her eyes in surprise. After a moment taken by hesitation, she slowly looked over the insignia. She had been given a royal education, so she immediately recognized it, and what it meant.

“This is from Fremmevilla Kingdom. Could it be... Are you here...for Aunt

Martina?”

“Yes, exactly! We’re here to rescue everyone. Lady Martina—and you, Princess.”



It took a moment for Eleonora to grasp the meaning of Kid's words. *Save? Run? Who? From where?* Fragmented thoughts ran through her mind. She wanted to cling to the hand of her rescuer, but her limbs wouldn't move. Was it because her thoughts were so scattered? The resignation that had eaten into her heart wasn't so easy to wipe away.

"Assuming we run from here... What do we do then?" Eleonora asked.

Kid had expected her to leap at the chance as soon as he'd mentioned running, so the unexpected question confused him.

"It's useless, no matter where we go," Eleonora continued. "This country is no longer ours. And father, he's no longer here..." The latter half of that sentence withered away in her throat as she teared up.

Her heart was weak, and couldn't stand any further despair. That was why she was afraid of the unknown future and couldn't bring herself to move—not even to grab the hand of a powerful knight.

So she's as much of a lovely but frail little princess as she looks, Kid thought. *I knew it, she's different from Ernie. Really, basing anything off of Ernie seems like a mistake, in more ways than one.*

Kid shook his head, throwing the image of his childhood friend who would only proceed forward even more explosively in the face of trouble out of his mind. Right now, he had to concentrate on the girl in front of him. Unlike that tiny humanoid monster, this girl was as delicate as spun glass and seemed like she would break if he touched her. "It'll be fine. We have amazing allies. Once we leave here, we'll blow all those invaders away and take this country back!"

Even after hearing that, Eleonora sank lower instead of being roused to action. Cold sweat started to run down Kid's back. Did he say something wrong?

"I'm...weak. Even though I'm a princess, I can't do anything. I can't *become* anything. I can't even move, let alone fight..."

"What's wrong with being weak? That's what strong people like us knights are here for, to wear armor and fight with swords and stuff," Kid replied somewhat shyly.

That got Eleonora to finally look up. “But who would follow someone like me? Who would listen to the words of someone who is nothing but a tool?” She thought of Cristobal as she spoke and shivered. In her mind, his face was distorted into something monstrous, like a beast that feasted on blood and meat. She was sure that it would turn its fangs on her soon.

“There are people that will, definitely. At least, I will.” Kid put clear determination and strength into his words as he reached behind himself for his Motor Beat. He fed his mana into it, and the mechanical suit of armor acted according to the script that he formed. Crystalline muscle thrummed as the steel suit of armor covered his limbs. The torso armor closed, and he disappeared from Eleonora’s sight. Instead, what now stood in front of her was a knight wearing heavy armor. “I will become your knight and protect you. My sword will be yours as I fulfill my duties as a knight.”

Eleonora silently stared up at the large suit of armor. She looked at the armored knight, lit by a small flame, and thought of the boy inside. In her mind, though they looked completely different, she saw all the people who had fought and died to protect her in the past. “My...knight. Will you live...and protect me?”

The Motor Beat took a step back. Kid tried to remember the knight’s conduct he’d learned in school, reproducing it to bow with the greatest respect he could muster. “Your Highness. Please, give me your first order as your knight.”

Then, Kid waited. He would do so silently, allowing this stifling atmosphere to persist until he heard a quiet, faltering whisper.

“I...don’t like this place. I...don’t want to marry the man who killed my father. Please—take me away from here.”

“As you wish!” Kid grabbed Eleonora’s outstretched hand. It felt cool and soft, but Kid pushed that sensation to the back of his mind as he moved his Motor Beat to pick up the weak girl as gingerly as he could.

A while later, a silhouette gear could be seen leaping from the tower carrying something—something that screamed and broke the silence of the night.



Ernie's Motor Beat jumped out of the highest floor of the tower while carrying Martina. To anyone else, this would surely have looked like a freefall rather than a withdrawal—that was how bold of an escape plan it was. Though Martina also thought this was suicide, she clenched her teeth and refused to let out a scream. She was the daughter of Ambrosius, after all; like him, she had guts.

Even though the tower was very tall, the freefall out of it quickly brought them to ground level. Seeing how fast the ground was coming up on them, Martina gulped. That was when the Motor Beat stretched out the arm that wasn't holding her and shot out a shining silver arrowhead. The Wire Anchor sliced through the night air and stuck into a wall. Using that as support, the Motor Beat reduced its momentum and cast an Air Suspension just before landing. The compressed air gently caught them, allowing the silhouette gear to stand up as if nothing had happened. Shadowrads bounced up around it from their own landings.

Martina sighed. "I was ready for it, but that escape method was a bit *too* rough. Are you really a knight?! It's true that we're out, but that was too far out of the realm of common sense!"

Though it was a familiar maneuver for Ernie, that wasn't the case for most others. "This is normal for a Fremmevillan knight!" he replied with a bright expression.

While Ernie's statement was misleading, it wasn't untrue when limited only to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Nevertheless, Martina couldn't help but imagine, terrified, what had happened to her home while she was away.

At any rate, having successfully escaped the tower, Ernie and his team waited for the other groups to join up with them.

"Oh, well done, Ernesti! I'm glad to see my aunt safe!"

The familiar, swelteringly hot-blooded voice got Martina to turn around and see Emris in a Shadowrad holding Isadora. Martina had made a bet and believed Ernie, but it was still a relief to see her daughter actually safe.

Next, Addy's team rejoined the group, but her hands were empty.

“My tower was a bust!” she complained. “Ah, I’m so jealous! Imagine having Ernie hold you...”

Ernie ignored Addy’s dissatisfied groaning, and Kid joined them shortly thereafter, holding Eleonora. With that, the Order of the Silver Phoenix had succeeded in rescuing all the captured Kuscheperkan royalty.

“This is all of them, right? Good, then let’s get out of here,” Ernie said.

“That’d be great, but the uproar is spreading throughout the castle. They’ll probably seal off the gates first, so how do you plan to leave? Break through the encirclement with just these numbers?” Martina’s doubts were understandable, but they were based off of knowledge of only conventional infantry-based warfare. Silhouette gears could break out of that common sense.

So Ernie replied with a smile, “Why do we even need to use the gate?”

With that, everyone ran toward the castle walls and shot out their Wire Anchors. What was necessary for their escape was speed. Now that the squad had cast off the veil of stealth, they didn’t hesitate to use Aero Thrust. Compressed air burst with a thunderous peal, explosively speeding up the silhouette gears. They allowed their momentum to carry them vertically up the tall walls, running up them at the same speed as they had been moving on the ground. The silhouette gear squad easily climbed over the wall and jumped out into the darkness beyond, all while carrying Martina and the others, whose eyes were wide in silent shock. Another burst of Aero Thrust easily threw the silhouette gears over the moat.

These obstacles may as well have not even existed to them. The silhouette gear squad returned to town, where they once again ran across the rooftops. While it depended on each individual’s mana reserves, silhouette gears could outpace a horse if the distance was short enough. They withdrew from Fontanie before the confusion in the castle could spread to town and activate its defense grid.

Meanwhile, the confusion in Raspede Castle had yet to fade as conflicting information flew all over the place, preventing anyone from taking any real action. After all, on top of the discovery that several sentries had been taken down, no one even knew where the infiltrators had come from or where they

had run off to. But given the incredible fuss from the soldiers that had been assigned to guard the towers, it was clear that the Kuscheperkan royals had all disappeared.

“D-Damn it... What a failure! How are you planning on explaining this to His Majesty?!” Dorotheo’s voice rumbled thunderously throughout the castle.

He had been left in charge of the castle, and was currently filled with so much rage that the soldiers around him froze in fear. Normally he was a rather calm man, but now he was like an erupting volcano.

“What happened to the thieves?! Where did they run off to?! Has someone, *anyone*, even caught sight of them?!”

“Well, um... The soldiers guarding the gates haven’t seen anyone, let alone the thieves. And almost all the patrolling soldiers who might have seen them have been killed, so we haven’t been able to garner any information...”

After hearing the report from a nearly incoherently terrified subordinate, Dorotheo gnashed his teeth. The soldier, sensing an impending eruption, took half a step back—but Dorotheo was still. There was no meaning in taking it out on his soldiers. It was more important for him to figure out his next move.

He absolutely could not allow the Kuscheperkan royals to get away. If they had been stolen, he just needed to take them right back. In order to do that, he couldn’t afford to be picky in his methods.

“Damn you thieves! I won’t let you get away with this. Use all the soldiers in the castle *and* in town to comb this whole place twice over! In the worst case, the thieves could have already made it out of town! We need to use the levitating ship—ready it immediately. We’ll use it to search outside the city. No matter what, we *cannot* let them escape!” With that, he immediately set off at a furious pace. The soldiers hurriedly ran to attend to their duties as he made his way for the air-port.

But...thieves?! Who would do such a thing? Dorotheo thought. Kuscheperkan remnants? I would never have imagined they would have such strength left, so this makes no sense. But no matter the culprit, I will destroy anyone who gets in His Majesty’s way!

Dorotheo Maldness—a famous veteran soldier back home in Jaloudek Kingdom—thus began his all-out pursuit of the escaped royalty.



The silhouette gear team left Fontanie swift as the wind, heading for a nearby forest. Part of the reason was simply to make it harder to track them, but they had also hidden something they needed for their escape in the forest.

“We ended up resorting to somewhat forceful measures—are you okay?” Ernie asked Martina after he finally put her down. “From here on out, we’ll be changing our method of travel. We need to get ready, so please wait a while.”

She stood unsteadily. Not even someone as stouthearted as her could hide the exhaustion from their (necessary) forced march.

“Yes, that was...forceful indeed. It was quite a thrilling experience. But Jaloudek will likely send people after us right away. It won’t be easy to escape, so how do you plan to...” Martina started, but she trailed off as she realized what was in front of her.

The moonlight filtering through the trees illuminated a gigantic figure crouched down ahead in the forest. It was a bizarre thing, part human and part horse: a Tzenndrimble.

“Just what *is* that, erm...” Martina shivered and gulped as she looked at it.

Meanwhile, the people of the Order of the Silver Phoenix efficiently proceeded with their preparations. There were two Tzenndrimbles prepared along with two accompanying carriages. The team jumped onto one of the carriages, got out of their silhouette gears, and went to tie their machines down. After that, Kid and Addy hopped into the Tzenndrimbles’ cockpits. They awoke the machines’ sleeping ether reactors, and the centaur knights neighed as they arose.

Martina and the other rescuees stood, dumbfounded, as the team made their preparations, but Ernie called them back to reality. “Okay then, could you all please get on the carriages? We’ll be leaving shortly. I’d like to create as much distance as possible overnight.”

“Uh, right,” Martina finally managed to say as Isadora, who was behind her,

pinched her own cheek to check if she was dreaming.

They'd already experienced quite the shock when the order had come in their silhouette gears, but these new silhouette knights totally overwhelmed that experience.

Though they had never even heard of a silhouette knight that didn't look human, given the presence of Emris, these were likely made in the Kingdom of Fremmevilla. The women did as they were told and headed for the other carriage, heads filled with endless questions that definitely showed in their mannerisms.

"I haven't been back in a while... Just what has happened in Fremmevilla?" Martina grumbled, unable to hide her exasperation.

"Hah hah! We can save that surprise for later. This way!" Emris replied while pumping his fist for some reason. He then led the trio to a waiting room installed in one of the carriages. It was normally used to allow knight runners to rest during long-distance travel, so the inside was made to be rather comfortable.

Martina and Isadora entered the room, looking around curiously. Behind them, Eleonora muttered, perplexed, "Is this...really...happening?"

Believing in the boy who had sworn to become her knight, she had hardened her will and escaped with him, but she just couldn't believe her eyes. Finally, she stopped trusting that she was perceiving reality correctly. She started to wonder if all this—the rescue, the escape from Raspede Castle—was just a convenient fantasy conjured up by her weak heart. Tonight had been jam-packed with events, enough so that it overwhelmed what her fragile mental state was able to process.

"It'll be fine, Princess," came a voice from one of the centaur knights, breaking her out of her reverie. It was the young knight who had rescued her. Though the centaur knight was large and intimidating, now, for some reason, she felt like she could see the boy's face behind the eye crystal.

"Just leave it to me. This Tzenndrimble and I will carry you to safety." That declaration from her knight finally brought her all the way back to reality. She had ordered him to save her, so how could she not believe in her knight?

Gathering up what little resolve she had left, she stood and said, “Okay... I’m counting on you.”

Her thin, reedy voice quickly dissipated among the loud noise of the silhouette knights. However, the boy caught what she’d said loud and clear.

“Ohooo... You’re more gung ho about this than usual, Kid! You are such a boy... I guess pretty princesses really are the dream?” Addy teased.

“Shut it. I just, erm, you know...it’s like, my duty as a member of the Order of the Silver Phoenix and stuff...”

“Ah haaa... Ah ha ha ha ha haaa! That’s nice, real nice! I’m getting fired up too, now!”

“Gaaah! You’ve definitely got it wrong, Addy!”

While the twins bantered between themselves, the preparations were finished.

Ernie called out to the silhouette knights after everything and everyone had been loaded onto the carriages. “Okay, you two! Stop messing around. We’re ready, so... Order of the Silver Phoenix, roll out!”

The Tzenndrimbles neighed as they got moving. Their destination was the easternmost point of old Kuscheperka. The knights had saved the captured princess and were now riding off.



The morning sun peeked over the Auvnier Mountains as a single levitating ship sailed, carried by the wind.

While listening to the wind rumble loudly on the other side of the window panes, Dorotheo sank back in the captain’s chair. The sunlight piercing into the cabin was bright, and he had to raise his arm to protect his eyes, which irritated him.

The levitating ship carrying him and his men had left Fontanie and been flying eastward through old Kuscheperka through the night. Because levitating ships literally sailed right over any difficult terrain, they were much faster than any normal method of transport—which in this age would be carriage or silhouette

knight. They had already gone a long distance.

“Where are they? The escaped royals should be somewhere in this land,” Dorotheo muttered to himself as he gazed over the map of old Kuscheperka that had been posted up in front of the captain’s seat.

The map was well-made and accurate, not one of those sloppy rush jobs. He had borrowed it from Raspede Castle.

There were many advantages to traveling by levitating ship, but it also had its disadvantages. The one currently rearing its head was how different it was to determine one’s heading. On the ground, the path was decided by settlements and roads, which could also be used as landmarks. But everything was different from the air, where you were looking down at those things. A person needed a map, a compass, and the imagination to be able to relate the details of the map to the view from above. It was nearly the same skill set a regular boat’s navigation officer would need, only applied to land. In this situation, an extremely accurate map’s already-high strategic value rose even higher.

“I knew it. East is the only possibility.”

There were many notes jotted down on the map—marks from when Dorotheo had to debate their heading with the navigators. They weren’t just flying around randomly; there was a reason they had gone east.

First, Dorotheo had surmised that the royals wouldn’t run west. After all, what lay west of Fontanie was the central region of old Kuscheperka, and they would find no allies there.

That was when he remembered something. The rumors of a mysterious group of enemies marauding through the east had popped up in his mind. The east was unstable, and now the royals had suddenly been recaptured; it was only natural to see a link between all those things.

“The only possible routes they could have taken are this one or this one. Either way, we can catch up using this levitating ship.”

Next, he narrowed down the roads they could have taken. This was because he expected the escaped royals would prioritize speed. They had already been captured once trying to be stealthy, so he thought they wouldn’t try that again.

So no matter how the royals were traveling, they would need to use the roads to move quickly.

The only remaining question was how far afield they should look. Searching was a difficult task in the dead of night, so up until now Dorotheo had been prioritizing speed of movement. Now that dawn had broken, they no longer needed to narrow down the search area so much. Even though traveling by levitating ship would give them a large advantage in speed, he felt they still didn't have much leeway.

Dorotheo spent a while hemming and hawing as the levitating ship's sails swelled with wind. Though levitating ships were capable of self-sustained movement through the use of the Blow Engine, they were still heavily affected by the weather.

"And we get an eastward wind, huh? But is this truly a stroke of fortune?"

With a sharp glint in his eye, Dorotheo gave orders to his men. Meanwhile, the sails caught the wind and the ship moved even faster. While listening to the occasional creaking of the ship, he sharpened his fangs in anticipation.



Under the light of the now-rising sun, the Order of the Silver Phoenix team with Martina and the girls in tow ran along a highway that stretched all the way through the former Kuscheperka Kingdom: Kuschere Road.

"Look, mom! We made it all the way here during the night! I guess these things don't just *look* ridiculous," Isadora said.

"I'm quite fine with their...*novel*...looks, though. But it really does sound like a joke, seeing a silhouette knight with so much more speed and endurance than a horse," Martina replied.

The rather blunt exchange between mother and daughter saw Emris shrug in lieu of any actual reply. Tzenndrimbles, which were built with half their bodies resembling horses, were specialized for movement. Their twin ether reactors further increased the machines' stamina, making them truly perfect for long-distance travel. If it weren't for the exhaustion of the knight runners inside, they could theoretically cross the entire continent in one go without any resupply.

As a result of Kid and Addy getting fired up and maintaining their escape throughout the night, they had traveled an absurd distance, one that frankly amazed the three rescued royals.

“Tzenndrimbles, huh? Seriously, why did you even make such weird silhouette knights? Your men are off in the head, Ris,” Isadora said.

“You think so? Horses are a knight’s best friend, so I thought it was a great idea,” Emris replied. “When I first saw one, I could barely contain my desire to try riding it!”

“You’re about the only one who *would* think that, big brother...”

Emris grunted appreciatively and tilted his head, pondering the notion. “But thanks to these, we were able to save everyone and carry you all out this far. All I see are positives!”

That got Martina and Isadora to give each other looks. They knew that full well and were extremely grateful. More than that, though, their common sense was totally stretched to its limits.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be so concerned about the small details in this case. You’re right—at this speed, it looks like we’ll be able to shake off our pursuers,” Martina conceded.

“Exactly. And after we meet up with the main force, it’ll be our turn to go on the offensive! I still have a bone to pick with that stupid prince!” Emris puffed out his chest proudly as he promised them revenge.

In response, Martina tightened up her expression and turned to face him fully. “Listen well, Ris. It’s true that your knight order is stronger than expected. But Jaloudek Kingdom isn’t such a weak foe that your one order alone could oppose them. Our knights have already fought to the death trying to protect this country, and we still came up short. I also find them extremely unpleasant, but that doesn’t mean we should carelessly pick a fight—”

That was as far as they were allowed to leisurely talk. Suddenly, the loud sound of a clanging bell reverberated through the waiting room. It was part of a simple communication system that was set up to connect to the Tzenndrimble’s cockpit. The message was different depending on how the bell was rung, and

the current clanging meant...

“‘Something’s wrong, be wary,’ huh? Speak of the devil. Never thought they’d be able to catch up to a Tzenndrimble. Looks like we were underestimating them, just like you said,” Emris said as he leaped into action, leaving the room like a blast of wind.

He was going for his Goldleo, which was stowed in the same carriage. The girls were surprised at being so suddenly left behind, but they quickly realized the meaning of what he’d said.

“That can’t be! We’ve run so far... No, wait...they were able to catch up with us, even with our speed? Oh no!” Martina jumped up to look out the window of the waiting room, her eyes wide like saucers as she searched the skies behind them.

There, she saw a black dot in the sky, thrown into stark relief by the dawn sun. It was like a stain, and she quickly recognized it for what it was.

“That’s a levitating ship from Jaloudek!”



The sails to either side of the levitating ship expanded as far as they could go, their masts creaking as the ship was driven forward, ever forward. Dorotheo looked out of the adjustable telescope at the front of the bridge, a gruesome smile on his bearded face.

“When we gained the boon of wind, I chose to ride it, thinking that it was guidance from above...and it looks like I’ve won the bet. I’ve finally found you, last of the Kuscheperkan royalty! And I will not let you get away!”

He could feel his old body brimming with power as he crossed the bridge in the span of a breath. The telescope was left to one of his subordinates as Dorotheo shouted out his orders in a clear voice. “Bring the levitating ship right above them! We’ll drop the Tyrantors on their heads. We must not fail to bring the royals back under our control. Start by slowing them down with the Catapults!”

“Roger! Raise our speed and lower our altitude! Ready the Catapults!” The bridge staff repeated the order as they jumped into action.

The ship's figurehead pumped up the Blow Engine to the maximum output its mana pool would allow, creating strong air currents around the ship. As the levitating ship accelerated further, it also dropped down in altitude. It was going fast enough to easily outpace the Tzenndrimbles.



Kid and Addy, who were piloting the Tzenndrimbles, were struck almost entirely speechless seeing the flying ships catching up with them at unbelievable speed.

"Hey, come on! What the heck is that?! That ship is *flying*!" Kid shouted.

"Ships don't, like, normally...fly, right? And they don't even have Ernie with them! Man, people think up some weird stuff," Addy muttered in disbelief.

Neither had seen these flying ships before, so both were quite curious—enough so that they forgot the ships were enemies chasing them, and they started bickering about it among themselves. However, that stopped soon enough when the levitating ship suddenly shot something at them.

"Ack! Crap! It's attacking us!" Kid shouted. The twins hurriedly changed course while stones rained down around them.

The stones gouged out chunks of earth with gravity's help, and the sound of their impacts reverberated in the order's collective guts. They were aimed poorly, and in the end only a few hit even the road, but Kid and Addy broke out into cold sweats seeing the projectiles smash into the ground and easily punch holes through trees.

"Damn it, as things stand they'll catch up to us. This is pretty bad, isn't it?" Kid asked.

Because they'd changed course, the Tzenndrimbles had bled off some speed. That allowed the levitating ship to mercilessly creep closer.

At around that time, Dorotheo and his men were preparing to sortie. Dorotheo himself was already in the cockpit of a Tyrantor. In fact, all six of the lined-up Tyrantors had knight runners in them by now. Dorotheo quickly moved on to the next step, giving the orders to move out. The figurehead skillfully manipulated the Blow Engine, guiding the levitating ship onto a course that

would put them directly on top of the centaur knights. The ship dipped low enough to scrape the trees, its belly ready to open and drop the Tyrantors at any moment.

“Now, when the target is in our sights, is when we must be at our sharpest. Let’s go! We’ll finish this up quickly!” he said to his men.

“Yes, sir!” they responded in unison.

The centaur knights seemed to be in disarray, and the levitating ship crept closer.

The next instant, the cover over the centaur knights’ towed cargo was thrown off, and Ikaruga roared as four arms stretched out of its back. Inside the cockpit, Ernie was leaning forward so far it was like his face had been glued to the holomonitor. He was completely ignoring this tense situation as he smiled a lovely, but definitely fierce, smile.

“Ah... How could this be?! A flying ship...amazing! Simply amazing! The hull really is just floating in the air. It’s not like a hot air balloon or a blimp; it’s using sails! No, I don’t understand this. It doesn’t follow the laws of the *other world*. I’m sure that there’s something wonderful to it that I have yet to discover!”

With that, Ikaruga’s roar grew even more dramatically intense. Its control scheme had become so convoluted that normal piloting methods could no longer keep up, and it had to use the Full Control style that relied on Ernie’s incredible calculating and processing ability to function. That was why his will became his machine’s will, and it rampaged as he wished.

“Keep the Tzenndrimbles on the current course, you two! That thing, the flying ship...is *mine*!” Ernie said.

Immediately afterward, Ikaruga threw itself off of the carriage. Having landed on the road, it unleashed the vast amount of mana it had saved up. The Magius Jet Thrusters roared, and it accelerated so fiercely it put the Tzenndrimble’s speed to shame. Ikaruga was an utterly unique machine, fitted with the hearts of two monsters that Ernie had defeated in the past: a behemoth and a queen shellcase. The rocks on the road were blasted away by the recoil as Ikaruga shot up into the sky.

“What the hell is that?! It... It’s coming this way!”

Ikaruga made full use of the great power of its Magius Jet Thrusters to make a beeline for the levitating ship. Ernie wasn’t trying to get cute or think of any clever plans. He was simply, purely looking only at the levitating ship. And he charged at it using the shortest line possible at a speed that said he didn’t care if he crashed right into it.

Though the levitating ship was great at traveling through the air for long periods, it was still essentially a boat that used wind to propel itself. It was completely impossible for them to escape Ikaruga as it flew at them, dragging long trails of fire behind it. This was especially true since they had been picking up speed trying to catch up to the Tzenndrimbles. The bridge crew couldn’t help but scream at its approach. They had no idea what that silhouette knight wreathed in blazing fire was, or even what was happening in this absurd situation. And while they were mired in fear and confusion, Ikaruga slammed into the ship with a tremendous sound.

“What’s wrong?! What was that?! What happened to the preparations for the drop?!” Dorotheo yelled. He had been waiting to drop but had noticed they were late to the target. Then, from the shaking of the ship, he’d realized that something was wrong.

“Eek! I... I don’t know! There’s a b-bizarre silhouette knight! I-It flew up and is on the ship now!”

After listening to that confused report, Dorotheo glared at the wall of the levitating ship. The hull was creaking, and he quickly realized that something had attached itself to the ship and was crawling around. A shiver ran down his spine, its meaning a mystery. Dorotheo only hesitated for a moment before activating his Tyrantor.

The outer panels that Ikaruga was clinging to were blown inside in a gout of fire. With its footing destroyed, Ikaruga fell. Of course Ernie was surprised, but he activated the Magius Jet Thrusters and corrected Ikaruga’s attitude before creating some distance.

Ernie could make out a Tyrantor with its back weapons at the ready through the large hole that had been opened up in the hull—Dorotheo’s unit. He had

sensed the threat and decided to apply the brute-force method of blowing away the enemy along with the wall. Dorotheo then continued to mercilessly shoot at Ikaruga while it was in the air.

“Ah ha ha, nice reflexes! Wonderful! Please enjoy this little bit of payback for trying to blow me away. No need to hold back!” Ernie shouted.

Ikaruga used its mobility to dodge the spellfire, jets of thrust flaring up as it drew the Bladed Cannons at its waist. The blades opened, their insides lighting up with fire and a large amount of mana. Ikaruga’s return volley was severe, as its hellfire pierced into the ship’s hull and even set the interior ablaze. Explosions happened in quick succession, easily blowing the wall open even wider. The ship’s armor had been designed with standard spellfire in mind. Ikaruga’s demonic mana output was beyond their expectations, to say the least.

“Impossible... What power! As things stand, this ship will fall!” Dorotheo realized. Instantly, many options came to his mind. He had to drop the Tyrantors right away to recapture Kuscheperka’s royals. However, if he left this flying demon alone, the levitating ship would easily be shot down. Though, could it even be stopped by Tyrantors in the first place? He wasn’t sure. The only thing he *was* sure of was that if the levitating ship were to go down, his plans would go with it.

After some thought, he came to a decision. “Grk... RAAAAGGGHH!!!” Dorotheo raised his Tyrantor’s shield and threw his machine in front of the incoming spellfire. He took a direct hit of incredibly strong flame, and his shield warped as crystal tissue flew out from all over his Tyrantor’s body. Just a few shots had brought the Tyrantor to its knees, but given its excellent toughness, it could still barely move.

“Quick...evasive maneuvers! We need to retreat *right now!*” he ordered.

After seeing what Dorotheo did, his men finally followed after him. The other Tyrantors sacrificed themselves to block the spellfire as the levitating ship unsteadily changed course.

“Huh? Leaving already? But you’re already all the way here! You can’t do that—I won’t let...you?” Ernie tried to continue pursuing the enemy in his madness, but that was when he noticed a commotion behind him. There were black

shadows running along the road. Something was chasing after the Tzenndrimbles.

“That’s...a separate force?! They definitely got me.” For a moment, Ernie hesitated. With Ikaruga’s power, it would be easy to chase after and sink the levitating ship. However, that would mean leaving the Tzenndrimbles to fend for themselves. His own goal aside, the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s first priority was to safely rescue the Kuscheperkan royalty. The last dregs of rationality that had been shoved into a corner of his mind managed to hold his greed in check.

“Heh heh... Fine, I’ll take a rain check on this ship. But next time we meet, I will make sure to eat this all up and leave nothing behind,” Ernie said, sounding truly frustrated as he turned Ikaruga around. Explosive flames fluttered, leaving behind shimmers of heated air as he flew off toward the Tzenndrimbles at high speed.



Let us rewind time to just before the Tzenndrimbles encountered the levitating ship.

Shadows were running through the forest that spread out around the road. Compared to the trees around them, these shadows were large, around ten meters tall, and human shaped. In other words, they were silhouette knights. Even so, their speed defied common sense; they were running around twice as fast as a normal silhouette knight. What was even stranger was the fact that the shadows made almost no noise. It was impossible to hear the sound of their crystal tissue twanging, let alone the intake noises of their ether reactors, making their presences terribly faint.

These silhouette knights were quite slim, fitting for their superior agility. They could even be called svelte, except for the strange bulges on each shoulder and the hands that ended in sharp claws. Their heads were also notable—they had no real design to speak of, as outside of the hole for sight, they were smooth and devoid of features. Between their lack of faces and their silent movement, the silhouette knights seemed like ghosts.

There were many of these ghosts, and they bounded through the forest. They

were chasing after a pair of centaur knights that were galloping along the road. The objective of these ghosts was clear. They sped up even further and began to approach the road directly. Soon enough, they leaped out of the forest and onto the road in one large step. The shadows were silent as they fell, but they were definitely there. One snuck up on the Tzenndrimbles, who were concentrating on running away, and it was about to use its sharp claws to bore into its target, when—

“What the hell?! New enemies!!!”

The shadow was flung back toward the forest by a mighty swing—and the accompanying roaring wind—of Goldleo’s bastard sword from atop the carriage. Because Goldleo didn’t possess a weapon that would be effective against the levitating ship, it had stayed behind on the carriage as a guard.

“That was close! So that flying ship was a decoy. They use some nasty tricks!” Emris had his machine kneel down on the carriage and take a stance with its bastard sword. Because the Tzenndrimbles were moving, he couldn’t go on the attack. Patiently waiting like this didn’t leave him in a good mood.

But the ghosts didn’t make him do so for long. They came for another attack, leaping out in a scattered formation from the forest to strike at the Tzenndrimbles that were towing the carriages. Though Goldleo swung its weapon, its unstable footing proved bothersome, not allowing it to move as it pleased. It succeeded in warding off the enemies, but didn’t manage to thin the herd. Irritation colored Emris’s heart. “If I was on solid ground, they would all be scrap by now! But we can’t afford to have the Tzenndrimbles stop...”

He wasn’t the only one feeling that way, though. “Jeez, they *had* to come when Ernie wasn’t around! Can’t we shake them off?!” Kid shouted.

The Tzenndrimbles swung their lances, warding off the attacking ghosts. Because they were continuing to run while towing the carriages, they couldn’t properly defend themselves, let alone really fight back. The ghosts must have understood that, since they persistently aimed for the Tzenndrimbles from behind. The Tzenndrimbles fought as well as they could, but they were outnumbered and in a poor situation. As a result, they continued to weather more and more dangerous attacks.

Again and again, the ghosts jumped at the Tzenndrimbles all at once. Goldleo and the two Tzenndrimbles swung their weapons to put them in check, but their concentration was slowly being worn away. They had been running for a long time, so they were weary.

Finally, the order made a fatal mistake. One of the ghosts jumped in after a time lag.

“Crap! I can’t dodge—” Kid shouted.

The ghost got very close to the Tzenndrimble and thrust its arm at the horse’s unprotected belly with fearsome force. It was using its hidden weapon that had the power to pierce through a silhouette knight. Just before the sharp claws were about to gouge into the Tzenndrimble’s belly...

Without warning, a huge spear of flame flew in from the distance and went straight through the ghost’s torso. The ghost was thinly armored, as it had ignored defense for speed, and it instantly exploded into pieces. Something else flew in behind it, trailing fire and destroying the road to throw up a cloud of dust.

“How dare you interrupt my time with the flying ship!” Ikaruga had arrived—the six-armed, demon-faced silhouette knight accompanied by roaring fire. Its pilot shouted angrily, and as Ikaruga caught up to the Tzenndrimbles, it adjusted its speed with crimson flame and landed in the carriage.

