In Another World With My Smartphone

17

Patora Fuyuhara
illustration・Eiji Usatsuka





In Another World With My Smartphone 17


"C'MON! I'M TOTALLY READY FOR THIS!"
"CAN'T SAY I EXPECTED TO RIDE THIS THING SO EARLY..."
Opposite the black lion came the voice of Nia, leader of the red cats and master of Rouge, the Red Crown. She was seated inside a massive, deep-red tiger. It was our newest Over Gear, Tiger Rouge.
It was a mechanical beast built from the same base as Frame Gears, only it had Gollem technology at its core. We called those types of machines the Over Gears. Since this Over Gear was exclusive to the Black Crown, Noir, it was only natural that its pilot would be that Gollem's master, Norn. She wasn't exactly thrilled to be riding it so early in the morning.


EVERYONE SAY
"COME ON IN!"

Character Profiles



One of Touya's fiancees.
The elder of the twin sisters saved by Touya some time ago. A ferocious melee fighter, she makes use of gauntlets in combat. Her personality is fairly to-the-point and blunt.
She can make use of Null fortification magic, specifically the spell **[Boost].** She loves spicy foods.



One of Touya's fiancees.
Princess of the Belfast Kingdom. She was twelve years old in her initial appearance, and her eyes are heterochromatic. The right is blue, while the left is green. She has mystic eyes that can discern the true character of an individual. She has three magical aptitudes: Earth, Wind, and Darkness. She's also extremely proficient with a bow and arrow. She fell in love with Touya at first sight.



A highschooler who was accidentally murdered by God. He's a no-hassle kind of guy who likes to go with the flow. He's not very good at reading the atmosphere, and typically makes rash decisions that bite him in the ass. His mana pool is limitless, he can flawlessly make use of every magical element, and he can cast any Null spell that he wants. He's currently the Grand Duke of Brunhild.



One of Touya's fiancees.
She was ten years old in her initial appearance. Her nickname is Sue. The niece of Belfast's king, and Yumina's cousin. Touya saved her from being attacked on the road. She has an innocently adventurous spirit.



One of Touya's fiancees.
The Third Princess of the Regulus Empire, she's Yumina's age. She fell in love with Touya when he saved her during a coup. She likes to fight with twin blades, and she's on good terms with Yumina.



One of Touya's fiancees.
A samurai girl from the far eastern land of Eashen, a country much like Japan. She tends to repeat herself and speak formally, she does. Yae is quite a glutton, eating more than most normal people would dare touch. She's a hard worker, but can sometimes slack off. Her family runs a dojo back in Eashen, and they take great pride in their craft. It's not obvious at first, but her boobs are pretty big.



One of Touya's fiancees.
The younger of the twin sisters saved by Touya some time ago.
She wields magic, specifically from the schools of Light, Water, and Fire. She finds talking to people difficult due to her own shy nature, but she is known to be surprisingly bold at times. Rumors say she might be the kind of girl who enjoys male on male romance... She loves sweet foods.



A stuffed toy bear animated by years upon years of the **[Program]** spell. She's the result of two-hundred years of programmed commands, making her seem like a fully aware living being. Paula... Paula's the worst!



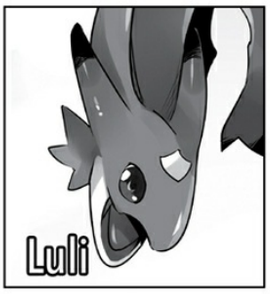
A mysterious girl Touya rescued in Eashen. She had lost her memories, but has now finally gotten them back. Her true identity is Farnese Forneus, daughter of the Xenoahs Overlord. Currently living a peaceful life in Brunhild, and she has joined the ranks of Touya's fiancees.



One of Touya's fiancees.
Former Clan Matriarch of the Fairies, she now serves as Brunhild's Court Magician. She claims to be six-hundred-and-twelve years old, but looks tremendously young. She can wield every magical element except Darkness, meaning her magical proficiency is that of a genius. Leen is a bit of a light-hearted bully.



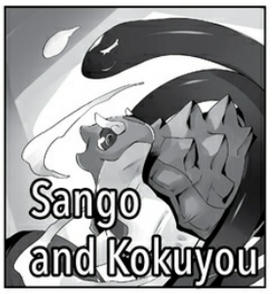
One of Touya's fiancees.
First Princess of the Knight Kingdom Lestia. Her swordplay talents earned her a reputation as a 'Knight Princess'. Touya saved her life when she was attacked by a group of Phrase, and she's loved him ever since. She's a good friend of Yae, and she stammers a bit when flustered.



The fourth of Touya's summoned Heavenly Beasts. She is the Azure Monarch, the ruler of dragons. She often clashes with Kohaku due to her condescending personality.



The third of Touya's summoned Heavenly Beasts. She is the Flame Monarch, ruler of feathered things. Though her appearance is flashy and extravagant, she's actually quite cool and collected.



The second of Touya's summoned Heavenly Beasts. They are the Black Monarch, two in one. The rulers of scaled beasts. They can freely manipulate water. Sango is a tortoise, and Kokuyou is a snake. Sango is a female, and Kokuyou is a male (but he's very much a female at heart).



The first of Touya's summoned Heavenly Beasts. She's the White Monarch, the ruler of beasts, the guardian of the west and a beautiful White Tiger. She can create devastating shockwaves, and also change size at will.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Workshop, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Rosetta for short. Her Airframe Serial Number is #27. For whatever reason, she's the most reliable of the bunch.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Hanging Garden, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Cesca for short. Her Airframe Serial Number is #23. She likes to tell very inappropriate jokes.



The God of Swords.
Claims to be Touya's older sister. She trains the and advises the knights of Brunhild. She's gallant and brave, but also a bit of an airhead at times.



The God of Love.
Claims to be Touya's older sister. She stays in Brunhild because she says she needs to catch a servile god, but doesn't really do all that much in the way of hunting him. She's a total pain in the butt.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Tower, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Noel for short and wears a jersey. Her Airframe Serial Number is #25. She sleeps all the time, and eats laying down. Her tremendous laziness means she doesn't do all that much.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Rampart, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Liora for short and wears a blazer. Her Airframe Serial Number is #20. She's the oldest of the Babylon Gynoids, and would attend to the... Personal night-time needs of Doctor Babylon herself. She has no experience with men.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Hangar, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Monica for short. Her Airframe Serial Number is #28. She's a funny little hard worker who has a bit of a casual streak. She's a good friend of Rosetta, and is the Gynoid with the most knowledge of the Frame Gears.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Alchemy Lab, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Flora for short and wears a nurse outfit. Her Airframe Serial Number is #21. A nurse with dangerously big boobs and even more dangerous medicines.



An ancient genius from a lost civilization, reborn into an artificial body that resembles a small girl. She is the "Babylon" that created the many artifacts and forgotten technologies scattered around the world today. Her Airframe serial number is #29. She remained in stasis for five-thousand years before finally being awakened.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Research Lab, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Tica for short. Her Airframe serial number is #22. Of the Babylon Numbers, she is the one who best embodies Doctor Babylon's inappropriately perverse side.



Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Storehouse, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Parshe for short and wears a shrine maiden outfit. Her Airframe Serial Number is #26. She's tremendously clumsy, even if she's just trying to help. The amount of stuff she ruins is troublingly high.

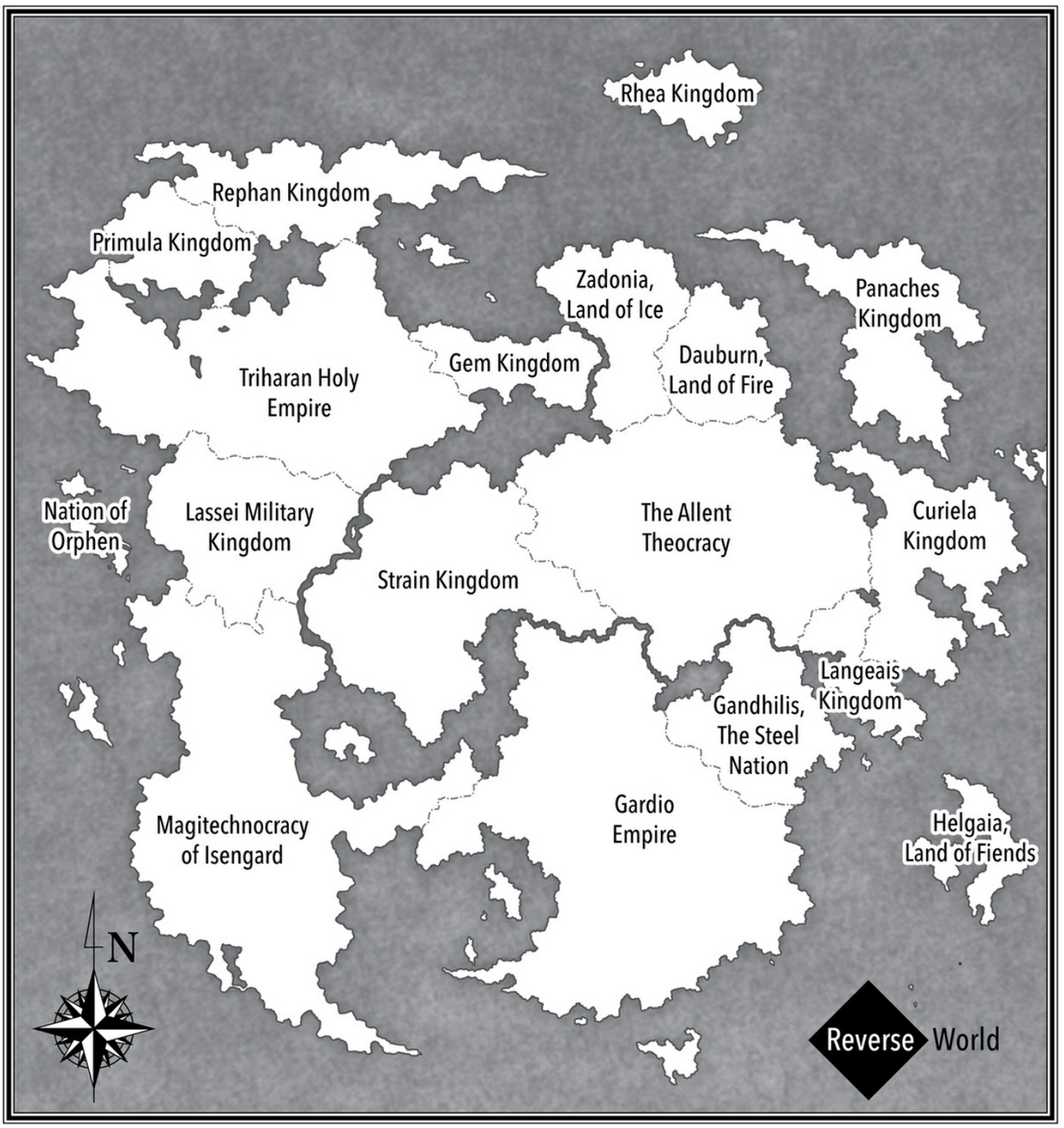


Terminal Gynoid in charge of the Library, one of the Babylon relics. She's called Fam for short and wears a school uniform. Her Airframe Serial Number is #24. She's a total book fanatic and hates being interrupted when she's reading.

The Worlds of In Another World With My Smartphone

World Map





The Story So Far!

Mochizuki Touya, wielding a smartphone customized by God himself, continues to live his life in a new world. After many adventures, Touya, now Grand Duke of a small nation named Brunhild, has joined forces with the other world leaders. Why? To stop the incoming extradimensional threat known as the Phrase. These merciless invaders from another world will stop at nothing until they get what they desire. As Touya continued to investigate potential ways to repel this threat, he found himself falling into another world entirely. This Reverse World was like a mirrored version of the world he knew, and relied on a mysterious mechanical technology known as the Gollems. Now, the fate of two worlds may hang in the balance...

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Character Profiles

Map of the World

Chapter I: Interdimensional Networking

Interlude: The Otherworld Restaurant

Chapter II: The Great Marriage Caper

Chapter III: The Amazing Race

Chapter IV: The Puzzling Horn Concerto

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Chapter I: Interdimensional Networking

There was a great plain to the north of Brunhild castle.

The entire area was covered with a barrier that barred entry to anyone but authorized personnel. It was also enchanted with the same kind of stealth field that surrounded Babylon.

This plain was largely used for testing out Frame Gears, as well as any new inventions or modifications designed by Doctor Babylon. And it just so happened that on this day, one of those tests was ongoing.

“It’s surprisingly swift.”

“Gollems are machines, so it’s obvious they’d be receptive.”

“It isn’t operated manually, so it’s actually a good bit faster than regular Frame Gears in terms of response time.”

Doctor Babylon, along with Elluka, answered my remark as we watched the giant machine running around. The thing before us was an enormous, black, lion-shaped robot. There was a hefty, almost see-through sphere embedded in its chest. It also had various phrasium attachments on its body, that glimmered as they reflected the sun. There were also golden lines of metal that ran across the mech’s structure.

In terms of scale... if a Frame Gear was the size of a human, then this thing would be the size of an actual lion in comparison.

It was the Gollem-enhancing mech that Elluka and Babylon had co-operated on developing. It was called the Over Gear.

The crystal sphere on the chest contained a cockpit, known as the Core Frame. The Gollem would act as the core and situate itself in there alongside its master.

The Over Gear synchronized with the Gollem inside it to bring out stronger versions of what the Gollem could already do. It was basically like a large powered suit that amplified the existing power within the Gollem.

A good question would be why it wasn't humanoid. I certainly wondered the same.

I asked the two of them, and they just responded with, "We wanted to make something freaky."

In other words, those two dumbasses just followed their own whims.

The black lion kicked off the ground and leaped up into the air. I was pretty amazed by the power in its legs. It ran around full-pelt, suddenly stopping and starting itself back up as it pleased. It was incredibly versatile... It definitely had more movement potential than a regular Frame Gear.

"Is it using a Gollem skill right now?"

"No, right now that function is disabled, since it's still a bit unstable. What you're seeing right now is purely the base functionality of the Leo Noir."

In terms of equipment, it only had crystal claws and fangs... But it looked like it could definitely fight multiple Intermediate Constructs with ease. I didn't think it could solo an Upper Construct, though.

"Hm... It might be interesting if we could have it transform into a humanoid mode..."

"The Core Frame is built all around the middle piece anyway, right? It'd just be a case of swapping out parts, though that's not quite transforming." As the two women spoke, the Leo Noir suddenly stopped moving. It lay down on its belly and turned off, after which a young girl and a little black robot emerged from the core in the middle. It was Elluka's younger sister, Norn, along with her Gollem, Noir.

I walked over towards Norn to ask her how she liked it.

"Your movements were pretty solid back there. How was the ride?"

I was met with silence. She didn't react at all. I wondered what was up. Norn looked up at me, her eyes were wiggling around in her head. She was staring like a dead fish. She slowly wobbled towards me unsteadily and grabbed me by the coat.

"...Blurgh..."

“Huh?”

■Please Stand By■

“...Hmm, seems like we didn’t nail the shock absorption.”

“Yeah, looks like the cockpit shook around more than we thought. We’ll need to tweak it to a higher level than the Frame Gear’s standard settings, I guess.”

“Hey, assholes! Quit jabbering and help us out!” I yelled over at Babylon and Elluka, who seemed to have a clinical reaction to the sudden outburst of vomit all over my pants. Norn, who was now prone on the ground and covered in the contents of her own stomach, glared weakly over at the duo.

“I-I can’t control it... It’s too powerful... I just wanted to make it run a little, and that happened...”

Norn stayed flat on the ground as she quietly muttered those words. I could relate a bit to that. When I first cast **[Accel],** it was way too intense... Either way, this meant the sleek display I’d just seen from Leo Noir was completely unintentional on Norn’s part.

She was almost like a newbie in a fighting game, just button-mashing and hoping for the best...

“It shook so much... It... It shook so much...”

“Shhh... There, there...” Noir softly patted at Norn’s puke-caked hair.

“Seems like the first test was a success, at any rate. The only real issue is, we can’t really mass-produce the Over Gears.”

“Really? Why not?”

I butted in when I heard the Doctor say that. *What do you mean you can’t mass-produce this thing? Did you make it specifically for Norn and Noir, like the Valkyrie Gears?*

“It’s a no-go. Each Over Gear needs to be attuned to the specific Gollem it’s made for. They’re basically all personal mechs.”

“So wait, if Nia’s Blood Rouge got into Leo Noir, it wouldn’t be able to do anything?”

“That’s right. Any other Gollem aside from Noir won’t even be able to boot up the Leo Noir. Frame Gears can be used by different people, but that’s not the case here. The Over Gear is powered through its connection with its assigned Gollem, so only the Gollem and its master can make use of it.”

That made sense. Gollems were all uniquely connected to their masters, after all.

“Even Soldats are only connected to one Gollem master. It’d be pointless to have one person who could control multiple Over Gears, anyway. Not to mention the fact that only legacy Gollems can connect to the Over Gears, so it’s basically pointless to mass-produce them.”

We’d still want to produce a lot of them, but it seemed like each one would have to be custom-made.

According to the two geniuses, the Core Frame was the only part that needed to be custom-built, and the other parts could be swapped freely. So for example, if we finished the Core Frame for Nia’s Over Gear, we could just snap the limb parts from Norn’s Over Gear, and it would work.

“Still, we can’t defeat the mutants without them, so we’ll need to hurry.”

“Yes, yes... We’ll continue to make improvements. I’m sure we’ll be able to make a mass-produced variation eventually. Though I doubt it’ll be as powerful or impressive.”

It always came down to either quantity or quality, but we needed a decent amount of both! It was a tricky situation.

It wasn’t like the enemy was going to wait for us to get everything right, either.

On the way back to the castle, I swung by the training field. Moroha was putting them through the grinder, as per usual. But from what I’d seen, they’d at least gotten used to it at this point.

“Touya, you’ve come at the right time.”

“Oh?”

As I watched the knights, Hilde walked over and greeted me. Her breathing

was still a little ragged, since she'd been training herself. I opened up **[Storage]** and pulled out a towel and bottle of water for her.

"Thank you. I was actually just on the phone with my brother, and he was wondering if the Lestian knight order could have a joint training session with ours."

"Reinhard was asking about that?"

Hmm... A joint training session with the knightly elite of Lestia? Sounds fun.

Hilde suddenly smiled a little awkwardly and continued talking.

"I think he's just saying that for the sake of appearances... I think he actually wants to fight against Moroha and receive some more training from her."

That made more sense. Last time Reinhard was in Brunhild, he had a quick duel with Hilde and ended up losing to her. His pride was probably damaged as a result.

Given that Reinhard also had the job of governing a country, it would make sense that Hilde would slowly overtake him in swordplay. Not to mention the fact that Hilde was a beneficiary of my divinity, which was already propelling her past regular humanity.

But still, the idea of a joint training session was appealing. I had recently bothered the former knight king, Galen, by making him judge some newbie adventurers, so this was probably a good way to make it up to them.

I pulled out my smartphone and looked up Reinhard in my contacts.

"Yeah, it's about what you said to Hilde earlier. Yes. Yeah. Uh... wait, now? You wanna do it right now?!"

I didn't mind, I just thought he was being a little too eager. Still, the guy was probably dead set on his goal, so I wasn't about to get between him and it.

I opened up a **[Gate]** to Lestia, and almost immediately, King Reinhard filed through with several elite Lestian knights.

The king of Lestia was technically the commander of the knight order over there, but they did have a proper sub-commander in place for when he was busy.

“Thanks for the invitation.”

“Thank you for obliging.”

The commander of the Lestian forces was exchanging a greeting with Lain, our commander.

The man’s name was Franz Icemann. He was over forty years old, and his hair was clearly greying all over the place. He had a small mustache as well, giving off the full image of a refined gentleman.

It seemed he was a friend of the former king, and somewhat of a mentor to the current king. He was considered a swordmaster in Lestia, and had been personally trained by Galen a long time ago. The man seemed very serious and studious man, so I was glad he didn’t take after Galen.

Typically, in joint training sessions, the commanders didn’t participate.

After all, if a commander lost in a battle against the commander from another nation, it would look extremely bad. If Lain lost to him, we’d definitely be looked down on.

That was how it usually went, at least... But apparently, the first one out to fight was the goddamn king of the country.

The first match got off to a flying start. It was Moroha and Reinhard, and their blades were clashing every other second. The knights gathered around and watched in awe.

...Awe at how brutally Reinhard was getting his ass handed to him, at least.

“...You could at least hold back a bit.”

I sighed quietly and pinched the bridge of my nose. Moroha was seriously dense. I was just glad that, even though they were watching a foreign king get beaten severely, all of my knights had the social awareness not to laugh.

They all understood how scary Moroha was, anyway... They probably felt bad for Reinhard.

Technically, Moroha wasn’t part of our knight order, so I could probably explain this away somehow... She was only here in an advisory capacity!

...Wait. If she's not a member of our order, then why the hell is she even participating in the joint training exercise?!

Reinhard took another heavy blow and got blasted out of the arena. It was hard to watch.

"Lady Moroha is truly a monster. It's incredible. My heart races just looking at her brutalize him..."

"A-Ah... W-Well, please forgive us... I'm sorry about my sister, she's a little extreme..."

I winced a little at Franz's commentary. Moroha really had to learn to read the mood... Sending a foreign king flying away like that could spark a war in some cases...

"No, no. It's not a bother at all. Our king certainly seems to be happy. Seeing such a terrifying wall before him makes me certain that he'll keep on striving to fight harder and faster."

I understood his logic. I'd certainly grown in strength since I'd arrived in this world, and that was through overcoming hardships. I still wasn't nearly on Moroha's level, though.

I couldn't afford to become complacent, since I was surrounded by gods. The moment I started getting all cocky, they'd put me in my place...

"We've recently added magic beast combat to our training schedule. It isn't seeing much success, though... Capturing the beasts and bringing them back is proving difficult, so we're considering just going out and training in the wild."

"Brunhild doesn't have much in the way of magical beasts, either. Our knights aren't really experienced at fighting them. There should be plenty of strong ones on the dungeon islands, though..."

Lestia had a massive amount of knights. After all, it was the knight kingdom. Many of them were assigned to protect towns, so they needed to know how to deal with unusual threats like magical beasts.

Often, the knight order would collaborate with the guild in order to hunt down magical beasts. That was even a way for adventurers to get their foot in

the door in terms of joining knight orders. Galen, who ended up becoming the king over there, started off as an adventurer as well.