“You’re a poor substitute for the ship, but you’re going to pay with your lives.” Ikaruga extended its extra arms from its back, grabbing the spare Bladed Cannons stored there.

Its standing silhouette must have looked like a porcupine, with Bladed Cannons pointed in all directions. Ikaruga’s roar exploded in intensity, as the fearsome amounts of mana within it ran wild and were expelled from the weapons as spellfire.

The ghosts had jumped into the forest to use the trees as cover, but they were blown away regardless, trees and all. The ghosts dashed, trying to use their speed to evade, but they were unable to dodge well enough and disappeared in the explosions. Ikaruga was angry, and the ghosts were buried one by one by its hand. It didn’t take long for their entire force to be burned to

a crisp, along with the surrounding landscape. Finally, Ikaruga calmed down.



A limping levitating ship chased after the setting sun.

It was the ship carrying Dorotheo and his men, who'd narrowly managed to escape the clutches of the raging, demon-faced silhouette knight. Much of the hull had been burned away, leaving only a warped skeleton. Even in that state, they'd pushed themselves to flee at maximum speed, so it wouldn't be surprising if the ship reached its limit at any moment.

The one silver lining in this disaster was that the Etheric Levitator was still intact. If it had been destroyed, the levitating ship wouldn't have been able to do the thing it was named for.

"Bring the ship down. Staying high in the air will just work against us if we crash," Dorotheo spat out from the captain's chair. He looked full of gloom.

Some time had passed since their battle, and there wasn't any sign of the enemy chasing them. On the other hand, staying in the air any longer would just be tempting fate. The men solemnly followed his order, and the ship landed.

Now that the ship was unusable, they would have to walk back in their Tyrantors. But the Tyrantors were also heavily damaged after using their bodies as shields for the ship, so they wouldn't be enough for transport.

Dorotheo and the crew disembarked, but one task remained before they could leave: destroying the ship. The levitating ships were Jaloudek Kingdom's secret weapons. Even though theirs was nearly kaput, they couldn't leave it behind while it was still even nominally functional. Dorotheo used his Tyrantor to swing a battering ram at it with jerky, faltering movements.

He gripped his control yokes with unnecessary strength to stop himself from trembling. He had lost his ship, his black knights, and failed to recapture Kuscheperka's royals. It was a failure too great to seemingly ever wipe away. At this point, Dorotheo had basically lost everything. Even if he were to return alive, there probably wouldn't be any place for him in Jaloudek's army. *If that's the case, maybe I should have just gone down with the ship.* He couldn't help

that a part of his mind thought that.

That was when one of his men, who had been watching over their efforts, called out and pointed at something in the sky. Everyone turned to look and saw a black dot in the sky, which in the sunrise was shot through with madder red, like dye. They quickly recognized it for what it was: an approaching levitating ship.



Under the twinkling stars of the night sky, two levitating ships made their way west. One was unharmed, while the one it was towing was so damaged it was a wonder it was still in the air. Obviously, the damaged ship belonged to Dorotheo and his men, and they had floated it high, ready to abandon it if the need arose.

Dorotheo had disembarked from his Tyrantor and looked around at his men, who had also been recovered into the other ship. Relief slightly colored his face, but he quickly scowled and stomped off in an attempt to shake off his emotions. He traveled from the hangar to the bridge. After he ascended a ladder, Dorotheo's destination came into view. His gaze stopped on a specific spot at the center of the bridge: the captain's seat, or more specifically, the person occupying it.

"So it really was you, Lady Hietakannes."

The woman lounging comfortably in the seat was Kerhilt Hietakannes, the knight captain of one of Jaloudek Kingdom's knight orders, the Copper Fang Knights. With her usual nasty smile planted firmly on her face, she shifted to rest her chin in her hand. "That's right. Got a problem with that?"

Dorotheo paused. "Of course not. You saved my men as well. I'm grateful to you..."

The two leaders weren't that close. If anything, the shadowy Kerhilt wasn't very popular in general. Still, seeing Dorotheo so strangely exhausted, she couldn't help but voice her concerns. "So, what happened? You aren't a flunky of His Highness—you genuinely earned your position. From the look of you, it was no minor incident."

Dorotheo didn't hide his shame as he recounted his failures of the day in faltering speech, but full detail. "...and you know the rest. I have gotten old. Even though that silhouette knight's power was like a nightmare, I can't believe I wasn't able to lift even a finger against it. I feel so worthless."

Even someone as seasoned as Dorotheo could hardly believe the silhouette knight that had cornered them. It had taken on him, his men, and his levitating ship, and it had wiped the floor with them.

"My fate is already sealed," he continued. "This failure is so great it cannot be made up for, even with my life."

The man who stood there was not the famous general who had both boldness and composure in spades.

Seeing him act so weak and deflated, Kerhilt spat out, "Tch! So you think offering up your wrinkled old neck is taking responsibility? I'm so disgusted, I'm speechless."

"Then... Then how would you atone for a failure of this magnitude?"

"This is why I hate dealing with war-obsessed idiots! Listen here: losing the royals, a levitating ship, and Tyrantors is just awful. But what would be worse is not coming back with information on the enemy."

Kerhilt's Copper Fang Knights were a group of spies. Their role was to gather information, and depending on the situation, that was more important than their lives.

That certainly wasn't a normal knight's attitude. Dorotheo lapsed into thought, and his utterly exhausted eyes regained a little strength. "You're right. The enemy was clearly abnormal and will surely prove a great hindrance to His Highness. I must relay this information so we can prepare for it. My neck can be reaped later."

Though his mood had changed a little, he still spoke like usual, and Kerhilt faced the heavens in a silent plea as she realized there was no helping him. "Is that right? Well, if you're planning to die anyway, at least try to bring the enemy down with you."

She had meant it as a joke, but Dorotheo nodded seriously in response, and

she just threw her hands up at his idiocy.



The capital of former Kuscheperka, Dervankhul, became Jaloudek's greatest base after King Augusti lost his life in the duel. Now that the invasion of Kuscheperka was almost complete, it had been designated as the regional capital of Jaloudek Kingdom's new territory, and the palace became the seat of this new government's power.

Underneath a fuzzy sky where the clouds stood out, a single levitating ship arrived at Dervankhul. Since ownership of the city had changed hands, an airport had been constructed to accommodate levitating ships. They'd just flattened the ground and installed gangways for disembarking, but it saw frequent use nonetheless since the city was a major Jaloudekian base. The ship that had just come landed in an open spot.



A while after, in the Central Protectorate Government's "audience chamber"—the name was a remnant from when it was the royal palace—the displeased voice of Jaloudek Kingdom's second prince, Cristobal Haslo Jaloudek, reverberated throughout the space. "What did you say? The princess and the others...were taken?!"

He kicked off the throne that was once meant for Kuscheperka's king, too incensed to remain seated. A single man was prostrated before him. It was Dorotheo Maldness, Cristobal's right hand. He had just arrived by levitating ship and rushed to his lord's side.

"Dorotheo... I know you're smart enough to know the value of that little princess! So you *must* be aware of how monumental a failure you've committed by allowing them to be taken by mere thieves! Not to mention while also losing a complement of Tyrantors and a levitating ship!!!" Cristobal's angry roar once again reverberated through the chamber.

Dorotheo listened to the reprimands without objection, remaining on the ground.

"That's enough, Cris. The supreme commander of our forces shouldn't allow

himself to get worked up like that.” Another voice cut into the audience chamber from the entrance. It sounded clear like a bell and got Cristobal to stop in his tracks. It was his sister and the first princess, Catarina.

“But, sister!” Cristobal objected.

“Calm down. You know Lord Maldness’s ability and loyalty better than anyone, don’t you? Continuing to blame him like this is just a waste of time. Your first task should be to understand what happened.”

That calm advice seemed to douse Cristobal’s anger, and he took a deep breath to steady himself with a somewhat embarrassed look on his face. Once he was visibly calmer, he turned to look at Dorotheo. “Raise your head. First, explain what happened, and don’t leave out even the smallest detail. I’ll think of your punishment after.”

“Yes, sir!” Dorotheo finally looked up, but he remained on the ground as he haltingly started to recount the attack on Raspede Castle.

“So I hadn’t noticed the royals had been taken until it was too late. I have no words to apologize for my lacking ability. I am ready to accept any punishment you see fit to give me.”

While he listened to the story, Cristobal’s expression filled with bitterness and disgust. Kuscheperka’s royals, especially the princess Eleonora, were tools he needed to stabilize the territory of Kuscheperka. While it was true that Jaloudek Kingdom’s power was overwhelming, and that they could do basically anything they wanted within the parts of Kuscheperka that were under their control, it was always best to be able to expend less effort.

“Still. You lost them all, not just that weak little princess? I can’t believe that you’d be bested by the likes of those indolent Kuscheperkans...” Doubt suddenly sprouted within Cristobal now that he had listened calmly to Dorotheo’s story.

Dorotheo had been serving him for a long time. Though he was a bit old, he was one of the five strongest people in Jaloudek’s entire army. The prince couldn’t think of any way that his right-hand man would have been bested by Kuscheperkan soldiers, who basically just existed to be hunted.

As he sank into thought, Catarina pondered alongside him, and she looked up first. “You’re right. Even a thousand Kuscheperkan soldiers wouldn’t have been able to take the royals from the castle Dorotheo was defending. So this attack must have been carried out by *someone else*.”

“Damn, so that’s it! Tch! I thought it would take them a little longer to take action. How dare they intervene!” Cristobal growled with a bitter expression.

The siblings had come upon an extremely troublesome possibility. If the royals really had been taken by a noble of former Kuscheperka, there wouldn’t be much of a problem. The solution would be simple, if annoying; they just had to let their army’s power do the talking and suppress their rebellion once again. However, if this was done by another country, then things suddenly became much more complicated. A royal would be able to grant that country a genuine *casus belli*—troublesome, to say the least.

They had, of course, understood and taken into consideration that they would face interference from other countries. However, in their long years of careful preparation followed by lightning action, they had never expected a response to happen this quickly. Their expectations had been utterly exceeded.

“So the Eleven Flags have taken roundabout action. Or perhaps it was remnants from Lokahl?” Cristobal muttered.

Catarina shook her head. “The problem is that we spread word of your engagement to Eleonora to keep Kuscheperka’s nobles in check. Our honor is totally crushed now that we’ve let them get away.”

Catarina’s handsome features were deeply colored by irritation. This turn of events was deeply displeasing to her as the governmental aide who proposed this plan.

That was when Dorotheo, who had kept quiet with his head bowed as they’d pondered, joined the conversation. “If I may speak, I do not believe our culprits were the Eleven Flags or Lokahl.”

“Oh? I expect you have a reason for saying that.” Cristobal was doubtful, but he motioned for Dorotheo to continue anyway.

But before he continued, Dorotheo slowly tore his sword from his waist,

scabbard and all, and reverently offered it to Cristobal.

“What is the meaning of this?” the prince asked.

“Everything I am about to say is the complete and utter truth. But if you still doubt my words...then please, use this sword to relieve me from my head on the spot.”

Cristobal audibly ground his teeth, which elicited a raised eyebrow from Catarina. Dorotheo had declared that he was betting his life on this. Which, if one tried to conversely interpret his meaning...

“Are you saying your report will be that unbelievable?” Cristobal asked.

Dorotheo silently nodded, continuing to hold out his sword. After some thought, Cristobal took the sword and drew it. While it was rather bare-bones, the sword was well maintained, and the blade shone dully in the light. “Hmph. There’s no way I would doubt your words after all this time. But I understand and have received your resolve. Speak without reserve.”

“It is my greatest honor and pleasure to be granted your mercy, Your Highness. This...concerns what happened after the royals made their escape. We gave chase in a levitating ship, but... We found them running along the road using a machine with a human upper half but a horse’s lower half.”

Cristobal let out a deep sigh, barely stopping himself from rejecting the notion immediately. The blade was still at Dorotheo’s neck even now. After all that, Cristobal wasn’t fool enough to doubt what Dorotheo was saying. “I understand why you offered your head now. What the hell are you talking about? Some sort of monster from ancient myths?”

“If I may say, I believe it was a silhouette knight, made by human hands. The thing was truly as swift as a horse; it was incredible. We wouldn’t have been able to catch up if not for the levitating ship.”

Cristobal furrowed his brows. Their Tyrantors were strong and without flaws in either attack or defense, but their only fault was speed. They were badly matched against an enemy with the mobility of a horse. Everything Dorotheo had said thus far had been alarming, but he had yet to broach the main subject.

“That wasn’t all the enemy had. We approached in the levitating ship to

attempt to reclaim the royals. That was when a multiarmed silhouette knight wreathed in fire *flew* at us. It wielded weapons more powerful than any I've ever seen and destroyed the levitating ship—"

"Wait! Come on, wait just one second, Dorotheo! What the hell are you talking about?!" Cristobal had been listening to Dorotheo's report, half in thought, but the sheer absurdity of that claim caused a quick reaction.

"The enemy silhouette knight, of course. In the end, we never even got off the ship. It flew up at us instead and essentially destroyed our vessel by itself. The silhouette arms it wielded were able to heavily damage a Tyrantor with every shot. So, we had to give up the pursuit. If...you believe I have missed a detail, then feel free to take that sword and..." Dorotheo trailed off.

"Agh, this is irritating. Enough with that! But such an enemy, it's... How should I put it? Hard to imagine." Cristobal groaned.

There was no way Dorotheo was lying when he'd bet his life on the report. However, the prince couldn't help but think that maybe he'd made a mistake somewhere.

While Cristobal was in the throes of confusion, Catarina had a realization. "A silhouette knight more powerful than a Tyrantor? While its form is abnormal, that also means the country it comes from must have corresponding technological skill. Dorotheo, do you believe this country is one that always had such technology, rather than one that recently had an innovation?"

The question was made without conviction, and was basically just a whispered thought, but Dorotheo nodded in response. "If I may add something, among the escaped royals was Archduke Fernando's family. Martina Alt Kuscheperka... She married into the family from Fremmevilla Kingdom. Furthermore, they ran east. Indeed, toward Fremmevilla."

"Wait, Fremmevilla? The monster guardians? So the backwoods hacks have come out of the woodwork." While Cristobal had considered a great many enemy countries, Fremmevilla was not one of them. After all, the kingdom was outside of the Occidents. While they'd meddled in the kingdom's affairs once, they'd lost all interest after their objective had been completed.

"They may just be siding with a relative, or they might want to claim a bit of

Kuscheperka's territory for themselves. Either way, the biggest problem is that the escaped royals have an ally that's powerful enough to rival the Tyrantor. I can't believe that there's that many of them, but we shouldn't be too optimistic." Catarina considered the need to amend her plans. Though they'd managed to make a guess at the enemy's identity, it was unknown how the enemy would affect things. For now, it was certain that their ability to govern the territory of Kuscheperka would take a hit.

Cristobal flopped backward onto the throne, his breath racing. It was clear he was getting emotional, but the emotion showing on his face wasn't rage. "Heh heh. Ha ha ha... Things are getting interesting. Stronger than a Tyrantor, huh? I was starting to get bored knocking the Kuscheperkans around."

Behind him, Catarina scrunched up her face. While her little brother was royalty, he was a rough and wild sort that preferred war to matters of state. It was his bad habit to constantly be looking for an enemy worth crushing.

"This isn't the time to be enjoying yourself that much, Cris," she chided him.

"I know, sister. If we're dealing with an enemy force, we just have to send our army after them and crush them. War is my territory; just leave it to me." Cristobal launched himself up into a standing position like a ferocious beast that had been let off its leash.

He was the supreme commander of Jaloudek's invasion forces, and that hadn't changed even after they'd become an occupying force. Catarina was in charge of all matters of government. But when it came to fighting, it was hard to keep Cristobal in control.

"Now that that's decided, we need to assault the eastern territory right away and choke the life out of them. It's a race against time. If word gets out that the royals are alive and planning a counterattack, a rebellion won't be far off," the prince said.

His expression was lively, as if he *weren't* talking about how disadvantaged his army was. Now that the royals had been retaken, the news would definitely spread. Royalty was the unifying force behind a country, and their absence was one of the biggest reasons Kuscheperka had collapsed so quickly. That meant the opposite was also true.

“Tools should obediently allow themselves to be used,” Cristobal muttered. “I’ll have you pay for the sin of defying us with your lives, along with the backwoods hicks who crossed the mountains.”

Crushing his enemy’s plans and resistance was what gave the prince the most joy. Seeing him about to rush off, Dorotheo stopped him. “Please wait, Your Highness. We’ve lost a number of Tyrantors in the east. Meanwhile, the enemy is strong. I believe it wouldn’t be wise to go with things as they stand.”

Thanks to the rampage of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, the Jaloudekians had much less influence in the eastern region. They retained control, but they’d lost significant freedom of movement. Suddenly, Cristobal’s mood dropped through the floor, and Catarina was forced to open her mouth before it reached rock bottom.

“Let’s rotate in some of the Black Knights stationed in the northern and southern territories, Cris. Given the situation, you should use resources from former Kuscheperka too. They’re still silhouette knights, even if they’re inferior to our Tyrantors.”

“How irritating. But I suppose it’s necessary. We need numbers to crush them in one fell swoop before they can try anything.” Cristobal groaned, throwing himself back onto the throne once more with a thud.

Thus Jaloudek Kingdom’s plans were solidified. Orders were sent right away to all the territories, and the elite Black Knights marched east. The net was slowly closing around the last of Kuscheperka’s royalty.



After finishing his report, Dorotheo left the audience chamber. His footsteps were heavy. Though he’d managed to report what he’d needed to, it didn’t change the fact that he’d failed stupendously and caused trouble for his lord. He couldn’t forgive himself.

“Father...”

“Gustavo? I heard that you suffered a failure as well.”

Dorotheo’s adopted son, Gustavo, had come to greet him. Gustavo had also suffered a lot of damage during his fight with the Order of the Silver Phoenix, so

both father and son were mired in shame.

“Sorry. It was a horrible showing. So what did His Highness say? Did he yell your ears off?”

“We won’t have our time in the sun for a while thanks to this. I was ordered to stand back until I’m needed.” Dorotheo heaved a sigh and sat down on a chair with a creak.

Put bluntly, his punishment had been postponed. His failure was too big to let go, but they couldn’t afford to lose an outstanding leader in such a situation. As a result, he was essentially under house arrest until the problem in the east was taken care of.

“The enemies we fought were pretty tough,” Gustavo offered. “They’re incomparable to the training dummies from Kuscheperka. This is exactly the situation where my swords are needed.”

“Just bear with it for now,” Dorotheo told his son. After a pause, he continued, “We must wipe away this disgrace, even at the cost of our lives. That silhouette knight...that fierce god...would never stay silent.”

The form of that avatar of destruction came unbidden to Dorotheo’s mind. It would surely bring disaster to the Kingdom of Jaloudek in the future—he had no doubt about that. He had already decided how he would use his life that had been saved.

As the pair conversed and calmed themselves down, a subordinate appeared to announce an unexpected visitor.

“Sorry to disturb your rest, Lord Maldness. May I please have a moment of your time?”

“If it isn’t Lord...Kojass...I believe? Shouldn’t you be back home? Why have you come to the front lines?” Dorotheo asked.

The guest was Horacio Kojass, chief of Jaloudek’s Central Development Workshop. Dorotheo welcomed him but was visibly confused by his visit. Kojass wasn’t a soldier, so he didn’t understand why the man would come to Kuscheperka, which was arguably the front lines of the war.

“Oh, I’m not here for anything too big. I just need to continue challenging myself in order for someone with my humble talents to be of use to His Majesty. So I came here to interview you soldiers who are fighting on the front lines.”

As a general and a knight runner, Dorotheo did not always understand how engineers thought, but in this instance he could feel his visitor’s earnestness. Since he was currently suspended from his activities, he had a lot of time to spare. Dorotheo nodded, accepting the request. “Then allow me to assist you. Though I don’t know how much help I’ll actually be. So, what did you want to talk about?”

Instantly, Horacio’s face split into a wide smile. He opened his mouth, and his voice sounded somehow viscous and sticky. “I heard that a levitating ship was brought down. Please tell me what kind of enemy you were facing...”

At that moment, Horacio looked completely different from anyone Dorotheo had ever met before. He felt an overwhelming drive that was at once passionate and somewhat disgusting.

Part 8: Princess of a Ruined Country Arc

Chapter 33: The Silver Phoenix's Flag Waves

The eastern region of the former Kingdom of Kuscheperka, which led into the foot of the Auvinier Mountains, was an undulating land rich in forests. Running through these forests was a main artery that ran across Kuscheperka itself, Kuschere Road.

“Even after losing Fontanie, the air of this forest hasn’t changed...” Martina stuck her head out of the carriage, squinting to defend against the blowing wind as she surveyed the landscape.

The scenery of the forest, overflowing with green, was as calm and peaceful as always, as if the troubles the country was facing had nothing to do with it. As the group put Fontanie behind them, the gloominess that had built up in Martina’s heart seemed to melt away. She and her husband, Archduke Fernando, used to live in that city—now the seat of the Eastern Protectorate Government. Indeed, the castle that she had been confined in until yesterday, Raspede Castle, used to be hers as well. It was also where her husband had been killed. No matter how strong a woman she was at her core, there was a limit. It wasn’t hard to imagine how she would have broken down if she had been forced to stay there.

“Finally, we can start. We’ll rip this country back out of their hands for sure. Fernando, dear... Please, watch over us.”

Martina had a mission—one she had inherited from her brother-in-law, the king, and her husband, the royal prince. Her prayer, filled with a heavy resolve, dissolved into the flowing wind of the forest. No one should have heard it, but her niece, who should have been asleep behind her, was breathing in an unnatural rhythm. Meanwhile, two Tzenndrimbles and the carriages they were towing continued down the road. Their destination, the magnificent Auvinier Mountains, awaited them.



The year was 1281 O.C.: a year of strife so heavy, it stood out even in the long history of the Occidents.

The Kingdom of Jaloudek, known far and wide through the western half of the continent of Setterlund, had suddenly invaded their neighbor. This was the start of what would be known to later generations as the Grand Storm of the West.

Jaloudek had displayed overwhelming strength from the very beginning of the invasion and flattened their neighbor, the Confederation of Lokahl, in the blink of an eye. They had then immediately used their momentum to proceed with an invasion of the next country, the Kingdom of Kuscheperka. Jaloudek and Kuscheperka were well-known, major nations, and their armies were supposed to be equally matched. At first, the surrounding countries had expected the war to drag on for a long time. However, Jaloudek's numerous new technologies, which manifested in a new silhouette knight and humanity's first flying weapon—the levitating ship—supported their push and made the war one-sided.



“So, Ris, where are we going? Over the mountains?” Isadora asked. She stretched, trying to work out the cramps from her limbs that had arisen over the course of their long carriage ride.

A few days had passed since their dramatic escape from Fontanie, and during that time their days had been spent doing nothing but running. Given the Tzenndrimbles' speed, they had covered quite a distance, and if they continued east, they would soon cross the Auvinier Mountains and enter the Kingdom of Fremmevilla. Considering who Emris was, it seemed likely that they would be taken there to seek asylum for the time being.

“No, I don't want to cause trouble for others. I made a promise with my old man too. We're stopping before that.”

“I admit these Tzenndrimbles are fast, but what are you planning to do by staying within the country's borders? As things stand, it's obvious we'll eventually be surrounded by Tyrantors,” Isadora said gloomily, her eyes pointed at the floor.

Emris puffed out his chest. “Don’t worry, Isadora. We didn’t take action without a plan. We’re preparing to strike back! And by we, I mean the Order of the Silver Phoenix!”

“You should at least say it was under your orders, Ris...” Isadora couldn’t help but feel uneasy, as she was unable to see the basis of his confidence.

With that feeling in her heart, she looked over to the other carriage that was running parallel to theirs. Parked there was the six-armed, demon-faced silhouette knight that had crushed a levitating ship on its own. She then realized that she actually had hope—hope that the subordinates who possessed such a machine would have some sort of imagination-defying method to accomplish their desire.

Before long, she would come to know exactly what the Order of the Silver Phoenix had brought to this land...

Eventually, they came upon terrain that was not forest. It was the relay town, Micilie, which was founded to be a point of rest on Kuscher Road. The Tzenndrimbles, who had been running at full speed all this time, finally slowed down in front of the town. Micilie was surrounded by crude walls with a flag raised on top. It wasn’t Jaloudek’s flag, but a flag emblazoned with a silver phoenix. One of the Tzenndrimbles raised a flag in answer, and the gates opened for them.

“Augh, that was exhausting... Good job, Tzenny!” Addy praised her machine.

“Sure, these things are the ones doing the actual running, but it’s a lot of work for the ones controlling them too,” Kid said.

The Tzenndrimbles made their way through the gates, with their intake noises almost sounding tired. Surrounded by onlookers who’d noticed their arrival, the Tzenndrimbles walked to the parking area. The pilots of the machines, Kid and Addy, seemed totally exhausted, and they unceremoniously cut the carriages loose before walking their silhouette knights into the workshop. The two units had been worked hard during their travels, which necessitated careful maintenance. The knightsmiths came flooding forward, thanking the twins for their hard work before unloading the silhouette gears from the carriages.

“Is this town really safe, Ris?” Martina asked. “We got in really easily, which

means it's not under Jaloudek's control, but..."

"Don't worry. You saw the flag, didn't you? The flag with the silver phoenix on it is ours."

Martina had opened the door to the carriage's waiting room and peeked out. As soon as she'd done so, she had been greeted with sounds of hustle and bustle, and she'd narrowed her eyes. Knightsmiths in silhouette gears were running around, busily unloading the carriages. She could also see a silhouette knight being assembled in the workshop next to the parking area. This place was filled with the liveliness that Fontanie had lost.

Behind the girls, who were having their first brush with human activity since being released from their confinement, Ikaruga stood, accompanied by the melody of moving crystal tissue.

"I'll go leave Ikaruga in the care of the workshop, so please lead everyone to the estate, young master," Ernesti said from the cockpit.

Emris raised his hand in agreement before turning to lead Martina and the others to the center of town. But before long, a human-sized carriage appeared before them, parting the crowd on the street. A single man emerged as the carriage stopped. He was Baron Modesto Letonmarquis, a minor noble with a holding in the eastern region.

"Ohhh! I'm glad to see you safe, Lady Martina. I heard the news already from Lord Emris, but... Ah!"

As soon as he noticed the girl hiding behind Martina, he immediately fell to his knees in a deep bow, heedless of the fact that he was on the side of a road.

"Your Highness Princess Eleonora. I thank the heavens to find you safe amid all this strife."

Eleonora Miranda Kuscheperka, now an orphan after King Augusti had died in combat, was the rightful successor to Kuscheperka's throne. Hearing how overcome with emotion Baron Letonmarquis was, the crowd around them fell to their knees as well with gasps of realization.

Eleonora, having been raised in a gilded cage, wasn't used to seeing such behavior up close. In the stead of her disoriented niece, Martina announced to

the crowd, “Raise your head, Lord Letonmarquis. And you all in the crowd ought to as well. I understand how you feel, but we have just finished a long escape after our rescue. Her Highness is exhausted. I would ask that you first lead us to a place we can rest.”

“Right, my apologies. Please, this way.” Baron Letonmarquis stood and invited the girls into the carriage. Once they were all inside, he instructed the driver to make for the center of town. “You went through the same escape, didn’t you, Lady Martina? I’m sure you’re tired as well.”

“You’re right, I am...a little. But considering the situation, I don’t think I have much leeway to rest. I would like to discuss the future as soon as possible, but —” Martina wanted to push her exhaustion aside in favor of taking action, but Emris cut her off.

“Then let’s continue our ‘business discussion’ from last time, Baron Letonmarquis! You’ve gathered quite the numbers, haven’t you?”

“Indeed I have. They’re eagerly awaiting your arrival. I also want to talk about those *plans* you delivered to us.”

After a while, they arrived at a comparatively larger building at the center of town. Baron Letonmarquis instructed a servant to take Eleonora and Isadora to their rooms while he led Emris and Martina himself. The adults moved to a room furnished for meetings, and there were already a lot of people waiting inside.

As soon as Baron Letonmarquis entered the room, he raised his voice. “Good news, everyone! The Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company has saved Lady Martina, Lady Isadora, and even Princess Eleonora!”

Cheers shook the room. Jaloudek had announced the engagement of Princess Eleonora and their Second Prince Cristobal the other day, and it had been a great shock to the surviving Kuscheperkan nobles. They already couldn’t resist the powerful army of Jaloudek, so the engagement announcement and realization that such a thing would spell an end to the royal line was as vivid and cruel a signal of their defeat as could ever be.

But now, the princess had been rescued from Jaloudek’s evil clutches. Who wouldn’t be surprised and overjoyed at such news?

Martina looked over this joyous crowd and adopted a doubtful expression. “Why are all of you here?”

The people gathered in this room were all nobles of former Kuscheperka’s eastern territory. As Archduke Fernando’s wife, Martina was well-known in the region, and she was familiar with most of the nobles here. Furthermore, they all had a certain point in common—they were all relatively low in rank.

“Allow me to give a simple explanation,” said Baron Letonmarquis. He then gave her a rundown on what had led up to this point.

Once Jaloudek had captured the Kuscheperkan royals, they’d wasted no time in beginning to invade the rest of Kuscheperka’s lands. Their next targets were Kuscheperka’s remaining major nobles. Many of them had already fallen along with the king during the assault on the capital. Anyone left stood alone amid the confusion rampant in the kingdom, and they were all taken out one by one by the power of the Tyrantors. Some nobles tried to submit and survive, and they were stripped of almost all their wealth and armaments, resulting in the near complete loss of their powers as nobles. The Kingdom of Jaloudek was oppressive and thorough.

While all the major nobles were being exterminated, most of the minor ones were left alone. It would be too much effort to kill every single noble, and doing so would only result in the collapse of Jaloudek’s ability to govern the area. As a result, the weaker nobles were simply put under Jaloudekian control and made to put up with regular patrols.

“And so a rather interesting ‘proposal’ came to us while we were languishing in this situation,” Baron Letonmarquis said, giving Emris a meaningful look.

Emris proudly thumped his chest in response. The question evident on Martina’s face morphed into exasperation, and Emris smiled like a mischievous little brat before politely correcting his expression and posture, though it was too late.

“Now then, as has just been mentioned, our Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company approached them with a trade deal,” Emris said. “We may have just come from a faraway land across the mountains, but it seems to us that Kuscheperka is in dire straits. This may be impertinent, but we couldn’t just

stand by and let it happen, so we offered our help.”

His words could not have been more of an act. He had clearly said everything by rote, and Martina was lost for words. Such a thing was truly unusual for a woman like her.

“You called yourself a mercantile company?” she finally asked. “Don’t you think that lie is far too transparent? You were sent by my elder brother Leo, that much is obvious to anyone.”

“Indeed!” Emris replied. “But according to my old man, it doesn’t matter how transparent the lie—the one who says something first wins!”

“Well. Leo’s thoughtfulness has touched my heart. I think I might tear up...” Martina sighed, disappointed.

Her nephew had just told her that while he had come with some truly superior silhouette knights, it wasn’t to lend aid as a friendly nation. She understood the meaning behind that, which was why she could do nothing but be astonished by the boldness of the lie.

“We were able to gather like this because of this mercantile company.”

After arriving in the eastern region, the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company had continuously assaulted Jaloudek’s army in the name of “stocking up.” After repeatedly suffering losses, the Jaloudek army had enough and started to concentrate their forces as a countermeasure. As a result, patrols through the eastern region had gotten markedly less frequent. At the same time, their monitoring of the minor nobles had also weakened.

“After that, the mercantile company... Or rather, Emris, left to save the princess while we spread word to gather in secret. Now that things have come this far, we will give our all to reclaim the kingdom, weak though we may be.” The baron’s speech elicited a wave of nods from the assembled nobles.

Determination shone through on their faces, but Martina slowly shook her head. “Your feelings gladden me. But how do you plan on accomplishing such a feat? In the first place, and this is truly frustrating, our Lesvants are no match for their Tyrantors. We stand no chance in battle and haven’t even won once in this entire war. Are you really planning to rely on Ris and his men for

everything?”

After several clashes, the common perception between both sides was that a Tyrantor was a match for three Lesvants at once.

And situations were rarely that simple, to boot. The difference in that strength was only widened by Jaloudek’s strategy of putting their units in a line formation like a wall. This made it hard to use numbers in the attack, and it dealt Kuscheperka painful losses over and over. The final straw was the levitating ship. These unprecedented vehicles that could travel freely through the sky completely invalidated all the standard strategies and tactics Kuscheperka had in its repertoire.

“Heh heh... You’re right that we won’t be the only ones fighting. Everyone gathered here will too. After all, we’re merchants, so our first order of business is to sell our wares.” Emris stood up in front of everyone and happily snapped his fingers.

As if he had been waiting for a signal this whole time, a small boy entered the room. His purplish-silver hair bobbed as he walked, and his lovely face held a cheery smile as the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti, started to speak with a clear voice. “Well then, if I may, I’d like to start things off by introducing our Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s new products. First allow me to confirm a prerequisite. We are facing two big problems: the strength of the enemy silhouette knight, and their flying ship. Dealing with either of those things would be far too heavy a burden for a Lesvant.”

Before anyone had noticed, Edgar and Dietrich had entered behind Ernie, and they silently set up a blackboard with practiced movements. They seemed strangely adept at this. Ernie immediately made use of the blackboard, posting up several papers with a soft and airy grin.

“That is why our Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company has prepared a solution for you. Now then, please take a look at the plans we have passed along to you all beforehand. As you can see...” Ernie’s blue eyes were filled with an excited light, and he seemed terribly happy as he started his presentation. In a sense, this was his true calling.



“So, from that explanation just now, I understand that *this* will let us fight as well. But there *are* problems with this.”

After Ernie’s presentation ended, the gathered Kuscheperkan nobles groaned with sullen looks on their faces. This proposal inspired a lot of hope, considering how powerless they’d been thus far. However, the caution that had been drilled into them *because* they were weak minor nobles wouldn’t let them nod and agree right away.

“The biggest problem is time. This plan is wonderful, but it’ll take time to build. I can’t imagine Jaloudek will continue to react as slowly as they have been now that they’ve let the princess slip through their fingers. If we don’t make it in time, we’ll just be crushed.”

“Oh, please, don’t worry about that. That’s why I’ve already prepared some things to slow them down. Those should buy us some time,” Ernie replied without hesitation.

Then, Martina opened her mouth. “That’s not all. You may be able to use a few tricks to slow down reinforcements coming from other territories. But if a patrol finds you building something like this, no excuse will save you.”

Martina’s doubt was well-founded. But for some reason, Ernie reacted with his best smile so far. “There’s no need to worry about that either. Our ‘supply runs’ before have greatly lessened the number of enemies in the east. And we’ll continue to procure ‘goods’ throughout this whole process as well.”

“Is... Is that so?” was all Martina could say in response.

The gathered lords knew well how effective the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s rampage had been. They also knew exactly how the boy in front of them had come to be called a god of death by the Jaloudek army. They could tell his words weren’t empty.

“So what do you think?” Emris asked Martina. “The wares we sell are ‘safety’ and ‘the strength to fight.’ Let’s say the contract will last until the country is retaken!”

“Heh! Heh heh... My word, you’re such a fool. Very well, you have a deal!” Martina, influenced by her nephew’s clear, fearless smile and his bold words,

regained her own grin as she agreed to his proposal. Both of their smiles actually looked very similar, which really highlighted their blood relation.

With that, Emris and Martina had solidified their contract. In that exact moment, someone unexpected spoke up from behind them, putting the brakes on this deal. “Please wait, young master. While it’s true that you and Lady Martina are linked by blood, this concerns the life or death of an entire country. Given that we are supposed to be merchants, we mustn’t help based entirely on goodwill. I must insist that we are paid appropriately.”

It was Ernie. Emris reacted with flustered confusion—until now, the boy had been completely unconcerned with how things had been going in this respect.

“Hey, what do you think you’re saying all of a sudden, Ernesti?! The mercantile company’s just a front; we’re not—”

That was when Martina cut in, “Be quiet, Ris. He’s right about this. I accept. We don’t want others to think we had to take charity either.”

Martina turned to face Ernie firmly. Right now, she needed to protect Eleonora and retake the country for the late king and her late husband. In order to do that, the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s strength would be indispensable. She knew Emris and his temperament well, but she also knew that organizations did not move solely based on bonds. Good work demanded a proper reward.

She carefully observed the small boy in front of her. He was the powerful and bizarre leader of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company (actually a knight order). While he looked like a young child, he had achieved some truly ridiculous things, from infiltrating the castle to fighting in that absurd silhouette knight. She didn’t think to underestimate him even a little.

While bathed under such an intense gaze, Ernie opened his mouth. “What we would like as payment are silhouette knights. Specifically, all the enemy silhouette knights we are about to destroy. We want the rights to keep all of their parts.”

After a long, shocked pause, Martina replied with “What? Is that all?”

“Yes, that is all.”

Martina quickly ran through some mental calculations. She and the nobles would certainly have to rely on their help for the foreseeable future, but eventually their own army would also certainly become the core of the resistance. The boy wanted all the enemy silhouette knights that they would destroy up until then. In the end, the payment would all come from the enemy's war potential, and wouldn't impact her own coffers at all. In the first place, taking just that as payment for the work of retaking an entire country was ridiculous. All things considered, this was a very small fee.

"All right then, that much is absolutely acceptable. We have no objections with that arrangement." While Martina did find the request somewhat suspicious, she still agreed in the end. But in her relief, she had failed to notice that Emris, who had been so noisy with his objections before, had fallen completely silent.

"Okay, then the contract is complete! I have your word now. As for the enemy, I'll rip them up by the roots and slash them, break them, and crush them until they're all mine!" Ernie nodded, a fierce, murderous intent seething behind his enchanting smile.

At that moment, Emris, who had spent a lot of time working with and getting to know Ernie, shivered as he came to a realization. *He said mine and not the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company's... There's no doubt. Ernesti seriously plans to crush the enemy to a man and take all the silhouette knights for himself!*

Emris almost reflexively went to stop the boy, but he held himself back. In the end, every extra enemy destroyed was good for them. Both his aunt and Ernie were satisfied as well, so he convinced himself that this arrangement was fine.

That was how the remnants of old Kuscheperka and the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company went into business together. The war would immediately head in a terrifying new direction.



"Losers should act like losers and obey the winners. Damn them for causing all this unnecessary trouble!"

A rank of pure black marched down Kuscher Road, synced footsteps shaking the stone pavement around them as they went. These jet-dark forces were

intensely intimidating, as if they were rejecting the overflowing nature around them. They were Black Knights who had come from the northern region of former Kuscheperka. The force consisted of a total of forty Tyrantors and twenty conscripted Lesvants. Combined, they were large enough to be a battalion.

“You shouldn’t say that out loud, Commander. The silhouette knight’s megaphone picks up all sorts of stuff you might rather keep private.” The lieutenant of this force matched his pace to his commander’s Tyrantor to warn the man.

Just the other day, they’d received orders signed directly by both Princess Catarina and Prince Cristobal. That meant whatever was written on that piece of paper was equivalent to an imperial order and carried the highest priority possible. The orders were to eradicate the escaped Kuscheperkan royalty and the rebellious forces that were helping them. The part about escaped royalty was top secret, so only the commander and lieutenant knew about it. Most of the knights were only told that they would be going east to suppress a rebellion. Such secrecy was understandable, though, as the truth that the captured royalty had escaped—or rather, had been rescued—would do a lot to kill the momentum and morale Jaloudek’s army had built up. Conversely, it would also become the wind behind the Kuscheperkan remnants’ sails and result in unnecessary Jaloudekian losses.

“I know already, don’t make such a big fuss. Jeez, who the hell let that little girl go? Forcing us, the magnificent Black Knights, to wipe their asses like this...” The commander waved off his lieutenant, annoyed, but he still turned his megaphone off.

The Black Knights were an especially elite knight order in Jaloudek Kingdom, and they tended to be given important roles more often than the other knight orders. There was no way they’d be happy to be forced to clean up after someone else’s mistake.

Before long, the battalion reached a fortress beside the road. This fortress acted as a checkpoint, and it had been abandoned during the initial stages of the war when the Kuscheperkans were scrambling to run from the threat of the levitating ships. The battalion showed some caution as they entered the empty

fortress.

“It looks completely abandoned. I guess it was too much to hope they left some supplies behind. Oh, well. Once we regroup with the supply corps following after us, start servicing the Tyrantors. Set up sentries too; we’ll be staying here a while.”

The soldiers all started moving at once. Because the fortress hadn’t been abandoned due to a battle, it was totally intact and could be used immediately. Their unit was exhausted, as they’d come all the way from the northern region. So, they decided to make use of the facilities here to rest and perform maintenance on their machines.

Following the battalion was a supply corps train carrying their resources and matériel. The corps entered the fortress as well, and now they had a surplus of supplies and a perfectly intact fortress. That, along with their sizable force, gave them peace of mind. In such a state, it was natural for them to relax. Without a single doubt in their minds, the soldiers focused on restoring their spirits.

The incident happened at night, two days after they started occupying the fortress.

Sentries patrolled atop the walls that ran all the way around the fortress. Though they had been assigned this duty, the sentries were terribly distracted, and it was clear they were only keeping watch in form, not in spirit. They walked aimlessly atop the wall, the lights of their lanterns moving along without any sense of drive. Without any forewarning, the lights started to disappear. One, then another—lights that should have been visible atop the wall went out in succession, and the area was smothered in darkness.

In the lights’ stead, shadows appeared on the wall. The corpses of the sentries were scattered haphazardly at their feet, but their forms were captured in the light of the lanterns that had fallen to the ground. The shadows were around two and a half meters tall and shaped like full plate armor: silhouette gears, specifically Shadowrads.

The Shadowrads looked into the fortress. Since it was originally Kuscheperkan, the squad had full intelligence on its interior structure. The Shadowrads had checked the wall carefully and knew how this force had placed

its men, so after some quick signals, they all took action according to plan.



The thundering of a sudden explosion shook the battalion from Jaloudek.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?!” The commander woke up, took his sword, and flew out of the room he’d requisitioned as his quarters.

A soldier responded and hurried to his side. “Allow me to report! It... It’s an enemy raid! The enemy has set fire to the fortress!”

“What?! What were the watchmen doing?! No... We can leave questions like that for later. Send men to quell the fire! The rest are tasked with finding the enemy. Don’t let them out of this fortress alive!”

However, the soldier in front of him hesitated to respond. A bad premonition welling up inside him, the leader bade his soldier to say what was on his mind.

“Well, um... The enemy are these bizarre...*things*. They’re like miniature silhouette knights. Regular infantry stand no chance! Moreover, they’ve already scaled the walls and left.”

“What?! What in blazes are you talking about?! Agh, send the knight runners to pursue in silhouette knights! We can’t just let them go!”

After receiving their orders, the knight runners were on the move. Several Tyrantors and Lesvants were woken up to chase after the escaped attackers. The attackers had fled toward the forest that grew alongside the road. Its plentiful trees posed a big obstacle to the larger silhouette knights, which gave the silhouette gears a large advantage. However, the forest was dim even in the middle of the day, so at night it was almost impossible to see within it. There was a limit to how fast the attackers could run.

The Tyrantors activated their back weapons and shot into the forest at random. The large explosions and flames revealed the silhouette gears hidden in the darkness. The silhouette knight squad, enraged, started their pursuit. Even though silhouette gears could run faster than horses, the larger silhouette knights could naturally run even faster, so the distance between the two groups shrank with each passing second. In the meantime, the Tyrantors continued to shoot with their back weapons, but their chances of hitting were slim to none

given all the trees in the way. Still, the silhouette knights sped up so as not to lose the silhouette gears that were still somewhat visible in the firelight.

Unfortunately, they didn't know that the Shadowrads' pilots were grinning under the armor of their silhouette gears.

The Shadowrads weren't just running away at random. Once they'd reached a designated spot, they had hunkered down and ran through a trap they'd set up among the trees. Then, the Tyrantors chasing them ran right into it. They had been completely focused on chasing after the silhouette gears, so they hadn't noticed the trap under their feet. Immediately after one Tyrantor stepped in the trap, it caught on something and tripped, with all its momentum still driving it forward. The Tyrantor had no time to brace itself and crashed into the ground hard, its armor warping as it slid along the ground.

The other silhouette knights that followed stopped in a panic. Unfortunately for them, it was already too late—they were unable to stop completely, so several more silhouette knights also fell prey to the trap and tripped onto the ground.

“What the— There's something here! It's...steel wire?!”

“Damn those rebels! They've trapped the forest!”

Visibility was terrible thanks to the cover of night, so it was already difficult for the silhouette knights to move around in the forest. It would be nearly impossible to spot any inconspicuous traps. While the Jaloudekians were dealing with the trap, the silhouette gears vanished from sight. If the silhouette knights tried to pursue, there was no doubt that more traps would be waiting for them. It would be impossible to give proper chase while remaining wary of those traps. Enraged insults resounded through the nighttime forest.



“And...that is how the rebels managed to escape...”

The silhouette knight squad returned to the fortress and gave their report to the commander, cold sweat running down their backs.

The commander's face twisted in rage as he cursed out the attackers. “Those damn rebels! How infuriating! So they were thoroughly prepared... Where are

they even from?! Aaagh, damn it all! So what about the fire, then?”

“Right, we’ve sent silhouette knights to help extinguish the fire, but it seems the enemy spread monster oil. The flames are very strong, and we’re having trouble putting it out.”

Monster oil was a special oil harvested from a specific monster east of the Auvinier Mountains. It burned fiercely, and the resultant flames were very hard to put out. It was standard fare for sabotage operations such as this.

“Those bastards... They get more detestable by the moment. So what did they burn?!”

“Sir! I’ve been told that they aimed for a portion of our provisions and paid special attention to the spare parts for our silhouette knights.”

That was when the commander’s anger reached its limit. He had the strong urge to take it out on whatever was around him, but he was in front of his men, so he persevered.

The provisions were a large blow, but the loss of spare parts was more serious by orders of magnitude. Tyrantors were unmatched in battle, but because they were so heavy, they put a lot of strain on their legs just by moving. At the very least, they were designed with enough durability to withstand their weight, but they still needed frequent maintenance for the legs to be able to exhibit their full strength in battle. The greatest problem was the machine’s strand crystal tissue—the spares of which comprised a large portion of the destroyed supplies.

“How could this happen? This will essentially prevent us from being able to march for our objective! This is a direct order from royalty, you know? Such excuses aren’t acceptable!”

The commander and his lieutenant shot each other looks. They were an expeditionary force, so they wouldn’t be able to rely on frequent resupplies. They would need to make do with what they had on hand for the foreseeable future.

“There’s no other choice, is there? We brought spare regular crystal tissue for the Lesvants, didn’t we? We’ll use that. Send notice to the knightsmiths—they’ll

need to arrange the tissue to form the strand type, after all.”

The remaining problem was that Tyrantors couldn't use the old type of crystal tissue as it was. They would need to use man power to reform the standard crystal tissue into the strand type.

As a result of that ad hoc solution, the maintenance team was forced to create more strand crystal tissue on top of their regular maintenance duties, which placed an even larger strain on the force during their march.

The nighttime attack had concentrated on supplies, so losses in terms of manpower and fighting strength were minimal. Though they were delayed, the Jaloudekian battalion resumed their march. But, naturally, that wasn't the only time they would be met with sabotage.

The next incident happened as they were moving down the road.

The battalion was moving in orderly ranks down the road when suddenly gigantic arrows flew out from the forest beside them. These arrows were large enough to have come from a siege engine, and they fell like rain. The silhouette knights moved to defend themselves in a panic, but the arrows were mostly aimed at the pack horses from the supply corps. Some soldiers also ended up involved in the storm of arrows, but the attackers were forced to run before they could properly assess the results of their ambush thanks to the apparent rage of the silhouette knights. The knights were unable to give chase, however, as steel wire traps were once more lovingly strung up across the forest.

The battalion was slowed even further thanks to the loss of so many of their horses. This was compounded with the fact that they were now wary of the repeated attacks. The damage they'd suffered was too large to ignore, and no one in the battalion thought this would be the end of it. But as the men of the supply corps were psyching themselves up to turn the tables on their attackers next time, the attackers turned around and went for a different squad instead.

This time, the target was a supply squad that was delivering resources to the marching force. The northern region they were traveling through should have been completely under Jaloudek's control. That was why they weren't on guard, and they fell prey to the ambush, had their goods set on fire, and took great losses.

“Aaagh! It just keeps happening over and over, those damnable wretches! So they’re aiming for our supply lines. The levitating ships should be keeping them down, but it seems some of the ones left still have guts.”

A large part of why the Jaloudek army’s supply corps were able to carry their provisions and matériel safely up until now was thanks to the existence of levitating ships. Silhouette knight movement was easy to pick up from above, and ambushes by the former Kuscheperkan army had been caught that way many times before. Trying to push out into Jaloudek’s sphere of influence under such conditions was basically suicide. But this time, the attackers weren’t using silhouette knights, but miniature silhouette knight knockoffs. They were able to use the cover of the forest to make them extremely hard to spot from above.

So, while the Jaloudek army was forced to sit on their hands, their supply train was attacked over and over. The only method they had to counteract this was to increase the number of guards protecting their supply squadrons, but while this lessened the frequency of attacks, it made them less mobile and thus less able to avoid such ambushes in the first place.

The damages to the supply train made the situation much worse than anything the Jaloudekians could have expected. The Black Knights on the march found themselves lacking in supplies more and more. Silhouette knights always required a lot of matériel to function, but the large Tyrantors required even more than usual. There was a limit to making do with what they had on hand. What’s more, they had been putting a large burden on their accompanying maintenance team by doing so.

The Jaloudek army had become arrogant after one-sidedly trouncing the Kuscheperkan army. But now, a skin-tingling nervousness was pervasive throughout the force, which slowed them down even more. The march, which should have been going well, was now enshrouded by dark clouds.



A little ways away from the Black Knights, who were traveling down the road, a group on a small mountain was observing the Jaloudekians’ movements.

“The enemy’s gotten quite wary. It’s about time to pack it in—we’ve slowed them down enough,” said Nora of the Order of the Indigo Falcon.

Behind her was a group of lined-up Shadowrads, camouflaged to be nearly invisible from far away. Her men, who were waiting around her, nodded. Nora's skill with the silhouette gear that she'd learned in her time with the Order of the Silver Phoenix was rated highly, which was why she was leading this sabotage team.

The ongoing attacks on the Jaloudek army were all her doing. Her order had always been good at sabotage and sowing confusion, and that had only been taken to new heights with the silhouette gear.

"We'll leave the rest to the nobles and the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Let's hurry back and prepare for the next mission."

Nora pointed her cold gaze to the east. Soon after, the shadows raced like the wind through the forest, planning to prepare for the fight that was sure to intensify.



Meanwhile, the battalion of Black Knights had managed to reach their next destination, though they were far from unscathed. Their initial vigor was nowhere to be found, and now they simply walked in almost complete silence. Before them now lay a wall that cut across the forest and road. It was the fortress city of Jedeon, the doorway from the north to the east.

This city lay at an important juncture, connecting to both Kuscher Road and Occident Road, which was the trade route to Fremmevilla Kingdom. It was widely known as a key point for traffic, and that was why it was equipped with significant fortifications, including very solid walls.

"Halt!"

The battalion was low on supplies and high on exhaustion. Continuing their march would be dangerous, even for the elite Black Knights. It was hard to imagine how relieved the soldiers felt when they finally came upon a town they could use as a base. However, their commander ordered a halt right in front of such salvation. The lieutenant looked at his superior questioningly, to which the commander had his Tyrantor point at *it*.

"Why isn't that city flying *our flag*? Actually, what flag *is* that?"

The flag flying proudly over Jedeon's walls bore a crest of a silver phoenix spreading its wings. Flags were meant to display one's allegiances to help people identify friend or foe. The fact that they weren't flying Jaloudek's flag could mean only one thing.

"How foolish. They're getting full of themselves just because they managed to take back one little girl!" the commander spat in a loud voice. He then ordered his troops to prepare for battle. Now that the city's rebellion had been made clear, there was only one thing for them to do.

"I bet they're feeling confident with that hard shell of theirs. But that wall is meaningless in front of our Tyrantors! Our soldiers are angry too. Don't think we'll show any mercy!"

Between their exhaustion from the incessant attacks and their feelings of betrayal at being denied safe haven, the Black Knights were raring to unleash their frustrations. Though they should have been quite exhausted after such a long journey, their fury blew all that away. The soldiers quickly took to their formations and started advancing with an intimidating air.

"Prepare to siiiiege! Front row, ready your hammers! Pulverize these fools to dust!"

The front row in their horizontal line formation consisted of Tyrantors wielding battle rams. Tyrantors, with their great strength, were able to damage defensive walls without having to resort to the standard siege engines that required multiple silhouette knights. With such destruction as their goal, the many Tyrantors in line raised their miniaturized siege weapons and attacked the wall all at once. This was their standard tactic to bring down the wall as fast as possible.

The fortress city of Jedeon showed no response to the advancing wave of black. Kuscheperkan Lesvants stood no chance in the face of Jaloudekian Tyrantors. That had been proved many times over up to this point, so the Kuscheperkans had stopped trying to meet their enemy on the field, deciding to rely on their fortified positions instead. This strategy had now been seen many times over by the Jaloudekians, which was why the Black Knights advanced without hesitation. Once they got close enough to be within silhouette arms'

range of the walls, the Kuscheperkan silhouette knights finally showed themselves. The Tyrantors paid them no mind, though. Some light spellfire wouldn't put a dent in their heavy armor.

That was why the commander, who was observing the battle from the back, was the first to realize something was wrong. "What in the world? Those aren't the Kuscheperkan training dummies! They look different!"

Jedeon's silhouette knight defenders, obviously not Lesvants, lined up on its walls. They wore heavy supplemental armor that looked as if it was enclosing everything surrounding the machines, and thanks to that, they looked like bizarre tubes that blended with the spires of the city walls.

Under the gaze of the suspicious commander, four silhouette arms stuck out of each of the silhouette knights' backs, pointing forward in concert. Those were back weapons, the same type of equipment system used by the Jaloudek army. Along with those back weapons, two arms holding more silhouette arms appeared from a gap in the supplemental armor. That made for a total of six silhouette arms per silhouette knight lined up on the wall.

The moment the commander realized what that meant, premonitions of an unprecedented terrible future arose in his mind. "So it's not that they don't want to approach. They don't have to! This is bad; our Tyrantors will—!"

His shout was too late, and it faded into nothingness. The next moment, the silhouette knights lined up on the walls started their bombardment. They committed to a continuous rain of fire from a set of silhouette arms far more numerous than any normal silhouette knight's. The intense storm of spellfire descended upon the Black Knights, throwing up a staggering wall of explosions and flames. It was enough to churn over the Tyrantors along with the ground beneath them.

That wasn't all. The Tyrantors were also at the perfect range for catapult fire, and hurled stones were added to the bombardment. The Black Knights had their hands full defending themselves from this severe curtain of spellfire, when a stone hit them from a different angle. Even the heavily armored Tyrantors couldn't take a direct impact from a fast-flying boulder without defending themselves and come out the other side unscathed. Their heretofore invincible

horizontal line formation started to come apart at the seams for the first time.

But the Tyrantors wouldn't allow themselves to be one-sidedly attacked like this. They activated their back weapons and tried to return fire. The Kuscheperkan silhouette knights were standing still on top of the wall, and the return fire hit them, but the intermittent shots had no effect through their extremely thick armor. The difference in spellfire volume was clear.

"Damn, what the hell are those things?! They're *still* firing their silhouette arms!"

The Jaloudekian force was having a tough time dealing with the two types of projectiles being flung at them, and it wasn't long before they realized something was off. Silhouette arms were powerful weapons, but they ate up a lot of mana with every shot. The defenders' mana pools should have evaporated almost immediately with this volume. However, the bombardment still continued. It was clear to the Black Knights that some kind of trick was at work here.

"Damn you, so you're just not going to let us get close because you can't win in melee combat?! That's cunningly evil...but this can't go on. Our losses are growing too high. Have them pull back for now, messenger!" The commander shouted orders to a messenger, a vein popping up on his forehead.

Tyrantors were heavily armored, but the enemy's bombardment was intense enough to overwhelm that. With how low a Tyrantor's maneuverability was, they would take too many losses by the time they reached the walls. The Black Knights were here because they were expecting a long-term mission. But with the enemy's repeated sabotage attempts, both the knight runners and their machines were very worn down, and they couldn't afford to take many losses in this single battle.

This was the first time the Jaloudek army had failed a siege since the beginning of the war.

While watching the Black Knights retreat, the Kuscheperkan defenders of Jedeon were running around in a fluster.

"The Jaloudek army is retreating! Viede unit, cease fire!"

“They’ll probably come back. Soldiers, hurry and replenish the stock of stones while you can!”

“Don’t put down your silhouette arms yet. Stay as you are and serve as a threat, Viede Unit. Take this chance to recover your mana pools while you’re at it!”

The array of silhouette knights spun up their ether reactors while still holding their silhouette arms forward. Intense intake sounds filled the air as the tube-shaped machines, Lesvant Viedes, recovered their mana. These silhouette knights had been modified according to the blueprints proposed by Ernie and distributed by the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company. Based off the Lesvant, the standard silhouette knight of the army of former Kuscheperka, this was a simple upgrade that only added back weapons and a large amount of capacity frame.

The focus of this modification was the large piece of supplemental armor that surrounded the machine, known as the wall robe. It was a strong piece of armor that was also made entirely of capacity frame, and the mana pool of the robe alone was bigger than a single Lesvant’s. The Lesvant Viede sported an extraordinarily large mana pool, and using that in conjunction with its many silhouette arms, it was heavily specialized for long-ranged attacks. Unfortunately, these lacked finer adjustments since they’d been made in such a rush. Also, the wall robe added so much weight they were essentially immobile, and so they were only good at defending positions. They were defective in a sense, but the Jaloudek army didn’t know that, so as far as they were concerned, the new machines posed a real threat.

“Look...the Jaloudek army is leaving the road! We protected this town! We won!” When they saw the Black Knights fall back and continue to leave the vicinity of the city, a ripple spread through the assembled soldiery. That ripple soon changed into a stir, and finally into an explosion of joy.

In the midst of the excited soldiers, the officers stayed relatively calm.

“Finally, a victory. Still, all we did was send them packing once. They haven’t taken that much damage, so they’ll probably be back eventually. It’d be great if this keeps them too apprehensive to attack for a while, though.”

The Lesvant Viede was great at defending an area, but it was disastrously unsuited to offensive maneuvers. Its mobility was just too low. Jaloudek's forces were still a threat, but the Kuscheperkans chose to just enjoy their victory for now.



Messengers on fast horses spread the news of the victory at Jedeon across the land. This greatly improved morale and set a good upward trend for the plan of resistance that had been decided on after Princess Eleonora had been rescued.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix thus far were the only ones who had the ability to fight the Jaloudek army head-on, but they wouldn't have been able to achieve true victory alone. Now that they had the Lesvant Viede, however, the nobles of former Kuscheperka rushed back to the battlefield. Thanks to the uprising of those minor nobles, Jaloudek's Eastern Protectorate Government's control of the region waned, and now the east was once again a battlefield.

Furthermore, the defensive line of Lesvant Viedes completely stymied the Black Knight reinforcements coming from the northern and southern regions. They were also still being sabotaged by teams of silhouette gears, so the Jaloudekian forces were taking unexpectedly significant damage. Their plans were thrown off and had to be redone many times over.

The Jaloudek army had been planning to end this upheaval quickly, but now they were forced to reorganize their forces. Meanwhile, the former Kuscheperkan remnants only had Lesvant Viedes to bring to the table, and so they couldn't really make any moves. With that, the war reached a sort of stalemate, a moment of serenity descending upon the Grand Storm of the West.

It was the year 1281 O.C., and autumn was fast approaching. About half a year had passed since the Kingdom of Jaloudek had declared war, which was now entering a new stage.

Chapter 34: The Worries of a Princess

In the far eastern reaches of former Kuscheperka's eastern territory lay a town named Micilie.

This town used to be known as a relay point, but it recently underwent huge changes. The biggest indicator of this were the workshops now dotting the town.

These workshops were active both day and night, in the throes of a fervor that couldn't be satisfied with just smithing. The source of this was a certain kind of machine that could be seen walking around inside the workshops. They were around two and a half meters tall and resembled suits of armor, but not quite. They were workhorse machines fitted with strand crystal tissue throughout and used the rider's mana to move. Obviously, these machines were silhouette gears—Motolifts, to be precise. Most of the knightsmiths working in these workshops were using Motolifts to accomplish their tasks.

"Hey, you there! Some of these people are running out of mana—let them rest! I know we're in a hurry, but don't work yourselves too hard. You'll just cause more trouble for the rest of us! You can take it easier in the beginning, since you'll get used to it right away—even if you don't want to!"

An assertive voice pierced through the din of one such workshop, and other voices loudly shouted in response from every corner of the room. The Kuscheperkan knightsmiths, not used to working in silhouette gears, would quickly hit their limits if they were left alone. The man who shouted the command earlier continued to look around the work happening around him for a moment before going around and admonishing the knightsmiths who were pushing themselves too hard. What was more surprising was that he managed to fit in some smithing work himself in between those moments. He was using a silhouette gear just like the rest, but upon closer inspection, his was clearly different.

First, it had dexterous limbs for precision work as well as a pair of extra crane

arms for manual labor, for a total of four arms. The iron fence that was normally there to protect the rider was also fitted with a rack to hold various tools, and there were boxes on the legs to store screws, metal scraps, and other supplies. Its legs were also larger and heavier, probably to allow it to handle the greater weight, and it also clearly gave the silhouette gear better stability. As a result, the machine was much more stout than the others, on top of its incredible stability and four arms. That all allowed it to accomplish tasks at dizzying speed, and watching it made for a bizarre sight.

The owner of this silhouette gear was the chief knightsmith of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, David Hepken, and it was named “Dwarf’s Fist.”

The knightsmiths of Fremmevilla, especially those of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, used silhouette gears to greatly boost their productivity. At first, they’d used the Motolifts as is, but eventually each knightsmith started to modify their machine to help them work more efficiently. Dwarf’s Fist stood head and shoulders above the rest, packing most of what anyone would need for smithing work. The crane arms could easily lift things too large or heavy for human strength and could even hold them firmly in place during work. The arms, fitted with five fingers like on the Shadowrad, were able to exhibit all the precision wonders of dwarven technology. This incredible power was a great boon in creating metal parts.

It even had a magic torch for welding work, so even on its own, it could manage to do anything from shaping metal to putting it together—anything except for jobs that would require a smelting furnace. The machine was so versatile it was almost funny.

“Booooss! Over heeere!” A voice called the boss, who was working using all four of his silhouette gear’s arms, through the din of the workshop.

“Oh, if it isn’t the silver kid! Wait a second, I’ll head over once I’m finished with this!” The boss then shouted out several more orders to those around him before finishing up what he was working on and finally stepping out of the workshop with heavy footsteps.

Ernie was waiting for him while excitedly watching the knightsmiths at work. “Good, good. The introduction of Motolifts seems to be going well.”

“Hmph, they were so hesitant at first because they’d never seen such a thing,” the boss complained. “But the moment they saw my Dwarf’s Fist in action, they changed their tune. Anyway, for now they’re pumping out more silhouette gears in a big hurry and getting used to using them. Manufacturing work-use Motolifts is easy, after all. They’ll quickly make enough to go around.”

The boss then added something about scaring them a bit to make that happen, and Ernie nodded, satisfied. Silhouette gears were so easy to mass-produce that they were incomparable to silhouette knights. They would likely make more than enough before long. The plan to bring the remnants of former Kuscheperka back on their feet started with introducing silhouette gears and mass-producing them.

“Their training’s going pretty well, I’d say,” Ernie started. “Let’s jump a little ahead and move this work to the next step. First—”

“I know. I figured you were going to bring it up sometime soon, so I got a copy of their Lesvant’s blueprints.” The boss produced a sheaf of paper and waved it around to show Ernie, who adopted a sort of wry smile.