There was certainly no harm in trying out some combat training against monsters, though.

“Hm... I’ll go find some random monsters and bring them back, then. Should be fine if I focus on ones we can eat afterward.”

“What?” I left behind the bewildered Franz and opened up a **[Gate]** to fetch some beasties for the knights to try their hands against.

“You need to aim for the joints or your swords won’t do anything... Don’t just stand in front of it, it’s gonna blow out bubbles. They’ll melt your skin if they touch you!”

I clicked my tongue as I yelled advice to the swarming knights. Both the knights from Brunhild and Lestia were fighting against a massive red-shelled Bloody Crab. Obviously, I had forbidden the Brunhild knights from using their phrasium blades, since that would’ve basically been cheating.

By guild standards, the Bloody Crab was a red target, the same tier as a Lesser Dragon. This particular magic beast was actually found in Lestia now and then, too.

That being said, this specimen was a little larger than usual... It could’ve even been considered a silver foe.

“It’s a bit big, isn’t it...?” Hilde muttered to herself as the Bloody Crab scuttled after the knights. She was right, it was.

“I’m just guessing here, but it might be turning into a Behemoth... If we’d left it a couple more years, we might’ve had to kill it with Frame Gears.” I shrugged and gave my hypothesis as I cast Healing magic on a knight who almost had his arm snipped off. The knight rose to his feet and promptly charged back toward the monster.

There were around twenty men in total fighting it, and they had ample support from my healing. It had nowhere to run, so they could probably kill it.

“Hm... It’s quite easy to see its movements from the side. See how its forelegs

clench together before it shoots its bubble?”

“You’re right. Also, it seems to shuffle slightly after swinging its pincers. Its follow-ups are quite well telegraphed.” Reinhard and Franz were looking at the crab from the side. They were being pretty smart. Observation was the best way to deal with an enemy. You could build a strategy around how it attacks. Human or magic beast, all things could be analyzed that way.

“You should’ve brought in a cyclops or something to make it more interesting.”

“No thanks... Why would I bring in a giant? That’s the kind of thing I’d reserve for Frame Gears.”

Moroha, who was still being casual and blunt, made a stupid comment. Cyclopes were magical beasts around the same size as golems. They tended to be smaller than Frame Gears, but they could vary in size.

“They could deal with one without a Frame Gear, I’m sure. You just need to find the best way to kill it. It would probably help their training, in all honesty. Finding out your opponent’s weakness and targeting it is a vital part of battle. Knowing which weapons are the best and exactly when and where to strike are the best ways to get better. You need to know how to bring out the best in you and your allies and move without overexerting yourself. If you do all that, the fight would be easy.” *Easier said than done...*

I sighed at Moroha’s nonchalant talk, then turned and noticed the knights had weakened the Bloody Crab considerably. They all charged in. Their spears pierced the leg joints, while axes cleaved the front pincers off. After that, a small group of knights pierced their swords through its underside, sending the Bloody Crab crashing to the ground.

“Woohoo!”

“W-We actually did it...”

“Hell yeah!”

The knights from Brunhild and Lestia all celebrated in their own ways, cheering out in joy with each other. A few were wounded, but I patched them up right away. Then, I used **[Refresh]** to restore everyone’s stamina.

“That’s it for the training session, then.”

“Seems so.”

I nodded to Hilde and opened up **[Storage],** producing a massive cooking pot. Then, I used Earth magic to create a basic stove in the ground and added some water to the pot with magic and lit the stove.

I took out a table and lined up a few snacks on it, then poured some miso into the pot as a base stock.

“Alright fellas, we’re having Bloody Crab hotpot tonight!”

“Yeaaah!”

The knights all took up their swords and started slicing up the Bloody Crab.

I threw the cut-up pieces into the big pot along with some tofu, veggies, mushrooms, and assorted meats. Slowly, but surely, it began to smell even better as it boiled. Everyone happily ate their portions for dinner, and they smiled in delight. I wasn’t too surprised they were happy, since they’d all worked hard to hunt this meal themselves.

As I was idly thinking about how much tastier this magical beast was than regular crabs, my smartphone began to vibrate.

“Oh, it’s Silhouette.”

Silhouette was the leader of a series of brothels in the Reverse World, as well as the boss of the Black Cats, an intelligence-gathering organization. She usually forwarded information to me from the other world, but it was unusual for her to call me. I was a little worried.

“‘Sup. Yeah. Uh-huh... Yup. Yup... What?!”

Hold on a goddamn second. I know I beat the old cyborg guy there a while ago, but...

What the hell do you mean by “the Magitechnocracy of Isengard is falling apart?!”

◇ ◇ ◇

The Reverse World, Magitechnocracy of Isengard.

A land once governed by the fearsome and insane witch-king.

He was an insane old man, who also happened to be a cyborg. He revived an ancient weapon and attempted to ravage his own nation with it before I put a stop to it.

I wasn't interested in anything to do with Isengard after all of that, so I didn't bother checking in on them after the witch-king died.

But apparently, the country was now falling apart at the seams... I had no idea what had happened. Apparently it had all begun two weeks before my phone call, when golden snow started falling in different parts of the country.

The snow subsided after a short amount of time, and nobody thought anything of it. But then a few days later, people started getting sick. They burned up, got all feverish... Their insides reportedly felt like they were twisting around... And then they died. The population was wracked with fear and paranoia due to the sudden outbreak of this terrifying disease. New carriers kept appearing everywhere, and nobody could identify what was going on.

But that was only the beginning of the end for them.

It was reported by those attempting to bury the dead, that strange golden flowers had been sprouting from the bodies of the infected.

And, with time, those corpses rose back up and started attacking the living.

It happened everywhere. Small towns, bustling cities... It was said that Zombies now walked the streets of northern Isengard, shambling around with golden flowers growing from their bodies.

This plague hadn't affected the entire country, but had mostly wiped out the northern territories.

I heard the name of the place this had originally broken out, and my blood ran cold... It was the town of Zeen.

Months back, a group of mutated Phrase had appeared near that town. I'd taken care of them, but I recalled the Ostrich-like enemy pecking at the ground over and over before it died.

It was possible that the strange behavior had something to do with all of this

now.

I brought Yumina, Sakura, and Sue with me to the other world. We warped directly to the outskirts of Zeen.

“Wh-What the hell?!” I stared in horror as I looked at a massive golden tree sprawled out before me. That wasn’t there last time.

It only resembled a plant on a superficial level. It was over a hundred meters tall and had a clear metallic sheen to it. Even its leaves looked like sheets of gold.

It was enormous. There were various trees back on Earth that could rival this one in size, but I’d still never seen anything like it before.

It was hard to look at, too. The gold color meant it was constantly reflecting light. It also looked like a bizarre mismatch of various tree species. Parts of it looked like a pine tree, parts of it resembled a cypress tree, while other parts of it kind of looked like a rosebush and a bamboo grove. This giant tree was a freakish amalgamation of metallic pieces that resembled different plants.

“Touya... What is this?”

“It’s probably the same species as the mutants...” I’d convinced myself, there and then. The ostrich had likely planted this deep in the ground as a last-ditch effort before it died.

“Doesn’t that make this thing a mutant too...?” Sue posed a reasonable question.

I’d never seen a plant-based Phrase before, but it looked just like a mutant Phrase in terms of composition. It stood to reason that if there were Phrase plants out there, then they could also be corrupted and mutated in the same way.

“...Then that snow they reported probably wasn’t snow at all. It was probably spores from this tree, spreading all over Isengard.”

“...Like a mushroom...?” Sakura frowned. She wasn’t a huge fan of mushrooms. But I was of the opinion you needed them in your diet to grow big and strong. That one mustached plumber certainly knew the benefits of

mushrooms.

“I guess so, yeah. I guess anyone who breathed in the spores ended up becoming those Zombies.”

Although it was probably more accurate to say that they became Phrase mutants, rather than Zombies.

“The mutants devour souls, remember? That’s probably why not everyone was affected. The ones who did succumb were probably people with deeper negative emotions.”

According to Silhouette, most of the victims were adults. That made sense, since older people typically had more stresses, prejudices, and reservations weighing on them.

That being said, there were still some children who were affected. Child Zombies had been reported in slum areas. It made sense that things like this would change based on the environment.

Zeen was basically done for. A full third of their population had been zombified, another third had been killed, and the last third had fled.

The Zombies weren’t exactly strong on their own. Combat-oriented Gollems were more than a match for them. But if their numbers swelled too much, they were overwhelming.

The afflicted people of Zeen moved towards other towns and started attacking them as well. It’s the kind of thing you’d see in a cheesy B-movie, but sadly this was all too real for the citizens.

“We gotta do something about this, Touya! Let’s get rid of this dumb old tree!”

Sue was right. We needed to uproot this thing to prevent it from causing any more harm. The only thing I wondered was where its core would be...

“I guess it could be underground or something... Hm...?” I saw something up at the top of the tree. Just for a split-second, I caught a glimpse of a blood-red object high up in the branches.

“[Long Sense].”

I projected my senses to get a closer look. About eighty meters up the tree, there was a blood-red Phrase core surrounded by thorny, golden branches.

That confirmed the tree's status as a mutant Phrase, at least.

I was glad I could see the core so clearly, but it was also unreasonably large... It was about four meters in diameter. If this tree was a Phrase, then it was easily an Upper Construct.

Sakura and Sue noticed the core as well. It was a bit hard to see from the ground, but the color contrast made it stand out.

"...Should we break it...?"

"Yeah!"

Almost as if it had heard Sue's affirmation to destroy it, the tree quivered. Several thorned branches shot out from underfoot and began lashing at us.

I barely had time to react before the vines were upon us, attempting to slice us up from every direction.

"[Teleport]!"

I warped myself and the three girls away from the tree. We landed at a spot several hundred meters away.

We looked at the tree in the distance, more and more thorny vines were rising from the ground and wildly lashing out. That was almost a very messy, dangerous situation...

It made sense that it'd have a defensive function, given that it was stationary. I just didn't expect the attack to come from underground. I was thinking it'd have razor leaves that it could fire at us, or maybe the ability to grow spiky fruit to drop on us...

The wall of thorns was getting denser by the minute. Even if we were in Frame Gears we'd have a hard time getting through without being damaged. Which meant there was only one thing to be done.

"Yumina, you got this?"

"Yes, I can handle this with relative ease." Yumina held out her engagement

ring, which was enchanted with **[Storage],** and her Frame Gear emerged from it on the spot.

Brunnhilde, her personal silver Frame Gear. It specialized in long-range attacks.

Yumina clambered into Brunnhilde's cockpit, brandished the sniper rifle that was on its back, and aimed straight ahead for the tree.

"One shot, one kill..."

Brunnhilde's hefty finger pulled down on the trigger, sending the crystal bullet in a straight beeline for the tree's core.

The bullet found its mark easily, obliterating the golden tree's blood-red core in a second. Just in case that wasn't enough, the **[Explosion]** enchantment on the round went off, burning the fragments to ash.

The giant tree imploded like a demolished building, crumbling to the ground with a great crash.

The golden remains eventually began to liquefy, turning into blackish goo before dissolving entirely. It was an unpleasant sight as ever...

"...Will it be safe now...?"

"For the time being, I guess."

I shrugged at Sakura. It ended up being a lot easier than I thought it would be.

That would at least put a stop to any new afflicted people in Isengard. Now all I had to do was handle the ones that were still active and dangerous.

I pulled up the map and searched for the Zombies. Just as I'd assumed, there were tons of them all over the northern area of Isengard.

I wondered how to deal with it. The range was a bit too broad for my area-of-effect spells, and they had the Phrase trait of being able to absorb magic anyway.

[Meteor Rain] was an option, but that attack was so indiscriminate that it'd obliterate everything around the Zombies too.

"Hm...?"

As I pondered my options, I noticed that the Zombie pins on the map were starting to vanish. *Wait, what? The infected people are vanishing?*

“What’s this supposed to mean?”

“...Maybe they’re going down because we took out the tree...”

Sue and Sakura looked at each other. That seemed like the most reasonable assumption, but it seemed like a pretty convenient turn of events...

Yumina hopped down from Brunnhilde and looked at the map before offering her own opinion.

“It’s possible that the giant tree was controlling the infected people... Don’t you think?”

That did make a lot of sense. It would be similar to the Soldats, with the giant tree operating as a transmitter.

That would make the flowers that sprouted out of their bodies the receivers. My **[Search]** spell no longer recognized them as mutant Phrase, so they’d probably ended up dissolving just like the tree did.

“We should go see Silhouette. She might have more info on this.”

I spoke up my plan, but Yumina wrinkled her nose in response. I wondered what was up.

“...I’m not so sure about going there... We do have Sue with us, after all.”

Ah... I could understand Yumina’s apprehension toward taking a twelve-year-old into a brothel... But she and Lu were pretty young too!

“Huh? How come I can’t come?” Sue suddenly spoke up.

Sue, no. Stop right there. I’m not going to have to explain sex work to you. That’s not my job. Then again, if I give a vague answer that’s just gonna be even more confusing...



Fiancee or not, I couldn't bring myself to say, "A brothel is a place where people pay to do sexual things with other people." Sue was a younger girl, that would just come off as weird! That being said, I was sure she had some degree of sexual knowledge thanks to the teachings of the perverted doctor and her freaky maid...

"F-For now, I'll go contact Silhouette. Yumina, Sakura, you guys can explain it to Sue! See ya!"

"What?!"

"...That's unfair, Grand Duke..."

I ignored my own irresponsibility as I turned around and pulled my phone up to my ear.

After the call, we headed to the commercial city found in the northern part of the Strain Kingdom. The city was home to Silhouette's brothel, which was also the headquarters of the Black Cats intelligence agency.

We sat at an open cafe in the corner of the city, waiting for our contact to arrive.

As it happened, she arrived before our tea did.

"Sorry to keep you guys waiting."

"It's all good. We appreciate you coming."

The bewitching, smiling beauty before us was none other than the leader of the Black Cats. She was Silhouette Lily, one of my co-operators in the Reverse World.

Sue was with us, so we didn't want the first meeting to be at the brothel... I felt bad for dragging Silhouette all the way out here just because of that.

Silhouette sat down with us and ordered a drink from the waiter. She seemed pretty calm, but the hulking, black-clad men who came with her were freaking everyone else out!

"First, I believe I owe you my thanks. The incident in Isengard seems to mostly be over. Was that your work?"

“Ah... So the infected actually did vanish?”

“The infected? Oh, you mean those flowered corpses? Yes, they did. About an hour ago they melted into nothingness, all at once.”

I was glad to hear that. I shared the information about the giant tree with Silhouette and wrapped up my business with her.

“Mm... I feel a little guilty, then. If we’d only noticed that tree sooner...”

“The sensor tablet didn’t give off a reading at all?”

“It didn’t. I wonder why that is...”

Our sensors were meant to be foolproof detectors that could pick up readings from the Phrase and their mutated offshoots. They worked by picking up the wavelengths generated by Phrase movement as they pushed into this world. My hypothesis was that the tree wasn’t detected because it was planted in the Reverse World from the get-go, so the seed wasn’t picked up because it came in with an earlier wave of mutants.

Silhouette seemed to agree with that idea, too. It hadn’t passed through the world barrier on its own, so there was nothing about it that could’ve been detected.

After the conversation, I introduced Sue and Sakura to Silhouette. Once she learned the two of them were my fiancees, she started teasing them about various things... Only Yumina and I got flustered, though. Sakura and Sue weren’t sexually versed enough to understand most of what the devilish woman was getting at.

After she was done teasing, Silhouette brought up another point of conversation.

“I heard from Est in the Red Cats. Is it true you’ve been teaching them magic?”

“Uh... A little, I guess.”

I gulped cautiously, having already spotted the glint in Silhouette’s eyes. I knew what she wanted.

“Ah... You know... magic can only be used by people with the right aptitudes,

so...”

“Can’t you check the aptitudes, sweetie?”

“Y-Yes.”

Silhouette’s bewitching smile forced me to co-operate with her. Yumina and the girls stared at me and shook their heads as I obediently took out a small pouch of spellstone shards. *Look, I’m just paying her back for how much she’s helped us...*

I hoped that she had no aptitude so I could be spared the bother, but men like me rarely got what they wanted. Silhouette had an excellent aptitude for darkness.

Thankfully, that was one of the easiest schools of magic to teach. I wasn’t going to teach her ancient curses, so I decided she only needed to know about summoning.

“Summoning? Like calling forth a familiar?”

“Kinda, yeah. Usually what you summon is randomized, basically down to dumb luck. But I can help you narrow those results down a little. Is there anything in particular you’d want in a summon?”

“Mm... A cat would be good, I think? One that could serve as an adept bodyguard.”

...I’m not so sure you’ll be able to do that, Silhouette. Even if you manage to make a contract, your magic reserves are so low that you’d only be able to summon it for a few minutes at a time. A bodyguard is kind of outta the question. I shrugged and decided to let her find out for herself.

I wondered why she wouldn’t be fine with a Gollem as a bodyguard. I asked her that and she said the aesthetic just wasn’t right. I couldn’t comprehend the woman’s need for form over function...

We’d cause a fuss if we summoned something in the cafe, so I moved us all to a different area.

I summoned Kohaku to my side and began drawing a magic circle on the ground. Then, I asked Kohaku to fuse her spiritual energy into the circle, while

Silhouette channeled her own magic power into it. Hopefully that would help her get a cat.

An explosion of black mist formed at the center of the circle before dispersing. Almost as if it was formed of the mist itself, a black-furred panther stepped forth from the middle of the circle.

“...White Monarch, is that you? It has been quite a while.”

“Indeed it has. You’re looking well.”

The black panther spoke to Kohaku, reverence clear in its voice. Seemed like it was the type that could speak. That was nice. Kohaku informed me that this creature was the Lightning Panther, and it had mastery over electricity.

Kohaku explained the situation, and the Lightning Panther agreed to contract itself with Silhouette. I took out a collar with a silver tag attached to it from **[Storage].**

“What’s this?”

“The collar’s normal, but the tag is special. I poured a large amount of my own magic into it, so it should be able to sustain the panther’s presence. That way he’ll be able to remain here as your bodyguard.”

I headed over to put the collar on the black panther, but the barrier around the magical circle stopped me. *Oh, duh. I gotta wait for Silhouette to finalize the contract.*

Silhouette named the panther Shade, and it stepped out from the magical circle. After that, I put the collar around its neck and left it at that.

“...Wow... I can talk to it through my mind?”

“Yeah, that’s telepathy. You should be able to talk even if you’re separated.”

But if you do end up separated then you’re doing a shitty job at bodyguarding...

Shade, unlike Kohaku, was incapable of transforming into a smaller version of itself. That meant that Silhouette would basically be walking around everywhere with a giant panther. Certainly one way to attract attention...

“I stand out a lot as it is, so this is fine by me. I’m actually pleased, since Shade here will be able to scare off bad people.”

Silhouette smiled as she stroked Shade’s head. That made sense enough to me.

Sakura and Sue joined in on the Shade petting. Eventually, Silhouette turned toward me and clasped her hands together.

“Oh, right. There’s actually someone I want you to meet. She’s in the city right now. Could you perhaps come with me?”

“Who, exactly?”

“This country’s most important woman...” Silhouette grinned, eyes brimming with mischief. We returned her expression with blank stares.

◇ ◇ ◇

Silhouette took us to a high-class restaurant, one that was clearly more for nobles than commoners. There wasn’t really such a thing as a dress code in the Reverse World, but I didn’t feel comfortable going inside a place like that in my adventurer getup.

When I saw the venue, I took a brief detour back to Drakliff island. Yumina, Sue, and Sakura each took some formalwear out from the **[Storage]** in their rings, while I got changed as well.

I changed into a blazer, shirt, and pants based on the uniform I’d first worn upon arriving in the other world. Zanac, who I had sold that uniform to, had designed the one I was wearing now. He said it wasn’t one of his best works, but I couldn’t see that at all. It was almost indistinguishable from the original, and was definitely more durable due to the difference in base materials.

It was nice to wear a necktie as well, since I hadn’t really had a chance to wear one since I originally died. I decided to keep Brunhild hanging around my belt, just in case.

“Are those new clothes? They suit you really nicely.”

“...You look handsome, Grand Duke...”

“That’s our Touya for you!”

My fiancees all sang my praises. I thanked them, but I felt a little bit too flattered for my own good. That reminded me of the fact that Zanac was the only person who ever saw me in my school uniform.

Once we returned to the restaurant, Silhouette raised an eyebrow.

“What strange garments. Are they what you wear during formal meetings in the other world?”

“Uh... Not exactly. They’re worn in the place I come from, though.” They were common in my original world, but there was no way I was going to explain that I was from ANOTHER another world. Students in Japan wore blazers and uniforms for certain formal events, so it was suitable enough...

Once we finally entered the restaurant, one of the members of staff went wide-eyed and ran over to Silhouette.

The black panther, Shade, was with us. It was clearly causing some kind of confusion.

The staff was obviously concerned, but Silhouette simply patted Shade on the head and explained its status as her bodyguard. We did have Kohaku with us, too, so they just rolled with it. Then again, Kohaku looked more like a cat than a tiger in her mini-form.

Also, if I had to make a guess... I’d say that this restaurant was probably affiliated with the Black Cats. That also probably meant there was no need for us to dress up... But then again, we didn’t want to look bad in front of this other person we were here to meet.

Speaking of which, they were apparently already there. We were brought up to the restaurant’s second floor and entered a small room within the inner area. Inside the room was a single large table, with a woman seated at it. There were two silver-colored knight-like Gollems standing behind her.

The woman seemed to be around forty years old, with blue eyes slightly obscured by a pair of glasses. She smiled softly and gave off the same gentle air that Yumina’s mother, Queen Yuel, did.

Her hair was light brown, brushed aside and held in place by a clip. She also wore a silver tiara on top of her head. It gleamed ever-so-slightly in the dim

light of the room.

This woman was clearly of noble birth, but she also didn't seem obnoxious enough to flaunt that.

"Forgive our lateness, Your Highness. Did we keep you waiting?"

"Not at all, I've only just arrived. Who are these people?"

"Ah, right. This is Mochizuki Touya and his fiancees."

The woman nodded at Silhouette, and then stood up to bow in our direction.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the ruler of the Kingdom of Strain, Margarita Twente Strain. I'm glad I finally got the chance to speak with you. I've heard much."