“I knew I could count on you, boss. The word ‘skilled’ doesn’t begin to cover it.”

“You know it. Well, I’ve known you for a while now, to be fair. Also, even though I’m stone useless in a fight, I can still tell that the Lesvants won’t be able to fight either unless we do something. After all, they’re not much different from our Kaldatoahs.”

Ernie took the sheaf of papers from the boss. “Yes, we’ll probably need to design a new model with acceptable capabilities in the end. Incidentally, I’m thinking of reusing the Kardetolle’s design since we’re so short on time.”

The boss paused a moment before responding. “You know, that’s kind of a local specialty of ours. I know we’re friendly with this place, but I don’t think we should let them in on our stuff so lightly.”

“Actually, I already asked His Majesty about this, and he said I could act upon my own discretion. I basically have the royal seal of approval.”

“I’m pretty sure that in this case, the big man upstairs gave permission to the

wrong person..." The boss deftly used his Dwarf's Fist to stroke his beard before letting out a long sigh.

"Of course I'm not going to copy the designs one-for-one. I'm just going to use the Kardetolle's structure as a base to give the Lesvant a rebirth. Well, I say that, but I don't know if I'll have the leeway to do that in such a short time frame."

"Jeez, you're taking on a pretty difficult problem again, huh? I'll need to train these knightsmiths properly while I can or I'll find myself too busy to get any sleep." The boss had on a fearless smile that said the exact opposite of his words as he slammed his fist into his palm. After all was said and done, the boss was also an eccentric that liked to take bets.

"Oh, also, one more thing: I'd like you to take care of these designs for a weapon we'll be *using*."

"Come on, you can hold back *a little*. You've managed to make it so long without making a ridiculous order. So, what is it?"

"We'll be able to hold our own against silhouette knights somehow with what we have. But there's still a problem. We have to be able to take down those flying ships too, after all. That's why we need to have at least one antiair weapon."

That surprised the boss. He'd heard how Ernie and his Ikaruga had basically single-handedly sunk a levitating ship during their escape with the Kuscheperkan royals.

"Do you and Ikaruga really need something like that?"

"No, this is for the others. To tell you the truth, Dee had to let one go before, and he was really frustrated. It'd be good to have something that can at least give them a poke. Just being able to tell the other side that the skies aren't safe will do a lot of good."

Ernie's explanation convinced the boss, and he agreed. Even he couldn't think of any weapon to fight against the flying ships. But for Ernie, who had a track record of making incredible machines and equipment, it might have been easy. Either way, it was his job to give those designs form. There was no way the boss

would refuse.

“All we need now is time. Will we complete the new model and stock up on our anti-air weapon first, or will the enemy finish their preparations and attack first?” Ernie wondered aloud. “Now then, let’s all take this all-out sprint together. Whether we get caught or manage to run away with it, this is a real feast of a war. I’m starting to have fun.”

With a clear goal now in front of him, Ernie smiled a totally fulfilled smile. But the boss only saw it as a hellish expression befitting a demon.



Micilie’s workshop district was steadily growing. Meanwhile, the escaped Kuscheperkan royals were being housed in a mansion in the center of town, which was now surrounded by said district. This mansion used to belong to some merchant, but it had been abandoned at the start of the war. Apparently that merchant had done fairly well for himself; the mansion’s size and splendor were remarkable considering how remote the town was. In addition to the royals, this mansion was also being used by the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company.

While watching the enthusiastic liveliness of Micilie’s townscape that stretched beyond the window, Martina sighed. “Seeing this lively place almost makes me forget that the Kingdom of Kuscheperka was destroyed.”

The bustling townscape had none of the grimness of a ruined country. Its fervorous energy was thanks to the wills of every Kuscheperkan soldier and citizen who wanted to take their country back.

“In order to respond to all their efforts, we first need to solve one big problem: the question of our next ruler, the one who will raise the flag of resistance and lead our new Kuscheperka.”

Martina’s words got Emris, who was sitting down and sipping tea, to look up. “Are you really going to say that Helena’s the next ruler? It’s true that she has the blood right... But, and I feel bad saying this, I don’t think she has what it takes to lead an entire kingdom. Not to mention that she can’t even lead from the front in battle.”

Martina paused. “I know, but Ris, this is the exact time where we need to rely on that sort of logic.”

Eleonora was the late King Augusti’s only child, and she was already technically an adult at sixteen years of age. So, according to this era’s customs, she would be first in line for the throne, and thus the one who had the most legitimate claim—but that was exactly what was causing Martina so much pain.

“Sure, but how’s Helena even been since then? Have her wounds healed?”

Isadora answered from her seat next to Prince Emris. “She’s not doing too well. She’s recovering physically, but...she’s been cooped up in her room this entire time, refusing to leave.” She slowly shook her head.

Eleonora had never been that resilient, and her imprisonment in Raspede Castle had only wasted what little she had away, so she’d stayed in her room since the group had arrived in town.

“Tch! I knew it. I don’t think I can agree with this. No matter how legitimate her claim, it’s not right to ask such a weak girl to step into the line of fire!” Emris shouted.

“That is what being royalty means, Emris! It’s the duty of anyone born with such blood,” Martina countered. “There are times when one must stand for their country and its people, even if they have to trample all over their own feelings. Eleonora needs to...understand that.”

Emris opened his mouth, about to argue more, but Martina stopped him with a gesture. She understood Eleonora’s circumstances. This war, the loss of her father, and her position as a princess all weighed on her, threatening to crush the poor girl and binding her to her room as her only means of relief. Martina’s face clearly betrayed her distress, and Emris swallowed his words.

Still, he didn’t seem convinced, so Martina hardened her resolve. “Ris, I know that the position of queen would be too big a burden for her. But only the act of leading her people in the midst of this chaos—of standing before them on the eve of our victory—can make her succession legitimate in their eyes. This is the only way to make her the queen!”

Martina’s gaze went to the floor. This was the only responsibility she had left,

one that had been entrusted to her from the late king. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a parting gift. This situation was a clear demonstration of the complicated hereditary dynamic between “king” and “country.” In any case, this wasn’t Martina’s desire alone. Ever since they had made their escape to this place, the nobles here also saw the princess as the symbol of their resistance. Their surroundings would not leave the princess be, regardless of what she wanted.

“Even so, it might be... No, it *would* be far too heavy a burden for her. Are you truly sure that this plan of yours will go well?”

“I don’t intend to have her bear it all alone, of course. We’ll be by her side to help her with the actual work.”

A heavy silence settled upon the room. Eventually, Emris sighed and scratched at his head. Though he didn’t belong to this country, he was still royalty, so it wasn’t as if he didn’t understand Martina’s point. While he wasn’t yet convinced, he still accepted her decision.

“You’re serious, huh? Okay, I get it. Sorry for arguing so much. So what do you want to do now, then? Helena won’t even leave her room, much less stand at the front of a battle, right?”

“Indeed. We tried everything we could to convince her to come out, but to be honest, it hasn’t really worked. If possible, I’d like to borrow your strength, Ris...and the strength of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company. Could you all cheer her up?”

Finally, Emris’s usual fearless expression returned. “Your wish is my command!”



A while after, in the workshop being used by the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Emris raised his voice so it could be heard clearly by everyone around him as he swept his gaze across the crowd.

“And that’s the gist of it! I want to encourage Helena. I want to let her know that as long as we’re here, there’s no need to worry! Could you all help me?”

He had immediately taken action after his conversation with Martina, coming

to explain the situation to his comrades and ask for their help. Though they'd hesitated at taking on such a big responsibility, especially since it involved talking to a member of royalty, the order was exposed to shocking things on a daily basis. They quickly regrouped and started a lively debate.

"If that's what you want, I can regale her with heroic tales of the second company's achievements..."

"No, we knightsmiths should tell her all about the wonderful capabilities of our new models..."

"We're talking to a princess, aren't we? Would that even work?"

Suggestions and reactions flew from the crowd, but none of them seemed feasible.

Ernie, who had been sitting back and listening to everything, waited for an opportunity before stepping in. "Okay, why don't we try telling her about our order's achievements first? Though I wonder if she's already heard it all... Anyway, we should probably prepare a backup plan, just in case she still refuses to leave her room after hearing all that."

Ernie continued to speak, quickly consolidating all his thoughts into a concise statement. "Right, we should probably do a little more intelligence gathering first. You studied abroad here in the past, didn't you, young master? Do you know what kind of things Her Highness likes to talk about?"

Emris furrowed his brows and crossed his arms in response. "That's a tough one. To tell you the truth, I spent almost my entire stay here at my aunt's, so I haven't talked to Helena all that much. Hrmmm... Oh, right, Isadora would regain her spirits after a single bout with swords. Okay, I can get on Goldleo and fix her mood in one shot!"

"Right, that's rejected," Ernie responded instantly. "It was a mistake to ask you, young master. Let's change our perspective on this and ask someone close to her age—that should get us a better idea. Any thoughts, Addy?"

"If you want to cheer up a princess, just leave it to me! Mweh heh heh, she sure is pretty and cute, right? She's tiny like Ernie too, so after I talk to her, I want to see if I can hug her."

“Okay, no. That just seems...like it shouldn’t happen.” Of course, even someone like Ernie had the tact to hold back the retort that only Addy would enjoy that.

Kid chimed in from beside his pouting sister. “What about you, Ernie? Do you have an idea?”

Ernie took a while to think. “I can solve any problem concerning silhouette knights or silhouette gears just by hearing them run...”

“Oh no, everyone’s absolutely useless...” Kid muttered, looking up to the heavens in exasperation.

That was when Addy seemed to realize something, as she gasped and thumped her fist into her palm. “Right! Didn’t you swear to be her knight, Kid?! Now’s the time to show her your cool side!”

Everyone turned in unison to look at Kid. He felt real, physical pressure at that, and backed up a few steps. “Grk! Why would you say that *now*, Addy?! Uh, no... Um, wait a second, everyone. That *is* t-true, but—”

Kid laughed, trying to gloss over the subject, but someone grabbed him by the arm. He jumped and turned around, only to see Ernie with a very *kind* smile on his face. “I see... Then we’ve got our candidate. Go and cheer up Her Highness the Princess, Kid. Captain’s orders.”

“Hey, come on, that’s not fair— Agh, jeez, fine! I get it! Damn it, I’m not responsible for what happens, okay?!” Kid realized he couldn’t escape, so he shouted in desperation.

And thus the brave warrior was set to face a difficult battle alone.



A while after, Isadora accompanied Kid to a corner of the mansion housing the Order of the Silver Phoenix—specifically, the hallway leading to Eleonora’s room.

“Think, think... Ernie would cheer up if we just threw him into a workshop for a while. Addy’s happy as long as Ernie is around... Agh, shoot! They’re no help at all!”

Kid had been muttering as he walked this entire time, sounding exhausted. He knew that he had been given a terribly important mission, and he was desperately racking his brains to think of a solution. As far as Isadora was concerned, though, this behavior was nothing but worrying. Still, Kid was the one who'd gotten the job, and he'd been one of the people who'd saved them from Raspede Castle, so the girl felt she had to let him try. Before long, they reached the room.

"We're here. Are you ready?" Isadora asked.

After a pause, Kid spoke up. "Everyone in the order is way too positive. I don't remember ever actually saying anything to encourage someone or cheer them up... Huh? Ah, right, yes. I shall do my best!"

His answer was in no way reassuring, but Isadora decided to ignore that as she knocked on the door. Once she'd stated their business, the maid waiting inside responded with practiced movements.

The room the princess lived in was actually two rooms joined together. The first was a waiting room for her guards and maids, while the princess was actually in the room farther in.

While the pair waited for the princess to get ready to receive visitors, the curious gazes of the maids stabbed into the boy Isadora brought with her. It was rare for a regular commoner boy to come to this place. From the look of his face, he seemed to be about the same age as the princess. But he was tall and had a lean, balanced body clad in light leather armor—the typical dress for a knight runner. For some mysterious and bizarre reason, he was giving off a feeling like he was backed into a corner.

"Welcome, Isadora. Today... Huh? Oh, um...Sir...Archid?" Eventually, Princess Eleonora made her appearance, and her shock was apparent as soon as she saw Isadora's companion.

She'd still been refusing to leave her room, so the only events to shake up her daily life were regular visits from Isadora. She came every day to talk, and since they were girls of the same age, Isadora was the person Eleonora could most open up her heart to.

But recently, Isadora had spent a lot of time trying to convince Eleonora to

become the queen at her mother's behest. Thanks to that, even the conversations Eleonora used to enjoy stopped serving as a time of peace where her heart could feel at ease. Even so, there was no reason for her not to welcome Isadora's visits.

In the face of the princess and her obvious shock at this unexpected encounter, Kid reacted with an awkward bow. This was the first time they'd seen each other since the group had reached Micilie. When they had first met each other, it was under the dim lamplight in Raspede Castle, but now they were seeing each other under the bright light of the sun. When Kid looked up, he wore an unreadable expression as his gaze swam around through the air, not settling on any single thing. Eleonora had previously been known throughout the kingdom for her beauty, likened to a flower in bloom—and now that she had started to recuperate from her imprisonment, that beauty was returning. Regardless of the brightness of the room, her looks were a bit too radiant for the boy to take.

Completely ignorant of his state of mind, Eleonora shot a bewildered look at Isadora, silently asking her to explain this situation.

The girl shrugged, showing no feelings of guilt. "You can't afford to stay cooped up in this room. You're the daughter of His Majesty King Augusti, and you have a duty to know the current affairs of this kingdom. So I brought someone you'll probably listen to."

Isadora then took a seat and motioned with her eyes for Kid to do the same. He resolved himself and also sat down, moving awkwardly like a damaged silhouette knight. When she recognized an unusual firmness to her friend's attitude, Eleonora's expression clouded. "Why, Isadora? We've talked about this so many times. I'm not fit to serve as a ruler..."

"That's not true," Isadora countered. "The nobles are about to strike back at Jaloudek. All because you—and your royal blood—came back to them. It's the job of royalty to lead them."

Isadora's words brought a memory to the forefront of Eleonora's brain: an arrogant man's face, a man who told her she'd be used for the Kuscheperkan royal blood flowing through her veins. His words weren't for another human,

but for a useless tool. He was proclaiming her death.

The sudden flashback sent shivers down her spine, and Eleonora slowly reached up to hold herself.

“We’re...going to fight again? Can we really win?” she asked.

Isadora took that as a display of Eleonora’s lack of confidence, and so she strengthened her choice of words. “It’ll be fine, Eleonora. We aren’t the same as before. We’ve gained a new power, and we even have a victory under our belts. So please...”

Anything more was Kid’s job. But when Isadora looked back at him, she saw that he had remained silent, with a serious air about him.

“There were so many knights in the capital when it happened. And yet they still died! All of them, even father! Even if we have a chance— No, it doesn’t matter! More war will only lead to more blood and more death! And that might include Aunt Martina, or Ris, or even you, Isadora!” As she talked, Eleonora’s expression showed clear and present fear. When she trailed off, she hung her head and refused to speak any further.

Not sure what to do, Isadora reached out to her friend, but...

“Your Highness Princess Eleonora...” Before that, the quiet voice of Eleonora’s knight called out to her.

Eleonora looked up to him as if she were clinging to a lifeline by doing so.

“I wholeheartedly agree with you that it would be best if we didn’t have to sacrifice anyone. But some problems *do* need violent solutions—and people to resist the cause. That’s the kinda time us knights take up our swords.” Kid spoke in a clear voice as he looked straight at Eleonora. His normal style of speaking leaked out a bit and made his words clearly too rough for talking to royalty, but no one pointed that out, as swallowed up by the moment as they were. “If they’re going to come at us with blades, we need to return the favor. We need to resist with a firm will in our hearts. Results will come after that.”

“Are you telling me to...prepare myself for those sacrifices? For the sake of the result?” In all her life, Eleonora had never experienced such a direct clash of opinions. Her emotions overflowed, and tears welled up in her eyes. “And what

if you fight...and become one of those sacrifices? What do I do then? That was how my father...! The one who always told me not to worry, and that he would protect me! That was how he—!!!”

What followed after that couldn't be classified as speech. She covered her face in her hands while Isadora quietly watched over her.

Meanwhile, Kid scratched his head, at a loss. He wasn't exceptional for this—all the knights of Fremmevilla Kingdom would never hesitate to fight. They prized quick and clear decision-making. This was something that came from the environment they were raised in, and the reason their kingdom's people were known to be of frank and simple temperament. It was a far cry from the thought processes of a sheltered princess from a foreign nation.

But it seemed that was a lucky break. Exactly because their thoughts were so foreign to each other, he was able to bring out the deepest worries in her heart.

Once she'd calmed down, Kid slowly searched for his next words. “So, basically, it's *that* sort of thing. You know, like you only think that way because you don't actually *know*.”

The result of all his thought was a suggestion that paid no attention to the depressing atmosphere clouding the room. With plain words and decisive intent, Kid said, “Let's go outside, Lady Eleonora!”

The words seemed to have no logical connection with anything that had been said previously, and even Isadora was taken aback. Both girls looked up at him in confusion.

“You'll never see what's happening to this country, or whether we can really win, if you stay in this room, right? It's fine if you don't want to fight. But you should make that decision after learning all the facts. So for right now... Let's go take a look at how this kingdom is doing!” Kid exclaimed.

To him, it was a very natural, reasonable conclusion. Since an answer wasn't needed right this moment, she should start by gathering information. That was just basic tactics. The method also came from the fact that in the end, he was the type to act before thinking. He extended his hand toward Eleonora.

The princess just stared absentmindedly at the proffered hand. This was the

second time he'd offered it to her. The first time, she'd been freed from a stone prison. And now, she was being freed from the jail of her own heart.

She didn't take long to make a decision. Once again, she decided to trust in her knight—the boy who moved only to save her, unlike the plans of everyone around her.

Having accepted the escort of her knight, the princess took her first step toward the outside world. This momentum, which even Kid himself didn't quite understand, continued until they'd left the room.

Kid almost collapsed to the ground, but he resisted the urge with sheer guts. Everything he'd said before had basically come out of him in the heat of the moment. Thinking back on it, he couldn't believe how he'd spoken to royalty. He nearly couldn't help the urge to clutch at his head. But now, he had a bigger problem.

"Sir Archid? Is something the matter?" Eleonora asked.

It was an ongoing issue: her hand was still in his. Bringing her outside was all well and good, but why did they have to stay holding hands? *Man, it's scary how strong the flow of events is*, he thought.

"Ah, uh, no. I'm fine. I'll make sure to give you a proper tour. First..." Kid then turned around and immediately saw his little sister and childhood friend eavesdropping with their ears pressed against the wall.



It took a long while for Kid to process what he was seeing. “Wha—?!”

Once their eyes met, Kid was clearly flabbergasted, while the pair froze with incredible grins on their faces. They were looking straight between Kid and Eleonora, at their interconnected hands.

“Whattheheckareyoutwodoin’?!”

“Whoa, Kid, I’ve never heard you talk like that before!” Addy shouted. “Come on, just calm down. So, it’s like that, huh? I get it, Kid. The princess is cute—of course you’d want to help her! Ah, that’s so nice. I know it’s every man’s dream to be a knight escorting a princess!”

“Eurgh, the way you talk pisses me off, Addy!” Kid shot back. “It’s not even like that! I mean, I hate that you’re making it seem like I have the same tastes as you! Agh, wait, no, that’s not it. Uh... Gah! Damn it!!!”

Addy ignored Kid, who was trying to rapid-fire excuses so fast his brain couldn’t keep up, reaching some kind of understanding entirely on her own. Meanwhile, Ernie was watching the two with a full-faced smile.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you! I’ll gather everyone from the order and show the princess how cool we can be!” Addy giggled. “Yeah, I’m getting pumped up!”

“Uuugh... I definitely appreciate the help, but why did it have to be you of all people? Damn it all...”

Now that she’d decided on a plan of action, Addy was even more fired up than Kid about the whole situation. Her twin gave up on trying to control her and shot a pleading look up to the sky.

That was when he heard a quiet giggle from beside him. Surprised, Kid turned to see Eleonora laughing. It was hard to believe that just a little while ago she was despondent to the point of tears. Though some signs of emaciation remained on her face, they were covered up by the light of exuberance that now shone in her expression.

“You were right, Sir Archid. I won’t be able to see anything while shut inside my room. Look, it’s so lively out here.”

Kid may have laughed in response himself if it weren’t for all the noise Addy

was making. Right now, the best he could manage was a stiff smile.

“Come now, Kid. This isn’t the time to be spacing out like that. If you’re a knight, make sure to escort her properly,” said Ernie. “I’ll go get the others.”

“Right, let’s hurry!” Addy agreed. “Ah, but seeing the princess and Ernie side by side, it’s pretty... No, amazingly cute!”

“It’s always that with you, Addy,” Kid muttered.

The group proceeded to escort Eleonora, making lots of noise along the way. There was a lot for them to talk about, from details of the Order of the Silver Phoenix to stuff about the new silhouette knight. So, their first stop was the workshop. As an aside, Kid held her hand the entire way there.



“Good. It looks like Helena’s feeling better!” Emris exclaimed happily.

After the princess had left, Isadora had followed suit, only to stumble upon the Fremmevillan prince standing imposingly outside.

“You too, Ris? I can’t say I approve of eavesdropping,” she said.

“Hm? I wasn’t doing anything sneaky like that! I was simply listening in, no shadiness about it. I was just making sure I wouldn’t be in the way by staying in the next room!”

“You’re the only person people would buy that excuse for, Ris...” Isadora shook her head, too exasperated for words. But she quickly gathered herself and joined Emris in following the princess.

Chapter 35: Plot against the Princess

Dervankhul, the city that was once the capital of Kuscheperka, was now the center of Jaloudek's hold over the ruined country and renamed the Central Protectorate Government. The royal castle had been repurposed as a living space for Jaloudek's own royalty, two of whom were currently making use of it.

One was the second prince, Cristobal, who was the supreme commander of the invasion forces. The other was the first princess, Catarina, who was in charge of political affairs.

Catarina was currently in the castle, elegantly enjoying the scent of some black tea. She was totally alone; there wasn't even anyone waiting on her. This time was only for her and so it couldn't even be called a tea party. She spent some time appreciating the atmosphere before asking a question to the air.

"Would you like to join me? I brought this tea from home. The local teas aren't bad, but this familiar scent calms me down."

"Oh, no. Please don't mind little old me."

Out of nowhere, a single woman appeared across the table. It was Kerhilt Hietakannes—the captain of the Copper Fang Knights. She'd refused the invitation, but she still took a seat without waiting for permission. Catarina didn't seem to mind, though, and she magnanimously continued enjoying her tea in silence.

Eventually, Catarina put her tea set down with a soft clatter and began to speak in a light tone, as though she were simply making small talk. "You know a lot about Kuscheperka's—well, *former* Kuscheperka's eastern region, don't you?"

"Why, yes, I know bits and pieces. After all, it's our job to know things." That one sentence was probably enough for Kerhilt to see where this conversation was going. In fact, she might have known the moment she was called here.

"The Kuscheperkan remnants have suddenly fielded a new model of

silhouette knight,” Catarina started. “And now our forces pursuing the royals have been stalled. I certainly don’t like that already, but what’s more, we’re no longer receiving information from the east. That is a bigger problem. There were dissidents moving in the region even before this latest string of incidents. I’m sure we’ve taken quite a lot of damage.”

Kerhilt played the part of the listener well, as she sat there silently without a change in her expression like a statue.

This caused a smile to come to Catarina’s face. “I hear they call themselves the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company.”

“I am aware,” came the reply.

“Is that so? Good. They may claim to be a merchant company, but I’m not sure they are. In short, I’m saying that they seem to be the dissidents who supplied the Kuscheperkans with those new silhouette knights.”

The nobles’ revolt had thrown the Jaloudekian forces in the eastern region into confusion. It was hard to get information out, but Catarina had pieced together bits and pieces that she’d gathered and actually grasped the situation rather well.

“Of course, we can’t afford to leave this be, but I hear the new enemy model is proving to be a lot of trouble. If we’re too slow, Cris will run out of patience. I know that boy, and he might just take a squad and go out to try and solve this himself,” Catarina said, letting out a rather deliberate-sounding sigh.

Kerhilt responded with an offhand bit of sympathy. “Right... That must be hard on you. My condolences.”

“So I’d like to entrust a job to you and your Copper Fang Knights. Find the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s base and bring it down. I believe this type of work is perfect for your order’s abilities.”

Kerhilt weighed the supposed danger of this mission with the amount of strength her order had in her mind. The result told her that this job was extremely dangerous.

Now then, she thought, that was a rather soft order, but it still came directly from royalty. How do I dodge this bit of trouble...?

Kerhilt couldn't stay silent while she pondered this, so she opened her mouth to say something—but Catarina cut her off. "If you're able to fulfill this mission," she murmured, "I will grant you a piece of Kuscheperkan land as a reward. It would be your very own territory, and of course, you would be given the appropriate peerage for such a holding."

Kerhilt ground her teeth audibly at that. Her entire body stiffened up, and her expression warped. She hit Catarina with a dark look that would normally never be pointed at royalty. "Is that... Can you really promise that?"

"Hee hee, do you doubt my words? Well, I can certainly understand that, but I do not hesitate to reward those that meet my expectations. And weren't you so gung ho about gaining achievements during the invasion so you could use them to claim a piece of land...and revive the fallen Hietakannes family?"

Kerhilt didn't reply directly, but she straightened herself up into a more formal posture. "Please, leave this to me, Your Highness Princess Catarina. We, the Copper Fang Knights, will bring all our might to bear to make this mission succeed."

"Well that's reassuring. I expect—" Catarina never finished her satisfied reply. She had taken her gaze off of Kerhilt for only a moment, but in that time the woman disappeared.

"Ah, of course. Those skills may actually allow the copper snakes' fangs to reach their prey. Fighting head-on isn't the only way to make war; I hope Cris will learn some tricks of his own soon."

Catarina called on someone to clean up her now-cold tea. She still had a lot of work to do, since the chaos in the east was having an effect on their control of the rest of Kuscheperka as well. She would need to quell the unrest across the territory. Catarina couldn't help but lament, *If only my little brother would show some more interest in governance.*



The town of Micilie was dotted with workshops. The Lesvant was the official Kuscheperkan silhouette knight, and the one all of its citizens would think of first when asked to picture one. Yet the workshops were currently abuzz with construction of an entirely different model.

On a maintenance table lay a gigantic frame—and inner skeleton. The rib cage, in human terms, was stretched open wide to allow the cockpit to fit inside, while the abdomen housed the unit's heart and brain: the ether reactor and magius engine. This was all currently exposed, and countless silvery metal wires—silver nerves—stretched from them, connecting to grayish-white fibers that had been placed all over the body—crystal tissue.

Some of the mid-assembly machines were nearing completion. While they still resembled Lesvants, they now looked notably stronger and more sturdy, with stockier, more solid builds. The design clearly prioritized close combat, and it was clear what was expected from this machine, given that they were made to fight the heavily armed and armored Tyrantor.

Knightsmiths in silhouette gears ran busily around the mid-assembly giants. By using silhouette gears, which were more powerful than any single human, they could easily put together heavy parts with incredible speed. With the support of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company, the mass-produced unit of old Kuscheperka was made anew. Though this upgrade plan was somewhat rushed, the designs themselves had been completed extremely quickly because the Kardetolle could be used as an example. Part of it was also because Ernie was so enthusiastic about it, though.

If anything, the biggest obstacle to this work lay with the Kuscheperkan knightsmiths—specifically, how unfamiliar they were with all this. They needed time to get used to the silhouette gear, which was a completely new tool to them, as well as the design of the new model, which was based off of a completely different machine of foreign origin. That being said, once they had gotten used to it, work proceeded without any further problems. The knightsmiths came together as one to prepare for the counteroffensive that was to come.

In the deepest parts of the section manufacturing the new model, there was a group taking on a completely different job: Ernie, Batson, and the boss, David. The boss used his four-armed silhouette gear, the Dwarf's Fist, to deftly lift up a large part and work on it. Batson was assisting from beside him, moving around and fiddling with all sorts of parts.

"Hrrrm... This isn't too hard to put together—it's just a bit big," the boss said.

“It won’t take much effort to make, but *using* it might be a problem. This’ll be more troublesome to adjust than the back weapon.”

“Agreed. And there’s no way the knight runners will be used to wielding this,” Batson said with a nod.

The dwarves were putting together a weird piece of equipment that looked like multiple rails lined up and attached to each other. The whole thing was quite large, even for a silhouette knight, and would be hard for them to hold.

“Hmmm...as expected, that *is* the problem. As for what we can do about it... We can only add extra support from the magius engine. Okay, I understand. I’ll fix this,” Ernie said as he looked at the piece of equipment.

The actual structure was basically an extension of existing technologies, but the speed at which it had been finished spoke volumes about how skilled the boss had become. He was truly a first-rate knightsmith. Meanwhile, Ernie was overwhelmingly skilled at manipulating the magius engine—and the script inside. The Order of the Silver Phoenix had created a wide variety of specialized equipment, all thanks to this pair.

“Once we get this done to a pretty good standard, I’ll put it through its paces,” Ernie told the boss. “But this is an antiair weapon, so I’d really like to test it against a levitating ship. I wonder if there’ll just happen to be one flying around somewhere?”

“You know, saying stuff like that here is fine, since there’s only people from the Order of the Silver Phoenix around. But if any of the locals heard you, their eyes would pop outta their heads,” the boss replied. Even in his silhouette gear, he was able to physically express his exasperation.

Considering how much damage the levitating ships had caused this country, any jokes about them wouldn’t be very funny. Ernie put a finger up to his lips, implying that it was a secret, with an impish smile.

They continued their work, and eventually a visitor arrived. It was Addy, a basket containing a light snack in hand.

“Good work, everyone!” she said. “Are you hungry? I brought snacks!”

“Ooh, I’ll have some!” said Batson.

“Thanks, I was just getting hungry.” The boss got out of the Dwarf’s Fist and rotated his shoulders with a crack.

As for Ernie, he had been grumbling while staring at a blueprint, but now he put his pen down. Batson swooped in, deftly cleaning up the desk as Addy put the basket down and laid out the food.

It had been divided into small portions to make it easier to eat, and the boss was the first to bite into a piece. “Huh. This is actually pretty good.”

“Boooss?” Addy questioned testily. “What do you mean, ‘actually’?! Mrs. Tina and my mom taught me all they knew about cooking, you know! I wouldn’t make anything weird!”

Addy sat down next to Ernie, pouting, and the boss raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, sure, got it. My bad. So? Who’s this Mrs. Tina?”

“She’s my mom,” Ernie replied. “Mmm, Addy’s cooking skills are steadily growing, I see. This is good.”

Ernie’s compliment managed to smooth things over, and Addy’s face shone as she glomped onto him. Ernie continued eating, seemingly used to this.

The boss looked back and forth between the two, letting out a confused groan. “The kid’s mom, huh? Well, if you’re fine with that, I won’t say anything about it.”

“I mean, nothing wrong with a little teaching. It’s not like his mom is gonna lose out on anything from it. It’s fine, right?” Batson asked as he gobbled down his food, sounding as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

In response, the boss shrugged and returned to his meal.



Micilie’s workshop district continued its activity into the night. Ernie and his small team likewise continued working, though it was unclear whether they were affected by the continued activity around them or were always like this. Time passed, and it was deep into the night when Ernie suddenly raised his hands and cheered.

“Good, that’s basically it for the script! Now I just have to mesh it with the

actual thing's movements and adjust it in operation!"

A pair of arms extended from behind him and caught him while his arms were up. The owner of these arms was obvious: it was Addy, who was helping Ernie as his assistant.

"Okay, Ernie, let's stop here for today. I know you're working hard, but pushing yourself like this isn't healthy. This is a good place to pause, right?"

"Hmmm... You're right. I'll call things here for today and pick this up tomorrow morning," Ernie said, scritchng at his cheek.