"...Nice to meet you, I'm Mochizuki Touya. You've heard of me?"

I bowed my head to Queen Margarita, but I was certainly curious how she knew of me. Perhaps Silhouette had been telling her things.

"Strain has its own group of intelligence operatives, I'll have you know. You've been the talk of our spies for quite some time. You're an adept mage who stopped a war between Primula and Triharan. You felled the golden beasts that appeared in Isengard's territory, as well as returning later on to defeat an ancient superweapon. You fought off the purple crown and took leadership of the Red Cats. You also seem to live on an island populated by nothing else but dragons! Plus, it seems you've made considerable inroads with the Black Cats, as well."

"...That's sort of right, but you're off on a few points..."

I didn't lead the Red Cats, nor did I actually live on the dragon island... Though I guess my holiday home was there, so it wasn't really wrong.

"Could I ask what your relationship with Silhouette is?"

"She's a client of our kingdom... so to speak. She informs me of things that I need to know. Obviously she won't sell me information on other nations that I could use for political gain, but her information network on the affairs within my own realm is enough for me. She helps me nip potential threats in the bud before they become issues."

Threats, eh...? Guess it's rough being a ruler, so I won't pry. Honestly, I think if I ask any more I'll just get roped into helping out... Interesting to know that the Strain Kingdom has an insurgency issue, though...

I looked over at Yumina for a small second, to which she replied with a small nod and a smile. Seemed like her mystic eye hadn't picked anything bad up, so this queen was fine in my book.

That being said, she didn't necessarily have to be a bad person to be trouble... The world leaders back in the other world were nice people, but a handful. Personally, this queen seemed sly as a fox.

"Let's sit down and enjoy the food for now. I'm sure you'll find it to your liking."

We all sat down at the table. Shade trotted over by Silhouette's chair and lay down on the floor next to her.

Kohaku had taken the liberty of hopping up on to Yumina's lap. Personally, I thought that'd make it a bit difficult to eat. As I pondered to myself, a carpaccio dish was brought out to the table. The herb sauce looked especially tasty.

I bit into the thin slices of meat, mixing it with the veggies and sauce in my mouth. *Oh man, this is great... If this is what we've got for the appetizer, then I can't wait to see the main course...*

The only thing throwing me off is I don't know what kind of meat this is... It tastes kinda like beef, and I guess it can't be weird if a queen's eating it...

"Touya, have you ever heard of a country named Belfast?"

I just about spat all the meat in my mouth all over the table in response to the queen of Strain's sudden statement. I hurriedly wiped my mouth and downed a glass of water.

I turned to Yumina and saw that she'd slightly choked on some of her food as well.

"It seems you have, then."

"...I have, yes. But where would you have heard of this country before, Your Highness?"

I would understand if she asked about Brunhild, I'd already mentioned that country to Nia and the king of Primula... But I had never once mentioned Belfast in this part of the world. Not ever.

"Over the last few months, there have been incidents of strange people appearing in the kingdom. Originally, we believed these bizarre refugees who cannot speak our language to be from the far-off frontier nations. But gradually, they began to learn our language, and we realized we were wrong. Some of them were capable of wielding magic, which was unusual in itself. But they also mentioned hailing from nations such as Belfast, Roadmare, Regulus, and Felsen. Do you know anything about this?"

"Wh..."

What?! There are people who slipped through the seams of the world barrier over here again? Are you kidding me?

"We've certainly never heard of these nations before. We asked them if they weren't confused, if these countries were actually smaller towns or cities. They were adamant that was not the case. And there was one interesting common thread amongst these people. When we showed them a world map, they all insisted that it was backward."

Silhouette remained silent as the queen talked to us. I'd already briefed Silhouette about where I was from, so I wouldn't have been too surprised to learn that she'd informed the queen about it.

But given how this conversation was going, it seemed like the queen hadn't been informed of anything in advance.

"I'll cut to the chase. Where are you from?"

She went right for the main issue at hand. Her eyes didn't seem sharp or accusatory, though. She seemed genuinely curious.

I didn't exactly want to hide the truth, so I figured it would be best if I just came out and told her. She was a world leader, so she could probably be trusted.

"...You've probably already guessed it, but we're visitors from another world. The world we came from is a neighbor, or a twin, to this one. I'm royalty, albeit

a bit of a newcomer. I rule as grand duke of a nation called Brunhild. This girl here is Yumina, and she's the princess of the aforementioned Belfast."

The queen's eyes went wide with shock. Not at the mention of us being from another world, but more at the fact that she was in the presence of a royal princess.

Yumina simply smiled over at her and nodded softly.

I decided to brief the queen of Strain over the key points that'd happened since I came to the Reverse World.

The appetizer plates were removed from the table, and a tasty soup was brought in. I spoke while savoring the meal before me.

By the time we finished the main course, I had roughly wrapped up the basic gist of the situation. Ordinarily, it'd be pretty hard to actually buy a story like this, but the appearances of the mutants, the refugees from the other world, and even me being there in front of her all added credibility to the tale.

I also showed her videos of the other world, including Frame Gear battles.

I also informed her about the battle we'd just had against the giant tree.

"I'd heard that Isengard was undergoing a crisis, but I had no idea it was that bad... You're saying the peculiar incidents there weren't caused by a disease?"

"That's right. The spores sent out by the mutant tree... Or maybe they were seeds? I dunno. Either way, they reacted with the negativity in the people they landed on and blossomed into flowers that took over the person. We've killed the tree now, so everything affected by it should've died with it."

I couldn't say for sure that similar trees hadn't been planted elsewhere in the world, though.

"...Is it true that our world will be merging with yours in the future, then?"

"It is. There may be small earthquakes and other strange natural events while things settle. There might even be more of those people who appear out of nowhere. In fact, it's probable that people from your world will end up appearing in ours here and there, too. We need to do our best to keep these unfortunate people safe."

Not including criminals, though. If someone comes through into my world and starts a killing spree, I'm not exactly going to treat them with kindness and compassion.

"Very well. We'll endeavor to protect those that appear in our kingdom."

I was thankful for her co-operation. Hopefully we could send the poor bastards home.

"I wish to inform the neighboring theocracy of this. There've been various individuals who have appeared in their borders, as well. The holy king has been quite concerned as of late."

Ah... The Allent Theocracy? That's the first nation I ever arrived in over here.

According to the queen of Strain, one of the cross-world refugees appeared in Allent. He had the ability to use recovery magic, which caused quite a stir. He couldn't communicate with anyone, but was formally welcomed because his talent was exceedingly rare in the Reverse World.

Given his propensity for magic, he was probably from Felsen.

He apparently just appeared in Allen, the holy capital, one day. Speaking of that city, I hoped Mr. Sancho and the others I met there were doing well. That was also where I met Nia and the Red Cats for the first time.

"I'm planning on hosting a summit meeting between the leaders of the other world, and some of the leaders from this world. Would you be interested in joining that?"

"Let me see... From what I understand, Primula, Triharan, and Gardio would be participating? In that case, the Kingdom of Strain would be happy to participate. Our allies in the Allent Theocracy, the Lassei Military Kingdom, and the Panaches Kingdom should be happy to join as well."

"Panaches... Ah, I've met the prince of that nation. It was a while ago during a fight against some mutants. He's certainly a colorful character..."

If I recalled correctly, he was the blue crown's master. His name was Robert or something.

He had that silly little crown atop his blonde bowl cut and wore those weird

pumpkin puffy pants with white tights... Even if you hated his style, there was no doubt it left an impression on you.

The queen smiled wryly in response to my words.

“I can’t say much about his fashion sense, but he is a splendid young man with a firm sense of justice. As it happens, he’s engaged to my niece.”

Oh, huh... He’s engaged? Guess that means Strain will have a blood connection to Panaches, then. Neat.

“The blue crown of the Panaches royal family is a mighty force, it has come to our aid many times in the past. Most crowns and their masters don’t care for serving individual nations, so Prince Robert and his blue crown have been a godsend for us.”

That made sense enough to me. The black, red, and purple crowns all had pretty problematic masters... In that sense, the sleepy prince was definitely a strong force for good.

Oh, right.

“We’ll probably need to get in touch with each other going forward, so take this.”

I pulled out a mass-produced smartphone from **[Storage],** along with a basic users manual. I passed it over to the queen. This particular manual was written in the common tongue of the Reverse World.

“What is this?”

“It’s a magical tool we can use to communicate with each other. Silhouette has one too. It can do more than just communicate, too. It’s a handy little device.”

I motioned to Silhouette, who reached over and started teaching the queen some basic functions. The queen seemed pretty surprised at just how much it could do.

The Reverse World certainly was more advanced than the regular world as far as science went, but they had clunky and user-unfriendly communication devices. Most of them were microwave-sized. They also didn’t really have very

good communication ranges.

The smartphone, on the other hand, would connect no matter what, so long as there was magic in the atmosphere. It probably wouldn't work deep in the ocean, though...

"This map is certainly helpful... It shows the city streets so clearly! I can already think of how to use this to facilitate developmental planning and trade routes!" The queen wasted no time working out useful ways to operate the smartphone. She was a true and shrewd politician, looking out for the best interests of her nation.

"Could we not make hundreds of these?"

"Right now, I'm reserving them only for world leaders and important individuals. We wouldn't want them to be misused, though we do have contingencies in place for events such as that."

Each and every mass-produced smartphone had a unique serial number that I could track and trace with my own phone. They were all programmed with teleportation magic that could return them to my hand at any time. They were also virtually indestructible, so they couldn't be taken apart and reverse-engineered. Even if they did find themselves in a situation where they were going to be broken or taken apart, they were programmed to warp back to me.

We continued eating as I leisurely answered more questions from the queen. For dessert, we had a crepe-like construction with whipped cream and an orange sauce. We also had a cup of black tea on the side. I was happy to find that it was as delicious as the previous courses.

"Yummy!"

"Mm... I'm glad I came with you, Grand Duke... This meal is good..."

The establishment was truly befitting royalty. Sue and Sakura seemed especially impressed.

"I'm thankful for this time you spent talking to me, Grand Duke of Brunhild. I'll return to the capital and inform the other nations of this upcoming conference."

We left the restaurant, only for the queen to be picked up by a fancy-looking Gollem-drawn wagon. Several knights stood by it.

The Gollem-drawn wagon was pretty unique since it wasn't an automatic vehicle, it was physically pulled along by a large, wheeled Gollem. There was also a platform behind the cart for the little Gollem knights to stand on.

"Until then."

"Indeed, stay safe."

The queen boarded the wagon and it slowly started pulling away.

I was glad for the opportunity, too. I'd secured a meeting between important leaders in both worlds. Also, the food was really good.

I turned to Silhouette and bowed my head slightly.

"Thanks a lot. This'll help us all, big-time."

"It's not like I just did it for you or anything. Those golden beasts have been appearing all over the world recently. It's clear to me that you're the only one with the means to deal with them properly, so I need to rely on you as well. You can consider this whole thing a token of thanks for showing me how to summon Shade."

Silhouette smiled as she patted her panther on the head. Shade purred in satisfaction.

We parted ways with Silhouette in front of the restaurant. She was certainly a busy woman... But she was basically the owner of a massive information network and manager of several brothels, so it wasn't too surprising.

"Hmm... Since we're already in the area, let's go visit Nia."

The Red Cats had based themselves in that old fortress hideout, which happened to be in the Strain Kingdom. It was a little bit of a walk away, close to the border of the Allent Theocracy, but that was pretty irrelevant, since I could just use **[Gate].**

"Nia? You mean that thief woman? It'll be my first time meeting her."

"She'd prefer to be called a chivalrous thief, Sue. Don't call her a regular thief

or you'll make her feel bad." I smirked at Sue.

That reminded me, though. The Red Cats had only met with Yumina, Lu, and Leen. This was a good chance to introduce Sue and Sakura to them... But I had no doubts Nia was gonna make another snide comment.

I resigned myself to my fate as a verbal punching bag before opening up a **[Gate]** to the hideout.

"What the...?!"

After passing through the portal, I was absolutely shocked and horrified by what I saw.

The walls were crumbling, scorch marks were etched into the ground. The tables and chairs used by the Red Cats were upturned or in splinters, and Est's communicator was smashed to bits in the corner of the courtyard.

I looked over and saw their ladder by the wall had been smashed in the middle as if obliterated by cannon fire.

Something horrible had happened here, and I had no idea if Nia and the others were safe.

I frantically reached into my pocket for my smartphone, shakily navigated to the address book, and started calling Nia.

◇ ◇ ◇

"I'm just glad you guys are okay. You didn't lose anyone, right?"

"As if we'd go down so easy. We did lose the fort, though..."

The Red Cats all laughed together in unison after Nia spoke.

When I called Nia, she responded right away. I immediately used **[Teleport]** to reach her location. I found the whole group, including Est, Euni, Euri, Nia herself, and a few other thieves. I was a little surprised, but I was just glad they were all okay.

We were in the forest, a fair bit north of where the old fort was. There were dense trees all around, which made it a perfect place to hide.

According to Nia, their hideout was attacked out of nowhere by a group of

giants. They were apparently under the control of an unknown party, who had been hiding in the shadows and firing cannons their way.

"Giants?"

"Trolls, to be more specific. They're hideous creatures with beastly strength and potent regenerative abilities. They're about as smart as a monkey, though. It's likely that whoever attacked us had monster tamers amongst them..." Est succinctly answered my small question.

Trolls? I've never seen one before... I wonder if they're different from ogres. There's an ogre in our knight order, but he's a pretty nice guy. I must have muttered something as I was thinking that, because Sakura suddenly spoke up with a frown.

"...Trolls and ogres are different... Trolls are much larger, and they're also monsters... Ogres are intelligent demonkin. Don't be so rude to ogres, Grand Duke..."

I was sorry, but I also wondered if there were any ogres in the Reverse World, too.

That being said, I should've kept my thoughts to myself. Sakura was a demonkin princess, so obviously me equating her kin to monsters would come off as insensitive.

"Somebody was controlling them, then?"

"We're pretty certain on that front, yeah. The Trolls had tattoos all over their bodies, so they were likely under the Geela clan's control."

"The what now?"

"It's a small tribal community that lives in Zadonia, the land of ice. They employ techniques that let them take control of monsters, and some of them work as mercenaries with that skill. Trolls are usually found in cold regions, so I'm willing to assume that's the place."

It seemed like even in a technological world like this one, there were still unusual magic techniques. They sounded similar to some of the tribes from the Sea of Trees.

“But why would that clan attack you guys? Did you piss them off, or something?”

“Well, we upset a lot of people with our actions. They’re probably being commanded by a noble from Strain or something. They’re probably after all the goods we’ve apprehended. If they took us out with a private force then they wouldn’t need to report to the government, so they could keep the treasure for themselves.”

Nia and the Red Cats were chivalrous thieves. That meant their main targets were corrupt merchants or nobles. They usually stole from them and gave most of the proceeds back to the poor. They didn’t usually keep much loot for themselves, so they only had a small stockpile of treasure.

You’d think that would be common sense, but apparently they were attacked every now and then by greedy people.

“You did good escaping, though!”

“Est headed the falling back, while I held them off with Rouge. I managed to beat a few Trolls, and then escaped as well... But I did have to pay for it a bit with my blood...” Nia replied to Sue as she glanced down at the Red Gollem by her side.

Nia’s Gollem was Blood Rouge, the red crown. It grew in power based on how much blood its master offered up to it. The more she sacrificed, the more monstrous and destructive the little Gollem could become. It probably didn’t take too much blood to get strong enough to beat some Trolls up, though.

I was honestly pretty surprised the enemies had attacked them, even knowing there was a crown wielder there.

“Nah, there were a lot of them. Definitely more than Rouge could have handled all alone. Plus we were in the middle of the forest, so I couldn’t go all-out with the fire.”

There were six Trolls in total, so it must’ve been a tough battle. Plus, to keep Rouge functional in an enhanced state, Nia needed to constantly expend her own blood.

“Yeah, I didn’t wanna collapse from blood-loss, so I did what I could and

dipped out. They were probably after our treasures or whatever, so they didn't bother pursuing us. Heheheh... Little did they know all our treasure is right in my hands, so they didn't get anything out of it."

Nia grinned as she waved her smartphone from left to right. It had a **[Storage]** app that allowed the holder to store and pull things out of the smartphone screen. Even though their treasure stockpile was small, it was still worth keeping hidden.

The attackers were probably pretty pissed off. The fortress might've been trashed so badly after the fight because they wanted to vent out their frustrations.

"I'm glad you're all well, anyways... What's next? Gonna go back to Allent's capital?"

"Nah, the knight order already discovered that place so we can't go back there. In the meantime, we've all split up into smaller groups and spread out. The only people here are Nia's most trusted allies."

"I don't exactly like it, but we have to be in hiding for now. We'll get payback... eventually."

According to Est, they had around a hundred active members. It would be difficult moving around in a group so large.

The other members separated into a few groups of a dozen or so, and the group I was with was about ten strong. Groups of that size made it much easier to blend in or hide.

"Everyone's gone off on their own for now... I wanna find a good spot to settle."

"That's just how we are... Roving wanderers..."

Euni and Euri laughed bitterly alongside each other.

"You guys could just come to Brunhild. We have a lot of land, and jobs going spare. Don't we?" Sue suddenly spoke up with an insane proposition. Everyone went quiet, and then Nia glanced over at me with stars in her eyes.

Why... Why did you say that, Sue?

“That’s right! That’s perfect! If we go to the other world, they won’t be able to hunt us down! Plus, the two worlds are gonna merge together eventually anyway, right?! So it’s no problem if we just happen to go there a little bit early, right?! Right?!”

“I... I mean...”

“C’mon, it’s fine. Isn’t it?! The black crown’s already over there, isn’t she? We’ll be good!”

“...Isn’t it a little weird for a world leader to invite a band of thieves into his territory...?”

I knew Nia’s group didn’t indiscriminately steal, but I also needed to consider my own position. It was a little stressful.

As I began to fret, Yumina tugged at my sleeve.

“Touya. Nia wields the red crown, does she not? We could perhaps use her as a test pilot for the Over Gear, like Norn.”

“Oh... That’s... a good idea? Probably?”

Elluka and Doctor Babylon would be happy to have another test subject. The more data the better, after all.

“I don’t know what an ogre beer is, but I’ll help with it if you want! I won’t steal from Brunhild, either! Promise!”

“...You promise?”

“I’m a chivalrous thief! I swear on my honor! We can’t continue to operate under the banner of chivalry if we don’t have trust. You’ve helped us so many times, so let us pay you back.”

I could see the honesty in Nia’s eyes. *I guess Elluka and Norn are there already, so this’ll be fine...*

“Fine, then... It’ll be difficult for me to bring so many people over at once, so lemme split you up into groups and make several jumps.”

“I don’t quite understand what you mean, but alright.”

I really hope this doesn’t backfire on me... Est, I’m putting their behavior in

your trustworthy hands...

It would be easier to just use the Dimensional Disruptor on Drakliff island, rather than using my world-jumping ability, but the portal there led to Babylon's garden, and I didn't want anyone knowing about it...

I made a mental note to ask Doctor Babylon to set up another portal that linked somewhere else at some point.

After several bouts of hopping between worlds, I finally delivered all the Red Cats in Nia's group to Brunhild.

I brought them a short distance away from the castle town, to allow them to look over the place by themselves.

The first thing I did was cast my translation magic on them, so they could speak with the people who lived here. I decided they'd have to figure out reading and writing on their own, though.

We walked toward the castle town and started moving through the streets, and they ended up being surprised at the differences between this place and the world they knew.

"Hi, Mister Duke!"

"Hey there! Don't run too far, okay?"

"Okaaay!"

A group of children waved at us and then headed off. They were wearing baseball gloves and carrying bats.

"...You really are a world leader, huh?"

"Yeah, I am. It's mostly my subordinates that do all the tough stuff, though."

I shrugged a bit in response to Nia. I was blessed to have a government with so many capable people in it. The Takeda Elite Four, as well as my knight order, were full of wonderfully capable people.

"The townspeople all seem so... happy?"

"There's so many different things on sale, too..."

"This country is a small one. It's on a large trade route between the nations of

Belfast and Regulus. A lot of people pass through as a result, and they tend to bring their unique native wares with them.”

I explained some things to Euni and Euri as we walked to the Silver Moon inn. I thought about letting them stay in the castle, but... they were still thieves, so I didn’t want to push it.

“Ooh, what a nice inn.”

Nia seemed impressed by what she saw. I was glad she liked it, honestly.

We entered the inn and approached the counter. Micah was standing behind it.

“Oh, hey there. Got some guests for me?”

“Sure do. There’s around twelve of them. They good to stay here long-term?”

“That’ll be fine if we do two to a room. You’re in luck. We just had a busy trading caravan leave. Now then, guests, please sign right here.”

The Red Cats all signed their names in the check-in book Micah brought out.

I looked to the side and saw a certain person coming down the stairs. The moment she saw us, she let out a disgruntled sigh.

“...Why are the Red Cats here...? I guess this is Touya’s doing...”

“Hypothesis: Agreed.”

“Mistress... They can hear you...” Norn stood staring at us with a sour expression on her face. The black crown, Noir, stood by her side. They also had the humanoid Gollem maid, Elfrau, with them.

Nia suddenly noticed Norn, and glanced up at her.

“Oh damn, if it isn’t the little black crownie. Tiny as usual, I see. You staying in this inn, too?”

“Why would I be here if I wasn’t staying here? I see your brain’s just as tiny as usual.”

“You sure have a scathing mouth on you, short stuff.”

“At least I’m capable of sharp words, pea brain.”

...This is pretty tense. I didn't really know they were this hostile with each other, but Euni did say something about them being rivals, if I remember right...

I turned to Norn in an attempt to diffuse the harsh atmosphere.

"You headed out?"

"To the dungeon islands, yeah. A Bicorn appeared in the Amaterasu dungeon, so I'm going to try and kill it. They're worth a pretty penny."

Oh dang, a Bicorn... If I remember right, they're two-horned black horses or something. Those horns definitely sell for a lot, so long as they're intact. I heard daggers made out of those horns have Dark magic in them.

Norn earned a living by dungeon diving every so often. She only went in weekly, so she had a good deal of free time.

"What's your guild rank right now?"

"Still blue. I'm making money just fine even at this rank."

The dungeons didn't really provide much opportunity to rank up. The whole dungeon experience was pretty divorced from the guild anyway. Adventurers who went out there just headed over, killed monsters, and sold any rare materials they found to the guild.

If an adventurer wanted to rank up, then they needed to focus on taking the actual quests that the guild put out. Brunhild was also a pretty peaceful nation, so there weren't very many high-tier quests available.

Whenever an especially powerful magical beast appeared around the dungeon area, the guild would put up a quest for it. But even then it could only be turned in by whoever got to it first. It wasn't like they showed up very often, either.

There were some quests that required people to gather certain materials, but they didn't give many points toward ranking up.

That was why, for the most part, Brunhild's guild was a great place to earn money, but not prestige. It was also a good place for those who wanted to practice or polish their skills.

But honestly, the fact that Norn was blue rank without having to take the test

was impressive in itself.

Nia and the others asked me to explain the whole dungeon and guild thing, so I did.

As I did that, Norn and her posse left the building. Clearly she didn't want to be around us any longer than necessary.

"So... this dungeon labyrinth has monsters and stuff in it... and you can kill them and sell their body parts?"

"That certainly sounds good! Let's make money by challenging the dungeons!"

"Hold it! I've told Norn this before, so I'll have to tell you. Don't use the crown abilities in the dungeon."

I didn't want the whole place caving in. Just in case of a crisis like that, I handed over several emergency escape pendants to Est.

We ate a small meal at the Silver Moon's canteen, and then I took the Red Cats to register at the guild. Frankly, I was worried about it, but I decided to put my trust in Est's ability to keep them sane... Hopefully everything would be okay.

◇ ◇ ◇

Doctor Babylon finally finished constructing a new Dimensional Disruptor in the castle courtyard. That allowed me to directly bridge the space between Drakliff island and Brunhild castle.

The island had a lot of Dragons on it, so I didn't expect anyone to come poking around the portal in the Reverse World. Not that misuse was a major concern, I was the only person who could activate the portals.

We had an upcoming conference between the world leaders of the two worlds to worry about. I planned on inviting the Reverse World leaders over to Drakliff island before bringing them to Brunhild to meet the other world leaders here.

Even though I was calling it a conference or summit, it was more like an introduction or briefing. Building a good relationship between the leaders was

the first step toward solid political relations, after all.

Guess I'll prepare some local delicacies, too...

That was the thought that ran through my head as I watched the trio in front of me tucking into some food. There was also a fourth individual there, but he was lying on the grass a short distance away.

"...I'm starting to notice a pattern of you guys always eating whenever I show up."

"Oh yeah?"

"This stew is delicious. It has a variety of flavors inside."

"Huff... Huff... The tofu's really yummy, but you have to blow on it..."

They were sitting beneath a shaded roof in the garden eating a traditional Japanese hot pot. The pot itself was sat atop a magical stove that Doctor Babylon had created. As for who was eating it... It was the three Dominant Constructs, Ney, Lycee, and Melle.

... You guys are just eating machines, huh...

"Cesca brings us different food every day, so I've been quite happy."

"So much cully... Chicken cully, beef cully, pork cully, seafood cully, cully udon, and so on."

"I didn't know that the dish had so much variety to it. We've been eating it for seven days straight..."

But you just said you had a different meal every day... That's all variants of the same thing! You guys are basically being tricked, right?!

I sighed, but realized that these girls had never really eaten before, so even small variations were probably something interesting to them.

"Hey, you not joining in?"

"Not hungry..." I yelled over to Ende, who was curled up on the grass. There were scratches and bruises all over his body. I had no doubt that he'd been put through the wringer by uncle Takeru.

That being said, the guy's build was definitely a little different. He was gaining

muscle here and there, and it was clear as day. Before he kind of reminded me of a nimble cat, but he was slowly starting to look more like a beefy tiger.

"You gotta eat or you won't get any stronger."

"If I eat, I'll just end up puking it out later on... I'm not exactly on the same tier as Melle and the others, but my race doesn't need to ingest many calories to function either."

Oh yeah, I forgot he's from another world.

Looking at his state made me wince. I wondered just how brutal the training was.

I briefly wondered something, so I triggered my divine sight and looked at Ende. I noticed some golden particles floating around and settling on his body. *Ohoho...*

"...You did something just now? Your eyes turned gold."

"I used my divinity to look at you more intently. There's some divinity hovering around your body as well. I had a feeling it was the case, but it looks like you're becoming a divine beneficiary too."

"Huh?! What does that mean?!"

Ende jumped up and started frantically looking at himself. I chuckled a bit after seeing him get so flustered and worked up.

"Chill out, man. It's not a bad thing. Basically, it means that, from a cosmic perspective, you're being recognized as someone related to uncle Takeru. You're basically in a state where his divinity is enveloping, empowering, and protecting you. Have you noticed any changes in you lately?"

"Hm... Now that you mention it, I've gotten better at taking hits lately, I think..."

That's probably just part of the training... Although maybe that is a bonus.

"Well, either way, it means you're getting stronger."

"He beats the crap out of me in every session, so that's a little hard to believe..."

Ende stared off into the distance with glazed eyes and a half-hearted grin on his face. I wondered if he was actually going to be okay.

“Those mutants that defeated you last time... Do you think you could beat them as you are now?”

“Leto and Luto...? I’m not so sure. It felt like, even back then, they were still holding something up their sleeve. Actually, do we have any new leads on those mutants?”

...Nope, not really. They’ve just been showing up all over the place... like goddamn cockroaches.

I’d heard reports from both worlds where Lesser Constructs had been showing up. They usually got defeated by adventurers, knights, or Gollem-equipped individuals.

They’d been appearing so often that if they weren’t killed quickly, the public would probably end up in a panic about these mysterious invaders. Thankfully, that hadn’t yet come to pass.

...In the regular world, at least. The Reverse World wasn’t handling it quite as well.

But that made sense. Unlike the Reverse World, most of the world leaders in the regular world had a full grasp of exactly what it was they were dealing with.

“What of the Phrase?”

“Nothing. Not a single thing.” It was probably safe to assume that all the Phrase had been mutated at this point.

“Then it should be fine to let Melle out, no? Ney said the mutants weren’t exactly interested in her.”

“Mm... I guess, but the enemy would still know her location...” The Phrase emitted a special wavelength that couldn’t be heard by humans. It basically allowed other members of their species to zero in on their location. The sound could even emanate beyond the world boundary, and it was the reason why the Phrase could constantly chase Melle after she fled.

Melle had reduced herself down to just her core, which reduced the intensity

of her resonance. Then, she hid within the hearts of human beings to mask the tiny sound that was left... But that didn't exactly have good results.

I saw no reason to assume that the mutants wouldn't have the same ability.

If the mutants came and attacked Brunhild because I happened to let Melle out, then I'd never forgive myself.

"Is there no way to mute her resonant tone?"

"It's like a human's heartbeat... You can't just tell someone to turn it off. We could turn it down, though..."

Ende shrugged a little. I looked over at the three Dominant Constructs as they happily enjoyed their meal, and I got an idea.

"Hold on. How did Lycee manage to avoid the Phrase when she was going around with you? Shouldn't her core emit the same kind of noise?"

"Lycee basically reduced her bodily functions until she was one step away from just being a core, and then I used an item fused with my own power to mask the rest. Unfortunately, Melle's resonance is far too strong for us to mask in that way."

Hmph... It won't be that easy, then.

"That barrier you have... The **[Prison]** thing... Can't you extend it to spread across the whole nation?"

"No can do. The larger it is, the less effective it becomes. If I stretched it that thin, I probably wouldn't be able to block the noise."

"Then what if you used a smaller one? Couldn't you put it around her core and set it so that it only confines the noise?"

"...Yeah... I... could..."

Why the hell didn't I think of that to begin with?! Ende stared blankly toward me, and I moved my line of sight to the three girls. They had stopped eating, and were staring at me with equally expressionless, slightly resentful expressions.

"Wh-Whoops. W-Wanna go outside?"

“Yes. I do...” Melle smiled and answered me very quickly.

It was pretty obvious she’d wanna go out...

I used my divine sight to confirm the locations of all three cores, and then I turned to Ney. She’d volunteered herself because there were potential risks. I gulped hard, and cast a divinity-boosted **[Prison]** around her core.

A teeny tiny barrier appeared inside Ney’s body, enveloping her core.

“...I can’t hear it...”

“Me neither.”

“Yep. It stopped.” Melle, Ende, and Lycee all muttered together. I didn’t even know Ende could hear it to begin with. To be honest, if I used my divinity and brought it to my ears, I’d probably be able to hear it too. What would I call that power, though... Divine ear? Divine hearing? That second one probably sounded better.

Since things seemed to be safe, I cast a similar **[Prison]** around the other two cores.

We were mostly worried about Melle’s noise being too strong, but in the end, my divinity proved stronger.

The moment Melle realized it had all worked out, she smiled broadly and clasped her hands together in relief.

“Now we can walk the surface with Endymion, right?”

“Not quite...”

“Huh...?”

Hold it, hold it. You guys aren’t human! Clearly! You aren’t of this world at all!

I sighed and reached into **[Storage],** producing three star-shaped pendants. I then enchanted each one with **[Mirage],** allowing the wearer to take on a human appearance.

“Ooh! Lady Melle, you’re a human!”

“Goodness, Ney! That red hair certainly suits you!”

“How do I look, how do I look?” Melle had ice-blue hair, Ney had fiery-red hair, and Lycee had chestnut hair. They also had the illusion of wearing ordinary-looking clothing. The three of them now looked the very picture of pretty young ladies.



“It’s just an illusion, so if anyone touches you, they’ll find out the truth.”

“That’s quite alright. I won’t let anyone touch Lady Melle!” Ney spoke out confidently, probably failing to realize that she needed to avoid being touched as well.

Dominant Constructs felt surprisingly similar to humans on their hands and faces, so nothing would go amiss if they were touched there... Though their low body temperatures could be a point of concern. But their shoulders, back, feet, and other areas were hard as rock. If they were touched there, they’d be caught out.

I wasn’t really worried though, I doubted they’d let themselves be touched just like that.

“Take these, too.”

I used **[Storage]** to pull out three mass-produced smartphones, along with three users manuals, then passed them to the girls.

“Use these to keep in contact, okay? I’m pretty sure this one’s obvious, but don’t leave the country either. It’d be pretty bad for me if you guys ended up causing a scene in a foreign place.”

“Understood. We’ll stay here.”

Melle, Lycee, and Ney all nodded firmly. I hoped they’d be alright.

I turned to Ende and gave him a warning.

“You’re responsible for these three, alright? I’ll look away when it comes to minor issues, but if too much trouble gets caused, then I’m gonna have to keep you confined in Babylon again.”

“Sure thing. We told you that we’re your allies, Touya. We won’t do anything to cause harm to your country.”

...That better be the case.

I decided there was no point worrying about it, put my suspicions aside, and warped us all down to the ground.

I gave them a brief tour of the castle, introducing them as my friends to

anyone who happened to pass by.

...Actually, where can these guys even stay? They can't really stay in the castle, and sending them back to Babylon would be kinda lame...

The Silver Moon was definitely a no-go. I could easily imagine them getting into conflicts with the other guests who were staying there, and I didn't exactly want to cause any more trouble for poor Micah.

I decided to go and ask Naito if there were any empty houses related to his development projects. If there weren't, I'd just have to ask them to build one.

If they lived in a regular house on their own, then there'd be fewer chances for trouble. Ende and Lycee already had some experience living incognito, so I was sure they'd blend in.

I called up Naito and learned that there happened to be a vacant home in the farmland area to the east.

Apparently he'd built it for one of his friends, but the friend ended up being called into a government position back in Eashen, so it went unused. It was even partially furnished, so they could move right in. I was pretty damn relieved to hear that.

We walked into the castle town, and Melle immediately got excited. She kept pointing at different things and asked Ende to explain them to her. From an outside perspective, they looked like any other happy couple.

"Lady Melle seems happy."

"Mh... Hmph. You're right, but... It bothers me that she's so happy with that man by her side..." Ney glared quietly in Ende's direction, but it seemed like she was being mindful enough to give them space together. However, apparently even Ney had her limits. The very moment that Melle took Ende's hand into hers, Ney charged forward and raised her voice at the two of them.

"Lady Melle! Look over here!"

"H-Hm? What is it, Ney?" And, in a flash, the happy date was broken up by Ney dragging Melle off. Good grief...

"Ney's happy too."

“...She is?”

Lycee said something I couldn’t quite understand, but these guys were pretty incomprehensible to begin with.

Ney and Melle walked quickly toward a yakitori stall by the street corner. The more assertive of the two spoke sternly to the old man who was working the grill.

“Hey. You. Is this consumable?”

“Huh? I... I mean, yes?”

The moment the man gave his confirmation, Ney grabbed some of the food right from the grill and tossed it into her mouth.

“L-Lady Melle! This is delicious!”

“H-Hey! You need to pay for that!”

Ney completely ignored the man and proceeded to pick up yet more meat. She fed Melle some pieces, and then fed more to herself.

Ende frantically ran toward them, pulling some coins out of his pockets. He passed them to the old man, insisted he keep the change, and then dragged the two girls away.

“...You’ve got it rough, man.”

I wasn’t jealous of that guy at all. He definitely had some tough times ahead. But I certainly wasn’t going to help. This was all his responsibility! He was the Phrase whisperer, after all.

Melle and Ney were taken aside into an alley, where Lycee and Ende explained the concept of money to them. They seemed to catch on pretty quickly to the idea, but I had a feeling it was going to take a lot of effort for them to adapt to regular society...

Interlude: The Otherworld Restaurant “No fair! I wanna eat in the other world, too!” Lu puffed out her cheeks and started grumbling.

Geez... Yumina must have let it slip that we had that fine dining experience in the Reverse World... Man, that place the queen of Strain was at sure was nice...

“...It’s not like we chose to go there. It just happened to be part of what was going on that day.”

“Even so, I feel a little left out...”

Lu continued to pout. It made sense that she was disappointed. As a person who loved cooking, she would’ve relished the opportunity to have an unusual meal from another world.

As I thought about that, Lu’s shoulders suddenly sagged and she let out a sigh.

“...I’m sorry. It’s just when the subject of food came up, I got a little disappointed that I missed out on an interesting culinary experience. Sorry if I seemed selfish.”

“No, no! You didn’t! I was the one who was being bad here. I should’ve thought of you. I should’ve at least picked up a recipe from the restaurant to bring back or something.”

“I doubt a high-grade restaurant would hand out their recipes just like that, you know. But I’m certain that if I ate some of it, I’d be able to reproduce it by myself...”

Wait, seriously?! I remember hearing about certain incredible chefs who have such refined palates that they can remember any food they’ve eaten before... Do you have that ability, Lu?!

“Well... let’s go eat some food in the Reverse World, then. How about it? Just lunch, though.”

“Oh? Y-Yes! Of course! I’ll get dressed right away!”

Lu smiled broadly and dashed off. It seemed like her sour mood had been remedied, at least.

But where should we eat... I'm a little apprehensive about eating in the place we went to with Silhouette, since she probably has informants there. Anything I discuss with Lu would probably get leaked to her.

Still, it wasn't like that was the only nice restaurant in the Reverse World. We didn't even have to go to the Strain Kingdom. We could just head over to the Allent Theocracy instead.

As I wondered about where to eat, Lu came back into the room. To my surprise, Yae was with her.

"I happened to bump into Yae, so I invited her."

"I heard that we are going to eat, I did. I am quite famished, I am."

Yae smiled softly, and I immediately knew why Lu had taken the liberty of inviting her. Lu enjoyed eating food, and she'd want to analyze whatever meals she ate over there. But Lu alone would only be able to handle one meal, which wouldn't be ideal if there was a varied menu. She couldn't order a lot if she was all by her lonesome, and would have to come back for repeat trips if she wanted to sample the entire variety.

But if she had Yae with her, the legendary big eater that she was, then there'd be no issues. Yae would surely order a bit of everything, and Lu would be able to sample it all. This was a cold and calculated decision on her part. It wasn't strictly ethical, but it was certainly a brilliant scheme.

"Yae sure is a good girl..."

"Wh-What are you doing all of a sudden, Touya-dono?!"

I reached out and petted Yae's head like one might a friendly dog. I quickly came to my senses and focused on my phone.

I pulled up the map as Yae blushed. Lu pouted again, seeming a little jealous of what had just transpired.

Hmm... Guess we'll go to Allent. If we go to Allen, the holy capital, then we can meet up with Mr. Sancho. He'll probably know a good place to eat.

I took Yae and Lu by the hand.

“Alright, time to launch.” I used my divinity to warp us straight to Allen’s city streets. More specifically, we landed in the back alley where I met the Red Cats for the first time. There weren’t many people around, so I wasn’t worried about being caught out.

To be honest, I still needed a good base of operations that wasn’t as secluded as Drakliff island. I thought about buying a home in one of the major cities, but I didn’t exactly have that kind of cash. There was a limit to how often I could sell rare metals to Mr. Sancho without it looking suspicious, after all.

We left the alley and headed out on to the main street. It was busy as ever.

There were Gollem carriages running up and down the streets, and various other Gollems of different shapes and sizes walking with their masters. Some were even carrying shopping bags for them.

The sight of all these machines clunking around really hammered in the fact that this was another world. Though the world I had just jumped from was also another world to the one I was born in.

“So, where do we go...” It was a royal capital, so it wouldn’t take long to find a restaurant. All we had to do was find one that looked tasty enough.

“Touya-dono, how about this restaurant? There is quite a long line, there is.”

Yae pointed to a building with a decent-sized line of people outside it. The building itself looked kinda gaudy, with gold decorations sparkling here and there. It was called the Golden Pig, which made me wonder if it was a restaurant that specialized in pork.

The big golden signboard with an image of a pig on it seemed to suggest so, at least. The size of the building was also massive... It felt a little *too* flashy for my tastes.

That being said, the presence of the long line certainly caught my interest. I wondered if it was really worth standing around for... While I internally deliberated on whether or not to stand in line, Yae and Lu already joined it. I shrugged a little and joined the two of them.

We waited quite a while, but we managed to secure a table inside. But what awaited me in the restaurant just made me nervous.

It was... over the top levels of gaudy. It was so pompous in there that I felt very out of place. There were various stuffed magic beast heads lining the walls as decoration, as well as strange illustrations I couldn't really recognize. There was also a massive golden pig statue made of solid gold. I could only assume the weird pig was their mascot or something.

I sighed a little, but figured that the interior design of the place probably didn't reflect the taste on the menu.

Speaking of the menu, I opened it up and saw an alphabet that Yae and Lu didn't recognize. I quickly cast **[Reading]** so we could all understand what we were ordering. But even after that, I had no idea what things like "Grilled Black Dras Pork" and "Papalacan Country-style Stew" were supposed to be.

"Hm... I do not know what would taste best, I do not."

"Some pictures would be helpful, yeah..."

Photographs existed in the Reverse World, but they weren't so widespread that they were used on menus. Nobles took family photos together, and photographs were used in newspapers, but that was about it. It was a little frustrating not to know what your food would look like.

"I shall order a platter of meat for now, I shall."

"And I'll go with this fish... I think it's fish?"

"Guess I'll get this pasta, then."

We didn't exactly know what we were ordering, but this was a restaurant! Obviously it had to be edible.

We flagged down the waitress and ordered our food. Eventually, our order came and was placed down in front of us.

The meal I ordered looked kinda like spaghetti bolognese. There were little red strips of meat mixed in with the sauce. It was slightly different to the kind I had back in Japan, but looked close enough. The sauce was a little thinner, too.

"Guess I'll try it out..." I scooped up some of the spaghetti with my fork, rolled

it around and put it in my mouth.

Mm... Ah?! L-Lemme just have another bite, and... Hm... I looked up to see Yae and Lu staring at me anxiously.

Mm... This is interesting... The seasoning is faint, and subtle.

It tastes pretty okay, not bad. I'll certainly eat it, but... How do I put this, exactly? It's just decent. The more I eat the less impressed I am. There's just something slightly off about the taste.

In all honesty, Lu and Crea cooked things that tasted a lot better than the food I was eating.

We all continued eating our food in silence. Leaving any part of your meal behind was bad manners, after all. I wondered if it was just a matter of personal taste, so I tried eating a little from Lu and Yae's meals, too. Sadly, their food wasn't all that good either.

We finished up our meal and settled the check. The amount we paid kinda felt like a rip-off, though... It wasn't enough to make your eyes pop out of your skull, but it was still more than I'd have liked to pay.

We left the restaurant and walked around before I finally spoke up.

"Guess we screwed up going there. The food wasn't bad, but it was a little... Meh."

"Mm. I thought it would be delicious because of the big line, I did... But perhaps because of Lu-dono and Crea-dono cooking so much, our tastes have become too refined, perhaps."

"I'm not sure if it's that. I overheard a conversation from a nearby table. I think eating there is more about prestige than flavor. They were talking about how great it was that they got to eat at such a fancy establishment... so I think it might just be for the sake of appearances."

...People eat there just to say they ate there? I guess it does look really fancy from the outside, but that's still kinda dumb.

It bothered me that such an expensive, high-class looking place had such average food.

Although that was a pretty smart strategy on the part of the management. If you attracted people with a gaudy decor and weird menu items, you'd end up becoming popular. People didn't usually talk about plain-looking places.

"I didn't feel any love in that food at all. There was no enthusiasm for the art or craft of cooking! It was just a prepared dish... Nothing more nothing less."

Lu raised a fair observation. Even if you used the greatest of ingredients, it was up to the quality of the chef to bring out the best in the meal.

"Thankfully we did not eat a lot, we did not... Oh, there is another restaurant across the street, there is!"

"Hm?"

Yae pointed toward another building. It was a small red-brick building with a tiled roof. It seemed fairly unassuming. There was a little rabbit on the signboard.

Nobody was lined up outside... Probably because all the attention was on the Golden Pig opposite the street.

"Hm... Perhaps we could cleanse our palate there... But it looks a little run-down."

"Hm? It may look run-down, but it could be good, could it not?"

"It ain't run-down!"

"Whoa!"

We were surprised by the sudden voice of a child from behind us. We turned and saw an eight-year-old girl. Her hair was tied up in twintails, and she looked at us with an irritated expression on her face.

"Mom's cooking is the best! We're way nicer than those pig guys!"

"Your mom?"

Huh... Your parents own that place or something? Yae and I heaved an awkward sigh. We'd been caught out badmouthing the place...

"Sorry. We just got done eating at that pig restaurant, and it didn't really taste all that good. Are you saying that smaller one's better?"