In both battle and manufacturing, if Ernie was left to his devices, his enthusiasm would keep him going forever. It was fast becoming Addy's job as the captain's aide to stop her superior's rampages at the appropriate times. It seemed Ernie was at least self-aware of this tendency, as he obeyed his childhood friend without fuss.

Their exchange was also the signal for the boss to stop. "Oh, so it's that time already, huh? Then I guess we'll finish things off for today too."

"Okay, boss. Good work today!" Batson responded.

This chain of events was a regular thing these days. After a cursory bit of cleanup, the group left the workshop for the mansion they were billeted in. The people of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company, who served as both the resistance's strongest force and weapons developers, were given appropriately lavish facilities. This was especially true for the captain, Ernie. He had his own room.

Addy followed Ernie to his room like it was natural. She went as far as to get into his bed. All this finally got Ernie to put his hand to his head. "Addy... I feel like I've said this to you every day, but you have your own room. Go back and sleep there."

"I might, sure! But listen to me, Ernie... I know we're in a friendly nation, but you're still a key figure to our country. I can't leave you alone! I'm here to serve as a bodyguard, as a member of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, and as your aide! So come on, let's sleep together."

"I'm not sure how all of that led you to that conclusion..."

Though he was pretty fed up, Ernie didn't pursue the matter any further. This happened way too often, so he knew that warning her was, for the most part, useless. As Ernie lay down in bed, Addy didn't just nestle close to him—she latched on.

“Mweh heh heh heh! It feels so nice to hug you, Ernie. I'm being healed... I feel so calm. I know I can sleep well like this.” Addy's hold on Ernie was solid as she stroked his hair.

Ernie sighed. “Jeez, seriously... Don't you think you're too spoiled? At this rate, you'll never get rid of this habit. I'll warn you now, don't think I'll stay the perfect hugging pillow forever. I might hit a huge growth spurt.”

“Hmmm? Well, I might reconsider if you actually do get bigger than me, Ernie.”

There was a long pause before Ernie said, “That was mean.”

Ernie turned his back to Addy and sulked. Addy didn't seem to mind; she never stopped stroking his hair as she whispered a good-night into his ear and closed her eyes. Soon enough, the two of them were asleep.



The night deepened. Floating clouds prevented any moonlight from reaching the ground, making the night darker than usual. A large shadow flitted through the forest, where even the plant life seemed to be asleep. It was humanoid and painted black as night, so it blended in. Though it was large enough for its head to peek out over the trees, it moved like the wind, only almost silent. Soon enough, the giant shadow left the forest and saw the light of a town ahead of it. The town was still lively, a far cry from a sleepy hamlet despite the late hour. The giant receded back into the forest, hiding, before moving slightly to point toward the town.

Several human figures appeared as if being guided by the giant, seeming to seep out of the forest. They were dressed to blend into the night as well and moved without making a sound. Just like the giant, they blurred into the night as they quietly left the forest.

Once late night rolled around, even the town of Micilie went to sleep. Yet a

part was still awake and moving, which betrayed the depths of their fervor. The figures avoided that well-lit area, choosing instead to flit from shadow to shadow. They traveled across rooftops and down unpopulated alleyways, going through all the darkness available to them. Their goal was the center of town—and the mansion where the Kuscheperkan royals were staying, as well as the base of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Even later, when almost everyone was asleep, intruders entered the building along with a gust of cool night air. Guards were placed around the area, but that meant nothing to the shadows with their skills at covert action. The mansion had never been designed to be defensible. The shadows landed silently on the floor of a hallway and exchanged hand gestures before spreading throughout the building.

One of the intruders, dressed in black clothes that made him look like the darkness itself was moving, ran silently through the mansion. Before long, he reached a certain room. After opening the door, the shadow looked around and found the room was split into two. The front section was well-lit and occupied by several maids in waiting, which meant the person inside was probably of decent standing. The shadow smiled underneath his dark hood.

He drew a dagger from its sheath. The black-painted blade was slathered in a powerful poison, and just a scratch would mean death. He entered the room through the small gap he'd made in the door. His entrance was silent, but the slight shifting of the air alerted the maids to the presence of an intruder. He threw the knife at one of them as she tried to stand up and raise her voice in warning. He actually threw several at once, and they all flew accurately, striking the maids in their throats.

The poison on the blades did quick work, reaping the lives of the maids. The intruder was nervous, wondering whether the sound of the maids falling to the floor would alert the owner of this room, but those worries proved to be unnecessary.

He picked up a light from the wall and went into the other half of the room, confirming the identity of the person sleeping within. There was no doubt—it was Eleonora, the princess of the former Kingdom of Kuscheperka.

Having confirmed that, the intruder took out a cloth and a small bottle. He soaked the cloth with the liquid in the bottle and held it up against her nose and mouth. She struggled a little, but that quickly stopped. The bottle had been filled with a powerful anesthetic. This would keep the princess asleep even if he had to carry her rather roughly.

The shadows who'd infiltrated the mansion had been ordered to try their best to capture the princess alive should they find her. They *would* kill her if capture proved impossible, though. Once the shadow took her back, his mission would be a complete success. The smile under the hood widened, and he made to withdraw from the room—but he was interrupted by an unforeseen event.

Suddenly, an intense peal of thunder rocked every corner of the mansion. It was quite truly a bolt from the blue. Wary, the shadow froze and listened carefully, trying to get a read on the situation. The weather today called for light cloud cover, but nothing notable outside of that. It wasn't the kind of weather where lightning could strike all of a sudden. The only thing that could make something this strange happen was magic. Realizing what that implied, the intruder immediately jumped, trying to get away, but—

Someone kicked open the door and leaped inside with the force of a gale, blocking the intruder's way. It was Kid, and once he saw the shadow's "luggage," he growled like a beast.

"Hey, you. What do you think you're trying to steal? Huh?"

In lieu of a response, the shadow threw a dagger stealthily. Kid calmly swung his gunstaff at the immediate ambush. He had already compiled a script on it, Spark Dart, and many low-power flashes of lightning sprang from the tip. The spell struck the dagger down and continued on toward the shadow faster than he could move, hitting him dead-on. It was an absolutely precise strike that completely avoided the captive princess.

The shadow had received a good amount of training and was very skilled, but he still didn't stand a chance against the electricity coursing through his body. His body convulsed, and he was forced to dance a strange step before dropping the princess. The moment he confirmed the effects of his spell, Kid moved with all haste. He activated Physical Boost at full strength, using the power

overflowing from his body to slam a fierce kick into the shadow. The intruder bent like the point of a triangle before flying off like he'd been struck by a mad charging bull, crashing into the wall behind him and ceasing to move.

The princess still did not wake even after being dropped unceremoniously to the ground. Kid paled as he rushed to pick her up and put his hand to her mouth to feel for breath.

“Thank goodness, she’s okay.”

Kid felt a gentle breath coming out of her, and he himself breathed a sigh of relief. Her life wasn’t in danger—she was just sleeping. He guessed that she’d been drugged into a deep slumber.

“Who the heck is attacking us? Anyway, staying here seems like a bad idea.”

He didn’t feel confident he’d be able to protect an unconscious princess alone. Kid gently picked her up and set off to regroup with the rest of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.



A little while ago, another one of the black-clad shadows infiltrated a different room. He focused his sight and checked its layout. The room was a cluttered mess, but there was a bed in the back. When he approached the bed, he noticed that the sheets betrayed the presence of two people. Their breathing was quiet and calm, indicating they were in a deep sleep. He drew a dagger. When he struck with this weapon, coated in a powerful poison, these two dreamers would fall into an eternal rest without ever knowing what had happened to them. He carefully snuck up beside the bed and swung the lethal weapon down.

Instantly, the sheets flipped over with an audible noise. Not minding that his line of sight had been blocked, the shadow calmly continued with his stab. When his weapon reached its mark, all he felt was it ripping through cloth, not flesh. The shadow immediately jumped back as the sheets fluttered to the ground. Behind it stood one of the people who should have been asleep in the bed—Addy.

She looked terribly upset and made no attempt to hide it. “Hey, who’re you?

It doesn't seem like you came to wake us up. I finally managed to cuddle Ernie to sleep, but you had to go and interrupt us!"

The intruder didn't reply, preferring instead to silently throw his dagger. Victory would be his if the blade nicked her in even the slightest way. However, before it reached its target, Addy swung the gunstaff in her hand. As was her habit, she had left the weapon right by the bed.

Her powerful processing ability didn't take long at all to compile a script. Out of seemingly nowhere, a bright light flashed along with a peal of thunder that shook the building. Addy hadn't hesitated to let loose with the intermediate spell Riot Sparrow. The resulting fierce lightning strike, strong enough to take down an intermediate-class monster, caught the dagger and went on to directly strike the intruder as well, sending him flying.

"Anybody who'd interrupt somebody else's cuddle time gets the lightning! Punishment from above!"

Because any Fremmevillan knight, not just those in the Order of the Silver Phoenix, would have to deal with nocturnal monsters, they were trained to be wary of their surroundings even while asleep. The intruder had been skilled for a human, but his stealth hardly compared to a monster's.

"We needed him for information, Addy. You shouldn't have killed him immediately." Ernie, who had gotten out of bed from the other side, gave her a perfunctory scolding.

Addy pouted, but she still went on to check on the intruder. He was burnt to a crisp and convulsing, but he was still alive.

"It's okay—looks like this guy's lucky. He's still alive, though he's not conscious."

She must have been quite angry, as Addy still kicked the near-dead intruder to roughly shove him away.

"Is that so?" Ernie said. "Then we can leave the rest to a specialist. That lightning should have woken everyone up. Let's go around and check to see if we've suffered any casualties—and if the intruders are still around."

"Mmrrrghh! And just when I finally got to sleep beside Ernie... Okay, fine! I'll

never forget this!” she shouted to no one in particular.

Addy howled her frustrations into the night air while Ernie dragged her along, having already changed clothes and prepared himself.

The crack of lightning had rumbled through the night and was more than enough to wake everyone else up. The response from the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s knights was especially quick, as they immediately picked up their swords and jumped out of bed. Their ability to quickly be alert from a dead sleep and their speed at understanding the situation could all be attributed to their birthplace of Fremmevilla. Before long, they were ready for combat.

As expected, the intruders stayed away from the large rooms where the knight order members were staying. Instead, they had prioritized the private rooms that were more lightly guarded. The biggest stroke of misfortune for these intruders was that, along with being the place where the Kuscheperkan royals were staying, it was also home to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. The knights who had woken up regardless of the time of night moved mercilessly and with incredible speed. The shadows were lit up by spellfire as they were one-sidedly taken down in one hit each.

The order members who left their rooms gathered together, naturally forming ranks.

“Edgar! We’re okay over here. Were there any casualties among the first company?!” Dietrich asked.

“Luckily, no,” Edgar answered. “Was the initial thunderclap from Ernesti?”

“Most likely...” Helvi said. Then, she gasped, “That’s right! What about the princess?!”

“Hmph! Of course she’s okay!”

The group turned around, surprised by the sudden voice, and they found Martina and Isadora, accompanied by Emris. He had been the one that shouted. Then, they noticed that Kid was also with them, and he was gingerly carrying Eleonora.

“It looks like everyone is safe. Now all that’s left is to see if the nonhumans are too.” Lastly, Ernie joined the group with Addy in tow, and he looked around,

confirming how everyone was doing.

Every member of the order knew what he was talking about. Right away, Edgar led his first company to march resolutely toward the workshop.

“My word, they’re really concerned. Now then, it’s the job of second company to protect the royals... Wait, aren’t the roles reversed here? Well, do your best regardless.” Dietrich shrugged before turning around to give orders to the knights in his company.



The shadows hadn’t only infiltrated the mansion. As the order expected, they had also visited Micilie’s array of workshops.

Cool air lingered inside one of these workshops. The intruders grinned when they saw the neat lines of silhouette knights on their maintenance tables. They split up and quickly got into the silhouette knights’ cockpits. Silhouette knight cockpits never differed much, even between different countries. The same went for their control schemes. That was why the shadows had no need to figure things out; they just manipulated the ether reactor output levers to start the machines up.

However, nothing happened. If the ether reactor’s output didn’t rise, the silhouette knight would quickly run out of mana. The invaders panicked, repeatedly shifting the levers back and forth, but the ether reactors remained dormant. It wasn’t just the reactors—the magius engines also weren’t responding, so the machines were silent. Each intruder wondered whether their machines were broken, but quickly noticed that their neighbors weren’t moving either. Not a single shadow had succeeded in activating their silhouette knight. It was a bizarre situation.

Because stealth was the most critical factor in this operation, they had infiltrated the town without the use of their own silhouette knights. That was why they needed to steal these ones; otherwise, they would be lacking in combat strength. So they’d allotted the appropriate amount of manpower to activate the machines, all without knowing that would become the fatal flaw in their plan.

A heavy clanking came from the open torso armor of one of the silhouette

knights. The intruder inside looked up in a panic and saw the large frame of a work-use silhouette gear, a Motolift, blocking his view. Edgar was inside and glaring at the intruder.

“So Ernesti’s fear was on the mark. You’re all fools. Did you really think we’d fall for the same trick twice?”

The intruder immediately drew a sword and tried to resist, but a steel fist slammed into his face and stopped him cold. With a silhouette gear’s power, outfitted with crystal tissue as it was, killing a human would be easy, but Edgar didn’t seem to care. His memories of their stolen silhouette knight had overlapped onto this situation and put him in terribly ill humor.

The same thing was happening to the other silhouette knights as well. The first company had made sure to equip silhouette gears before charging into the workshop, so they were able to easily get rid of the intruders one after another. Before long, they had finished their “cleaning” and Edgar shouted an order to the rest of the company.

“Get into your units, first company! These intruders may have brought silhouette knights with them. We need to attend to the security of the town and its surroundings! This will be a long night. On our honor as the Order of the Silver Phoenix—no, first company—we will not be stolen from again!”

Their wills united, the first company responded, their shouts reassuring Edgar. Once they entered their personal units, the knight runners took their silver short swords and stabbed them into the Pattern Identifiers. The silhouette knights’ channels opened, and the magius engines responded to them. The ether reactors likewise roared, supplying the mana that would nourish the giants. One by one, the steel machines awoke, breathing sharply. The knight runners’ commands were relayed through, and the silhouette knights shuddered as they rose, crystalline muscles grating.

The machine of the first company commander, the pure white Aldiradcumber, stepped forward firmly onto the floor of the workshop. The rest of the company followed in their Kardetolles. The first company left the workshop, proceeding into town to protect it.



“No way... Every single one of them failed?!” Kerhilt groaned as she watched through a telescope from her position in the forest on Micilie’s outskirts.

The black-clothed group that had infiltrated Micilie were actually members of her Copper Fang Knights. They were essentially spies attached to the Jaloudek army, and they had come to this town to sabotage the Kuscheperkan remnants’ base under the orders of First Princess Catarina.

Though they were labeled a knight order, they were actually spies given specialized training. They had high aptitude for long-term infiltration operations in small numbers, and sabotage missions like this should have been in their wheelhouse. However...

What Kerhilt could see from her telescope completely shattered her confidence. She spotted a pure white knight peeking out of the dimness of the night, standing with the town to its back. Silhouette knights that seemed like its subordinates lined up behind it, and she couldn’t see a single machine under her men’s control. Furthermore, none of her subordinates had come back to her.

Feelings of impatience made Kerhilt grip her telescope tight.

“I can’t afford to just go back and report that we failed. I finally managed to grasp this chance! The rest of you had better prepare yourselves. We’re fighting!”

Nervousness broke the quiet of night. Her men responded to her orders, and pitch-black giants stood up, revealing themselves from inside the forest. Their armor was painted black, and they had thin frames to go with weirdly long arms which ended in fingers tipped in sharp blades. These were the faceless ghosts that had been allotted to the Copper Fang Knights, the Vittendohlas. A few years ago, they’d been left on the verge of destruction after their operation in Fremmevilla Kingdom. However, the “souvenir” they’d obtained thanks to that effort had been highly evaluated, and they’d been allowed to return home. What’s more, they’d even gotten reorganized and given a newly developed silhouette knight.

The murmurs produced by the writhing ghosts reached the members of the first company, who were guarding the town.

“I knew they were hiding,” Edgar muttered to himself. “Don’t let a single one into town!”

Aldiradcumber’s Flexible Coat flapped in the breeze as it pointed forward with its sword. A white cross emblem had been emblazoned on the units, and the Kardetolles braced their shields in unison and drew their swords, following after it.

The black shadows advanced, running from the forest. Edgar watched his enemy’s movements intently through his holomonitor. They had incredible mobility for silhouette knights. Though they weren’t as mobile as the Tzenndrimble, they were still awe-inspiringly fast. Given the Copper Fang Knights’ true calling, the Vittendohlas had been designed for a completely different purpose than normal silhouette knights. Their thin frames were packed with strand crystal tissue, making them both strong and overwhelmingly fast.

Once they reached the first company, the Vittendohlas used their speed and power to make a huge leap. They were like acrobats, and their movements were nothing like what one would expect from such heavy machines. While forcing down the shock that had pervaded their systems, the first company raised their shields, pointing them at the threat above their heads.

The enemy hissed from their megaphones. The Vittendohlas weren’t holding any weapons, for their hands themselves were tipped with sharp blades. The first company noticed that, and moved to intercept with their swords, which would give them the advantage in range. The moment they tried, though, the Vittendohlas activated special devices that had been embedded within their shoulders, and their arms shot forward, extending with great momentum. These hidden weapons were called shotclaws, and the enemy used it to attack the first company from a shocking distance.

The Fremmevillan knights were totally taken by surprise. In melee combat, mistaking your opponent’s effective range was a fatal mistake. Because they were unable to dodge or block in time, the weapons hit and bounced off the Kardetolles’ armor with a scream of metal and shower of sparks. While keeping the faltering forms of the Fremmevillan knights in the corners of their eyes, the Vittendohlas’ knight runners performed a flip before landing, using the

flexibility of their machines to escape the impact of their landings and making a follow-up attack as soon as they stood up.

“They’re pretty skilled at their acrobatics. But that’s all!” Edgar shouted.

The Vittendohla’s surprise weapon had also caught Edgar off guard. However, he had amazing reflexes, and was able to respond to the attack anyway. Aldiradcumber activated the Flexible Coat around its shoulders. It ate a lot of mana to reinforce itself as it managed to deflect the blow from the Vittendohla before him, a shower of sparks erupting from the surface of the armor. But the ghost’s attack wasn’t over. Obviously, it had two arms. The other one immediately launched forward.

The Flexible Coat had just blocked the other shotclaw, and they were so close together that the pure white knight couldn’t dodge in time. The Vittendohla’s knight runner was confident that this two-stage attack would kill. His silhouette knight was almost dainty in its build, but its arms carried a large amount of strand crystal tissue that allowed for this extending attack, which gave it enough power to pierce through a silhouette knight’s outer skin.

The situation pretty much spelled checkmate for the Vittendohla’s target. Any normal knight runner would have succumbed. But, once again, Edgar was anything but normal.

The moment he noticed the other arm moving, he immediately shifted his arm with the shield in that direction. Aldiradcumber’s shield was made smaller so as to not interfere with its Flexible Coat. The size, however, was an advantage in this situation. The shotclaw smashed into the shield, burrowing into it with a shriek of warping metal. With his expectation subverted, the Vittendohla’s knight runner was a little late to respond. Against a knight runner like Edgar, that was a fatal mistake. The Fremmevillan knight sent commands to his charge, and the Flexible Coat closed with the Vittendohla’s arm still buried in its shield.

“Taste Aldirad’s power!” Edgar roared, stomping on his machine’s stirrups.

Aldiradcumber, now a solid wall of metal, slammed into the Vittendohla. Since the Jaloudekian silhouette knight was so lightweight, its outer skin was thin and weak. It had no way to resist an opponent that so outclassed it in both

weight and muscle mass. The black-painted armor split and warped, and crushed crystal shards scattered throughout their surroundings.

Aldiradcumber continued, slamming its enemy into the ground, and the half-totaled Vittendohla stopped moving. Immediately, Edgar followed up on his advantage. Aldiradcumber stepped in and made a swipe with its sword, the single swipe slicing the thin silhouette knight in two.

Now that his enemy had been totally destroyed, Edgar surveyed the area to confirm the state of the battle. It looked like the first company was struggling. The opening surprise attack had been effective, and the ghosts were annoying to deal with—their black armor and quick movements made things difficult in the darkness of night.

“So first, we need some light,” Edgar muttered before shifting his machine’s Flexible Coat.

Aldiradcumber took hold of the silhouette arms placed on the underside of the coat, and a reticle appeared in the darkness of his holomonitor. Then, he aimed toward a ghost that was fighting a Kardetolle next to him and pulled the trigger. The projectile of fire found its mark, burying into the Vittendohla’s body before blooming into an explosion of fire. The destroyed ghost fell over on the spot, burning like a torch.

This flashy attack now served as a light source in the middle of the battlefield, throwing the shadowy ghosts into stark relief. With the cover of night peeled away, the first company could now properly see their faceless foes.

“The enemy is quick, but fragile. Don’t be fooled! Calm down and deal with them!” Edgar shouted.

Now that their enemies were much easier to see, the first company’s attacks gradually began to hit their marks. The Fremmevillans soon got into a groove, and it wasn’t long before the fragile ghosts were nothing more than rust on the first company’s blades.



Micilie’s night finally regained its peace with dawn just over the horizon. The carcasses of many wrecked ghosts littered the area around the town as the first

company continued to stand on watch.

Inside the mansion, the knights of the second company stood guard as well. Kuscheperka's royalty had been gathered in the center of the mansion, where Ernie, Kid, Addy, and Emris stood as an iron wall of defense.

"It seems like the battle is over. We may have gotten through this, but I can't believe they targeted Helena on top of attacking at night. I'm liking those dirty cowards less and less!" Emris declared.

"It's a war, after all, young master," said Ernie. "Assassinating the enemy's VIP will obviously make things much easier and prevent casualties. But, well, I do agree that it's a boring way to end things. They should focus more on fighting with silhouette knights."

"I have to wonder what's wrong with your head sometimes." Emris glared to his side at Ernie, exasperated.

Ernie averted his gaze and tried to change the subject. "Ahem! Anyway, up until now, Jaloudek Kingdom has only tried to use brute force to get its way. But this night attack marks the first time they've done something sneaky. They obviously thought that a surprise attack would work and gambled on its success. It seems they're starting to panic."

"Even though we haven't even recaptured the eastern region yet?" The group of royals showed expressions ranging from nervousness to exhaustion, but only Martina retained a firm exterior.

Ernie shook his head. "Now that we've introduced the tower-type Viede, they're unable to just push us over with brute force. I imagine they wanted to settle things before the situation got any more troublesome. After all, the more time passes, the more advantage we gain and the more they lose."

In truth, now that the Lesvant's next-generation model was being made, their forces were only growing stronger. They didn't know exactly how much Jaloudek had grasped of their situation, but the night's events had given them a good idea.

"Hm... Indeed. We already have enough strength to be a threat to them. As proof..." Martina muttered.

With that, the curtains fell on this night attack incident.

Dawn soon broke, and the Order of the Silver Phoenix did a sweep of their surroundings.

They recovered a number of wrecked Vittendohlas from the area surrounding the town. The spies that had attacked the mansion and workshops, meanwhile, had all been either killed or captured.

But in the midst of all that, Kerhilt Hietakannes, the captain of the Copper Fang Knights, was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 36: The Black Knights Make a Move

In the former royal castle, which towered at the center of the former capital of Dervankhul, a glass shattered with a clear ring reverberating throughout the room. Here, where the Central Protectorate Government was concentrated, the second prince Cristobal sat on the throne, glaring with bloodshot eyes at the report he'd just been delivered.

“How much trouble can one little princess and her band of rebels be?! And you call yourselves Jaloudek's elite?!”

Three months had already passed since he'd given the order for the Black Knights to pursue and attack Kuscheperka's royals and their rebel elements. All they had accomplished in this time was currently being crushed within his grip, easily contained within the now-crumpled report.

There were two main things of import inside.

The first concerned the current state of their forces in the eastern region. Thanks to the resistance forces throughout the entire region, their own forces had been divided and isolated. Furthermore, the surviving nobles of old Kuscheperka had begun raising the flag of rebellion one after the other, and because they started to field those new silhouette knights specialized for long-range combat, the Jaloudekian Tyrantors were having a tough time. The report used that as an excuse for why they had yet to suppress the uprising, among other things.

The second was about the Black Knights that had moved out from the northern and southern regions to reinforce the east. At first, their march had gone well, but after suffering numerous sabotages by small pseudo-silhouette knights, they had been forced to significantly slow their advance. Also, they were having trouble dealing with the fortified bases along their path that fielded the fearsome long-ranged silhouette knights, and so they were utterly stalled. The report actually went into more detail than necessary.

The report concluded by saying that it had become difficult to use the

difference in their silhouette knights' abilities to push forward like they had been doing since the beginning of the war, so attacking was not an easy prospect, and they would need more time to conquer the eastern region. That was why Cristobal was so furious. He had always lacked patience, and his current rage was so great he had thrown his cup and shattered it. Seeing his pages hurriedly clean up the broken shards out of the corner of his eye, Cristobal slowed his breathing and tried to calm down.

"They *do* say that a cornered rat will bite even a cat, but who knew they would be so stubborn?!"

He rested his elbow on the throne with an audible thud, and his glare focused on a singular point in the air at something invisible. He wasn't escaping from reality—he could clearly see the form of his enemy.

"The little princess isn't the one that irks me. It's the insurgents...no, those damn originals! We can't allow them any more time!"

The princess had escaped their clutches, and the remnants of old Kuscheperka had suddenly fielded new weapons. All of that was thanks to the monster guards of Fremmevilla, whose shadows lay hidden behind everything. Bitter emotions welled up in his heart. It was evident that the country whose technology Jaloudek's new silhouette knights originated from would be a serious threat. Still, who would even have imagined they would give Jaloudek such a hard time?

At the beginning of the war, Jaloudek's army had invaded with lightning speed. Their levitating ships enabled a new strategy, one where they attacked and destroyed the enemy's central base of power first. What's more, this was coupled with a new silhouette knight, making their invasion of Kuscheperka impossible to resist. This was proved by the fact that they were now on the eve of completely conquering all of the territory that was once the Kingdom of Kuscheperka. But now the country's royalty had been retaken, their soldiers were being pushed back, and Cristobal was on the verge of flipping over the board.

"We can't afford to sit around and take this slow... We need to resolve ourselves to commit to a dangerous gamble."

Taking all that into account, Cristobal eventually made a decision.

He was looking at a map of the territory of Kuscheperka that was spread out before him. There were many pieces representing Tyrantors placed along the borders between the northern and eastern regions, and the southern and eastern regions. There was a crown placed in the east—representing the Kuscheperkan royalty.

He picked up one of the pieces shaped like a boat that had been placed in various locations. Of course, the boat represented his trump card, the levitating ship. He then placed the piece back down on a certain spot on the map with a loud clack. Below the ship piece was the city where Jaloudek's Eastern Protectorate Government sat in power, Fontanie.

"It's time to make a comeback. Prepare a messenger! We're deploying the Central Protectorate Government's forces. Call the Steel Wing Knights back! We will pacify the east with everything we have left—prepare to sortie! I will lead the men personally!"

The people waiting beside Cristobal hurried to carry out his orders. He paid them no mind as he continued to glare at the map, letting his emotions twist his face. His chest was filled with anticipation of the fierce battle that awaited him in the east.

Right away, First Princess Catarina appeared, as if switching out for the soldiers. Unusually, anxiousness colored her attitude. "Cris! I heard that you plan to lead the men personally. You need to understand your position! You're the supreme commander! You mustn't be so rash! Such thoughtless actions will —"

But, also unusually, Cristobal cut his sister off. "It seems you were planning something with these pieces, weren't you, sister? I'm not going to complain about that, but I don't see that the situation has improved at all. You failed, didn't you?"

Catarina instantly gummed up. She had never expected Cristobal, as ignorant of artifice as he was, to have noticed that her ploy with the Copper Fang Knights had failed.

"We've lost too much time," he said. "We're at the point where tricks will no

longer suffice! We need to move now, or the situation will only get worse.”

Even his older sister, who led a life far removed from war, had to agree with his opinion. Conversely, because Cristobal was so proficient at war, his senses as a general allowed him to keenly sense their current danger. A strong determination shone in his eyes.

Catarina realized that no matter what she did, she wouldn't be able to stop her little brother, so she quietly pointed toward a point on the map with a small sigh. “The escaped royals and those monster guards from Fremmevilla are here. It's a tiny little relay town named Micilie. It seems they've made it their base.”

While the Copper Fang Knights had failed, it wasn't as if they'd gained nothing. They had managed to grasp the bare minimum of information: the location of the Kuscheperkan remnants' base.

Cristobal glared at the location his elder sister pointed to as a ferocious smile lit up his face. “Of course you'd know. Thank you, sister. Awright, let's go! First, we land at Fontanie, then we go crush the rebels in Micilie!”

That was how Cristobal ended up leading the main contingent of Black Knights that were guarding the Central Protectorate Government toward Fontanie. Ever since the city had been attacked by the Order of the Silver Phoenix and had lost the Kuscheperkan royals, it had been on strict lockdown, but the gates still opened to welcome Cristobal.

A mere one week later, the air in Fontanie once again rang with the cadence of impending battle. The force that had accompanied Cristobal to this city numbered a full brigade (one hundred units), and this large fighting force now marched directly east.



The Tyrantors marched down the road, their footsteps falling on paved road. Above them soared the trump cards of Jaloudek Kingdom, the levitating ships. A total of ten ships flew through the skies, representing most of the Steel Wing Knights' aerial strength.

Jaloudek's army was on the move.

It was impossible to hide action being taken on such a large scale. Reports of

their march quickly reached the Kuscheperkan remnants in Micilie, and by association, the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Jaloudek's army was heading east, while the remnants of Kuscheperka Kingdom were trying to defend their position in the eastern region. Naturally, the two would eventually clash. The Jaloudekians were marching down Kusphere Road toward the foot of the Auvinier Mountains. The eastern region started to grow more and more rugged once one approached its center. The territory of Baron Letonmarquis was no exception to this.

Most of this territory was taken up by hilly land stretching from the Auvinier Mountains, which was not convenient for travel or transport. It also wasn't suited for farmland. However, those qualities also made it perfect for protecting the east. The few roads that stretched across the baron's land were dotted with large towns and checkpoints. During peacetime, these places served as nice stopping points for traveling merchants, but they also worked as natural fortresses when coupled with the mountainous terrain.

"How deeply moving it is for us to be able to serve our original roles."

Several cylindrical towerlike objects were lined up along a set of walls that stretched across a valley. Their appearances marked them as Lesvant Viedes, which had been affectionately dubbed "tower knights." These machines were extremely powerful for having been modified from existing mass-produced silhouette knights. Most of the remaining Lesvants in the kingdom had already been transformed, and they were then sent in great numbers to protect the important areas across the region.

"My lord, we've finished stationing our Viede squad. Also...the people who are retreating to Micilie have just left."

"I see. You may retreat as well—I won't blame you."

Two men talked atop the walls. One was the lord of Letonmarquis Barony, Baron Modesto Letonmarquis. His companion was the knight captain who worked directly under him, leading his Lesvant Viede forces.

"That is quite the jest when you aren't leaving either, my lord. We are here to be your shield in times of emergency. How could we so easily turn our backs on that duty? All the remaining soldiers feel the same way."

Baron Letonmarquis smiled wryly. The approaching Jaloudekian army was large. Even though they'd gained the strength of the Lesvant Viedes, a minor noble could not hope to resist the might of Jaloudek. "Just a little more... The Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company is working to deploy the newest models even as we speak. But they still need a little more time."

The production of their cutting-edge silhouette knights in Micilie was still continuing. But that also meant they needed to *continue*. They didn't yet have the strength needed to contest Jaloudek.

That was why Letonmarquis was here with such a small force. He had informed his men of how disadvantaged they'd be beforehand. He'd also said they could retreat to Micilie and wait for their chance to launch a counterattack. Even so, most of the soldiers decided to stay, clearly demonstrating their pride.

"Then let us give them a good bit of trouble, enough so as to not shame our ancestors who have been laid to rest in this land. On that note, it seems our unwanted guests have arrived," the baron muttered. But he didn't have to say anything—everyone else had noticed this as well.