“You bet I am! We don’t have a lot on the menu, but it tastes real good! Come and see!”

Lu was a lot more delicate than us, and gently smiled toward the kid. *Huh... Is it a specialty restaurant or something? Like a place that only does fish, maybe.*

“Alright, let’s eat there. There are three of us, can you get us a table?”

“No prob! Oh, my name’s Fizz! You’re gonna love eating at the Little Bunny, I promise!”

The kid, Fizz, ran on ahead to the restaurant as if leading us. *Little Bunny, huh...? Do they only cook rabbit or something? Huh... Hold on, the sign doesn’t say it’s open...*

Fizz completely disregarded that and opened the front door with a little key around her neck.

We walked in after her. Unlike the previous restaurant we had been to, this one had a calm and understated interior design. Even though it was a brickwork building, it felt almost like a log cabin with a warm and cozy atmosphere about it.

The restaurant had leylightstones placed here and there, but the sun also came in through a small skylight in the middle.

“I like the atmosphere here. It feels comfy.”

“I have higher expectations than the pork restaurant, I do.”

I sat down in an empty seat next to Lu and Yae. Before long, Fizz brought us all three glasses of cold water.

“Here you are.”

“Ah, thanks.”

Huh. Little thing like you works as a waiter? Cute. Seems like kids in the Reverse World work just as hard as kids in the other one. Then again, it might just be because they have more free time. There’s no compulsory education like on Earth.

“Now, time to order... Oh, where’s the menu?”

I looked on the table, but there was nothing. There weren't any menus affixed to the walls, and I couldn't see anything else, either. That was a bit odd.

"Umm... We don't really have many menus, so... Just leave it to me! I'll get you the best stuff!"

Fizz nodded quickly and said she'd get our food.

It seemed that 'not a lot on the menu' literally meant that they didn't have many menus, rather than them being a specialty restaurant. I was a bit confused, though. Didn't she say that her mom was the one who cooked the meals?

"We'll leave it to you, then."

"Sure thing! I can handle it!"

Fizz nodded and ran off to the kitchen. I wondered what kind of food we'd get.

"There really are no customers, there are not..."

"I'm not that surprised. They have such a popular, gaudy restaurant right across from them."

They were probably here before the Golden Pig was, and ended up losing customers as that tacky place gained more popularity.

We were on the main street of the capital, so people would obviously come by and favor the more popular restaurant. Frankly, setting up shop like that right in front of these guys was meanspirited on the part of the Golden Pig owners.

As I thought about that, Fizz reappeared and placed three plates down on the table.

"Here you go!"

...What is this? Soup...? Pot-au-feu? There's a lot of big veggies and sausage-like meat mixed in with the broth... This is definitely simple food, down to a T.

I looked at Fizz, and she seemed a little anxious. *...C'mon, kid. Don't pull that face.*

I scooped up some of the stew with my spoon and brought it to my mouth. *What?!*

“...This is amazing.”

“It is delicious, it is!”

“Oh, how tasty!”

Wh... What the hell?! How can it be this good?! I can’t even put it into words how good this is!

I bit into the sausage, allowing the crunchy skin to give way to the softer meat inside. The wonderful flavor spread out across my mouth.



The vegetables were fantastic, as were the potatoes. In no time at all, we had thoroughly devoured the pot-au-feu. It was unreasonably good... Far better than the meal we'd had at the Golden Pig, despite the smaller portion.

"That was lovely, it was. The sausage was especially nice, it was..."

"Oh! You liked it? It's homemade!"

Fizz smiled as she refilled my water. *Dang, homemade? That's really good.*

"The dish is simple, but the flavor was really brought out well. I'm certain only the best of cooks could have managed to make something like this, I must say I'm thoroughly impressed."

The meal had received the coveted Lu seal of approval. It was definitely tastier than the stuff served up at the other place, but that went without saying.

"Thanks for your kind words, I'm happy to hear you were satisfied."

A woman in an apron came out from the kitchen. She was in her late twenties and had flax-colored hair. Her face vaguely resembled Fizz's. This must have been her mother.

"It tasted great. With food like this, I'm surprised you don't have more patrons. The portion was a little small, too... Any reason?"

Fizz frowned a little at my question.

"We don't have as many ingredients... The Golden Pig buys up everything from the market..."

"They buy it all up? Seriously?"

"There aren't enough fresh vegetables or meat to go around because of them! Mom's still doing what she can, but I dunno how long it'll last..."

I turned to Fizz's mother, who was named Nina, and she explained that the Golden Pig had cornered the market and was starving the other local restaurants of ingredients. Apparently they were doing this deliberately, as they wanted to buy out the plots of land nearby and turn them into parking lots for Gollem carriages.

The Golden Pig was hurting the market in general, and hindering sales for any

and all competitors.

Fizz and her mother had turned to growing their own veggies on their own land, but the yield was hardly enough to support a restaurant.

Lu suddenly balled up her hand into a fist and slammed it down on the table.

“I can’t forgive this! If they wanted to compete in terms of flavor, that would be one thing... But this is outrageous!”

“I feel the same as Lu-dono, I do. This will not stand, it will not.”

Lu and Yae looked over to me with fire blazing in their eyes. I agreed with them.

“Touya! Can we handle this?”

“Eh... I mean... Even if we got a lot of ingredients for these guys, I dunno if that’d be enough to get their customers back.”

People weren’t dining at the Golden Pig for good food, they were just doing it for social status. It was a trendy place that people liked to talk about.

Just as we were thinking about that, the door opened up and three people entered.

“Welcome! Oh... You again? Didn’t we tell you that we’re not going to sell?”

“It’s been a while since we last asked, ma’am. Just wondered if you might’ve changed your mind.”

I was stunned. The huge, chubby man in the doorway wore dazzling clothing that glittered gold. Even his walking cane was golden... It was quite the sight to see. He stood with two crony-looking men standing behind him.

It seemed like this gaudy man was the owner of the Golden Pig. His body certainly matched the name of his establishment.

“I already told ya, ma’am. I’ll buy this restaurant for twenty pah-cent higher than the going rate! Yer gonna go outta business soon, sugar! Might as well sell high!”

“I refuse. This place has sentimental value. It’s all I have left of my husband and father-in-law. I can’t sell it, no way.”

Nina glared at the golden pig man. He just laughed at her in response.

“No customers, doll! No sales! No profit! I don’t mind waiting, but yer just delaying the inevitable, ya know? Why make this hard on our customers? We need more parking spaces for our fancy-types, y’dig?”

“Go away and leave us alone! It’s your fault anyway!” Fizz suddenly yelled at the golden pig. He just snorted loudly and started laughing again.

“I don’t like little brats who don’t know when tah keep their mouths all shut-like. Not my fault you guys can’t compete, is it? That’s capitalism, baby! Well... doesn’t matter if you wait, the result’ll be the same in the end. We’re good to wait, so don’t worry about it. We’ll be here when ya come crawlin’, sugar.”

“[Slip].”

“Gwaugh?! Bwuh?”

The golden pig suddenly fell on his ass, yelped in pain, and then rolled right out the door with his cronies following him. What a jerk...

He was worse than that, honestly. I couldn’t stand people who treated children with such disdain. He just got what was coming to him.

I looked over to Yae and Lu, and they smiled at me. I was glad we were thinking on the same wavelength.

“Touya, I’d like to help this restaurant out. I don’t want to see a chef of this quality lose out.”

“Indeed. I agree, I do. I do not want those unpleasant people to get their way, I do not.”

Lu and Yae seemed resolved to help out Nina and her daughter. I felt the same way, honestly. When I saw that golden pig treating them so disrespectfully, I just wanted to knock his lights out.

“Mister, are you guys okay?”

“Just fine! There’s nothing we can’t do! Trust us!”

Lu responded in my stead, patting little Fizz on the shoulder. I appreciated her enthusiasm, but she probably didn’t want to hit the kid too hard.

“First thing to do is get you guys some ingredients. If we can’t trust the market, then we’ll just have to check out alternative options.”

We weren’t going to let this store get bought out. It was true I had a lot of merchant friends back home, but I didn’t really have any here...

In terms of merchants here... Well, the only guy I really knew was Mr. Sancho. He was a cheery guy, so I wondered if he’d be able to help.

“If you’ve decided on a plan, then please hurry.”

Yae and Lu decided to stay behind in case those jerks came back to harass people again. I didn’t really know what kind of tactics they could end up employing, so it was better to be safe than sorry. If Lu and Yae were there, then things would be a lot safer.

I nodded to the girls and then used **[Teleport],** bringing me to Mr. Sancho.

◇ ◇ ◇

“No way! That’s unforgivable!”

“Please calm down, honey.”

Mr. Sancho crossed his arms and yelled as his wife, Mona, tried to soothe his temper. As I’d expected, Mr. Sancho had heard of the Golden Pig before. He’d never eaten there, though.

Apparently he had no idea that they’d been harassing other restaurants, and as my explanation increased, so did Mr. Sancho’s indignation.

“In business, it’s fine if you win or lose based on sales, but cornering the market and not caring about your quality?! That’s unacceptable!”

To be honest, if they hadn’t employed such underhanded means then they might have gradually won out in the long-run, but their controversial practices were clearly the result of impatience and laziness. It was righteous to find it offensive.

“Alright, then! I’ll have my acquaintances prepare food supplies without going through the direct market routes.”

“I appreciate it. I was kind of at a loss, to be honest...”

The supplies would apparently come from Strain, which was good since I knew the queen.

Still, that didn't solve the main issue.

"I'll check out the merchant's guild soon. It's likely that there's some corruption or conspiracy going on there to benefit senior staff who collaborate with the Golden Pig. I'll have a full investigation launched, though it'll take some time to find sufficient evidence."

It seemed that Mr. Sancho was a much more influential merchant than I had initially guessed. Well, it was less that he himself was powerful, and more that he had several powerful contacts. He even knew people in the knight order, so they'd have the cooperation of the government. I was pretty pleased by what I was hearing.

Now all we had to do was help increase customers at the Little Bunny.

I wanted to thank Mr. Sancho for his help, so I gave him some trinkets from Felsen. These included a cane that fired flames, a lightning sword, and a few other bits and pieces. I originally bought them to sell at a higher price, but I was kind of sick of lugging them around in my **[Storage].**

I returned from Mr. Sancho's store and found Yae and Fizz sitting at the table.

"Mm... Ah, Touya-dono! It seems you are back, you are."

"Yup, I'm back. What's this?"

I looked at Yae's plate and saw macaroni beneath white sauce and a layer of cheese and breadcrumbs. *Is that gratin? Man, that looks real good...*

"Ms. Lu made this! It's very nice!"

Fizz smiled broadly as Lu walked back out of the kitchen. She wore oven mitts, and carried between them a new baking tray of gratin. I assumed Lu had brought the ingredients out from the **[Storage]** spell in her engagement ring.

"I was thinking up new dishes for the restaurant, so I decided to make this one."

Gratin was a good idea, I approved. It'd probably turn some heads if it appeared on a signpost menu outside. It'd be ideal if it came with a photograph,

as well.

As I thought about that, Nina appeared from the kitchen with yet more gratin.

“Lu’s dishes are certainly unusual, but I love them... She’s taught me much while you were away. I’m sure our customers will love this.”

“Come now, Nina. I was happy to teach you, and you showed me plenty of local recipes as well!”

It seemed like the two had become fast friends, bonding over various recipes together.

“The only issue is whether or not customers will come, it is. I am not sure what we should do, I am not. Perhaps we should invest in advertising.”

Advertising, huh? That’d be one way to catch some attention. The golden, gaudy place across the street never fails to turn heads, after all... Maybe we should redecorate in silver... Nah, no need to stoop to their level.

Hmm... I’m out of good ideas...

“I have a way to draw attention. A simple and fun method, actually.”

“You do?”

Lu smiled widely. I was curious about what she had in mind.

◇ ◇ ◇

“...I can’t believe I’m wearing this again...”

A day later, I let out a resigned sigh. I was in a mascot costume, handing out balloons to kids.

I was in the giant mascot outfit we’d based on Kohaku... They decided that handing out flyers while dressed as the Mr. Kohaku character was the best thing for it. At the very least, we’d improved the outfit, so it had cold air circulating through the suit. I called it the Mr. Kohaku Mk. II.

Lu was right, it definitely caught people’s eyes. We’d had customer after customer come over toward me... But it was definitely hard work.

I looked through the store window and saw Yae, Yumina, Linze, and Sakura all running around as they served customers. They’d been called in for waitressing

duty, and wore matching uniforms. Lu was helping Nina in the kitchen, while Fizz was handing out flyers with me.

We had a decent amount of customers coming in, so things were going well.

As I continued my work, two rough-looking men came over from across the street. It was the duo that had accompanied the golden pig guy the day before.

“Hey, what’s up with all the people, huh? Wanna explain yourself?”

“I’d suggest you two move along. I don’t want you to disturb our advertising campaign. Unless you’re looking to be sent off on your own.”

The Mr. Kohaku Mk. II was outfitted with a **[Silence]** spell that I could toggle off and on. Fizz hid behind me, but glared up at the men.

“Think you can threaten me, huh?!”

One of the men lunged at me, but he was immediately smacked in the face by one of the mascot outfit’s log-like arms. Then, I followed it up with an uppercut using the hand that was holding balloons.

“Gueh?!”

Crap, one of the balloons flew away... It’s kinda hard to keep a grip with this thing.

The man staggered back. I wanted to jump up for the balloons, but I figured it was best to just leave it.

“B-Bastard! No shitty cat’s gonna get the jump on us!”

“I’m not a cat, I’m a tiger.”

The next man lunged in, so I spun around and counterattacked. He went down like a sack of bricks.

“...Man, this stuff gets in the way.”

I handed the rest of the balloons to Fizz before dragging the unconscious men to the doorway of the Golden Pig. Then, I looked into the store and saw the golden pig himself staring at me with a furious glare. I didn’t much care for his false accusations, so I turned around and left.

Once I got back, Linze stopped waitressing for a moment and came out to

check on me.

“Um, is it okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little trouble...”

“No, I meant the costume... Did you damage it?”

“Oh, no. That’s all fine...”

Seemed like Linze was nervous since the outfit wasn’t designed for the swift motions I’d just performed. Still, it was all good.

“If they keep coming it’ll be a pain, though. I don’t think they’re gonna stop, either.”

They weren’t the types to leave well enough alone. All I was doing was fighting back against them, though.

After I handed out enough flyers and ran out of balloons, I retired from Mr. Kohaku duty for a bit and cooled off in the back garden. It was pretty exhausting...

Fortunately, my waiter uniform didn’t get sweaty because of the new airflow system in the suit. That was a smart move on my part.

“Urgh! What the hell is this?!”

I suddenly heard a voice from inside the restaurant. *Tsk... Seems like my work’s never over...*

When I entered the restaurant, I saw a man standing up from his chair and walking toward one of the waitresses. This particular waitress was Sakura.

“There was a bug in my food! Is this the kind of restaurant that serves bugs in its food?!”

The man started waving his arms around, addressing the other customers. Sakura simply stared at him without moving.

“Where is the bug...?”

“Where?! Right here on my plate, look at... Huh?”

The man pointed at the plate, but there was no bug there at all. He used his

fork to sift through it, but couldn't find any such insect.

"Wh-Where'd it go? I made sure to put it down right there..."

"Hey, customer. Tell your friends that was a nice try."

"Gaugh!"

I triggered **[Power Rise],** picked up the man by the scruff of his neck, and then threw him out the door. I had no time for his made-up crap, so I wanted him out as soon as possible.

We gave some free wine to the customers who were bothered by the commotion, and it seemed like everyone was aware the guy was an obvious plant.

I wondered what Sakura had done, though... I hadn't made the bug vanish.

"I didn't do much... Just used **[Teleport]** to send the insect away..."

"Oh, I get it. But where'd you send it...?" After I asked that, I suddenly heard yelling and uproar from the restaurant across the street.

Oh... I get it... Good job.

They were just getting what was coming to them. If they wanted to mess with us, then we'd mess with them right back.

Still, it really seemed like they weren't going to let up. I wondered why they were persisting so much...

◇ ◇ ◇

"Ya fucked up!"

After hearing the report from his subordinate, the Golden Pig's owner slammed his fists down on his desk. His name was Hogsworth Von Buffett, and he was pretty mad.

He didn't think the tiny restaurant would pose much of an issue, but it had suddenly become a much larger deal than it was supposed to be.

Even though he'd taken underhanded methods into his own hands and prevented them from accessing fresh ingredients, they'd somehow found another source.

They ended up hiring a weird group of people, and had seen an influx of customers lately. Every single plan he'd poured into ruining them had now come undone. That also meant the money he'd spent on them was wasted, too. He couldn't let that slide.

"Use force if ya have to, but get rid of 'em!"

"W-We would, but there's this giant stuffed animal over there! He can beat multiple of us at once, sir!"

Since the first attempt, there'd been a few attacks on the enemy restaurant, but each had been repelled by the mysterious mascot character. As a result, the Golden Pig's manager was at a loss.

"Use yer head, idiots! Ya don't hafta just beat the guard, see? Let's rely on some of our underground contacts. We can prepare a Gollem carriage with a wild animal on it. Ya dig?"

"...What do we do with the animal?"

Hogsworth's underlings raised their brows in confusion. They had no idea what was being implied.

"Ugh. Ain't it obvious? We crash it into their building!"

"Ohhh, I get it."

It was a devious plan. All they had to do was have the carriage crash into the store, and then the wild animal it was transporting would be let loose. It would look just like an accident, too. The Gollem that caused the accident would be trashed, too, which would allow for careful recovery of the G-Cube that could be used as evidence.

"Go do it already, idiots!"

"G-Got it!"

Little did the men know that the entire exchange had been observed by a red bird outside their window.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Little Bunny's business was booming. They'd hired part-timers, so they

could carry on without my help. I didn't think they needed to worry about losing business now. There was just one last issue to deal with.

I sat at the table and looked through the window at the Golden Pig.

"Think they'll do it?"

"I do. That jerk is hellbent on ruining this place. He's one persistent bad guy, I'll give him that."

Lu was seated next to me, glancing out the window. Nothing was happening yet, but we were sitting prepared for their next strike. Yae was just kinda eating like normal, though...

"Ah."

I saw Kougyoku approaching the window, so I opened it up and allowed her to perch herself there.

"The Gollem carriage is inbound."

"So it finally showed up..." Kougyoku had reported to me earlier, and I learned the basic gist of their intentions. That was why we were sitting, prepared for it to come in.

I quickly heard a loud voice from down the street.

"Look ouuut! The Gollem carriage went out of controool!"

I was expecting one or two animals tops, but when I headed outside and saw the carriage headed down the street, it was more like a four-ton truck. It was loaded with horses, deer, cows, and wild boar.

If those things rushed into the building, then it wouldn't matter if everyone got out safely. They'd completely demolish the place.

The six-legged Gollem pulling the cargo raised a roar as it charged through the streets. It wasn't going at an incredible speed, but it was still moving fast enough that it couldn't be stopped by people.

I moved to the main street with **[Teleport],** just narrowly avoiding being hit by it.

Then, I made sure it was in my sights as I prepared my next spell.

“[Cracking]!”

I cast it on the Gollem. **[Cracking]** was a spell that allowed me to interfere with how magical tools and artifacts functioned, but it could also be applied to magitechnological creations like Gollems.

I wasn’t quite as learned on Gollems as Doctor Babylon or Elluka, but I was able to control basic functions. For example, I could make this Gollem turn left instead of right.

I grinned, and the Gollem suddenly made a sharp left turn. It was headed right for the Golden Pig.

“L-Look out! Run away!”

The customers lined up outside the restaurant began to scatter like a cluster of spiders, leaving behind the manager and his cronies.

“Wh-What the... Why’s it headed our way?!”

“I-I don’t know! This isn’t what we had programmed!”

They argued with each other as the Gollem carriage advanced toward them. As it got closer, they realized their position before screaming and running away. The carriage smashed through the restaurant’s window.

“N-No! Stop! Stop!” The six-legged Gollem completely ignored the man’s pleas and continued driving its way through the inner walls of the building until it broke down.

The cargo carriage fell to its side, causing quite the loud crash. The tremor unlocked the cage, and the frightened animals were all turned loose.

Cows, deer, horses, and boars all came flooding out into the building, rampaging wildly. There was nothing he could do.

“M-My restaurant! My restauraaant!”

The manager’s yells rang out into the street. *Evil deeds bring evil outcomes, buddy. Accept your punishment and be thankful it wasn’t worse.*

Eventually, the knight order appeared on the scene, clad in their holy white armor.

“Ah! About time you showed up! Take care of those wild beasts!”

“We’re actually here for you, Hogsworth Von Buffett. You’re wanted on charges of bribery, market exclusivity, illicit dealings with the black guild, and other petty crimes. You have the right to remain silent.”

“No!”

The knights dragged the blubbering mass of blubber up from his knees. I glanced over and saw Mr. Sancho with the knights, and he smiled and winked my way. I knew he’d pull through for me. What a great guy.

“Enough of this joking around! I have ties to the nobility in this area, you can’t arrest me! These are baseless claims!”

“We can assure you that we have evidence. There’s nowhere for you to escape to. Take him away, boys.”

The golden pig, former owner of the Golden Pig, was dragged away kicking and screaming. The animals were safely recovered by a group of knight Gollems, and placed back in holding pens.

“All’s well that ends well?”

“I’ll agree with that.”

“I think Nina and Fizz will be able to live peacefully now.”

We watched the knights leave and heaved sighs of relief.

I looked at the customers enjoying their food at the Little Rabbit, and I smiled. I was really glad that I could protect this place.

“Sorry! Mom’s really busy in there, can you help us out?!”

Fizz, clad in a waitress outfit, rushed out of the store. Lu and Yae went in to help out for the rest of the shift. I figured I’d join them.

“Alright, you can hand out flyers again!”

Just as I was about to re-enter the store, Fizz appeared and gave me that dreaded order. A small sigh of resignation leaked past my lips.

I opened up **[Storage]** and pulled out the Mr. Kohaku Mk. II costume... I had a long day ahead of me.

Chapter II: The Great Marriage Caper

“The Kingdom of Horn is on the verge of civil war...?”

“It is. There are two factions. One supports the grandson of the king, and the other supports the younger brother of the king.”

I groaned out in irritation as Tsubaki gave her report.

The Kingdom of Horn was a country to the east of Felsen, and to the south of where Yulong once was.

It was a fertile land that had the blessing of various spirits, and a mighty king that managed his nation well. It was probably the best country in the world when it came to agriculture and financial prosperity.

Culture-wise, it was kind of similar to Eashen, but also a little bit different. If it were a country on earth, it would be one of the many nations that factored into Asia’s cultural sphere.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck the kingdom only a year ago. Their brilliant king died without warning.

Typically, the crown prince would just succeed the throne, and life would go on... But there was an issue.

The crown prince of Horn had suddenly died only a week before his father did. He was only twenty-one years old, but apparently it was caused by an accident.

The king had no other male heirs, but the prince did have a son. In other words, the dead king’s grandson was eligible for the throne.

Or he would’ve been eligible, if not for the fact that he was a literal infant at only one year old. And so, the prime minister took over as regent in his stead.

But while things seemed to be moving smoothly, the process was suddenly stalled when the late king’s younger brother raised an objection.

The prime minister of the nation happened to be the father of the dead prince’s wife. The king’s younger brother claimed that something smelled foul,

and it was a clear plot by the prime minister's family to usurp the country. He claimed that only he could carry on his brother's will.

It seemed that when he was alive, the king had disagreed with his son often. The late king preferred traditional, less risky methods and wanted to keep the country focused on what worked for it. The son, however, was industrious and wanted to lead Horn into several new fields and focuses.

It was a shame that the two of them, who clearly cared in different ways about their country, died within the same week.

The king's younger brother publicly stated that the late king was always planning on cutting the crown prince out of the line of succession due to his 'dangerous' new-age way of thinking and that he should be king instead.

The prime minister, however, stated that although the king and the prince had argued often, they understood that they had the best interests of the country in mind and managed to keep an open mind with each other. He even stated that he often acted as a mediator between the two parties, and helped them come to an understanding about several issues over the course of their lives.

Unfortunately, neither side listened to the other, and tensions mounted until civil war seemed about ready to break out.

"Seems more like a conflict between the prime minister and the king's brother than the king's grandson and the king's brother..."

"Quite, yes. The brother of the late king is named Ganossa Da Horn, and the prime minister is named Schwein Adante. The grandson of the late king is named Kuoh Da Horn, and he is also the grandson of the prime minister due to his mother."

Tsubaki nodded at Kousaka, who gave his take on the situation.

This certainly sounded like a whole heap of trouble to me. Succession issues like this did sprout up now and then, so it wasn't like I could really do much.

There were also special cases like if the crown prince was a blistering idiot, and his younger brother happened to be intelligent and wise. That might be cause for a succession dispute. It'd be better to have the more talented person

reigning, after all.

Though, in the king's case, it would be rough since they'd both be his children... But that also begged the question of whether or not a good king would let personal feelings and connections sway him.

Either way, a civil war sounded rough. I didn't know if we needed to intervene, since I doubted it would cause international issues.

"It's irritating that we don't have any ties to Horn... What are their neighbors doing?"

"Felsen is simply watching without making any moves. It seems as if they have ties to both the younger brother and the prime minister, so it is an awkward situation for them..."

Tsubaki hesitated for a moment, before continuing.

"...Yulong may be behind this."

"Excuse me?"

...Yulong? What? Ever since all that stuff with their heavenly emperor and the Phrase invasion, the country's basically been reduced to nothing.

As far as I understood it, the region only had a group of independent cities in it. There were even small in-fights between those cities every now and then.

"Yulong is to the north of Horn. Ever since the Phrase invasion, there has been a large influx of refugees out of Yulong into Horn, which has caused trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"The citizens of Horn cannot easily accept the refugees from Yulong, which has resulted in many of the Yulongese refugees turning to crime. A lot of them have even gone so far as becoming roving gangs, laying waste to the fertile farmland."

That was definitely trouble. I wondered why Horn couldn't take in the people from Yulong, though... A fertile nation like that shouldn't have had any issues.

"Yulong had planned to invade Horn, just like it had planned to invade Hannock. The people of Yulong also had a lot of national propaganda, belittling

the Horn citizens as inferior and uncivilized. Given the national image, it is no surprise to me that the people of Horn would be reluctant to allow a group of people that so clearly hated them to join their society."

Hm... I listened to what Kousaka said and sighed. He was certainly right, though. If the Yulongese people had looked down on Horn and then suddenly counted on them for help, it was only natural that the original victimized party would be hesitant to let them integrate.

"As you know, there was that spy division in Yulong, yes? They specialized in sabotage and assassination. From what my intelligence suggests, they all drifted to Horn when the country collapsed. The rumors go that these individuals may be behind the current unrest in that nation."

Yulong's spies... If I remember right, that organization was called Qulau or something. They targeted me in the past. I remember they wore those traditional Chinese masks and were the kinds of guys who'd kill themselves if they failed. They were pretty intense...

"Don't tell me the deaths of the king and his son..."

"Yes. It could have been the work of Qulau. Either Prime Minister Schwein or the king's brother, Ganossa, may have hired them. It might be neither of them, some random third party that sought to drive Horn into chaos..."

If the prime minister hired them, then... It went without saying that the prime minister would want his grandson to have the throne someday. If the king's younger brother's claims were true, then him succeeding the throne would become an obstacle to that eventuality. That would be reason enough to kill the prince and king... especially if the prime minister disagreed with the prince's new-age thinking as well. But I wondered if he'd really be able to kill his own son-in-law for an agenda like that.

On the other side of the argument, if the king's brother was the culprit... No, that didn't make sense. If his story was true, then neither the king nor his son would need to die. He'd get the throne eventually anyway.

But if he was actually lying about that, and the prime minister was telling the truth about the king and his son having a mutual understanding... then yeah, he'd have cause to kill both parties.

Still, it was confusing... If the king's brother wanted to succeed, I would have expected him to kill the grandson as well to eliminate all potential competition... This case was a perplexing one.

"This is annoying."

"Agreed."

"I also agree." It wasn't like we could act without knowing the truth.

Though with all we had right now, I was more inclined to believe the prime minister. His faction had less of a reason to kill the crown prince.

"I guess we shouldn't interfere anyway, huh?"

"There is no reason for us to get involved, yes. The country has no formal contact with Brunhild. You could surely end the conflict with the power that you hold, but it would likely be an unnecessary move... Or would you prefer it if we crushed Horn and claimed it as one of our territories amidst all this chaos?"

Gimme a break, old man... Why didn't that sound like the joke it should've been...?

It wasn't like I was incapable of conquering Horn, or even the world! I just had no desire to handle the clerical duties of owning that much territory. Brunhild was tiny and it was already a pain in my ass a lot of the time.

"Jokes aside, the development of our nation comes before interfering with the outside. The castle town has increased in size lately, and we have had another influx of citizens. Crime rates have been rising proportionally to that influx. The knight order and Mr. Mittens have been doing a fine job keeping the peace in town, but I am concerned that if our knights were to be dispatched, we would not have enough personnel to handle these issues."

I could understand what Kousaka was worried about. The town guards were made up of our knights, so the town became less secure during training missions or Frame Gear operations. Ideally, there wouldn't be any more large battles in the near future, but the mutants were so unpredictable that I couldn't say that with any certainty.

"Guess so. We'll create a town guard unit separate from the main knights."

“Wonderful. We can have Yamagata and Baba-dono command it, and make it an official government branch instead of something that serves you directly. With that in place, they will be able to operate autonomously even when you are not around.”

I was pretty confident in the two old men to run the guards well. They didn’t exactly enjoy Frame Gear combat anyway, so I figured it’d be the best job for them.

“The fishery we established on the dungeon islands is also going quite well. Merchants from Belfast and Regulus have come by to purchase our fresh wares.”

“Tell the fishermen not to go out too far from the coastline, alright? Don’t want any monster attacks.”

“Of course, we are aware.”

I’d summoned a Kraken to patrol the waters around the dungeon islands and keep strong monsters at bay, but if the fishermen went too far out to sea then there’d be trouble.

I received a few more reports from Kousaka and Tsubaki, and then my duties were over. After that, I ate lunch with everyone and decided to head to the Reverse World in the afternoon. I still had a few things I needed to prepare before the multi-world summit.

First up was the Triharan Holy empire. I needed to schedule a meeting with the leader of that place... Linze and Hilde seemed to have some free time, so they decided they’d tag along too.

I used my divinity to warp us through to the Triharan imperial palace. We were greeted there by a familiar face.

“Long time no see, Prince Listin... Or should that be Princess Listis? How are you?”

“Ah, well... There has been much going on in the country since it reformed. I’m certainly glad for it, though.”

She was now wearing a jacket and some loose pants, instead of the straight-

laced masculine clothing that I'd seen last time. It had been a while since I'd seen Tristan Le Triharan, imperial princess of the Holy Empire, but it was nice to see her.

I introduced Linze and Hilde to her as my fiancees, and she seemed briefly taken aback. Either way, she leaned in and shook their hands with a smile.

"My father and brother are waiting for you. They have a matter they wanted to discuss with you, actually."

Listis spoke casually as she took us into the castle. I wondered what they wanted with me. We reached an inner room in the castle and were greeted by Emperor Harold La Triharan, along with his son, Prince Lupheus La Triharan. Listis' mentor, Zerorick, was also in attendance.

The emperor and his son both wore glasses, giving them kind of a nerdy and studious look. Zerorick, on the other hand, looked like a battle-scarred combat veteran.

Back when the senate still ran things in the Holy Empire, the emperor and his son looked a lot more sickly... I was happy to see that their health had noticeably improved.

"Aha. It's nice to see you again, Touya." The Triharan emperor stood up and went to shake my hand.

"Glad you're looking well, Emperor."

"It's all thanks to you, my boy. I feel like I've been aging backward lately!"

I smiled at the emperor's joke. Recently, he'd only really been a puppet leader, held back by the senate. It only made sense he'd be more lively once he could actually do what he wanted to do.

Same with his son. All the misery he had about him because of that woman he'd been engaged to had been completely wiped from his face.

I heard that, much like her father, that fiancee of his was using her position for exploitative purposes. After her father was dealt with, she'd been imprisoned for good. Anyone would feel invigorated after being freed by a beastly fiancee like that.

I'd briefed them on it over the phone, but I decided to once again explain the whole multi-world summit concept to the emperor and his son. I asked if they had any ideas for countries that might like to join, as well.

"Sadly, the senate controlled most of our international relationships in the past. There isn't really a country out there that's friendly with us... We have a non-combat treaty with the Lassei Military Kingdom to the south, but that's about it... The senate was also putting pressure on the Gem Kingdom to the east, so that's a no-go either. Currently, only the Kingdom of Primula is willing to co-operate with us, and that's only thanks to your efforts."

Oh yeah, there was that thing where Primula nearly got invaded, huh...? I guess you can't fix international relations by saying 'these guys did it, blame them!'

"That's why we intend to show a new and reborn Triharan at the upcoming summit. Putting that aside for a moment, we actually had something we wanted to discuss with you..."

"Oh yeah, Princess Listis said something like that earlier. What's up? Do you need my help with something?"

The emperor glanced at his son for a moment before clearing his throat. His bespectacled son suddenly looked uncomfortable for a moment, but I couldn't discern why.

"Well... I heard that you met Queen Margarita of the Strain Kingdom recently?"

"I did. She'll be participating in the summit as well. She plans on bringing the Lassei Military Kingdom and the Allent Theocracy with her... Is there an issue?"

"Well, you see... Queen Margarita has a son and a daughter, and that daughter of hers... She's twenty years old, her name is Berlietta... She's said to be a great beauty, highly intelligent... So, well... You know..."

As I stared at the emperor in confusion, hoping that he'd spit out what he meant already, Linze suddenly spoke up.

"...D-Do you perhaps wish for her to be engaged to your son?"

Linze’s words caused the emperor to nod enthusiastically.

“Precisely! Exactly! Don’t you think such a union could bring Strain and Triharan closer together?! Touya, my boy, I’d very much like you to convey our intentions to Queen Margarita, and...”

“Wouldn’t this be better coming from you? I can just give you her phone number.”

“Ah, well... That’s not ideal, honestly. You know how our image is to outsiders right now... I don’t want her to think I or my son are useless people who get pushed around... I fear she may reject us on the grounds of being incompetent.”

Yeah, she might... I thought to myself, taking care not to say anything mean to the dejected emperor in front of me.

“What about your son’s feelings on the matter?”

“I agree with my father’s opinion. Though I must confess, I have mixed feelings about wedding someone I have little personal knowledge of... It could be trouble for her, as well. I do not wish for her to be unhappy with me as her husband, after all... She may dislike me...”

The bespectacled prince shrugged slightly as he pushed his glasses up his nose. I thought his assumptions were a little bit negative.

“My brother isn’t what one might call an optimist. He hasn’t considered that they’d likely grow to love each other after getting married.”

The crown prince heaved a sigh at his sister’s words. She’d been living as a man for most of her life, so it only stood to reason that she’d be a bit more assertive than most girls, and her relatively reserved brother.

Even if it was a political marriage, it would be better if all parties were in love. That was the case for my brides-to-be.

“Is she not engaged yet?”

I raised a brow at Hilde’s sudden comment. That was definitely a fair point. If she was already engaged, then we might as well just call this off.

That actually reminded me of Hilde being surprised to learn about my other

fiancees before she joined their ranks.

“Nothing to worry about there. According to our reports, Princess Berlietta is not betrothed, nor does she have any suitors. We don’t know if she has a crush on anyone, though.”

Ah, fair enough... That’s kind of weird though, isn’t it? A princess that old not having a single suitor? Does she have unreasonable standards or something?

“Well, whatever. I guess I’ll contact Queen Margarita for you.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble, but please do take care. The future of our country may be at stake!”

I grumbled slightly as the emperor bowed his head.

He wasn’t wrong in that it was a good way to forge bonds between nations. I just hoped that things wouldn’t end awkwardly.

I wondered if I should just bring appropriately-aged nobles to the multi-world conference and host a big old mixer or something. Well, even if it wasn’t specifically a mixer, it’d be a chance for highborn people to get to know each other.

The only thing I’d provide would be the venue, then they could figure the rest out themselves... The idea was definitely worth thinking about, at least. Plus, my Duchy happened to have a pro in the matter of love... Or rather, a goddess... I sighed, took my phone out, and began calling Queen Margarita of Strain.

◇ ◇ ◇

I managed to gain an audience with Queen Margarita, so I decided to talk to Prince Lupheus before going to meet her.

After all, if a salesman didn’t know anything about the product he was selling, he probably wouldn’t be doing a great job. I took a picture of him, then asked the imperial secretary to locate a family history and personal notes on the guy.

“Hm...”

“Hmhm... It looks mostly good... There’s just one issue.”

“Please neglect to point it out...” Crown Prince Lupheus grumbled to himself.

The issue was the fact that Prince Lupheus had been engaged, and then that engagement had been broken off. Obviously, that wasn't his fault, since it was caused entirely by issues on the part of the other person, but it still made him look like a weak judge of character.

Though, of course, the truth of the matter was that the senate had forced the engagement on him, so it wasn't like he'd judged her poorly at first glance or anything.

Princess Listis flicked through the papers and muttered something.

"The hobby section hasn't been filled out."

"I mean... You know..."

"Come now, if you're getting married, she'll find out about it eventually. You should just write it down."

Prince Lupheus resigned himself, sighed, and wrote down "magitechnology alteration/Gollem maintenance" on the sheet of paper.

"Oho... You're into magitech?"

"He's not just into it, he's super into it. He's been tinkering around with that smoffo... smart...phone thing that you gave us a while ago. He also enjoys tinkering with the Gollem carriages we keep in the courtyard. I'm sure that if he tried hard enough, he'd even be able to create a Gollem of his own!"

"I'm not so sure about that... The G-Cube and Q-Crystals are still a bit beyond my expertise. Only geniuses like Elluka have a comprehensive understanding of those elements."

The prince smiled wryly in his sister's direction. Personally, I had trouble imagining Elluka as a genius, given her awful personality... But she was definitely worthy of working on nonsensical stuff with Doctor Babylon.

Either way, this guy certainly seemed more and more like a geek.

"I don't think it's a hobby you need to hide, is it?"

"That's right. It doesn't seem all that strange to me."

Linze and Hilde voiced their support for his interests. Lupheus simply let out a

miserable sigh in response.

“I was once told by my ex-fiancee that I was pathetic, that playing around with commoner stuff was unbecoming of the emperor-to-be... She told me that the oil and grime from my tinkering smelled horrible and that I should just give up...”

Ah... The old hag instilled some kind of trauma in you, huh...? I wonder if your lack of confidence is because she was always keeping you down...

I didn’t really think it was a bad hobby to have, even if he was to be a world leader. The witch-king of Isengard sure enjoyed it... Although he was kind of a horrible monster.

The prince looked down and sniffed slightly, he was probably recalling all the times he’d been verbally abused. His glasses slipped down to the edge of his nose.

Ohh, here’s an idea...

“Here. There’s something I’d like you to take a look at, actually. It’s something I think you’ll be impressed with.”

“Hm?” I took everyone out to the Triharan palace courtyard and pulled out an Ether Vehicle from my **[Storage].**

It was a slightly better version than the Fiat 3.5 HP models that I’d sold to the world leaders back home.

“This is an Ether Vehicle. It’s an autonomous vehicle that can move without Gollem interference.”

In the place I called home, transport was mostly done via horse-drawn carriages. Transportation in the reverse world was mostly done via Gollem-drawn carriages.

Usually, Gollem carriages were pulled by multi-legged Gollems, or Gollems that had continuous metal tracks like those used on tanks. They could lug around a lot of cargo. There were also smaller options available for personal use.

Science in the Reverse World was heavily based on Gollems, so virtually

everything they invented required Gollems to actually function. Transportation naturally fell under that umbrella, too. Even the ships in the reverse world had Gollem parts.

Ether Vehicles, however, were pretty much ideal. Other than the Ether Liquid they used for fuel, it was entirely composed of parts most engineers in the reverse world could understand. Plus, it didn't need a Gollem to operate.

I hopped into the Ether Vehicle and drove it around a few times, showing everyone how it handled. I returned to the original position, and Prince Lupheus immediately wanted to give it a go.

"This is incredible! The power must come from a magic-based engine... But it certainly isn't an ordinary one. I didn't even know speeds of this level were possible with such a small-sized power source... I wonder if I could use a Barreken-brand engine if we increased the size a little... Ah, but would that reduce speeds due to the weight offset? Hmm... And it's astounding how the magic energy is distributed, these parts are incredible..."

The prince started murmuring to himself as he investigated each nook and cranny of the Ether Vehicle. I had a feeling he'd get along with those tech-loving dwarves back home.

"You can have this, if you want."

"I can?!"

"Sure. In the world I come from, a bunch of countries are trying to make new models based on this one. I have a feeling you've got plenty of ideas yourself, right?"

"I do, yes. I'd love to try improving this design. It's honestly fascinating... I can't remember the last time my heart fluttered this way."

I could understand him a little. When I was a kid, I had a little toy car of my own... I'd happily buy new parts, opened up holes on it for weight reduction, streamlined it for more aerodynamic capability... Precious memories.

I passed over an operations manual and a basic blueprint to the prince. It was written by Doctor Babylon and Rosetta. Obviously, it'd be bad if he didn't know how to reassemble it.

I passed on a few bottles of Ether Liquid as a bonus, too.

The giddy prince happily took it all, thanked me profusely, and drove his Ether Vehicle straight to the Gollem workshop near the stables.

“...He probably won’t come out for a few days. We’re not gonna get more marriage-related information out of him.”

Princess Listis heaved a sigh as she crossed her arms.

Frankly, I thought he looked a lot better than the miserable young man I’d seen earlier, but my opinion wasn’t the one that counted here. I could only hope that the princess of Strain would be able to tolerate his hobby.

Married couples could definitely fight over petty things like personal interests... But it was better to do that than to lie.

“No worries, I’ll go talk to the Queen of Strain about the marriage. I promise we’ll do our best to represent you. Even if they say no, we’ll come back to tell you exactly why.”

“Best of luck... Or rather, thank you for this.”

Princess Listis waved us off as we hopped through a **[Gate]** to the kingdom of Strain. It was time to play matchmaker.

◇ ◇ ◇

Strain’s capital city, Citronia, resembled Belfast’s capital quite a bit.

It was just as lively as Allent’s capital city, too. There were many people and Gollems making their way around the bustling streets.

“It’s a nice city...”

Hilde gazed around and muttered her impression of the place. Linze stood nearby, curiously gazing at all the Gollems.

We headed to the shining white castle ahead. It was a very beautiful building with red-colored roof tiles. It contrasted well against the blue of the sky.

I gave my name to the guards by the castle bridge, and we were escorted in quickly. It seemed that the queen had already planned for my arrival.

We waited in a guest room for a while before Queen Margarita came to see

us, with a few knights and hand servants in tow.

“Welcome, Grand Duke. It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise. Sorry for the short notice on our visit.”

I didn’t really think I’d be visiting her again so soon. It had only been a couple of days since I saw her at the restaurant, so I figured I wouldn’t be seeing her again until the summit.

“And who are these young women?”

“Ah, this is Linze and this is Hilde, two of my fiancees. Linze is a mage who wields magic from a bygone age, and Hilde is a princess from a kingdom of knights.”

“Goodness me... And here I thought it would end at the three I met at dinner.”

The queen had a baffled look on her face. Apparently, she thought it had ended with just Yumina, Sakura, and Sue... But nope. There were another two visiting this time. I didn’t really know how to break it to her that I had nine brides-to-be. And that was why I didn’t.

I didn’t know much about how the Reverse World treated marriage in general. It was possible that even royals of this world didn’t have many spouses.

I asked for clarification, and my original guess was wrong. Apparently, it was fairly normal for nobles and royals in the Reverse World to have many partners.

The former King of Strain had two wives, in fact. Each wife bore him one daughter, and the eldest of those two daughters was Queen Margarita herself.

The queen had married a duke’s son, and gave birth to a daughter and then a son. The daughter in question was Princess Berlietta.

Since she happened to be brought up, I seized the opportunity to cover the matter entrusted to me by the Triharan royal family.

“...The emperor of Triharan really said that? I’m thankful for the offer, but...”

The queen frowned, implying rejection was on the table. Everyone around the queen made some awkward faces, so apparently whatever the issues were...

they were well known.

Damn it, I even dug out the prince's family history and everything... Was it all for nothing?