Giants of black steel were approaching them, leaking heated exhaust. They advanced silently, entering the narrow mountain road that lay in the flat land of the valley while taking their usual horizontal line formation. They wielded long pikes, pointed toward the Kuscheperkan defenders. This wall of black-dyed iron faced off against the wall of stone under the defenders from some distance away.

The Jaloudek army did not panic at all when faced with such impregnable terrain, nor did they stop. Their calm was actually uncanny, and Baron Letonmarquis's forces could feel the pressure. Even though the Kuscheperkan defenders had the terrain advantage, they were being mentally overpowered by the sight in front of them.

The knight captain folded his telescope, gathered strength in his belly, and rebuked his subordinates who had gone weak in the knees. "Don't be afraid! The new Lesvants you're using are unmatched in terms of defense! Remember the efforts of your brethren all throughout the kingdom! There's nothing to be

afraid of. Just burn them to cinders before they get near the walls!”

The main silhouette knight of the Jaloudek army, the Tyrantor, did not match up well against the Lesvant Viede. The Tyrantor was overwhelmingly superior in close combat, but the walls of the Kuscheperkan fortifications prevented them from approaching. The defensive power of the tower-type Viedes was unprecedented; they were able to decimate the slow Tyrantors before they even got close. That was why they’d been able to keep the Jaloudek army in check so far.

Slowly, the Viedes’ knight runners regained their calm; their captain’s words had encouraged them. The men responded with a vigorous cry, and the towerlike silhouette knights with their wall robes deployed their silhouette arms all at once, adopting an intercepting stance. Their reticles were aimed squarely at the silently marching wall of black iron.

The knight captain got in his own Viede and used his machine’s megaphone to give his orders. “You have permission to fire as soon as they come within range! Don’t let them get any closer!”

The Viedes’ silhouette arms pointed toward the black knights, looking like a thorny hedgerow. The Tyrantors’ knight runners gripped their controls tightly in nervousness, the shaking of their hands transmitting to their machines’ back weapons and causing their aim to waver as well.

The Jaloudek army could clearly see the baron’s forces preparing to shoot them. In the face of a bombardment that could threaten even a Tyrantor’s armor, their movements changed. While the army still advanced, they adopted a never-before-seen formation to do so.

“They’re...not taking a close formation?!” the knight captain cried.

Up until now, the black knights had always taken a horizontal line formation to quite literally squash the opposition underfoot as they advanced. But now, the army of Tyrantors split into smaller groups, advancing while putting a decent amount of space between each silhouette knight.

“So they’ve put some thought into this too. They’re not letting us concentrate our fire...” the knight captain muttered bitterly. He’d caught on to the meaning of this change as soon as he’d seen it.

It was extremely important for the Kuscheperkan forces to concentrate their spellfire in order to break a Tyrantor's armor. The Jaloudekian commanders must have realized their standard formation was putting them in more danger. So, they were now trying to split the Viedes' aim.

Still, there was only one thing for the baron's forces to do. The moment the Tyrantors stepped into their range, they unleashed a storm of spellfire. Shining orange bolts of destructive magic flew toward the spread-out Jaloudekian force. The Tyrantors were enveloped and completely obscured by an explosive curtain.

Before, the Jaloudek army would have forced their way forward, but now they did something different. As soon as they saw the spellfire coming for them, they immediately fell back.

The Kuscheperkan captain clicked his tongue. The magical phenomena that spellfire was made of naturally had an effective range. This was because the ether in the air interfered with the magical projectiles. Any such projectile that exceeded its effective range would rapidly crumble until it completely disappeared.

Having escaped the Viedes' effective range, the Tyrantors boldly started to deflect the incoming spellfire. They didn't even need to take defensive stances. Spellfire that had started to undo itself was nothing in the face of their thick armor. Soldiers who were observing the battle from atop the walls reported the results of the bombardment in loud voices. Soon, the volley ceased, and the battlefield fell silent once more.

But before long, a trumpet and gong sounded. These belonged to the Jaloudek army. Having received orders from the rear, the Tyrantors once again advanced. They did so even more slowly than their usual sluggish pace, carefully moving into their enemy's silhouette arms' range. This time, the baron's forces did not fire. On the walls, the observation team gripped their telescopes tightly, frantically trying to judge the right time and spacing. Runners came to and fro frequently in an attempt to maximize the density and efficiency of orders.

"Don't make any careless moves. Wait for clearance to fire from the observation team!"

“Not yet... A little more... If we let them retreat now, we won’t do enough damage. We need to draw them in far enough that they won’t be able to just run away!”

The baron’s forces had to be careful. Their Lesvant Viedes had powerful bombardment capabilities thanks to their multiple silhouette arms, but at the same time they had two fatal flaws. One was, of course, their utter lack of mobility. The other was the speed at which they recovered their mana pools. While their wall robes, which consisted totally of capacity frame, gave them unprecedented mana pools, the ether reactors they had with which to charge these pools were still the same. Once they ran out of mana, it took an extremely long time for them to charge back up to full. Such an opening would be fatal in battle.

This meant they couldn’t afford to waste any shots.

“Damn it. They’re teasing us.”

It wasn’t just their formation that was different. The Jaloudek army was acting strangely cautious. Both sides were putting their lives on the line, walking a tightrope balancing distance and mana, attack and defense. The black knights took one more step forward. There was no response. Then they took another, and the spellfire had yet to fly.

Then, the Tyrantors stopped advancing. They were within the Kuscheperkans’ effective range, but not that far inside. The knight captain of the baron’s forces questioned relentlessly in his mind whether he should order his men to fire. The Jaloudekians had yet to advance far enough, and he knew the enemy would quickly retreat out of range should they start to attack. Should they fire anyway to keep the enemy in check? The way this battle was going, it was more like a duel where both sides had a sword at each other’s throats than a battle between armies. The valley was now filled with a nervous air that almost seemed viscous and sticky.

Then, the winds of change blew through this stagnant battlefield, though it was no natural gust. A shadow appeared, disrupting the sunlight shining down on the battle. It wasn’t a cloud, but a more dense, defined, and large shadow staining the sky. It didn’t take long for the barony’s forces to identify it. Being

able to see the shadow meant it was close enough that they could see it clearly for what it was.

It was a levitating ship.

The Tyrantor was not the sole source of Jaloudek's might. Their trump card, which had allowed them to destroy the Kingdom of Kuscheperka once already, was the Steel Wing Knights. Baron Letonmarquis counted a total of ten levitating ships, and he let out a deep, pained groan.

These ships that sailed through the sky did not care about terrain. They made their leisurely way over the land, ignoring the walls until they were practically over the checkpoint entirely. Baron Letonmarquis, and the natural defenses he was so proud of, meant nothing to the levitating ships. Their experiences up until now told the Kuscheperkans what the ships would do next.

The baron and his knight captain shouted heatedly. "Oh, no! Have the tower-type Viede squad take aim at the levitating ships! Don't let them drop their cargo!"

The Viedes aimed at the sky, but the resounding footfalls of the Black Knights' march had begun simultaneously. This time, there was none of their previous caution. They marched with the speed of a raging tsunami, and the defenders would need to intercept them with fire, else they would soon be on top of the walls. Pincered between the ground and sky, the baron's forces froze for a moment.

"Have the tower-type Viede squad aim for the levitating ships! They can ignore the Tyrantors!" Baron Letonmarquis shouted. "We cannot afford to pull back, so we must take down as many of those ships for our brethren behind us as we can!"

They were already in checkmate. Realizing that allowed Baron Letonmarquis to make the brave choice. He had set up here intending to sacrifice himself in the first place, so he wasn't going to chicken out now.

While enduring the fear from the oncoming rush of black iron, the Viede squad set their sights on the sky and started their bombardment of the levitating ships. Orange rain, launched from the ground, looked like it was sucked up by the sky itself before several explosions bloomed.

However, the levitating ships continued to make their way through the air as if nothing was happening. They were the first practical flying weapons in the world, so of course they were designed to deal with enemies on the ground. That was why they were shaped like seaborne ships flipped upside down, and the flat bottom “deck” and its surroundings were armored with solid steel. This armor was designed with silhouette arms fire in mind, so taking some hits from such weapons wouldn’t do much. Before long, several of the ships started to rapidly descend. They barely slowed down at all as they crossed the airspace above the walls.

While Lesvant Viedes had a fire control system and the aiming function that came with it, they were still dependent on their knight runner’s aim. Given that the model’s construction was rushed, the knight runners hadn’t had much training in aiming at airborne enemies. The attacks that just barely managed to hit their mark were not enough to break through the ships’ armor. Then, the levitating ships started to drop their silhouette knight complements, despite their speed. Ports on the underside opened up one after the other, and silhouette knights attached to chains jumped out.

These silhouette knights wore the Jaloudek army’s trademark black-painted outer skin, but their frames were much thinner than expected. They weren’t Tyrantors, but Vittendohlas of the Copper Fang Knights.

The Vittendohlas fell, released from their chains in midair. They were high up enough that a Tyrantor would have nearly destroyed itself upon landing. However, the Vittendohlas, which were meant for use by spies, were specially designed, and they used the springiness of their bodies to bleed off the impacts of their landings on the wall.

Immediately, the Vittendohlas sprang into action, furiously attacking the Viedes accompanied by the twangs of their crystal tissue. While the Viedes had strong defenses, surrounded by wall robes as they were, the weight became shackles, making them too sluggish and thus extremely bad at close-quarters combat. They were like turtles from the perspective of the nimble Vittendohlas. The difference in their agility was obvious, and on top of that, there were various gaps in the wall robe to allow the Viedes to reach out and aim with their silhouette arms. The Vittendohlas easily maneuvered around their prey and

struck at these weak points with fearsome accuracy. One attacker used a thrusting weapon, and another used its shotclaw. One after another, the Viedes fell.

“Viede squad, fight back as you see fit! I don’t care if you discard your robes, take out as many of the enemy as you can!”

Heavy, metallic sounds filled the air. The Lesvant Viedes had shed their wall robes. In preparation for worst-case scenarios, a mechanism to allow them to throw away their robes had been put in place, and now was the time for its use.

After the tower-type Viedes had thrown away their primary advantage, all they were left with were back weapons and normal Lesvants. They fought back valiantly, their silhouette arms scattering through the air, but the Vittendohlas were far superior in close combat. The tower knights continued to fall one by one.

The baron’s forces were already being cornered when the situation went from bad to worse. The ground shook tremendously from some sort of impact below them—the Tyrantors had finally reached the walls. They had tossed aside their pikes and switched to battle rams, which they used to hit the wall in front of them. The strand crystal tissues laid throughout the Tyrantors sang as they swung their battle rams as hard as they could, causing the solid steel gate to buckle and warp.

The gate suffered blow after blow, gradually bending out of shape before it finally reached the limits of its endurance and broke. The sound of this destruction reverberated through the air, and the black knights entered through the new opening before the dust had even settled. Now that they no longer had the advantage of range, the Lesvant Viedes fell prey to the Tyrantors’ hammers. Both sword and spellfire were nothing in the face of the black knights’ armor at this range.

At this point, the baron stood no chance of a comeback.

“So this is the true strength of Jaloudek’s army...” Baron Letonmarquis muttered as he watched his checkpoint be overrun. He fell powerlessly to his knees.

Because he wasn’t in a silhouette knight, no one attacked him, and he was

unscathed in the middle of all this chaos. But that was likely only a matter of time. More and more Tyrantors were flooding into the checkpoint, and after the silhouette knights completely suppressed the area, the infantry would move in next.

“Princess, Lady Martina... My apologies for being so powerless. I leave the rest to you, Lord Emris...” Baron Letonmarquis’s final words disappeared under the thunderous footfall of a Tyrantor.

After the Black Knights finished trampling over the holdings of Baron Letonmarquis, they continued on their way as if nothing had happened.



News of the destruction of Letonmarquis Barony reached Micilie by swift horse.

“I see, so the enemy’s main force is making its move! Our location *was* found out when we suffered that night raid. I knew it was only a matter of time until this happened, but...” Emris groaned, a displeased look on his face.

They still needed a little more time until the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company’s deployment of the new model was complete. Given the speed at which the Jaloudek army was marching, it was a risky bet whether they’d finish in time.

“We’ll need to consider going out ourselves to delay them if it comes down to it,” Emris muttered to himself.

With the Tzenndrimbles’ speed, such a plan was possible. Thinking that they should at least be ready to head out just in case, he decided to head to the workshop. At that moment, Martina came to him.

“A-Aunt Martina...” Emris gumbled up when he saw his aunt.

She wasn’t wearing her usual dress. Now, she was in men’s clothing which prioritized functionality and ease of movement, over which she also wore leather armor. In short, she was clearly dressed for battle.

“I heard the news. It seems war is fast approaching. We cannot afford to waste the time Lord Letonmarquis bought for us. We stayed here to prepare for

the coming fight, after all.”

“Yes, of course,” Emris replied. “I don’t plan on losing! But the way you’re dressed... Are you planning on going to battle, Aunt Martina?”

Martina smiled wryly before shaking her head. “Of course not. I’ll leave the fighting to you—I don’t expect to be of any use on the battlefield. This is just preparation. I don’t intend to be a burden.”

She regretted that all she could do was run, ever since they were attacked in Dervankhul. Actually, even if all she could do *was* run, she knew she could have done so in a smarter fashion.

No land in the eastern region was more suited to defense than the territory of Baron Letonmarquis. It was certain that sooner or later, the Jaloudek army would come crashing toward Micilie. Given that, they needed to prepare so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

“I understand,” said Emris after a moment’s pause. “We’ll make sure we’re ready in time so we can beat them down. We won’t let their black knights or their flying ships get close to you ever again. Just leave the rest to us.”

To this point, almost no one in Kuscheperka’s army had managed to claim victory over a levitating ship. The Order of the Silver Phoenix was the only exception, as they were undefeated against all foes, the ships included. On top of that, they had given the Kuscheperkan remnants a new weapon.

“I will, Ris. I believe in you.”

Both of them were pouring their all into preparing for the inevitable clash. The clock was inexorably ticking toward their decisive battle.



After they’d overcome Baron Letonmarquis’s resistance, there was nothing left to stop the Jaloudek army. The checkpoints that were placed at regular intervals along Kuscher Road had mostly been abandoned in the initial stages of the war to avoid the threat of the levitating ships. Furthermore, the soldiers who should have been defending the other territories had been pulled back.

“So they’re concentrating their forces,” said the second prince, Cristobal. “I

see that little princess hasn't stopped being a coward."

He was the commander of the Eastern Region Suppression Army that he'd formed. He was currently embarked on his specially designed flagship, which was standing by behind his forces. The flagship had positioned itself to be able to look over the entire army. The Black Knights' Tyrantors were marching in an orderly formation, and above them were the Steel Wing Knights, their levitating ships spread out in formation. Just the forces arrayed here would easily be enough to conquer a country of middling size. Needless to say, it was excessive considering they were marching to eliminate the remnants of former Kuscheperka, a group that couldn't even function as its own nation.

Cristobal wasn't taking the losses he'd suffered thus far lightly. He planned to take this chance to finish off both the royals and those monster guards from Fremmevilla with certainty, which was why he'd mobilized as much war power as he could muster.

"Still, it's boring for so much nothing to be happening." This elicited a wave of small chuckles from the rest of the bridge.

Though their enemies were just the remnants of a ruined kingdom, their resistance had still forced Jaloudek to this—it was pathetic that they'd been pushed this far. Everyone felt the same way.

Their march was unimpeded, and they moved through totally empty fields. Things were going so well that even the slow Tyrantors had made more progress than expected. From there, it didn't take much time for the Jaloudek army to arrive just a small ways away from Micilie. The town was originally just an inn town, a relay point on the road. The resistance had pulled back the forces which should have been stationed around the area, which likely meant it would be crowded with Lesvant Viedes. It was a totally defensive strategy centered around interception. Since they wouldn't be able to win against Tyrantors on an open field, the remnants of former Kuscheperka had no other choice.

Cristobal's mouth warped into a fearless expression. Their fight against Baron Letonmarquis had exposed many of the tower knights' weaknesses. At this point, they weren't much of a threat to the Black Knights.

“Okay. All units, halt!” he commanded. “Let’s take this chance to allow the men to rest. The Kuscheperkans’ end is near, after all!”

Following his orders, the Jaloudek army set up a simple encampment by the side of the road. The soldiers’ morale was high, since they were so close to finishing off the enemy, but they were also tired since they’d been marching for so long. They needed a rest before starting the final battle. There was no need for them to hurry; they could rest their soldiers and meet their enemy with more than enough strength to lay them low.

Yet this camp had spectators, who were some distance away. The Jaloudekians were surrounded by forest, and the observers were in Shadowrads, which were painted to blend into their wooded surroundings. They were part of the Order of the Indigo Falcon, and they’d been watching the Jaloudek army since they’d marched from Fontanie.

The Jaloudekians hadn’t tried to hide their movements whatsoever. After all, the only thing farther east than Micilie was the Auvinier Mountains, so there was nowhere to run. Their enemy’s backs were against the wall, so to speak. Either way, it was basically impossible for a force of that size to hide. Instead of attempting the impossible, they just boldly marched forth, which had the added bonus of the intimidation factor.

Still, the Order of the Indigo Falcon stayed hidden in the forest. They were able to make accurate predictions on the enemy army’s movements based on the speed of their progress. It was all to be able to know the exact moment the Jaloudek army would make its move.

Once camp was set up, the Jaloudek army spent a while resting. The soldiers, having gotten some respite, had plenty of strength to do their duties, and now they were waiting excitedly for their leader to give them the order to defeat their enemy.

“It seems the Kuscheperkans are truly cowards. Actually, they’re probably just out of decent generals.” They hadn’t even been ambushed during their respite, which actually served to make Cristobal angrier. He’d thought the Kuscheperkans would show their fangs now that they were cornered, but they just stayed holed up in their town like always.

“So much for their national pride! I guess it’s all been blown away by the winds of our levitating ships,” Cristobal continued. “Humph! Still, we can’t let our guards down, even if they are cowards. We’ll proceed with our original strategy. Go!”

He’d finally given the order for his entire army to move. By the time this happened, the sun had already set, and it was late into the night. Their plan was the same they’d used on Dervankhul at the beginning of the war: a night raid using levitating ships.

The Jaloudekians had learned from their battle against Baron Letonmarquis that the Lesvant Viedes had a hard time hitting the levitating ships with their spellfire. However, the remnants’ forces had been concentrated around Micilie, so the levitating ships hesitated to fly into the weight of all that fire. That was why they were attacking at night. It would be much harder to hit levitating ships that blended into the darkness.

As planned, the ships approached. Once they infiltrated the enemy’s base, they would be able to deal with whatever came next. Neither Kuscheperka’s mass-produced Lesvants nor their Lesvant Viedes were a match for Jaloudekian silhouette knights in close combat. After the infiltration team had eliminated enough of the tower knights, they could call in the main force, the Black Knights, to charge in and crush the entire town flat. Such was the Jaloudekians’ plan to completely eliminate the enemy and achieve a perfect victory.

“It’s your time to shine, men of the Steel Wing Knights. Stir up the wind, and call in victory! Get their airspace under control immediately!” Cristobal commanded.

The ships’ black-colored sails swelled with wind generated by their Blow Engines. They swam through the air, accompanied by the sound of wind as they stealthily made their way toward the as-yet quiet Micilie. Even now, there were no signs of activity in the town. Though they had the cover of darkness, the Steel Wing Knights had been expecting at least some resistance, so this lack of action turned their disappointment into disquiet. After all, Kuscheperka had originally lost the war because they’d lost their capital to a night attack just like this one. There was no way they wouldn’t be on guard for a repeat of the strategy.

But the levitating ships continued on their way toward Micilie, leaving their crews' confusion behind. The men pushed aside their growing feelings of suspicion, and the Steel Wing Knights dropped their ships' speed and gradually lowered their altitude. Inside, the Tyrantors prepared to drop.

That was when something faintly shining appeared on the ground.

It was a burning bullet of fire with an orange tail—an overspell from silhouette arms. This bullet, which stretched as it flew straight, wasn't aimed at the levitating ships.

This bit of spellfire was unique. At its core was a thin physical container made of metal. As the projectile was fired, it was fully covered in magic. Thus the container would melt midflight, and the core's contents would be exposed to the magical fire after a delay.

It was filled with a fine metal powder. This powder made contact with the magical fire that was about to obey its script and explode, kicking off an intense fiery reaction. It continued to light up the night sky like a blooming flower of light—in another world, it would have been called a flare.

The Indigo Falcons' spies had positioned themselves in the forest surrounding Micilie beforehand. They had to create a human-powered net of detection, since in this world, radar didn't exist—in other words, they were a barrier. The Kuscheperkans *had* been wary of a night attack. In fact, they'd been waiting for it to happen. To them, this was a chance for a *preemptive strike*.

The false star in the night sky shone brightly, revealing the invaders who were trying to hide in the darkness.

In response, a stir arose in a section of the forest. The Order of the Indigo Falcon and the Steel Wing Knights weren't the only ones lurking in the night. There were also hunters lying in wait for just such a moment.

The exhaust sounds of ether reactors spinning up pierced through the silence, and giant forms revealed themselves as they cast aside camouflaged cloths. These particular silhouette knights had a single horn jutting out from their foreheads and possessed the bottom half of a horse, so they stood fifteen meters tall. They towed carriages behind them—Tzenndrimbles.

“Eheh heh heh heh heh heh, you’re finally here, you nuisances. I got separated from Ernie for so long because we had to prepare for you! You’ll pay for that! I’m going to strike you down and make you a present for Ernie! That way Kid can show off, and I can vent a little!” Addy spat out from her pilot’s seat as she gripped her control yokes extra hard.

Her Tzenney, as if responding to its master’s murderous intent, let out a powerful cry from its ether reactor. Since they didn’t know when the Jaloudek army would attack, both Tzenndrimble and knight runner had been ordered to stand by outside of town. Of course, Ernie would be doing something else, so Addy could no longer enjoy meals with him or sleep alongside him. As a result, she was breathing out stress like miasma, and her eyes were filled with a will to kill that was pointed straight at the levitating ships.

“Whoa there, scary. But I agree that they should be brought down. We need to take this victory, for Lady Helena’s sake.” Beside Addy and her heated emotions, Kid’s Tzenndrimble also activated.

One after another, more Tzenndrimbles started moving as well. All of the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s third company were here in their centaur knights.

“Finally! We were waiting for so long... Now then, everyone, it’s time for work!” Helvi shouted, and all of third company glared through their holomonitors at the levitating ships that were within their crosshairs.

They then activated the new weapons that had been attached on top of their Tzenndrimbles, firing them toward their targets.

These new weapons were machines with an unknown purpose that had a series of rails in an array. There were also wires and spools to reel them in to match with every individual rail. The rails had javelins on them, and they were all positioned pointing upward.

“Let’s go! Vertically Launched Javelin Thrower, fire!” Following Addy’s cry, the javelins on her weapon’s rails flew forth with a jet of fire. Small fires continued to flash around the javelins, which indeed flew up almost vertically. After this initial burst, they reoriented with a sputter before stronger jets of fire gushed out of their ends, propelling them toward their target.

In this world, these weapons would be described as “wired javelins,” but in

Earth terms, they would be wire-guided surface-to-air missiles. They were actually large javelins for use by silhouette knights that each had a catalyst for propulsion and attitude control tacked on, along with a silver nerve connection to send them mana and the accompanying script. They were missile javelins, remote weapons that were wire controlled. That was what Ernie had thought of to combat their aerial enemy—an antiair weapon for the Tzenndrimble.

The levitating ships, floating in the night sky, noticed the sudden appearance of those mysterious projectiles that were accompanied by jets of fire. However, since levitating ships moved by stirring up wind, they could move quickly in a straight line—but their maneuverability was quite poor. It was impossible for them to avoid the missile javelins, which were not only gaining speed fast, but were also guided.

The flying missile javelins quickly maxed out the length of the silver nerves attached to them. The silver nerves then detached from the javelins, and, having lost their sources of mana, they continued to fly from inertia. By this time, they had gained more than enough speed and power, slamming into the side of a levitating ship that had tried evasive maneuvers in vain. The levitating ship's armor was powerless against the flying javelins. Though they'd expected spellfire from the ground, they had never anticipated physical objects to come flying at them.

The missile javelins punched through the armor of the levitating ship and proceeded inside. One ended up stabbing into the Tyrantors inside, while another made a mess of its target's innards. Then, one of them coincidentally stabbed into the Etheric Levitator at the center of the ship. Destruction ran rampant inside the ship as the enclosed high-purity ether came storming out. The ether immediately spread throughout the surroundings, mixing into the atmosphere and losing its density.

Immediately afterward, the struck ship started to yaw. When high-purity ether gathered in high densities, it created a levitating field that lifted everything within it. That was what supported the levitating ships and allowed them to stay in the air, and the principle behind the Etheric Levitator. But now that the integrity of the machine had been compromised and the density of ether inside was dropping, it was losing its buoyancy.

The ship now dropped rapidly as if it had fallen down a waterfall. It tried to summon wind, but no amount of that would blow it back up. It continued to fall toward the forest below, obeying gravity and picking up downward speed. Its own potential energy had become a destructive force as the levitating ship was forced to kiss the ground. It slammed to the earth, kicking up a dust cloud with a low rumble that reverberated through the air as the overwhelming destructive force of the ground damaged the ship so heavily it couldn't even retain its original shape. All the Tyrantors inside had been turned to scrap as well.

“And that's one! It's a lot of work, but we're taking them down! Next! We'll get all of 'em!” Addy was in a good mood after the success of her first attack, and she immediately went to prepare her next salvo.

The large spools in the Tzenndrimble activated at full speed, drawing back the silver nerves that were to be connected with the next round of missile javelins. Meanwhile, silhouette gears that were standing by in the Tzenndrimble's carriage got out and started carrying more missile javelins into position. It didn't take long for them to install the new javelins onto the rails, after which they reattached the returned silver nerves.

The Vertically Launched Javelin Thrower didn't have a function to automatically load more javelins, so it needed human hands to reload. That role, of course, went to the nimble and strong silhouette gears. Once they'd finished, one of them alerted Addy in a loud voice before returning to the carriage. Addy waited for them to get away before launching another salvo.

These weapons were controlled basically the same way as the wire anchor. While the missile javelin was connected to the wire, it was possible for the knight runner in the Tzenndrimble to control its flight path. That was why the number of missile javelins that could be launched at once heavily depended on the skill of the knight runner.

The twins were Ernie's direct disciples, and the knight runners of the third company had been trained as their subordinates. They were able to launch a multitude of javelins, whose flames paired well with the fire of the false star in the night sky.



The bridge of the levitating ship went quiet. No one accurately understood what was going on. They'd just seen one of the other ships in their flotilla sink without any warning—and by unimaginable means besides. They should have been the rulers of the skies, but now they were just prey to be hunted. The bridge crew stood still in shock, and they only regained their senses by the time the second volley of missile javelins was already in the air. Another ship was rocked by the impacts, turning its cargo hold into a scene from hell.

“D-Damn it! Damn it all!!! I can't believe this... I can't believe this was a trap! How could this be? They're insane! To think they were *lying in wait* when their backs are to the wall! Hurry and send a message to the figurehead! Tell them to start emergency evasive maneuvers! Raise our speed and get away from that ball of light! We need to run back to the darkness, or we'll just be target practice!”

The Steel Wing Knights, who had gone in ahead of the main force, were now in total confusion. The “false star” that had been shot up from the ground illuminated the entire area, and they were being riddled with fire-spewing lances being launched from who knows where. It was impossible for the crews to remain calm in this situation.

“Change our heading as much as possible! Do *not* move in a straight line! Lower our altitude! I don't care if you have to force it—drop the Tyrantors right now!”

The crew turned to face their captain, forgetting to repeat the orders like they'd been trained to. He had told them to drop the Tyrantors. He had said this even though they were in danger from the ambush, which didn't seem like a sane decision.

The captain decided to elaborate. “Once the Tyrantors are on the ground, they'll be able to find what's launching these attacks and destroy it! Either way, we're just sitting ducks if nothing changes. We should at least try to strike back!”

They hadn't noticed since the first ship had gone down so spectacularly, but the missile javelins weren't guaranteed to bring down a levitating ship; they'd

need to hit the Etheric Levitator in the ship's center. The Order of the Silver Phoenix didn't know how these vessels were laid out, so they had no idea where to aim for a critical hit; they had just gotten lucky the first time.

Still, there was no way for the Jaloudekians to know that. The levitating ship dropped altitude quickly, coming out in front of the pack. They would proceed to force-drop the Tyrantors as quickly as possible, and once they had lightened their loads, they would immediately withdraw. They only had to get a little lower to pull this off, and the crew prayed as they watched the altimeter tick down.

"The Vertically Launched Javelin Thrower is pretty powerful, I see. But it also seems like it won't sink these ships unless we land a lot of them, so there's still room for improvement." There was no way the robot-crazed boy would stay still in such a big clash. Ernie was in his personal unit, the six-armed, demon-faced Ikaruga, watching the levitating ships try to break through the assault of the missile javelins from his pilot's seat.

As he watched, one ship broke through while being hit with several missile javelins. Ernie locked onto it and sent orders to Ikaruga.

Ikaruga activated the Magius Jet Thrusters on its shoulders and waist, emitting a shrill noise. Intense jets of fire spewed downward, gouging out the ground and dyeing the area red. Meanwhile, Behemoth's Heart and Queen's Coronet, reactors that were once hearts of powerful monsters, vomited out crazy amounts of mana, fueling the fierce god with infinite power.

Immediately afterward, Ikaruga launched into the sky from this powerful thrust. Regardless of the fact that it had not been designed with aerodynamics in mind at all, this overwhelming thrust was able to best the force of gravity. Ikaruga transformed into a meteor wreathed in fire, reaching an altitude higher than the levitating ships in the span of a single breath.

"Now, get a full taste of Ikaruga's power. I've built in a lot of things, after all! Let's start with the internal wire anchor: Rahu's Fist!"

Ernie happily typed away at his keyboard, switching the function of the four arms on Ikaruga's back. The mechanism that fixed the wrists to the arms activated, intentionally weakening the physical enhancement magic to

disconnect the crystal tissue and inner skeleton. The wrists were connected to the arms by wires with silver nerves woven into them, and these wires had the same function as wire anchors.

In short order, the crystal tissue inside the wrists acted as a catalyst and emitted a fierce jet of compressed atmosphere fused with explosive flame, meaning that this was the same mechanism as the Magius Jet Thrusters. These four Rahu's Fists that had been freed from their bindings trailed burning fire as they flew through the air, following Ernie's will to aim straight for the levitating ship. Their fingertips were sharp, and they arrayed themselves while benefiting from a strong physical enhancement as they easily pierced through the levitating ship's armor. They then fulfilled their original function as hands, grabbing fistfuls of the ship's interior to lock themselves in place.

"I've got you now! This time, I will *not* let you go!" Ernie shouted excitedly, once again typing away at his keyboard.

The winding mechanism received its orders and roared as it spooled in the wire, guiding Ikaruga at accelerated speed toward the ship. Once it was close enough, it activated reverse thrust, slowing down enough that Ikaruga could descend on the ship with only a mildly hard impact.

The crew of the levitating ship saw it happen.

It looked like the moonlight that had been shining down on them had been quietly cut away as a deeply black shadow descended upon them. This was accompanied by an earsplitting, explosive peal, which the missile javelins couldn't even compare to. They then heard a sound of air intake similar to a roar, loud enough that even the ship's massive body shook. The shadow's form was then lit up by the moonlight, revealing six arms that were creaking with tensed crystal muscles. The bright cloak of red around its armor moved in time with the movements of its thrusters.

The crew's fear passed its limit, and their minds rejected the reality in front of them. That was when Ikaruga's face was lit up by the moon with such perfect timing it seemed like a prank. The visor, which was carved to look like a wrathful demon, made the crew's faces twist even more in fear.

"It... It's a monster..."