"Erm... Does your daughter already have a suitor she's interested in? Or do you just not want to connect your nation with Triharan?"

"No, that isn't the issue. I actually feel like marrying my daughter off would be a burden to Prince Lupheus."

The queen smiled wryly.

"Berl... Berlietta is... Somewhat of an odd young lady. Since a young age she's done nothing but involve herself in Gollem tinkering, and studies of magitechnology. She's a recluse, so to speak."

Wait a second... That actually sounds perfect, doesn't it?

"Perhaps she takes after me a little too much... When she becomes interested in something, she'll engross herself in it so deeply that she'll ignore everything else. We've talked about potential suitors in the past, but she merely told me that she'd rather invest time and effort into building a magical motor than something as unoriginal as a baby."

Hrm... So I guess we'd need to get her to be interested in him before bringing up marriage talks.

Still... I think I can bait her pretty easily. I'll just do the same thing I did with the prince, show her something cool.

"Would you mind if I met with Princess Berlietta? I'd like to speak with her, and then hand her a present."

"That would be agreeable to me. I'll have her called to meet us, she should be in her workshop right now."

One of the maids exited the room to fetch the princess, and the topic of my discussion with Queen Margarita switched to the displaced refugees from the regular world.

There were eight refugees currently taking shelter in Strain. Of the eight, three had decided they didn't want to go home. Since that left five lost people

who wanted to head back, it would be up to me to warp them home later on.

Queen Margarita began questioning Linze on multiple topics. Apparently, she was curious about magic.

“So even someone from my world could use magic, should they have the right aptitude?”

“That’s right, yes. This world has a thinner amount of mana in its atmosphere, so it would take a truly talented person to cast more powerful spells... But it should be possible. The right person would at least be able to cast standard spells.”

“How would one be able to know their aptitu—”

The queen was cut off by the arrival of a lone woman. She had brown hair, much like her mother. It was tied up, but messy in a few places. It seemed like she’d ran all the way here. I heard she was around twenty, but she looked much closer to someone my age due to her thick-rimmed glasses and baby-face. *Guess this is Berlietta.*

Her outfit didn’t exactly exude feminine charm. She was wearing the kinds of workman’s coveralls that Rosetta wore... The oil-slicked workman’s pouch about her waist also made her look more like a laborer than a princess. Frankly, I wouldn’t have even been able to tell at a glance that she was royalty.

“Berl... Berlietta. Why are you wearing that? Did I not tell you to change your clothing when we have guests?”

“Mother, please don’t worry about that right now! I need to know if that’s the person who gave you that Smarfoam thing?!”

The girl ignored her mother and stared at me. I could practically see the stars in her eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Princess Berlietta. I’m Mochizuki Touya, Grand Duke of Brunhi—”

“Please give me one of those snarfphones! It’s incredible! A technological marvel! It’s a mass-produced model, isn’t it?! That means it isn’t an ancient object like the legacy Gollems, I can tell! What kind of tech did you even use to

get it so small? Are you perhaps using methods derived from the ol—”

“Hey, hey, hey! Personal space!”

I held up my arms to block Berlietta as she brought herself dangerously close to me.



Hilde parted the two of us and narrowed her eyes at the other princess, causing her to back off a little.

“Sorry, I didn’t create it. The ones who did work for me, but I, unfortunately, won’t be able to answer any of your questions.”

“...That’s a shame. I was hoping I’d learn something of note.”

Princess Berlietta slumped her shoulders and sat down on a nearby armchair. It was as if all energy had drained from her body. The contrast in her behavior was extremely noticeable.

“Please forgive my daughter’s disrespectful display, Grand Duke...”

“No, don’t worry about it. She just caught me by surprise a bit. You did warn me about her interest in magitech, so it’s sort of my fault anyway. Actually, that reminds me, I mentioned earlier that I have a present here for her...”

“A present?! I-Is it one of those fabled smarf... smartphones?”

“...No, it isn’t.”

Berlietta’s shoulders sank again. We walked out to the courtyard. It wasn’t like I could take her gift out of **[Storage]** indoors.

“This is amazing! Can I really keep this?”

“You can.”

Princess Berlietta had already started tinkering around with the Ether Vehicle’s engine.

“Is it really okay if my daughter has this, Grand Duke?”

“It is, I don’t mind. I gave one to the prince of Triharan as well... The prince actually has an interest in magitechnology as well, I think he’d get along with your daughter.”

“Oh my! That’s promising!”

Berlietta stopped tinkering and instead turned and looked over at us with suspicious eyes.

“What are you discussing?”

She didn’t know why I’d come here, so I filled her in on the situation regarding Triharan. I explained that the prince wanted to marry her and that he was also an enthusiast in the field of magitechnology. Then, I passed over his personal details and a photo of his face.

“Hmm... He certainly seems attractive...”

Princess Berlietta muttered slightly after looking over his details. It seemed like she was tentatively interested, at least. She was probably reassured by the fact that their hobbies lined up.

“Would you like to meet with him? You can just talk a little for the time being. He was also really interested in the Ether Vehicle I gave him, so I’m sure you’d be able to talk at length about it.”

“Well, I suppose... If it’s just a meeting and a conversation...”

Princess Berlietta looked down slightly as a red flush overtook her cheeks. The uncharacteristic response prompted the nearby knights and servants to start muttering to each other.

“Lady Berlietta’s interested in a boy...”

“Lady Berlietta, who always holed herself up in her workshop, is interested in a boy...”

“She never showed an interest in fashion or men, but now Lady Berlietta is interested in a boy!”

“P-Please be quiet!”

Berlietta’s blush grew deeper as she yelled, and she immediately drove away in her Ether Vehicle.

Damn, she’s got the steering down.

“Goodness me... That girl’s never blushed like that before. Please, Grand Duke, convey our intentions to the prince and his family. It may be my daughter’s last chance for salvation.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but I’ll arrange a meeting for them both. I’ll be in contact about it soon.”

Thank goodness... Seems like this all just might work out.

Whew, I thought. *I'm sure they'll get along because of their hobby.*

But I didn't realize the untold chaos that their shared hobby would eventually create...

◇ ◇ ◇

In the Reverse World, my main base of operations was on Drakliff Island.

It was an island of Dragons, so no other humans were allowed to set foot there. The one who sat as the island's overseer was Shirogane, the Silver Dragon.

If a ship approached the island, then Elder Dragons would warn the people aboard not to approach. If they failed to heed the warning, they'd be chased away.

I told the Dragons to avoid killing when they could, but that wasn't absolute. If the island came under attack, they were free to kill in self-defense.

Drakliff island was located within a landlocked body of water, surrounded by Triharan, Strain, Allent, and Gem.

Since the island was located roughly between the territories of Triharan and Strain, I thought it'd be a good place for the prince and princess to meet.

The emperor of Triharan and his son arrived on the island first, followed by the queen of Strain and her daughter. They gathered on the island as Dragons freely soared overhead.

Prince Lupheus had come looking slightly more formal than usual, but he was still his recognizable self. Princess Berlietta, on the other hand, was almost unrecognizable when compared to how I'd last seen her.

She wore a beautiful pink dress and a small tiara on her head. Her brown hair flowed freely down her back, and she wore much more flattering glasses. Her cute baby-like face was also lightly accentuated with makeup. Women were pretty versatile creatures when it came to fashion, it seemed...

After the introductions, it was time to see how well they'd get along.

I was technically the one doing the matchmaking here, but I was also kind of a total outsider... That was why I tried my best not to get involved in their conversations. I didn't exactly know much about Strain or Triharan anyway, so there wasn't a lot for me to add.

I wasn't the only one not saying much, though. The queen and emperor were happily chatting away, but the prince and princess seemed too nervous to actually speak.

"My home has a beautiful garden, you know. It has a full view of the island. Maybe you two would be more comfortable taking a walk out there?"

"Hm? Ah, yes... If Princess Berlietta would be happy with that..."

"Huh? Oh, yes... I think I would. L-Let us go."

The two of them shyly toddled outside, each of them followed by a bodyguard.

I also sent out Kougyoku to keep an eye on them from above.

"Seems like they made a decent first impression at least."

"Indeed. The atmosphere was quite calm."

The emperor and the queen both looked over at their respective children with smiles on their faces. I could see that they were speaking as parents, not world leaders.

Still, they did have to go into government mode at some point. This was a rare opportunity for two monarchs to have an audience with one another. The two of them promptly began chatting over legal proposals, trade agreements, and so on.

That wasn't a discussion I could participate in, so I left them in Shirogane's care. Ruby, Saph, and Emerl bowed to me as I left for the garden.

I'm not going out to interfere or anything... I just want to take a little peek at how they're getting along. Just a little one.

I sat down outside the house and synchronized my vision with Kougyoku's. She was perched atop a tree branch, watching the duo intently. They were walking alongside each other, but they were still maintaining a respectful

distance.

It seemed like they hadn't broken the ice. From where I was looking, it was more like they both had good ideas for conversation starters, they just couldn't find the right moment to talk. I wondered why they didn't just start talking about magitech, I was sure the conversation would flow naturally if they brought up their mutual interest.

"I guess they're both pretty inexperienced..."

One party was a fairly spineless man who had been engaged to an abusive old hag, while the other was a recluse who only really cared about her tinkering. I had a hard time viewing these people as future leaders.

"You should give them a little push, you know?"

"Eh... I don't wanna interfere."

"But if they get married without knowing each other better, they'll have a shallow marriage, you know?"

"I mean that's true and all, but... Wait a minute, whoa!"

I blinked in surprise at the sudden appearance of Karen. *When the hell did you get here?!*

"I told you not to shield your presence before approaching me. You're gonna give me a goddamn heart attack!"

"My radar went off, that's all. Although it was a faulty reading, since the couple isn't really related to you this time, you know?"

Karen, the god of love, frowned a bit. *I wish that sensor of yours would break.*

"Still, I think a little push would be good for them, you know? Look, the awkward silences between them are getting longer. It's gonna get bad real soon, you know?"

Well, you raise a good point... But I can't help but feel like a meddler here. I didn't really want to do this.

I opened **[Storage]** and pulled out an Ether Vehicle, then started up its engine. Karen promptly hopped into the passenger seat, even though I didn't recall

inviting her.

The magical engine within let out a whirring sound as I drove toward the couple.

“Ah?”

“Grand Duke, what is that?”

The duo didn’t seem especially interested in me or Karen. Instead, they were more focused on the vehicle I’d driven over in.

The ones I’d given to them were based on Fiat 3.5 HPs, but the one I was driving was based on the Renault Type K.

In 1902, the France-based company, Renault, won a race from Paris to Vienna with their Type K. The real thing could reach speeds of 125km/hour, but this one couldn’t go that fast. It was just a replica in terms of appearance, really.

To be honest though, depending on how it could be tweaked, this engine could probably go faster. I just capped out the speed at some point, since the car’s core frame wouldn’t be able to handle a massive impact.

I stopped the vehicle and stepped out before the duo. Technically, there were four of them if you counted the guards, but I couldn’t even see their faces.

“This is a different model of Ether Vehicle, isn’t it?!”

“Sorry, but could we take a look at the inner workings?”

I nodded to Berlietta and opened the hood of the vehicle. The two of them stared in awe, almost crashing into each other as they rushed to see the insides.

“Ooh... Three ether lines, I see... But I’ve never seen this kind of magic engine before...”

“Isn’t this the kind of engine used in the Gardio Empire? By Gritten Corp, as I recall.”

“It’s not. That one is slightly larger, and the mechanisms in this one are more intricate.”

“Interesting...”

The two escort knights simply shrugged and sat down nearby. The prince and

princess were engrossed in an incomprehensible conversation.

Magic engines were, as the name would suggest, engines that operated through magic. But it was very hard for a single human to provide the amount of magic power necessary to start it. That was why Gollems and their G-Cubes were necessary in the Reverse World.

The Ether Vehicle worked in a similar way, only it had Ether Liquid for mana amplification instead of a G-Cube, which allowed it to flow into the engine and start it up.

Depending on which engine was used, various things would change. For example, one might be more durable, less noisy, have better horsepower, or require less liquid. That was what they were finding the most interesting.

“This is a new kind of magical engine made in my world. New vehicles are being created over there as we speak.”

The Type K was made by Rosetta when she was bored. I felt like if Babylon or Elluka had made one, it would’ve been something absurd.

There were a few factions like the dwarves, or the engineers from Felsen, that continued working on new models of Ether Vehicles around the clock. Doctor Babylon found them interesting, since quite a few unique designs were sprouting up.

“I was thinking of hosting a race between all the Ether Vehicles that have been developed by different nations. It’d work as a testing track, basically. We’ll be running it as an experimental run on a track that we’re planning out right now.”

Frankly, I needed to put some rules together, along with some health and safety standards. Didn’t want anyone getting hurt.

The race would be about experimenting with how well the Ether Vehicles ran on a variety of terrains or under a variety of circumstances. I was sure it would be interesting. We could use magic to make the track safer, but also use that same magic to make the race more compelling from a viewer’s perspective.

For example, we were thinking of floor panels that could slow down the racers for a while or tunnels that accelerated the driver’s speed. We’d also been

experimenting with enchanting the seats with **[Teleport],** which would move the riders to a safe location if there was a sudden impact. It was basically like what we used in the Frame Gears. We decided to use them in the vehicles because they were much safer than airbags.

“Would you two perhaps like to participate in the race? I think that—”

“Yes! I’d love that!”

“I can’t pass up on a chance like this!”

The two of them nodded so hard I thought their heads were gonna fly off. They were a little too excitable for me...

They wanted to know more about the Type K, so I handed them the blueprints that Rosetta had drawn up. Doc Babylon and I were lucky, since we could just use **[Analyze].**

Though, Doc Babylon would get more out of it than me, since she had the actual technical understanding.

“Interesting... I didn’t know it could be done like this.”

“Hmm... But what about short bursts of magic through the piping?”

“That’s handled by this part, see?”

“Ooh... Perhaps if we cut out this segment and fed it through...” The two of them were in their own world now, so I turned and left the garden with my sister.

“Well, at least they’ve found common ground to talk about.”

“This is just the start, you know? The next step is getting them interested in each other on a personal level. It won’t be any good if their marriage is built on an interest in your Ether Vehicles, you know?”

She had a point. The hobby alone wouldn’t be enough to keep them working as a good couple. But in the end, that was up to the two of them, and there were also other matters like circumstances lining up properly, and so on... I wasn’t really qualified as a love expert, but I sure was talking like one.

We entered the house again and found the emperor and queen chatting

casually.

“Oh, Touya. How are they getting along?”

“Pretty well, I think. They’re talking at least.”

“Mm, I see. That’s good to hear.”

The two of them sighed breaths of relief. It seemed to me like they were worried about their kids.

I introduced Karen to the two of them as Shirogane poured us all tea. Then, I decided to go over the upcoming multidimensional summit.

According to the queen of Strain, the Allent Theocracy had agreed to join, while the Lassei Military Kingdom was still on the fence. Apparently they found the whole story of another world hard to believe because they hadn’t suffered any attacks from the mutants, nor had they any refugees who had accidentally phased in.

Still, I didn’t exactly want to wait until they’d been attacked for them to listen... I decided that convincing them some other way would be best.

“I think it’ll be fine. If you show them your strength they’ll listen.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“They’re a military kingdom, yeah? Their culture is all about individual strength trumping all. If you charge at them head-on and show them what you’re made of, they’ll definitely respect that.”

A country full of musclebrained meatheads, huh...? I bet if I threw uncle Takeru in there, he’d rise to the top in no time...

“Touya... I can tell what you’re thinking, you know? That would definitely be a bad idea.”

“Tsk... I guess.”

As usual, Karen could read me like a book. She was right, though. That course of action would lead to a major incident.

The Panaches Kingdom responded positively, apparently mostly thanks to their prince. I kept hearing about how he was telling everyone what a good

friend I was to him, but I didn't recall befriending the guy... *We just know each other! As casual acquaintances!*

Either way, it was decided that Triharan, Primula, Allent, Panaches, and hopefully Lassei would be joining us.

As we continued to plan, I got a telepathic message from Kougyoku.

《My lord, we have a problem.》

《What's wrong?》

《The two of them are arguing.》

"Huh?!"

"Is something wrong?"

The queen noticed my alarm and turned to me in confusion.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I'm receiving a phone call... Excuse me a moment."

I took my smartphone out and pretended to start a conversation with the static on the other side of the line as I walked out of the room. After I left their line of sight, I used **[Teleport]** to warp straight to Kougyoku.

"I told you already! We need to bolster the magic engine first! Then we design the main body of the car once we've established the limits!"

"No way! You need to balance the car's body first! If we ignore that procedure, then it'll be totally unsafe!"

"It's not like I'm ignoring the safety procedures, I'm just saying that it's better to specialize the vehicle than make it all well-balanced!"

"That's just gonna cause more trouble for the driver! Do you want poor handling? Because that's how you get poor handling. It's not like human drivers can respond like machines, duh!"

The two of them were engaged in a shouting match. The two knights just sort of looked at each other uncomfortably, sitting at a short distance away.

Apparently they'd had a falling out when they disagreed over which way to improve the Ether Vehicle.

“Calm down, you two...”

I tried to settle them both, but they simply stared at me with unified, furious eyes. It was terrifying.

“Grand Duke, you agree with me, don’t you?! We need to increase the output of the engine first, so that the future models can incrementally have more horsepower! That would make Ether Vehicles even more powerful over time!”

“He obviously agrees with me, that if such a thing happened, the high-specs would be completely wasted on the average driver! The best solution is to create a well-balanced vehicle that just about anyone can drive which will pave the way forward to more well-rounded models!”

“Sorry, I don’t really know much about this subject...”

I wasn’t even the creator of this car!

“Fine then, Lupheus! I’ll prove to you that my theory is right during the test race! My vehicle won’t lose to yours!”

“Very well, Berlietta! I’ll prove to you that speed doesn’t matter, it’s how you balance it!”

Uhh... Guys, I haven’t even built the racetrack yet. There are gonna be more participants than just you guys, too...

Clearly, I was misguided when I thought inviting them to race would be a good idea.

“Okay, you know? I hope you two fight with all your heart, you know?! Make it a fair race!”

“Wait, hey! Sis, stop! What are you doing?! Why are you encouraging this?”

In a flash, Karen had appeared out of nowhere with her thumbs up. I didn’t want her making this bad situation any worse!

“Goodness me... Love is born from conflict, you know? This is a good chance for them to get to know each other on a personal level.”

“You sure? Seems to me it’s more like you just thought it’d be funny to watch them duke it out...”

Even though Karen had whispered an excuse into my ear, I glared at her with suspicion. Still, she had a point... They were learning more about each other already... Sort of.

I wonder if this is really gonna turn out okay... I looked at the two of them, glaring fearlessly at one another. I had no idea how to feel about all of this.

◇ ◇ ◇

“The track’s being planned to go one loop around Drakliff island. Are we good to add hazards and obstacles?”

“This race is about testing the Ether Vehicles out, so yeah. We want different kinds of road conditions, and other environmental hazards.”

...The test was supposed to be the main part, but it seems like the race is gradually becoming the focal point.

Doctor Babylon was the one designing the racetrack, since she was the one gathering the data. I was a little worried about having her in charge of it, but I was sure that it’d be able to suit our needs.

We were in Babylon’s research laboratory, where she had the design projected up on a monitor. It looked normal at a glance, but I had my doubts...

“Why does the road split here?”

“That’s a shortcut. If the driver manages to navigate it well, then they’ll get a major boost. If they don’t? Well, I wouldn’t want to be them.”

“And this part here? Why the gap in the road?”

“That’s an area where they’ll need to jump. If their car can’t go the full distance, then they’re done for.”

“...Why’s this part in the ocean?”

“Oh, we’ll be putting a pier here. It’s part of the track where you can’t afford to go off-road. Eheheh.”

I quietly reminded Doc Babylon not to go too far, while wondering if things were really going to be okay.

I wondered how they’d be able to construct the course over on Drakliff island,

but apparently, they were just going to transport mini fabricators from the workshop. The same kinds of things they used to make Frame Gear ammunition on the fly.

The mini fabricators weren't quite as complex as the original Workshop, so I had faith it wouldn't be misused.

"Regina! I've finished it!"

Elluka walked into the research laboratory with Fenrir plodding along after her.

Hearing that she was also helping design the track just gave me more anxiety.

"Look, guys... safety is paramount here, okay? I don't want anyone crashing badly and getting hurt."

"It's fine, you silly boy. Even if their Ether Vehicle explodes into smithereens, I'll ensure that no harm comes to the driver. Have a little faith in your lover, hm?"

I'm not your damn lover, pipsqueak. I sighed, left the research laboratory, and left the grinning little doctor to her own devices.

I went to the hangar to speak with Monica, and found her doing maintenance on an Ether Vehicle along with Rosetta and the minibots.

"Oh, it's like... totally you and stuff, Master. Could I trouble you to pass me that wrench?"

I passed over the wrench to Monica, who promptly used it to tighten a bolt or two on a wheel fitting. She let out a deep breath before Rosetta tried turning the wheel itself.

I looked further into the garage area and saw several chassis and basic vehicular frames with exposed magic engines. They were all Ether Vehicles with different designs and specialties.

"All good here?"

"Uhm, yeah. This isn't really all that much compared to Frame Gears. We can like, totally get all this done even if we used a little bit of our free time and stuff. What about the doctor?"

“She’s designing a weird-ass racetrack.”

“Sir! We’ll make an Ether Vehicle so well-refined that it’ll conquer any kind of track they throw our way, sir! Yessir we will, just you wait!”

Rosetta puffed hot air through her nose as she stood tall, triumphantly gripping a spanner in her hands.

The two of them were also planning on participating in the race. They were gonna be drivers, while Doctor Babylon and Elluka were sticking to course design. It seemed like they had a feeling of rivalry going on, probably because they were all in the engineering field.

I didn’t write about it in the rules, but the two of them decided that they weren’t going to incorporate any Babylon tech into their Ether Vehicle.

That was what I wanted, though. It would’ve been pointless to have some souped-up mega-car enter the race. It needed to be something that any engineer from either world could reasonably create... Putting aside the Ether Liquid, at least.

“The dwarves are like, totally making their own stuff too, right? We cannot afford to lose to them!”

Monica was referring to the group of dwarves that had built the Dverg. They planned on participating as well.

I was looking forward to seeing what kind of unique vehicle they’d bring to the table, but I also knew that they’d be pitting it against a terrifying racetrack... I could only pray that nothing explosive would happen.