Those were the captain's final words. The fierce god who had alighted upon the ship lifted up its large sword without mercy and slammed it into the bridge. This blow held within it a ferocious destructive force, and the bridge was instantly crushed. Then, the sword split in two, revealing a silver plate engraved with complex patterns, marking it as a silhouette arm. Ikaruga activated its Bladed Cannon while it was still embedded in the remains of the bridge, feeding it with large amounts of mana.

Immediately after, the weapon unleashed a bright flash of fire, punching through the remains of the bridge and into the innards of the levitating ship. Roaring flames consumed the interior, burning it to a crisp and blowing out the ship's bottom when the fire had nowhere else to go.

This one shot was enough to scrap the Etheric Levitator. Having lost its levitating field, the ship started to list. Ernie noticed that and had Ikaruga quickly jump off the ship, his business done.

"That's one to start off," he said. "We've finally got this party going, and there's lots of other guests waiting... I'll need to hurry!"

There were other levitating ships that were being hounded by missile javelins. Ikaruga's Magius Jet Thrusters flashed, and it darted toward its next prey with no hesitation.

The Steel Wing Knights were being whittled down slowly but surely, whether from piercing javelins sailing through the air or the all-consuming power of a greedy, fierce god. However, some ships succeeded in forcefully dropping their Tyrantors.

As soon as the Tyrantors made it to the ground, the levitating ships hurried to get out of the way. This place was a death trap, and there was no way to resist it other than to run.

The Tyrantor squads didn't even spare a glance back at the running ships as they immediately started running through the forest. This battle had caused extreme losses for the Steel Wing Knights. They needed to get their revenge on whatever caused this, no matter what it cost, and they knew they had no future anymore. The Tyrantors were in no way agile, and the levitating ships were not coming back. So, the knight runners gave up on returning home and resolved to

become a suicide squad, advancing forward with brave resolve in stark opposition to their fear from just a little earlier.

All they could hear in this dark forest were their own footsteps and the occasional sound of something heavy crashing to the ground far away. Both the fierce god and the centaur knights were focused on their prey in the sky. The Tyrantors' knight runners gradually awoke to the faint hope that they might actually be able to make their way forward without being found.

As soon as they did, though, they saw the wavering forms of silhouette knights in the darkness, blocking their way. They were hard to make out in this lack of light, but these silhouette knights seemed to be Lesvants from the former Kingdom of Kuscheperka's army.

"Humph. What can Lesvants do at this point?!" shouted one of the Tyrantors' knight runners. Yet something about these silhouette knights readying themselves for battle left the Jaloudekians uneasy. Something was off. The Kuscheperkan army should know by now that Lesvants stood no chance against Tyrantors. In the first place, would they even bring such useless machines to such an important battle?

"Well met, black knights. Your lives end here!"

As they were questioning this situation, they heard a voice that had been forced into a lower register. As soon as they'd registered the declaration, though, the mysterious silhouette knights started to run at them. As the Jaloudekian knight runners suspected, these weren't Lesvants. They were something stronger, while keeping the same general design.

Instantly, the Jaloudekians realized what was going on: these were new models from Kuscheperka. And they were correct. These were Kuscheperka's new silhouette knights, developed using the technology provided by the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company—the Laevantia. Actually, these were the prototypes. Though they were few in number, they had been stationed on the outskirts of Micilie to protect it.

"Our new knights will not lose to your Tyrantors! Taste the pain of all the humiliation you've dealt us!"

The ground rumbled in chorus with the knight's shout. There were no tricks

pulled—both sides ran at each other, clashing head-on. Every fight up until now would have ended with the Kuscheperkan knights being one-sidedly defeated, unable to stand up to the Tyrantors' attacks. However, now things were different. A Laevantia stopped the swing of a Tyrantor's heavy mace with its bastard sword. Both of its feet sank into the ground and the entire machine creaked, but the Laevantia definitely blocked it.

"No way! Against a Tyrantor's strike?!" the Jaloudekian knight runner shouted in surprise.

These silhouette knights, based off of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's Kardetolles, used strand crystal tissue and boasted enough power to be worthy of being called cutting edge. At maximum output, a heavy Tyrantor would still win in terms of pure strength. However, the gap was no longer nearly as wide. And in this situation, the Tyrantors were outnumbered, which meant they were in trouble.

While the Jaloudekian knight runners were shaken, the Laevantia squad's confidence only grew after seeing one of their own successfully defend against a Tyrantor's strike, and they stepped forward for a fierce counterattack. The Tyrantors' heavy maces didn't hit the Laevantias, and they were instead surrounded and teamed up on to be taken down one by one. This meant the Tyrantors were meeting the same fate as the levitating ships they'd escaped—elimination, one at a time.

As time passed, the fighting around Micilie calmed down. The only things left were a great number of levitating-ship and Tyrantor wrecks strewn around the forest. The Steel Wing Knights were now one step away from destruction.

The fate of the levitating ships that had been illuminated by the flare was easily witnessed by those waiting farther away.

The Black Knights had been set to attack after the Steel Wing Knights had charged in, but they were aghast at this sight, forgetting to advance. They had seen their levitating ships, which were rulers of the skies up until now, easily sunk one after another. The levitating ships had been invincible since the start of the war, but now the Jaloudekians had woken up from that dream. The ships were just weapons, and it was definitely possible for them to be broken. They'd

finally realized that.

The Black Knights felt as if they were in a nightmare, and they hesitated to act.

Realistically, now that the push by the levitating ships had failed, they would find it hard to capture Micilie by force. Advancing would likely incur many casualties. However, that didn't mean they could accept losing so easily, when they had pushed this close to their enemy's base with such a large force.

This moment of hesitation was fatal, though, and decided their fates. One by one, lights came on in Micilie. Now that they'd dealt with their greatest obstacles—the levitating ships—there was nothing to hold the Kuscheperkans back. The counteroffensive had been called, and they sallied forth. Lesvant Viedes formed ranks, advancing despite their slowness. At the core of the formation were the Laevantias, which were still few in number. They were organized as infantry and were the main thrust of this counterattack.

At the front of this army stood a rather conspicuous group: the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They were led by the demon-faced silhouette knight and were Fremmevilla Kingdom's strongest knight order. Ikaruga, having chewed its way through the levitating ships, was nowhere near satisfied, and had now set its sights on the Black Knights.

"There's the signal. Now's our turn to advance!" Ernie shouted.

Ikaruga raised its Bladed Cannon like a ceremonial staff and brought it down in a symbolic gesture. The Kuscheperkan remnants then rushed forward all at once.

Chapter 37: Nightmare of Micilie

Far to the east, backed by the Auvinier Mountains that were shrouded by distance, a bright radiance revealed itself.

With the brilliantly shining morning sun to their backs, the Kuscheperkan remnants marched out of Micilie. The levitating ships—the symbol of Jaloudek’s victory that had so dominated the skies—had vanished, no more than useless scrap thanks to the missile javelins and Ikaruga’s rampage. Now, there was nothing to hold the Kuscheperkan remnants down. They marched with high spirits, determined to take out their frustrations after losing their country and being cornered.

Though they were motivated, their movement was slow. While the Laevantias had been introduced, their forces still mostly consisted of the tower-type Lesvant Viedes. Marching as one, they ended up slower than even the Tyrantors.

Meanwhile, the Black Knights, who had stiffened up in fear, finally regained their senses as the rumblings of the approaching army tickled their ears.

“Y-Your Highness... The enemy, they’re coming! Your orders, please!”

Every member of the bridge crew of the flagship located at the rear of the Jaloudekian formation focused their gazes on Cristobal. With the destruction of the Steel Wing Knights, their initial plan had been flipped on its head. Should they retreat? Or give battle? The only one who could guide them was their supreme commander.

Slowly, a bead of sweat dripped down the man’s forehead. Now that their original plan was bust, they should be pulling back to adjust their posture. However, he was unable to give the order.

Cristobal had come with Jaloudek’s most elite force, the Black Knights, as well as history’s first air force, the Steel Wing Knights. With all this power poured into this campaign, how could he report to his sister waiting in Dervankhul that

he'd retreated in the face of a near-dead enemy? Furthermore, the fact that the Black Knights were still mostly unmolested made him hesitate even more. They could still fight—that knowledge twisted his thought process.

He made his decision after a moment's hesitation. "Have the Tyrantors take horizontal line formations immediately. The enemy's main force will be coming soon, and we're going to avenge our comrades! Don't be afraid, fierce knights of Jaloudek! The enemy is but a union of weaklings, and there's nothing that can beat a Tyrantor in open battle! Use your strength to its fullest, and show them the power of the Black Knights!"

The flagship sent out his orders, and though the Jaloudek army wasn't enthusiastic, they followed them and managed to rouse their fighting spirit. They moved to intercept the enemy, and because they were so numerous, they didn't enter the forest, instead choosing to wait in the open field beyond it. The peerlessly sturdy knights of black iron stood in a line and readied their pikes, still not exhibiting even a shadow of their usual composed might. But before long, the soldiers got over their fear. Their trust in the shining black knights had surpassed any doubts that had sprung up.

There were no shouts, and no sounds of armor scraping together; the area was ruled by an unnatural silence. The Tyrantors continued pointing their pikes at the forest, not moving an inch. Time seemed to grow viscous, flowing like slime, but eventually the dull shine of metal could be seen in the darkness of the forest. It was Kuscheperka's main unit, the Lesvant Viedes, that looked like towers in their wall robes.

The moment both sides caught sight of each other, they exchanged spellfire in lieu of words. The silence from before had been overturned, now replaced by the din of battle that completely overwhelmed any natural sounds of the woods.

"First rank, hold up your shields and advance! Trap them in the forest!"

The Tyrantors in the first rank responded immediately, starting to move up. These ones were special among the Tyrantors, equipped with heavy shields and pikes along with their already heavy armor. They defended against the storm of spellfire coming from the forest with their shields as they forced their way

forward.

The Jaloudek army's strategy was to take position in the field, where it was easier for them to maneuver, while limiting their enemy to the forest. In order to achieve that, they gave the Tyrantors, which already had powerful defensive abilities, heavy shields to allow them to force their way forward and close the distance to the enemy. This was their counter to the tower knights, which possessed powerful long-range capabilities.

The trees in the forest were caught up in this hailstorm of spellfire and were pulverized to smithereens. In the midst of the never-ending flames, the Tyrantors continued advancing. No matter how tough their machines were, these unending attacks would make anyone flinch. But the Black Knights did not, which proved how well trained they were.

While this fierce, continuous bombardment caused some casualties, the Tyrantors were finally about to come within range of their long pikes. The tower knights had basically no capability in melee combat. Once they were brought into that range, they had basically lost.

"We've got you now, you Kuscheperkan training dummies!" shouted one of the knight runners. "Squash them flat! Charge! CHAAARGE! Glory to Jaloudek Kingdom!!!"

The Jaloudekian silhouette knights then surged forward, choosing to deflect the rest of the spellfire with their armor. Their attack changed their fearsome mass into raw destructive power through their weapons as they assaulted the tower knights. The sound of their clash was like a peal of distant thunder, and the ground rumbled.



Meanwhile, in Micilie:

Princess Eleonora was in the mansion in the center of town, her hands clasped together tightly in earnest prayer—though whether to a god or her dead father, only she knew.

She felt like she had a sword pointed at her throat, and she was unable to get even a wink of sleep. This night felt even longer than the one she'd experienced

when Dervankhul fell. It wasn't just her—the knights and noncombatants all felt like praying as dawn broke.

To the remnants of former Kuscheperka, this battle was a gamble with their lives on the line. After all, even though this was part of the strategy, they'd exposed the royalty who were the heart of their resistance to danger. If they were defeated here, it would truly be the end.

There was a reason they'd put their own backs so thoroughly to the wall: it was all to gather the levitating ships in one spot. Those elusive and free-flying ships had caused the Kingdom of Kuscheperka nothing but pain since the start of the war, and while eliminating them would make for the perfect chance for a counterattack, they were also the biggest hurdle the Kuscheperkans had to face.

The method they'd adopted to fight the levitating ships wasn't anything special. They'd just spread some bait.

Since they'd been attacked by the Copper Fang Knights, they knew Jaloudek had learned that they were based in Micilie. The east was in chaos, and in order to suppress that, there was no doubt that the Jaloudek army would prioritize the royals. That expectation proved to be correct, and Jaloudek had sent in a large army. Of course, the levitating ships of the Steel Wing Knights would be among them.

The rest was easy. Since Jaloudek knew their location, the Kuscheperkans stayed in Micilie. By doing that, naturally, the Jaloudek army would concentrate in one area. Strategically, gathering the large majority of the enemy's forces in one area to obtain victory was an act of insanity. One wrong move and they would be crushed under the weight of Jaloudek's concentrated might; it was an extremely risky bet.

But tonight, the Kuscheperkan forces won that bet. The Jaloudek army had unsuspectingly committed to a night raid. What awaited them were the destructive and extremely brutal javelins carefully crafted by the Order of the Silver Phoenix. As planned, these weapons forced the levitating ships to withdraw, allowing them to bring the battlefield back to the ground.

As a peaceful sun dawned over the land, the only remaining Jaloudekian

forces were the Black Knights. However, compared to the fight in the sky, this ground battle was a much more simple contest of strength. Thus, the outcome was not obvious.

“The spearhead of the royal guards has made contact with the enemy, it seems,” Martina reported to Eleonora, who had continued to pray all this time.

“I see...”

Martina had come specifically to Eleonora’s room to make this report, as she’d not moved from that spot this entire time.

Eleonora massaged her shaking fingers and raised her face, paled by her anxiety. Even though they were counterattacking their invaders, she had been the one to order the soldiers to march. It was hard to imagine how much of a burden commanding others would be to just a sixteen-year-old girl.

She didn’t have the ability to command the troops from the front. The only thing she could do was force down her emotions—the ones making her feel like she was cutting away at her own body deep in her heart—and pray for victory.

“You’ll ruin your health if you keep at this, Helena. Ris and the others are giving their all to win the war, so you should rest.” Martina tried her best to gently convince the girl, worried by her abnormal mood.

The princess was still young, but she was somewhat emaciated from all the anxiety in her heart, and she had a sort of frailness about her that made her seem like she’d break at the slightest provocation. In truth, one could hardly say she was in perfect health. It would be a huge problem if the princess were to persist at this and end up falling ill during the war.

However, Eleonora still shook her head slowly. “The soldiers are risking their lives to fend off the invaders. I know I am just a powerless princess, but I can’t allow myself to sleep so brazenly while they are fighting. Not to mention, my knight is out there...”

The princess had changed a lot, and she’d now clearly expressed her will, which left Martina wide-eyed in surprise. Just the other day, Eleonora had been like a little bird, refusing to leave her cage out of fear. But now, she was spreading her wings and attempting to fly on her own. Martina couldn’t help

but wonder who she got this surprising headstrongness from.

That was when Martina started to feel a glimmer of hope for this kingdom's future. She, too, sent her prayers to the people battling on the outskirts of Micilie.



The Tyrantors charged forward to bring the battle to melee combat, engendering a huge response from the Kuscheperkan remnants.

The Lesvant Viedes had been in a wall-like formation, imitating the Jaloudek army's main strategy, and now they spread out even farther. The silhouette knights waiting behind this wall came out from the newly created gaps to meet the Tyrantors in combat. These newcomers were Laevantias, the remnants' newest model and the core of their infantry.

Something shining and golden was mixed into this group.

"Hah! Hah! Hah! I will never let you get close to the town!" Emris shouted as his Goldleo ran forward, crashing into the Tyrantors head-on.

This clash between two high-strength machines created an intense impact, which caused a blast of wind around them.

"Damn! This thing can match a Tyrantor?!" shouted the Tyrantor's knight runner.

Goldleo wasn't alone—the Laevantia squad also went into melee combat with the other Tyrantors. Kuscheperka's main force lay in the tower knights, which were terrible at close combat. That was why the Tyrantor squad, which had forced their way in close to counter this, had their plans completely foiled by the appearance of the Laevantia squad.

The Kuscheperkans had forced the Jaloudekians' hand by sticking the tower knights out front. Their obvious weak points were perfect bait, and the Jaloudekians took it. That meant the Jaloudek army had once again fallen for the Kuscheperkan remnants' scheme.

The point of Jaloudek's spear was blunted, and they had utterly lost their forward momentum. Meanwhile, the Viedes slowly changed their positions.

They went from a formation facing the enemy head-on to a loose encirclement. The Laevantia squad, led by Goldleo, was able to fight the Tyrantors openly, but they lacked numbers. Their role was just to tie the enemy down when necessary. The Lesvant Viedes, however, were the main source of firepower. Their many silhouette arms glowed with a ferocious light.

Spellfire slammed into the Jaloudekian forces like fierce, sideways rain. It was hard for the Tyrantors to approach, and what awaited any such approach was the squad of Laevantias. The Jaloudekian detachment in the forest had been driven into a corner. While they were struggling to find a solution, the Tyrantors went down one by one.

“Gah! If this keeps going, our losses will be too extreme! We need to fall back for the moment and regroup!” shouted the frontline leader, a company commander.

The flow of battle was clearly against them, so they needed to reset. Giving up on the attack, the Jaloudekian force hardened their defenses and fell back. They attacked enough to keep the Kuscheperkan forces in check, as the Kuscheperkans were watching for a chance to take a bite out of the rearguard, and managed to get out of the forest.

Once the squad made it back out onto the field, they were greeted with a scene that seemed straight out of hell.



Back when the spearheads of both armies were about to make contact, the Black Knights in the central ranks of the formation were preparing to pile into the battle. Their elites had been placed at the front of the formation, but even they were being worn down quickly by the fierce fight. Eventually, they would need to switch lines, which meant it would be the central rank's turn next.

The squads making up the central ranks enjoyed a good feeling of rising morale and excitement, though they remained vigilant as they slowly approached the forest—but that was when a horde of shadows shrouded them from above.

Confused and wary, they looked up, only to see a mass of missile javelins flying in an arc over the forest to assault them. These javelins, benefiting from

extreme acceleration and the pull of gravity, smashed into the Tyrantors and easily tore through their heavy armor to skewer them. Every screech of metal scraping against metal marked a Tyrantor being staked into the ground, becoming some sort of strange art piece.

“Unbelievable! How could they possibly throw javelins this far?! Grk! Raise your shields! The next wave is coming!”

The knight runners who’d survived the threat of the lances had lost their heads. They were looking to go into battle, so they hadn’t let their guards down. However, they would never have imagined, even in their wildest dreams, that a fatal attack could be made from this distance, let alone one that traveled in such an arc through the air. In truth, a regular javelin couldn’t have reached them across the forest. Still, it was possible for the missile javelins launched by the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s newest weapon, the Vertically Launched Javelin Thrower.

The Black Knights recognized the danger and reacted quickly, raising their shields. They certainly were well-trained and skilled soldiers. But, as if to laugh at their vigilance, an aberration flew through the air, followed by a brilliantly shining red trail.

“I fooodound you! Oh, wooow! There sure are a lot of you!”

It was Ikaruga. It flew over the forest, following after the missile javelins, and Ernie used the momentum of this flight to slam right into the middle of the Black Knights. Amazingly, the shields the Tyrantors had put up served as great footing for Ikaruga. The Tyrantor that got hit by a literal flying kick that traveled like a meteor was bowled over by the attack’s overwhelming force. Its strand crystal tissue, which should have been exceedingly strong, snapped, unable to take the strain. Its joints thus broke, and it was crushed between its shield and the ground.

“It’s too hard to move around the forest with all the stuff in the way. So I’ll just play here!” Ernie announced cheerfully.

After landing on the convenient footstool and softening the impact of its landing, Ikaruga drew and readied its Bladed Cannons with natural grace. They were in their silhouette arms forms and immediately started to glow brightly

with spellfire.

Ikaruga's ample mana output allowed it and it alone to put out heavily overfed overcasts, which hit the Black Knights and summoned swirls of explosions and fire around them. The Black Knights had been formed up in orderly lines, but "confused" couldn't even begin to describe this new situation.

"Don't falter! Teach that fool what a mistake it was to let himself be surrounded!"

None of their brains had caught up with the situation, but they regrouped through sheer morale and resolutely turned to counterattack. One by one, they activated their back weapons, starting their own fierce bombardment. This silhouette knight had jumped directly into their formation and was totally surrounded. The Black Knights knew that this enemy would pay for his foolishness with his life.

"Good reaction... I'll need to respond with Ikaruga's full power!" Ernie shouted.

Before the Jaloudekian bombardment could reach its target, Ernie entered some commands into his keyboard. The fire being spat out by Ikaruga's Magius Jet Thrusters, which had been flickering and swaying in the wind like a robe, suddenly gained directionality, and the silhouette knight once more took to the air. After so easily escaping his encirclement, Ernie activated his remote guided weapon, Rahu's Fist. The hands from the four arms on his silhouette knight's back detached at the wrists, spewing fire as they flew forth.

In the face of this extremely abnormal mobility and the attack that followed, the Tyrantors were fatally slow to react. Taking advantage of that opening, the hands accelerated quickly, penetrating into the Tyrantors despite their thick armor. Ikaruga had used its abundant power output to enhance the physical enhancement on Rahu's Fist as much as it could, to the point where the fists were tougher than their targets' armor.

"Grk! What an outrageous attack! But we Black Knights will not fall to something of that level!"

These wired weapons were certainly a threat. However, Tyrantors were sturdy enough not to go down with only one such blow. The fists remained

stuck inside the Jaloudekian silhouette knights' armor as they pointed their back weapons up to swat their enemy down from the air.

"Now, Ikaruga, let's show them all the true function of Rahu's Fist! Detonate!" Ernie exclaimed as he input a command that sent a script to the Rahu's Fists.

Ernie's script combined functions for compressing atmosphere and causing a fiery explosion. In the next instant, the Tyrantors impaled by the fists had intense jets of fire shoot out from within before they burst. The function of the Magius Jet Thruster that created thrust had been activated while still inside the silhouette knights' chassis. Not even the Tyrantors, as famed as they were for their thick and heavy armor, were able to withstand having their innards burnt to a crisp. The four Tyrantors were instantly turned to scrap, exploding into fire, parts, and shrapnel.

"Yee...eeep?!" A knight runner in the next rank screamed as his machine was hit by a flying arm. His brain was rejecting the reality in front of him. To the Jaloudekian knight runners, who had absolute trust in the strength and armor of their Tyrantors, seeing one be so thoroughly decimated was enough of a shock to crumble everything supporting their mental states.

Their thoughts, now colored by fear, were spurred into a frenzy by a thundering roar from the fierce god in front of them. Ikaruga's main reactor, Behemoth's Heart, spun up to maximum output, and Ikaruga was wreathed in fire as it once again descended to the ground. It swung down the irregular swords it had in each hand, relieving a Tyrantor of its arms. Meanwhile, the deadly hands continued to dance through the air, searching for their next victims.

"What's wrong? There's still so, so, so many of you! Keep coming at me! Let's fight more, as fellow silhouette knights!" Ernie shouted.

This battlefield was a paradise for Ernie—he could go as far as he wanted with his personal silhouette knight without holding back. He was excited, and he continuously had Ikaruga charge into areas where the enemy was most concentrated. He slammed his machine's Bladed Cannons into the confused Tyrantors, and spellfire from the same weapons created fountains of fire all over. Meanwhile, the Rahu's Fists continued to weave their way through the

confusion of the battlefield, reducing Tyrantors to scrap in quick succession.

The biggest misfortune of the Black Knights was that the Tyrantor, which formed the foundation of their combat capability, was such a terrible matchup against Ikaruga. All the desperate attacks from the Black Knights were easily evaded by Ikaruga thanks to its overwhelming mobility gained by expert use of its Magius Jet Thrusters. Meanwhile, Ikaruga's insanely fast attacks were essentially unavoidable to the Tyrantors. The strength the Jaloudekians were so proud of was meaningless since they couldn't hit, and the heaviness of the Tyrantor's armor was meaningless in the face of Ikaruga's ridiculous firepower.

Even when the Black Knights tried to surround Ernie's silhouette knight, Ikaruga was able to travel through the air as easily as if it were the ground. Its mobility was completely removed from the realm of common sense, and there was nothing the Black Knights could do.

"Y-You monster! You damn monsteeeeerrr!"

As a result, the Jaloudekians were nothing but powerless prey in front of the raging deity of war, waiting for their turn to be picked off.

The Black Knights were already being one-sidedly overrun when another threat mercilessly assaulted them. A herd of horseback silhouette knights had come thundering out of the forest—the Tzenndrimbles of the third company towing their carriages. Now that they'd finished launching their long-distance attacks with the missile javelins, they had changed to charging equipment and advanced. The carriages were carrying members of the first and second companies as extra means of spellfire.

"Our dear captain's gone pretty wild, hasn't he? The enemy's in shambles, both their formation and morale. Okay, let's shave away at them from the outside of their formation. Let's go!" commanded Helvi, leader of the third company, and her Tzenndrimble let out a loud whinny.

With that as a signal, the group started their charge.

The Tzenndrimbles' lances bored through the Tyrantors in their path while the Kardetolles in their carriages bombarded the enemy with their back weapons. Ikaruga was running riot in the middle of the central rank, while the Tzenndrimbles shaved away at them from the outskirts of their formation.

“What... What the hell are those?! I can’t believe our powerful Tyrantors are being so easily dispatched! Ahhh, they’re monsters... They’re death incarnate!”

Like a sandcastle being swept away by raging waves, the collapse was near instant. Unable to solidify their defenses, attack, or even run away, the Jaloudek army’s central rank was utterly routed. The area was filled with the sound of explosions and metal being crushed as their squads were annihilated.

Tragically, the spearhead squads of the Jaloudek army had retreated into such a scene.

They’d been supposed to link up with the central ranks that were being held in reserve, but the scene that greeted them was just gruesome. In front of them lay a scene of burning fire and scattered Tyrantor wrecks as far as the eye could see. What happened for the Tyrantors to be destroyed like this? This sight had exceeded the limits of their imagination.

“I can’t believe it... What happened to the reserves?! What could they possibly have been fighting?!”

The Kuscheperkan remnants were continuing to attack them from behind. They’d pushed out of the forest, so the only place for the Jaloudekian spearhead to go was through the wasteland of destruction. The moment they stepped forward, they found something moving in the midst of the carnage. For an instant, the Jaloudekian knight runners thought that there might be a survivor, but that misunderstanding only lasted for a moment.

It noticed them, realizing they’d come from the forest, and turned around. There was no way it was an ally. Six arms stretched toward their force, and they saw a visor carved to look like a human face warped in rage. There was no way such a silhouette knight existed in their army.

Behind it, a cloud of dust was fast approaching. The dust was being thrown up by centaur knights running along, trampling over any Tyrantor wrecks that got underfoot while towing large carriages. It didn’t take much thought to realize that they were the cause of all this destruction. There were no possibilities other than this fierce god and those aberrant centaurs.

“The demon-faced...god of death!”

The spearhead forces hadn't spent that long engaging the enemy. What happened for this much destruction to be wrought in such a short time? None of the Jaloudekians could even understand how such a thing was possible.

The Jaloudekian detachment stood petrified in the face of such a terrible scene, and finally the Kuscheperkan remnants' main force caught up and engaged. There was no time to hesitate, even though it was clearly extremely dangerous—their only chance of getting out of this dangerous situation was to go through the wasteland.

With resolute determination, the spearhead force of the Black Knights valiantly stood against the Order of the Silver Phoenix, and were exterminated in short order.



The Jaloudek army's most elite force, the Black Knights, had collapsed.

Cristobal watched the whole thing happen in a daze. But he shouldn't be blamed for that—everyone on the bridge of the flagship was the same way. No one present could understand the state of the battle at this point.

It was far too late, but Cristobal finally cottoned on to the fact that he no longer had any chance at victory. Not even the slightest chance—this was beyond salvaging.

The only pieces they had left were what had stayed behind along with the flagship. The fact that this portion of the army was still controllable was an incredible stroke of luck. It wouldn't have been strange for them to have cut their losses and run, or otherwise been thrown into chaos along with the rest of the army in the face of so much destruction. The only question left to answer was whether the Jaloudekians would be completely decimated, or if a small number of them would be able to run away.

“So those are...the centaur knights that Dorotheo mentioned. And that *thing*! It's impossible. How could something like that even exist?!” At that moment, Cristobal remembered how Dorotheo had described the Kuscheperkan royals being taken: how a single aberrant silhouette knight had managed to take down a levitating ship on its own.

He thought he'd believed Dorotheo, since the man had put his life on the line for his report, but it seemed some part of his heart had still doubted those claims. If he'd truly accepted Dorotheo's story as truth, he would have taken that as warning and their strategy would likely have been different. Regret welled up infinitely inside his heart.

"Relay this to all forces. Retreat... Retreat! Hurry...before those monsters give chase!"

Before he'd noticed, his mouth had gone dry. His orders, too late by far, had been given in a hoarse voice, and who knew how many soldiers were still in the right state of mind to hear them? Even so, the crew hurried to take action.

The flagship's Blow Engine whipped up some wind, turning the vessel around. The few Black Knights that were left followed after the ship, retreating from the battlefield. They needed to get out of this killing field before the rampaging monsters took notice of them. At this point, their pride as the elite forces of the Jaloudek army had disappeared, leaving only fear to hurry them along on their retreat.

But their desperate hopes were in vain; they heard hoofbeats coming from behind them. The slow, ground-bound Tyrantors had no hope of outrunning Tzenndrimbles.

The third company chased after their enemy, biting into the rearguard.

"Your Highness, look! The ground forces are being chased. As things stand, even the Black Knights will—"

"So what?!" Cristobal yelled. "Do you really want to go and help them? With the forces we have left, the best we could do is go down with them. More importantly, send a message to the figurehead. Raise the output of the Blow Engine. We need to get out of here as fast as possible!"

While the crew looked down at the confused melee on the ground, the flagship put all its energy into its Blow Engine to escape in the air. Even if it dropped its silhouette knight complement to contribute to the fight, it would be but a drop in the bucket, so they had made the correct decision. However, whether they would succeed at escaping was another matter entirely.

“One of them’s getting away!” Addy exclaimed.

“Then I was right to bring these! We won’t let them run so easily!” Kid responded.

Two Tzenndrimbles, piloted by Kid and Addy, split off from the third company. Unlike their comrades, who had switched out their equipment for melee sets, they had kept their Vertically Launched Javelin Throwers. As soon as they found the running flagship, they launched missile javelins toward it.

When the ship shook, Cristobal realized that his enemy’s fangs had finally sunk into him.

“Gwooarrgh! Damn, what’s the damage?! I need a damage report! We aren’t sunk yet! Don’t let up on the speed! We need to make it back to Fontanie no matter what!” He shouted orders in a panic, but he was soon struck utterly dumb when he looked out of the bridge’s window.

It was coming from below the levitating ship, flying on a tail of explosive flame and roaring noise. The fierce god of destruction that had been born outside of this world’s laws was taking advantage of its Magius Jet Thrusters and the overwhelming speed they imparted to approach Cristobal’s levitating ship and rise above it.

“Impossible... It can even fly this high?! How insane is this monster?” Cristobal rose out of his captain’s seat, glaring at Ikaruga.

In that moment, the enemy silhouette knight’s head turned and its eyes met his, and an unfathomable sense of fear ran through Cristobal’s whole body with a shiver. He had to wonder what kind of mad mind had given birth to it, as the machine’s visor was carved into the visage of an enraged man. Its power and form both had long since abandoned the common sense of silhouette knights.

“D-Damn you... You monster!” Cristobal shouted. “I... I’m not afraid of you!!!”

All the feelings roiling inside him had finally surpassed his fear. The dominant emotion: rage. Ironically, Cristobal’s anger had actually made him regain his senses. Immediately, he ran off the bridge toward the hangar.



“It seems this is the end.”

As always, Ernie controlled his Ikaruga in a lighthearted manner. Just when he'd alighted on the flagship in high spirits, a part of its upper deck opened up. He waited and watched, interested, to see a single silhouette knight rise from the hole on an elevator.

“You monster! Who gave you permission to land on this ship?! Do you commit this outrage knowing this ship is mine, and that I am the second prince of Jaloudek?!” The voice came from a silhouette knight with pure white armor fitted with gold lines on its edges, along with a gold crest. It clearly was not mass-produced, as it had a certain elegance to it. It was the Arkelorix, the standard-bearer of Jaloudek's army, that once was responsible for putting the Kuscheperkan royal silhouette knight, Cartoga Ol Kuschere, into the ground and destroying the kingdom.

Cristobal glared at Ikaruga with bloodshot eyes from his cockpit. Arkelorix was built for royalty, and so it had a lot of money poured into it. It boasted better parameters than any other silhouette knight in Jaloudek's army, and he was quite a skilled knight runner himself. Even so, he had almost no hope. That, however, didn't mean he could do nothing and go down with his ship; his pride wouldn't allow it.

“It's your fault that my army is destroyed! And on top of all that, you dare infringe on my ship? That is going too far. I will deal with you myself—think of it as an honor!” Cristobal pumped himself up and had Arkelorix draw its sword.

Inside the cockpit of the prince's opponent, Ernie was smiling. “Ah, so we have royalty piloting that one. Then that means this is the flagship. That machine... It has back weapons and close combat equipment—the standard loadout. But you look quite dignified. And you're so full of confidence... Can I expect a lot from you?”

The Magius Jet Thrusters fired, their intakes screaming as they did so. Ikaruga casually readied its Bladed Cannons and took a step forward. That action alone made Cristobal feel like something had a death grip on his heart. The prince scolded himself and forced Arkelorix into a run. This battlefield was small, given they were on top of a levitating ship, and since they had basically started off in

melee range, tactics didn't mean much.

With sharp movements and a flexibility betraying its high quality, Arkelorix unleashed a biting slash that was the best it could possibly make. At the same time, it activated its back weapons, launching an intense volley of spellfire at its target. If his enemy had just been a simple silhouette knight, then this attack like a raging fire would have surely finished the fight—but he was facing Ikaruga. Supported by its incredible power output, it treated its Bladed Cannon, which should have been very heavy, like it was anything but as it danced forth. It quickly deflected the incoming spellfire before swatting down Arkelorix's blade, which had weaved in between the shots, as if it were an afterthought.

"Y-You dealt with that so easily... Are you saying that my attack was mere child's play?!" Cristobal groaned as he had his machine stagger back.

Arkelorix then drew its spare sword, even as Cristobal shuddered. His finisher had been easily turned aside. He was sure that his life would end as soon as Ikaruga went on the attack. His instincts as a warrior were screaming this in his mind, and he didn't have the means or resources to deny it. But because he knew that, Cristobal decided to use his words instead of his sword, cornered as he was. While he was far less eloquent than his elder brother and sister, he didn't have the luxury of choice.

"Wait, Sir Knight Runner of that fierce god! I believe you are from that country of monster guards, Fremmevilla. Tell me, why? Why lend your aid to Kuscheperka?! Is it the bond between your royal families?! Or do you monster guards actually have designs upon this land?!"

"Oh, no, the only one who's here because of that bond is the young master. I just want to swing my sword as a knight and enjoy fights between silhouette knights."

The voice from the demon-faced silhouette knight was so cute it seemed inappropriate for such a situation, which confused Cristobal, but he did see a faint light of hope in the answer. "Hah! Ha ha! So you're saying that your country and its creed don't matter to you, huh? Then come to my side, and bring that monster of a silhouette knight along with you! With that strength, it'd be a waste to leave you as just a knight. If you join me, I will grant you

whatever status you desire! Not only that, but we, the Kingdom of Jaloudek, are aiming to inherit the reigns of the ancient great country, Fadar-Abahden. That is why we must make war with the entire Occidents and swallow them into our fold. You will be able to see as much conflict as you like! How about it?!"

For a person as arrogant as Cristobal, this bit of persuasion was actually quite sincere.

"Hm... But you know, I've already gained a fairly high position back home. Can you prepare something for me as good or better than that?"

Cristobal thought he'd be rejected offhand, so this answer was far more favorable than he'd expected. He latched on enthusiastically. "Heh heh, there's no need to worry about that. As the second prince, I have been made supreme commander of Jaloudek's entire army! The power of my home cannot even be compared to some monster guards out in the sticks. Even giving you a position twice as high as you have now will be easy! Let's see... How about this? If you wish, I can even give you a peerage!"

Arkelorix spread its arms wide, as if welcoming Ikaruga. Inside his cockpit, Cristobal's smile only got wider and wider.

He had taken his opponent's question as a negotiating tactic to drive up the price. That meant the fierce god had taken his bait. Providing a better social status was a natural choice to sweeten the deal.

He was sure his negotiation had succeeded. The conditions he'd offered were so extravagant that the term didn't even begin to cover it. He was recruiting a silhouette knight powerful enough to change the tide of battle alone, the technology that made it, and the knight runner piloting it. If this succeeded, a peerage was cheap. After all, Kuscheperka was spacious enough that they had land to spare.

Cristobal had thus started to regain his composure and haughtiness, and his attitude reflected his new, overwhelming confidence.

However, Ernie's next words shattered that completely. "I see. Then...I would like the rights to all your country's silhouette knight manufacturing, the rights to the distribution of said silhouette knights, and my choice of command of any of your knight orders. How about that?"

Cristobal doubted his own ears, and he did not answer. Eventually the blood rose in his head, and he clenched his fist and shouted, “What kind of joke is that?! How dare you! You’re nothing but a knight... No, it wouldn’t matter even if you were a noble! Only the king himself is allowed to have that much authority!”

“Oh, but it isn’t a joke,” Ernie replied. “To tell you the truth, I actually have all that authority back home. The knight order you see here is only what I was able to move on short notice.”

As he spoke, Ernie adopted a terribly greedy smile. His words were matched by his charge’s actions, as the silhouette knight started counting on its fingers in conjunction with the words. “First, I have the authority of the king’s proxy when it comes to the development and manufacture of silhouette knights. After all, I lead the development and design of most of these myself. Well, their foundations, at least. I also have a say in their distribution, though I’m not taking advantage of it since it’s too much trouble. And as for having the priority of command, I do have the authority to lead all the knight orders in case of a high-ranking monster disaster. Depending on the situation, I could even overrule the king, you know? Ah, but I don’t want to have to manage a territory, so I don’t need a peerage.”

It was a stroke of luck that Cristobal had been inside Arkelorix. Why? Because as he listened to that speech, his expression was that of a blank-headed fool, without a trace of royal dignity.

Everything his opponent had said utterly exceeded his understanding. How could any kingdom, any *king*, allow a knight without a noble title that much authority? Even if Cristobal were to accept these conditions, they could only be achieved by giving this knight runner equal standing to Cristobal himself, and he couldn’t allow that. Of course, he had no idea of all the incredible achievements Ernie had piled up thus far. Neither could he understand the trust placed in his opponent as the final defense against national crises. His imagination was far too paltry to conceive of the ridiculous passion of the robot-crazed maniac in front of him that made the boy capable of changing the face of an entire country.

Cristobal’s whole body shivered, though he didn’t know why. Seeing that his

enemy had no answer, Ernie made a conjecture on the results of this negotiation, and crossed his arms, pondering if he'd been a little too mean-spirited.

“Well, if you just want to live... How about this? If you get out of your silhouette knight, I won't attack you. Though I will be taking your machine.” Those words were all the kindness that Ernie could muster.

As a pure robot maniac, he couldn't bear to take it easy on an enemy robot. However, if the pilot were to leave his machine, it would no longer be an enemy.

“Damn you... How far do you have to mock me to be satisfied?! Anyone who interferes with our rule, no matter how powerful, is nothing but a fool! You damn lunatic, did you really think I would cling to your mercy?!”

However, at this point Cristobal's mind was reaching its limits. Naturally, Ernie's insane kindness did not get through to him—it only sounded like an ultimatum.

Cristobal's footing and the gap in power between him and his enemy were no longer in his mind. His rage simply drove him to attack recklessly. Arkelorix swung its spare sword, charging forward as it fired its back weapons. This time, Ikaruga did more than just defend. It used the mobility granted by its Magius Jet Thrusters to dodge and swing its sword during its explosive acceleration, crushing both Arkelorix's sword and right arm.

The attack also gave Arkelorix a huge impact, and it staggered back, its balance crumbled. Meanwhile, the Rahu's Fists, which had been flying outside of Arkelorix's field of view, stuck to its legs. Immediately after, hellish flames blasted the silhouette knight's legs apart. Having lost its legs, an arm, and its ability to fight in the blink of an eye, Arkelorix fell to the deck. It seemed like it would tumble and fall off the ship entirely, but Ikaruga stopped that by stepping on it.

“Oh, no, you can't do that. I'm not good at holding back against robots, so this is your last chance. Will you get out of your silhouette knight and give it to me?” Ernie asked.

All that had rolled and tossed Cristobal around in his cockpit, so he had to

shake his head to clear the haze and dizziness that clouded his consciousness. Once his mind cleared up, the sense of defeat finally welled up within him.

Suddenly, though, he felt a spurt of hot-bloodedness, and he slammed at his control yokes. Arkelorex swung its only remaining limb, its left arm, in a punch at Ikaruga's leg. The punch, which had been strong enough it would have destroyed Arkelorex's fist, was dodged by Ikaruga pulling its leg back. Having lost its support, Arkelorex tumbled off the levitating ship.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha... HA HA HA! You damn monster! I will never do what you want! I haven't lost to you! I will greet my end with pri—" Before Cristobal could finish, Arkelorex reached the ground.

The impact pulverized the entire silhouette knight in a cloud of dust. No amount of Physical Boost could make a silhouette knight survive a fall from such a great height. Thus, Jaloudek's second prince met his disappointingly abrupt end, along with his silhouette knight.

Ernie was impressed. "Meeting your end along with your robot is a good mindset to have. Your weapons were quite fun, this flying ship included. This was truly a good battlefield. This may not be much, but allow me to pray for you to have a good next life."

After offering his last words to the enemy general in his own sincere way, Ernie quickly moved on. Ikaruga turned around, pointing its Bladed Cannon at the flagship's bridge. The exposed, deadly silhouette arms spelled clear death to the bridge crew.

"Now then! Those of you moving this ship, can you hear me?" Ernie called out to them. "Please disembark immediately and hand this ship over. As you can see, resistance is futile."

The bridge crew, who had up until now been watching events unfold in a daze, shivered as though they'd been shocked by electricity. They immediately communicated their surrender, and the flagship slowly descended to the ground. That signaled the end of the battle over Micilie.



"I don't understand... What are you saying?" First Princess Catarina said as

she stood beside the throne. She was looking down at a member of the Black Knights, who was bowing so low his head scraped against the ground. Her voice sounded emotionless.

“I’m sorry, but I must report this! The results of our attempt to recapture Micilie are...the loss of ninety percent of our deployed Tyrantors. Likewise, out of a total of twenty-four ships of the Steel Wing Knights, ten have been sunk! None of the levitating ships we deployed have returned alive!”

The nearly destroyed remnants of the Black Knights had arrived back to Jaloudek’s Central Protectorate Government just the other day. The report that had immediately been requested from those survivors was far more than just “shocking” to Catarina.

Her reaction was understandable. After all, the Black Knights, the core of Jaloudek Kingdom’s strength, had sent their hundred most elite soldiers into a strategic ploy that had ended in an unprecedented failure. The Black Knights who had safely returned to Dervankhul didn’t even number enough to fill a company. But the most shocking news to Catarina wasn’t any of that—it was what came next.

“And, as for the flagship led by His Highness Prince Cristobal... He fought with an enemy who managed to board the ship and...fell from the ship, losing his life!”

Catarina stood there dazed for some time, with a face she would normally never show to anyone else. Gradually, her mind caught up with what she’d heard, and a tremble worked its way up from her limbs.

The Black Knights had been all but annihilated, and her little brother had lost his life. Why? Because they’d been careless and let their guards down? She couldn’t deny that they’d grown arrogant after the brilliant results they’d achieved during the beginning of the war. But even considering that, their losses this time were far too large. Would any country’s army ever expect such utter destruction when deploying? The fact that they had committed so many of the Steel Wing Knights’ levitating ships to this operation and they’d still failed so spectacularly made the result even more inscrutable.

Her mind was going every which way, but suddenly, she realized something.

With Cristobal's death, she was now the de facto supreme commander of Jaloudek's army. Such a heavy responsibility meant she couldn't allow herself to look so shaken in front of someone who was now her direct subordinate.

"I have duly received your report. Now... Leave me at once!" she commanded, after a long pause to muster the ability for speech. Even so, she couldn't hide the way her voice shook. She had used up the last of her reason to force that out. More than anything, what she needed right now was time to calm herself.

After the knight runner basically flew out of the room, Catarina immediately shooed everyone away from the audience chamber. Her emotions were at their limit. She had no choice but to chase everyone else out so as not to expose an unsightly side of herself.

Now that she was alone, she started to sob. She'd been raised well as royalty, but there was no way she could be expected to wrest her tumultuous feelings under control. She'd loved her brother, and so she cried.

But she wasn't overcome with grief for long. Once the sadness had flowed out of her along with her tears, anger came next. The rage of having her brother ripped away was now motivation for what came next.

"I will never forgive the enemy who took his life... But our loss this time was too great to allow us to take revenge. The devastation of the Black Knights means we don't have enough forces."

Now that she'd regained a sense of calm, the graveness of their situation weighed heavily.

While the losses suffered by the Black Knights were truly severe, the levitating ships were the bigger problem. Up until now, they'd been undefeatable; the vehicle supporting the myth of the invincible Jaloudek army. The fact that they'd lost ten in one battle would eat away at their men much more than the decimation of the Black Knights would. Catarina couldn't even imagine off the top of her head how devastating this news could really prove to be.

"First, we need more Tyrantors... No, we definitely need more levitating ships to make a comeback. But with how many we lost, it'd be dangerous to leave them as they are. We must strengthen them with all haste. I'm sure Lord Kojass

will be taken aback once he hears that the Steel Wing Knights were also decimated in that battle.”

“Yes, indeed. It was earth-shattering news, Your Highness.”

She should have been alone, so the unexpected reply made Catarina jump and turn around with amazing speed. There stood a rather sullen-looking man—the chief of Jaloudek Kingdom’s development workshop and mastermind behind the levitating ship, Horacio Kojass.

“I had ordered everyone to leave me, Lord Kojass,” said Catarina. “No matter how important you are, I refuse to believe you’ve become so arrogant that you think you will be forgiven for anything you do.”

Given the circumstances they were in, Catarina’s beautiful face was warped into a menacing expression. However, Horacio didn’t seem bothered at all. “Yes, I know you did. But, given our current peril, there was something I desperately needed your permission on. Which was why I came, Your Highness.”

Catarina hesitated for a moment before sitting down on the throne. She knew that now wasn’t the time to be bothered over trifles, so she prioritized taking action. “Fine. I will allow your rudeness just this once. More importantly, the levitating ships of the Steel Wing Knights have been sunk. The remaining ships must be strengthened with all haste. I’m sure Kuscheperka will not let this chance go, so we do not have a moment to waste.”

“Yes, about that... How exactly did this enemy fight, that we took such stupidly huge losses? I need to know this much to decide on a plan of action. I would like your permission, Your Highness, to interview the survivors.”

While Horacio’s looks made him seem sullen all the time, he was currently wearing a horribly twisted smile. It made one wonder how he saw this situation, and Catarina hesitated a little before making her decision. “Do as you please. However, failure will not be tolerated. The levitating ship must never again be sunk. If you’re going to go this far, make sure you produce results.”

“I will. I want the levitating ship to rule over the skies myself, after all.” Horacio made a superficially polite bow before leaving.

After the man left, Catarina let out a deep breath and slumped back into the throne. She didn't know what he was thinking, but when it came to the levitating ship, they seemed to be on the same page. She could only pray that this would recover a little of their previous strength.

Eventually, she looked up, called over a messenger, and declared, "Have Dorotheo Maldness come immediately."

Her expression at the time betrayed a firmer will than she'd ever shown before.



After the battle between the remnants of former Kuscheperka and the army of Jaloudek near Micilie, the power balance in Kuscheperka's eastern region changed dramatically.

The actions of the Order of the Silver Phoenix up until now had eaten away at Jaloudek's control of the area, but the great failure dealt to the Black Knights and the Steel Wing Knights had completely collapsed their hold on the region.

With this unprecedented victory filling their sails, the Kuscheperkan remnants moved their pieces toward the seat of Jaloudek's Eastern Protectorate Government, Fontanie. The Jaloudek army, having lost its Black Knights, what Steel Wing Knights were in the area, and their supreme commander Cristobal, hadn't the wherewithal to stop them. Seeing Kuscher Road buried in Kuscheperkan flags, the soldiers guarding the city retreated instead of crossing swords.

So fell one of the protectorate governments that were Jaloudek's symbols of authority, and it sent large ripples through the other regions still under Jaloudek's control.

Tzenndrimbles walked down Fontanie's central street. The city's citizens shivered in fear at first when they saw the strange centaur knights, but when they saw the machines bearing the flag of Kuscheperka, they apprehensively came out onto the street.

The Tzenndrimbles were followed by Laevantias, which were followed in turn by Lesvant Viedes. Seeing the gallant forms of the Kuscheperkan army, the

citizens knew that Fontanie had been retaken along with the entire eastern region, and they exploded with cheers.

“What do you think, Your Highness? We won all this,” Kid spoke to the other occupant of his cockpit, Princess Eleonora.

The Tzenndrimble was originally designed as a two-seater, so the cockpit was unusually big for a silhouette knight. Because of that, there was essentially a passenger seat in front of the main pilot’s seat.

“Indeed... We did, didn’t we?” Eleonora muttered, as she listened to the cheers of the people around them.

The citizens’ joy was so vivid that their cheers were well audible even through the running noises of the silhouette knights. Some of their voices were even praising the princess. That was embarrassing to Eleonora, and she quietly hid her blushing face.

Eventually, the procession reached the end of the street. There stood Raspede Castle, and seeing the fateful castle, the princess trembled slightly before stiffening up. Right away, though, she heard a powerful and reassuring voice from behind her.

“It’ll be fine. This castle is ours now. You will never be trapped inside it again. I won’t let that happen.”

“Yes, I’ll be fine... I’ll be relying on you from now on, my knight.”

What Eleonora said was packed full of the highest level of trust, and Kid’s gaze wavered. Distracted as he was, he somehow managed to pilot his machine up to the castle without making any mistakes.



“We’ve finally taken this place back, dear...” Martina gently caressed a desk in Raspede Castle’s library. It seemed the place hadn’t been changed with the switch of ownership, as it didn’t look all that different from the library in her memory. Finally, the castle was back in the hands of its rightful masters.

“Thanks to Jaloudek, I’ve made some rather unpleasant memories of this place, though.” She smiled wryly and turned her gaze outside the window.

There, she could see the castle's signature four minarets. Just a few months ago, she'd been confined in one of them at Cristobal's behest. She wasn't the only one who felt this way. Her daughter, Isadora, also held some complicated emotions about this place, and the first thing she said as soon as she entered the castle was:

"Let's destroy those minarets as soon as possible, mother."

Martina seriously considered that suggestion. Perhaps they could rebuild them after all.



The Order of the Silver Phoenix entered Fontanie at the same time as the main Kuscheperkan forces. While they'd previously entered under the guise of the Silver Phoenix Mercantile Company and run around in their silhouette gears, they were now walking freely.

Emris immediately took advantage of said freedom. "Not having to sneak around really is nice! I felt so constrained last time we were here—I couldn't stand it. And now that those tasteless black silhouette knights aren't around, the entire city looks much better and brighter!"

"We've secured the road from Auvinier to Fontanie, so people should start flowing back here," Ernie responded as he looked out at the surrounding scenery.

The Kuscheperkans had extended their sphere of influence from Micilie all the way to Fontanie, which meant restoring Occident Road's original role. As they spoke, a messenger was on the way to Fremmevilla Kingdom with a report on their achievements. If he succeeded, trade would resume sometime soon, and Fontanie would regain its previous liveliness.



A few days after the Kuscheperkan remnants had retaken Fontanie:

Eleonora was looking through her window out at the sprawling cityscape—out at Fontanie—which, along with the relief of its people, was regaining more of its liveliness every day. This was its original state, before the Kingdom of Jaloudek had invaded. She carved the sight into her heart and renewed her

resolve. Before long, Martina appeared before her.

“Everyone’s already here,” she said. “Have you gathered your thoughts, Helena?”

“I have... I will no longer run.” Though there was still some unreliability about her, Eleonora’s eyes definitely burned with a strong will.

The girl looked almost too bright to Martina, and after a moment of staring, she knelt.



The nobles who’d joined the Kuscheperkan remnants and everyone from the Order of the Silver Phoenix had gathered in the inner courtyard of Raspede Castle. All their gazes were concentrated on the main reason for this gathering. Eleonora felt their hopes and expectations, and she felt like she would be crushed under the pressure. Though she’d resolved herself, her natural timidity was making its way to the forefront of her expression.

A small bit of hesitance led her gaze to wander, which had her finding a certain person in the crowd: a tall, thin boy. He was the knight runner of a centaur knight, as well as the person who personally and reassuringly promised her victory as her very own knight, and he nodded once in response to her gaze. With that bit of reinforcement, she was able to take the last step.

Eleonora squeezed her hands together tightly, took one more look around the crowd, and said, “There’s something I’d like to tell you all today.”

The hubbub in the crowd quickly died off. Everyone gulped as they waited for Eleonora’s next words. Soon enough, she started to move. Though she was a little shaky, she started to spin words that had an unbelievably strong will behind them.

“I...have decided to succeed my father and become the queen of this country. I may not have any power myself, but I believe in all your strength. And I... I declare, as Queen Eleonora Miranda Kuscheperka: we will restore our great nation, as the New Kuscheperka Kingdom!”



It was right before the winter of the year 1281 O.C.

The news of the birth of the New Kuschepërka Kingdom spread throughout the Occidents, along with the words of its new queen. While many countries were feeling disorientated by the sudden changes, they also realized an important fact.

They saw that the new kingdom had the strength to take back their land, and that the Kingdom of Jaloudek, which should have been huge and threatening, was slowly being overcome.

The power balance between major nations in the west affected the rest of the world, whether they liked it or not. This declaration marked another stage of the Grand Storm of the West.

—To be continued in *Knight's & Magic* volume 5

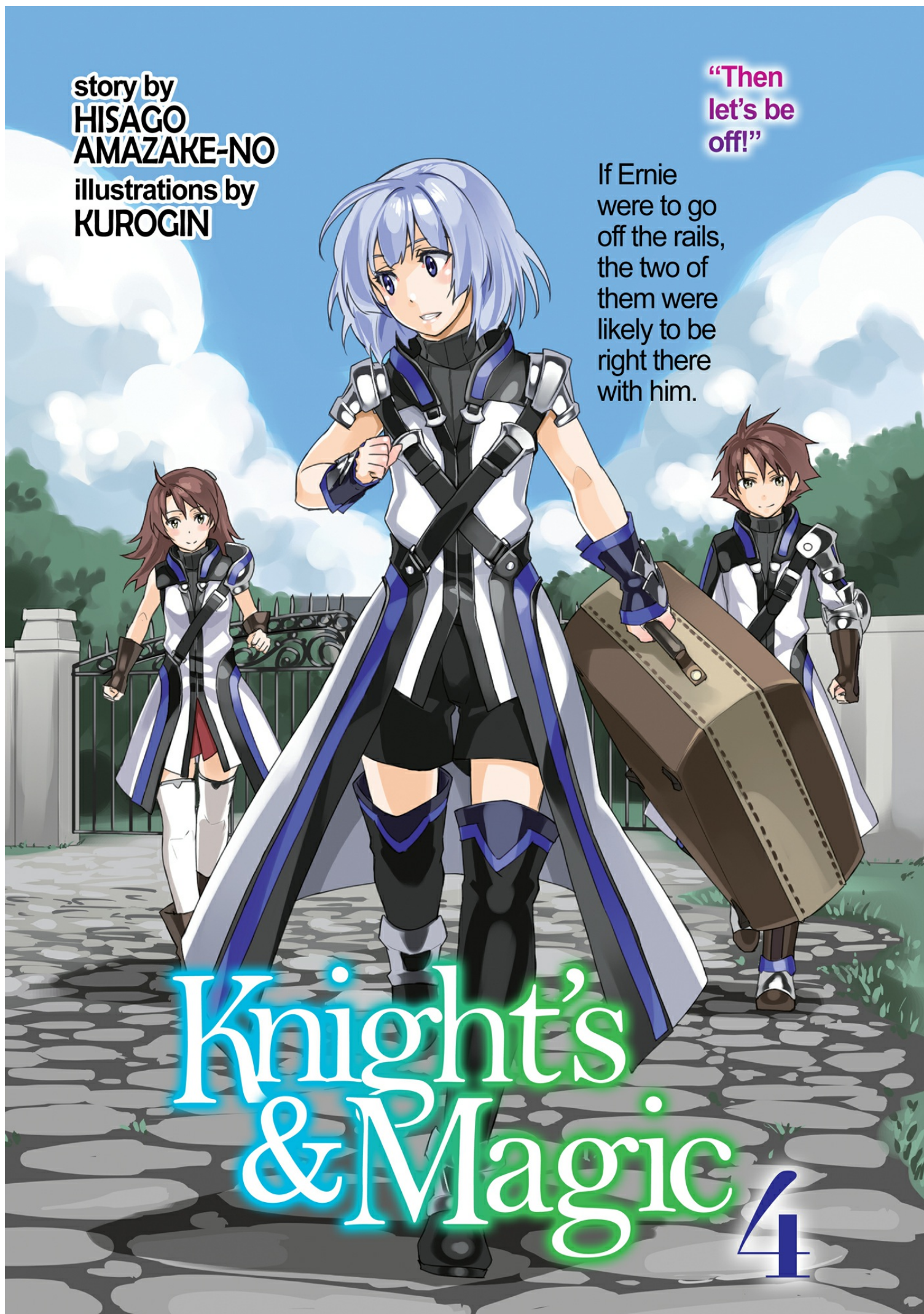
story by
**HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO**
illustrations by
KUROGIN

**“Then
let’s be
off!”**

If Ernie
were to go
off the rails,
the two of
them were
likely to be
right there
with him.

Knight's & Magic

4



**“Pull
yourself
together,
Eleonora!”**

Eleonora didn't react
to Isodora's words;
her head just lolled
around in time with
the shaking of the
carriage like a
broken doll.



Ikaruga



Main Pilot: Ernesti Echevalier

specs

Height: 11.2 m
Operational Weight: 21.6 t
Equipment: Bladed Cannon, halberd,
Rahu's Fist, Magius Jet Thrusters

explanation

The personal unit of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's captain, Ernesti, and also the order's flag unit. Its motif mixes influences from Ernesti's previous Japanese life, so this unit looks more like an armored samurai of Japan than a typical silhouette knight.

It's designed to contain two reactors: its abdomen contains the mid-sized ether reactor, Queen's Coronet, while its back contains the large-sized ether reactor, Behemoth's Heart.

Ikaruga uses the incredible mana output of these reactors to power the adjustable Magius Jet Thrusters installed across its entire chassis, which gives it ridiculous mobility. However, this also necessitates controls so complicated that only Ernesti can operate it. It is history's most defective silhouette knight, but it's also the strongest in the world.

Bladed Cannon

explanation

Ikaruga's personal weapon that looks like a very thick greatsword. A silver plate with an Emblem Graph engraved on it is hidden inside, allowing it to be used as both a sword and a silhouette arms. The very powerful physical enhancement Emblem Graph was added so that a silhouette arms—which is normally quite brittle—can be used as a close combat weapon. This has caused the Blade Cannon to be a rather inefficient weapon that requires a lot of mana just to swing around.



Tyrantor

Main Pilots: Black Knights
of Jaloudek

specs

Height: 12.0 m

Operational

Weight: 30.8 t

Equipment:

heavy mace,

mace, pike,

twin back weapons



explanation

The Kingdom of Jaloudek's cutting-edge heavy silhouette knight. Sacrificing fuel efficiency for power, it uses the fuel inefficient strand-type crystal tissue to its fullest extent, adding as much "muscle" as possible.

It makes use of this strength by equipping uncommonly thick armor, making it both a strong and tough unit. On the other hand, because it is so weighty, its mobility is awful, and it lacks endurance.

“Is... is that you,
Big Brother
Ris?!
I recognize
this voice!
It's
really
you,
isn't
it?”

Isadora
recovered
from her
initial shock
and quickly
jumped into
his arms.







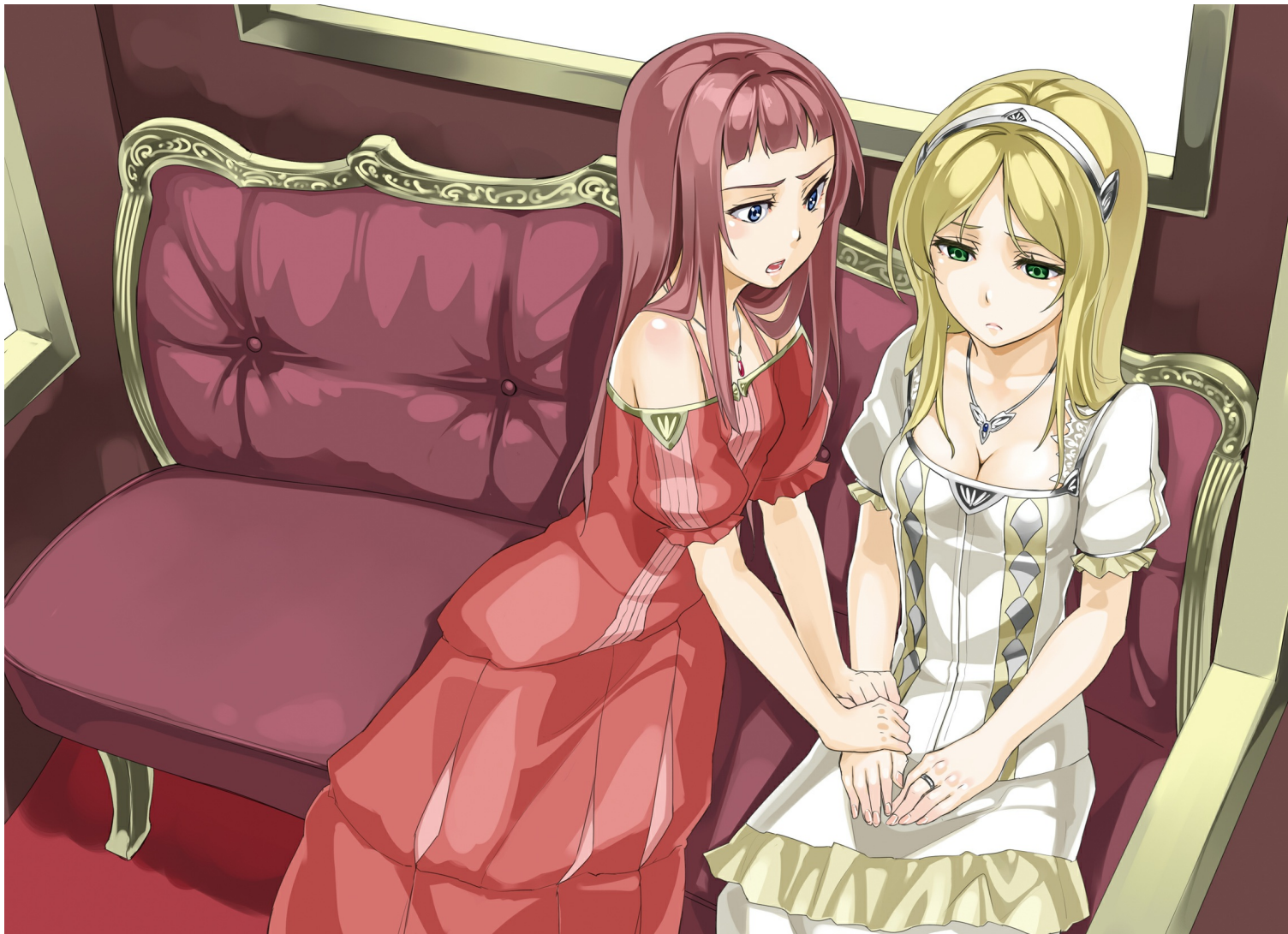




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