Our head maid, Lapis, was also intent on participating. She was extremely good at handling Ether Vehicles, so we’d be able to collect really interesting data on her handling in the race.

Nia, leader of the Red Cats, also forced her way into the whole thing somehow... She was the owner of the red crown, though... I hoped she’d be able to keep her road rage contained. If she didn’t, I was sure that Est would give her a stern talking to.

The Ether Vehicles for Nia and Lapis were being designed by the hangar-

dwelling duo. The cars didn't look all that flashy, so I wasn't too scared.

Triharan and Strain were participating, obviously... But Felsen also wanted to participate.

Felsen had always held a claim as one of the most advanced nations in the world when it came to magical engineering, and they immediately signed up to assert their dominance in the race.

I figured having a good variety of participants would be fun, and it'd help us collect more data on different models... But I almost canceled the whole thing entirely when the nominated driver for Felsen ended up being the king himself.

I couldn't imagine what kind of vehicle that beefy weapon-loving man would end up driving, but I could only picture it as a dump truck, or some other kind of beefy construction vehicle.

As I continued to worry about the race and its participants, the days flew by until the date was nearly upon us...

The Ether Vehicle testing is pretty important, but I hope those two end up closer together because of this...

I called their parents up to check on them, and apparently, they were working themselves so ragged that they were even missing out on sleep... Frankly, I worried about them.

Chapter III: The Amazing Race

The skies were blue and clear, aside from the occasional roaring Dragon. There was no severe wind, and the seas were relatively peaceful. It was the perfect day for racing.

I'd warned the Dragons not to attack the humans zipping around the island, and a few of them even seemed interested in watching the race. I was fine with them watching so long as they didn't disrupt anything.

I summoned a few Valkyries to act as my camera crew. They hoisted cameras into the air and could move around above the vehicles. After that, I erected a large monitor on the beach for the spectators to watch at their own leisure.

Now, for the list of participants...

Vehicle Number One: The Steel Ax. Driver: Griff This rugged dwarven machine was being driven by Griff, the leader of the dwarven craftsmen. It was an Ether Vehicle made almost completely out of original dwarven tech.

Vehicle Number Two: The Silver Star. Drivers: Rosetta & Monica This lean, mean, silver machine was built collaboratively by the gynoids Rosetta and Monica. Both of them would be driving it together.

Vehicle Number Three: The Swan. Driver: Lapis An elegant vehicle driven by an elegant beauty. Rosetta and Monica created the machine, but head maid Lapis would be handling it.

Vehicle Number Four: The Red Cat. Driver: Nia A red machine for a red cat. Rosetta and Monica created this one as well, but Nia was handling it.

Vehicle Number Five: Strain. Driver: Berlietta A standard-build Ether Vehicle modified extensively by Princess Berlietta of Strain.

Vehicle Number Six: Triharan. Driver: Lupheus A standard-build Ether Vehicle modified extensively by Prince Lupheus of Triharan.

Vehicle Number Seven: Felsen. Driver: The king of Felsen The culmination of Felsen's magitech research. It was quite a huge vehicle compared to the others.

Vehicle Number Eight: Brunhild. Driver: Mochizuki Touya I was participating as well, though I stuck to a regular Ether Vehicle. This one was based on the Renault Type K.

All eight vehicles were racing against each other.

Some of the vehicles definitely looked unusual, but the range of their specifications weren't known off the bat. I was one of the participants too, so obviously I wouldn't be told if they had any aces up their sleeves.

The one that stood out the most was Felsen's, with its massive size. I kind of felt like it was only big to match the size of its driver, though...

The Steel Ax also looked like a military vehicle... If I wasn't mistaken, it was made out of mithril.

I'd handed out a map of the race track to all drivers a few days before the race began. I hadn't made it too detailed, since I didn't want to spoil all the obstacles, but it let them get a general feel for the place.

If you split the island into four areas based on the directions, then the race started in the southern area and looped around the island counter-clockwise.

Elluka and Doctor Babylon explained the segments of the track to me like this:
■South■

The pier track. It was basically a racetrack on a pier that had been constructed atop the beach and sea areas.

■East■

The forest track. It was a series of dirt roads that went over winding hills.

■North■

The snow track. A slippery track with ice and snow around it.

■West■

The obstacle course. A dangerous area filled with mysterious obstacles.

The details were pretty vague in general, so I had a feeling my suspicion wasn't misplaced.

The rules were pretty simple too. The drivers needed to get through each

area within a certain amount of time, or they were out of the race.

If the vehicle broke down and ended up being pushed manually into the next area by its driver, it would be considered them getting through, so they could stay in that way if they sustained damage.

Each area also had one or two pit stops that would allow the drivers to repair or refit parts on to their vehicles.

I let out a small sigh. *Geez... This was supposed to be more of a test than a race, but I guess it's my fault for expecting things to go according to plan...*

◇ ◇ ◇

It was an hour before the race began.

The international representatives that I'd invited, along with their guards, were all looking up at the screen. All of them seemed happy as they sat around the various tables I'd set up.

I'd invited almost every country from the regular world. This was their first time in the Reverse World, but the island was identical to the one in the world they'd come from, so they weren't really doing any sightseeing.

The Reverse World nations in attendance were Triharan, Strain, Primula, and Gardio.

The one representing Gardio was Prince Lucrecion, who no longer held any rights to the throne. He was still overseeing Lowe, though.

"It's been a while. Thanks again for your help earlier."

"You're looking well. How are your parents?"

"Quite well. They've been living pretty peacefully since abdicating the throne."

The young boy gave off such a mature vibe that I almost forgot he was only around ten years old. I was impressed every time I saw him.

Even though he'd been put in charge of Lowe, someone else was managing it until he was older. He'd probably been learning a lot about how to be a ruler, so I hoped this would be a chance for him to relax a bit.

I introduced him to the young king of Palouf, since they were close in terms of age.

Seemed like young Ernest hadn't brought his shogi set with him this time. The two boys seemed to get along, so I let them chat about various topics from each world.

I backed off slightly when Ernest's fiancee Rachael glared at me as if to say "Why did you bring some stranger over?" She probably wanted some alone time with him.

Triharan's emperor, Strain's queen, and Primula's king were all busy chatting to the world leaders from the world I lived in.

I was glad that they were able to get acquainted a bit before the formal summit. I wondered if they were chatting out of caution, or a desire to make friends...

"A kidnapping, you say? That certainly sounds like him."

"I'm not surprised that Isengard country fell when they made him an enemy. Two countries on our side actually made the same mistake."

"It's fine if you just get along with him, though. He's a fine young man, he just does some crazy things every so often. This gathering, for example!"

...What are you guys talking about? I neglected to butt in, since they seemed to be having a good time.

As the world leaders continued to side-eye me and gossip, I moved towards the contestant garages.

There was a wall enchanted with **[Gate]** opposite the garages, which connected to various pit stops along the race track. If their vehicle was damaged during the race, they'd be able to come back to the garage for repairs using the pit stops.

I entered garage number eight.

There wasn't a door or anything, so it was pretty easy to walk right in. I figured I should do some last-minute preparation before the race.

Four mini-bots acted as my maintenance workers. They were all doing some

final checks on the Type K.

Each participant was allowed four maintenance staff and one navigator who could ride with them. Only Rosetta and Monica opted for the navigator option, though. Everyone else thought the weight of an extra person would be too much.

“Make sure the handling’s secure, alright?”

The mini-bots waved my way in affirmation. I wasn’t aiming to win the race or anything, so I wanted to prioritize getting through it safely.

As I directed the little robots, two people walked into the garage.

“Is this your vehicle, Touya? It looks cool!”

“Ah, we brought some food...”

Linze and Elze walked through the entrance and greeted me. They each held a small basket with sandwiches and fruit inside.

We started eating together, and I asked them what the other girls were up to.

It seemed that Lu, Yumina, Hilde, and Sakura were talking to their respective fathers. Leen was talking to the beastking, and Yae was meeting with Eashen’s mikado. Apparently Yae only went to see the mikado because her brother was there as an imperial guard, though.

Sakura was also only talking to the overlord because her mother dragged her there. Linze and Elze weren’t royals so they didn’t have any family among the guests. That was why they came to see me.

Technically they were from Refreese, but it wasn’t like they knew the emperor or anything.

“How’re you feeling about the race?”

“I’m not really aiming to win or anything. I just want to get the testing sorted out.”

“Huh? That sounds like loser-talk to me. Don’t you wanna win?”

Elze’s competitive streak started flaring up. But I didn’t really see the point in winning. I was more interested in the rivalry between Lupheus and Berlietta.

So long as I finished safely, I'd be happy enough with that. I had no idea what kind of obstacles I'd be facing during the race... I just had to pray that there wouldn't be any landmines.

Gradually, all my other fiancees made their way towards the garage. We all chatted together as the mini-bots finished their tweaks.

"Hey, Touya. Can I ride with you?"

"Eh... It'll probably be safe, but you shouldn't. If we drove into the water you'd get all wet."

Sue wanted to get in the passenger seat for the race, but her getting wet was the least of my worries. I had no idea what kind of weird dangers would be on the track.

All my other fiancees had probably considered that as well, since Sue was the only one to ask. The navigator position was entirely optional, so I didn't need them in there. I could just have the map projected in the car, anyway.

Paula suddenly raised her arm, as if to volunteer. I didn't think she'd be much use, though...

"Heh... I doubt she'll get in your way, so could you take her?"



“...I mean, I guess.”

I shrugged and gave in, since Leen asked me to. Paula suddenly threw both arms into the air and dashed out of the garage in celebration, I had no idea where the hell she was going.

The **[Program]** spell sure was incredible, though. It made a stuffed doll like her seem so alive... I was even calling her a ‘her’ sometimes instead of an ‘it.’

“Alright, now all I need to do is wait.” Paula suddenly toddled back in and started tapping me on the pants leg.

“What’s up?”

I followed her outside, only to find Prince Lupheus and Princess Berlietta staring each other down. *Shit...*

“Congratulations on finishing your vehicle. But your victory is all but impossible. My Strain will wipe the floor with you!”

“I’m afraid you’re misguided, Princess Berlietta. Your pride and joy will be left in the dust by the power of my Triharan! I must apologize in advance.”

“Eheheheh...”

“Ahahahahaha...”

...Your eyes are a lot more menacing than your laughs... Even your maintenance staff are getting freaked out.

“...This is certainly a vicious battle...”

“Not yet it isn’t.” I heard Elze and Sue chattering as they peeked around the garage entrance.

I wondered if everything would be okay... They were certainly more aware of each other on an individual level, but it wasn’t exactly loving...

“The race begins in fifteen minutes! All participants please change into your racing suits and assemble in front of the main building.”

Elluka’s voice came through the speakers atop the garage. It was finally time.

The two royals broke up their glaring match and headed towards their

vehicles. I quickly returned to mine as well.

...Geez. I hope this race ends safely.

I prayed to God Almighty, hoping he'd somehow keep this looming disaster free from harm.

◇ ◇ ◇

"As we mentioned earlier, you must clear each zone within the designated timeframe, or else you're out. If your vehicle breaks down and you have to push it, then you'll still be A-OK to pass so long as it gets through in the right amount of time."

Elluka listed off the basic rules from atop the stage.

"You're permitted to interfere with the other drivers. Each of your vehicles has been enchanted with magic to prevent direct collision, so feel free to try ramming each other. The lighter cars might get repelled away like a magnet, though."

Each vehicle had been enchanted to create a repulsion field that synchronized with their engines. Basically, each one would act as a magnet, pushing the other cars away.

The closest any two cars could get to each other before the repulsion activated would be roughly ten centimeters. It was originally just a safety feature, but when we realized it could be used for 'fighting' we decided to incorporate it that way.

"In the event of a crash, the driver will be teleported back here before impact. That doesn't immediately mean you're out of the race, but if the crash is so bad that the vehicle teleports you, then it'll probably end up too wrecked for you to carry on. We also have a manual emergency teleport button, use it if you think it's necessary."

We had a **[Gate]** enchanted into all the car seats, just in case. We also had Flora from the Alchemy Lab on standby to treat any possible injuries.

"Magic's also forbidden during this race. If you use any spells, you'll be out immediately. I'm talking to you here, Touya."

“...I get it, geez.”

If magic was allowed, I’d just use **[Slip]** and win without a hitch.

“And the race commentator is...”

“A cat that fights for the sake of mankind! Mankind that gives its lifeblood to a cat! The heavens cry! The earth cries! The cats cry! Bear witness to my kitty-cat chivalry! For it is I, the feline knight that’s feline fine, Mr. Mitt-Uh... D’Artagnan!”

Sakura’s summoned Cat Sith, Mr. Mittens, took to the stage. He was brandishing a mic instead of his usual rapier.

You’re the one commentating? Please don’t make too many puns...

“Meow then! It’s time to get your paws on the pedals, all participants into the Ether Vehicles!”

A red line was drawn along the stone path by the beach, and all our vehicles lined up against it. We’d all be starting in the same spot.

The drivers all got into their cars and began revving up their engines. I also got into my Type K. I then fired up the magic engine and started to project my map before I realized something... I wasn’t allowed to use magic.

Luckily, Paula was in the passenger seat and helpfully passed over a map to me. What a thoughtful little inanimate object.

Hmm... So the stone road stretches out straight and then ends on a sandy beach path... Then we’ll race in another line until we veer right on to the pier area, got it.

The pier was only about two and a half times wider than a standard Ether Vehicle. If someone decided to drive in the middle, it’d be almost impossible to pass them. If someone tried to ram someone else there’s a chance that both cars could get knocked off into the water and disqualified... That was a pretty tough starting area. I shrugged a bit and decided to just keep driving while prioritizing safety. If I held back a little at the start of the race, I’d be able to survey the situation as well. It wasn’t like I needed to win.

I put my helmet on and pulled the attached goggles down over my face.

“Are mew ready?! Then I pawsitively declare the start of the first Babylon Cup... Go!“

Right as Mr. Mittens yelled ‘go,’ the signal to start went off. A roaring sound rang out as all eight vehicles whooshed forward past the starting line.

“Meow about that! Princess Berlietta’s Strain has blasted past all the others! The Red Cat and the Silver Star are coming up close behind!”

Strain shot ahead with incredible speed, followed closely by Nia’s Red Cat. Rosetta & Monica were gaining on them both in the Silver Star, taking third place easily. Lapis’ Swan was coming up in fourth, with Prince Lupheus’ Triharan following after her. I was behind them both in sixth place.

The king of Felsen’s Felsen was behind me, and Griff the dwarf’s Steel Ax was in last place.

There were five people in front of me, but none of them had a particularly massive lead.

The smooth stone path ended in a flash, quickly replacing itself with a sandy trail beneath our wheels. It was slightly wet, goopy sand but it wasn’t quite on the level of quicksand. It gave me some traction trouble, but I carried on without a hitch.

“Wahaha! If you’ll excuse me, Grand Duke!”

“Uh.”

“I can’t believe my little kitty eyes! The Felsen is clawing its way ahead!”

The king of Felsen’s vehicle completely ignored the more difficult terrain, charging forward like a bulldozer and rushing right past both me and the Triharan.

...Damn it. I know I said I don’t care about winning, but it doesn’t mean I like being overtaken either.

“Meow my goodness! The frontrunners are already at the pier! It’s hard to pass people there cause it’s so narrow, so they’ll probably be stuck in their positions! But don’t let that throw you off! This little kitty knows it’s actually one of the most dangerous parts of the race! One wrong move will send them

hurtling into the deep!”

...The pier track was actually built over the shallows. The deepest it got was a meter and a half at most. None of the Ether Vehicles in the race were airtight, but the drivers would easily be able to get out so long as their seatbelts didn’t get stuck or something. In a worst-case scenario, there was always the teleport button.

If a participant drove off the pier in a more shallow area, they could definitely get back to the beach. Ether Vehicles ran on magical engines, after all, so getting wet wouldn’t stop them... But they’d definitely lose any chance of placing first place.

I drove off the beach area on to the pier. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw that there was quite a bit of distance between Steel Ax and my vehicle. I couldn’t imagine him being able to catch up to me without some kind of major boost.

I looked ahead and saw the Triharan. I didn’t really feel like overtaking it, since it looked like it was a similar weight to my own car. That meant I didn’t have a clear advantage or disadvantage when it came to ramming attempts, so it was better to play it safe.

If my car was a lot heavier, I’d obviously be playing a lot more aggressively.

“The Felsen is approaching the Swan! If it tries to overtake then paws-on-heart I promise you folks, the smaller vehicle is gonna get pushed off the course!”

The Felsen and the Swan were driving down a straight stretch of the pier, with the Felsen closing in fast.

“I’ll be forcing my way through, now! Don’t think too badly of me, now!”

“Hrmph.”

The Felsen caught up to the Swan and began driving right next to it. Given how large the Felsen was, it didn’t leave much room on the pier when lined up with another vehicle.

The Swan swerved slightly as the Felsen caused its repulsors to activate. It

swiftly managed to stabilize itself, but I had a feeling that another good push would knock it and Lapis right into the water below.

Lapis probably realized that too, as her vehicle began accelerating in an attempt to get ahead of the Felsen.

But the Felsen retaliated by accelerating itself, overtaking the Swan with surprising ease.

“Muahaha! How do you like that? Wait... What?!”

The boastful king of Felsen failed to notice a ninety-degree left-hand turn coming up.

“Noooooooo!”

The king of Felsen slammed down on the brakes, turning his vehicle hard to the left and just barely making the turn... Is what would have happened if Lapis wasn’t so prepared.

In a flash, Lapis drifted her car on the inner part of the turn, syncing her movements up with the Felsen perfectly. The Swan continued to drift, perfectly making the turn... before bumping hard into the Felsen just as it managed to stabilize itself.

“Uh oh.”

The Felsen had its delicate balance completely shattered and crashed into the waves below. The Swan sped onwards through the rest of the pier track, leaving the enormous splash behind it.

“Ooh! It’s a long catnap for the Felsen! Upside down in the ocean waves! You’re out!”

Good lord... Kinda glad I didn’t try anything now...

I, along with Prince Lupheus’ Triharan, passed through the left-hand turn. I glanced at the bubbling Felsen as I drove by. Obviously we lowered our speeds to safe levels before attempting the turn.

As the Steel Ax passed the same turn, the king of Felsen appeared all drenched in saltwater. He suddenly gripped the front of his vehicle and took in a deep breath.

“Looks like the king of Felsen is good to continue! If he can somehow make it back to the beach, then... Great yarn balls, what is he doing?!”

“Hrrrrrrrrgh!!!”

Mr. Mittens’ shocked voice caused me to turn around and look at what was going on. I looked and saw the king of Felsen lifting up his vehicle using his bare hands.

What the hell is going on?!

“Hup!”

In a flash, the beefy king physically threw his vehicle back up onto the pier. He then clambered back up, got into the driver’s seat, and started the engine back up. Even though there was a long distance between him and everyone else, he clearly wasn’t down for the count.

“That... That’s a little too much, isn’t it?”

I muttered in disbelief. Paula nodded her little head in agreement. If that guy was the king of the magic kingdom, there was something fundamentally wrong with this entire world.

“Looks like we have a furry-ous change in leadership! The Silver Star has overtaken both Strain and Red Cat! It’s in first place!”

Heh... So Rosetta and Monica took first? That’s pretty good.

I reached the end of the first pier stretch and drove along the sand. The Triharan in front of me wasn’t going especially fast, either. It was probably conserving its energy based on the rough terrain. I took a quick swerve and drove on to the next pier segment.

This segment had a lot of S-shaped curves and stuff, so I’d have to be careful.

Given how easily the Felsen took a bath, I had no choice but to lower my speed and play it safe.

I noticed, however, that the Triharan ahead of me wasn’t really slowing down at all. I wondered if it was because it had better tires or something... Probably improved the grip strength.

Berlietta's Strain started to fall behind, probably because it wasn't so good on this kind of terrain.

Currently, the leader was the Silver Star, followed by the Red Cat, with Strain struggling a little behind.

"Would you believe it, folk?! The Swan slipped right by Strain with a purrfect corner drift! That overtake cemented its place in the third position!"

Lapis overtook her, huh...? How the hell can you drift so well on such a narrow, wooden pier?! With the Swan taking third, that meant Strain was in fourth and Triharan was in fifth.

The two fated foes... who were supposed to be fated lovers... were within one place of each other.

Triharan kept on trying to overtake the Strain, but it was deflected at every turn.

"Ghh..."

"You shall not pass!"

The two of them kept swerving to the left and right atop the pier. The constant swerving meant their speed went down, resulting in me gradually catching up.

Damn it, now they're in my way...

From behind, it was clear that whenever the Triharan moved one way to overtake, the Strain moved the exact same way to block it. They were effectively synchronized, which gave me an opening.

Paula spread her arms forwards as if to egg me on, and she was right. I had to take my chance.

I perfectly timed my acceleration to coincide with their next veer to the left and blasted past them.

"What the?!"

"Huh?!"

The two of them stared at my Type K in utter disbelief.

Sorry guys, time to leave you in the dust! I pressed on until Lapis and her Swan were in my line of sight. I was in fourth place, which was a good position to maintain throughout the rest of the zone.

We finally drove off the second pier and made our way to the third sandy track. I looked ahead and saw that the Swan was approaching the Red Cat.

“Ohoho! Bless my little kitten soul, the Swan is on the warpath! It’s cutting in close, using all the twists and turns to its advantage! And... Ohhh, just as they make it back off the sandy trail, that’s it, folks! It’s a successful overtake! The Swan is in second place!”

Lapis used the transition from sandy road to stony road and overtook Nia in a flash. That was pretty wild.

I kept Nia in my sights as I continued to drive at a steady pace. The stone road was a little bit difficult to drive on due to the patches of sand scattered across it. Driving off-road wouldn’t knock me out at this point, but I still had to take care.

“The Silver Star is purring on smoothly through the pier track’s gate! It’s steadily proceeding towards the forest track! In that zone, you gotta keep on your toes, because mountain trails can be harsh for drivers!”

Rosetta’s team cleared the area first. Lapis passed through not long after, followed by Nia. They were all well under the time limit.

I maintained my position in fourth and passed through the gate with good time as well.

“I-I-It’s pretty bumpy here, huh...?”

The rough mountain path was extremely uncomfortable to drive on. The surface of the path was so uneven that the cars could easily overturn if they went too fast and hit a raised area.

I kept on driving until I saw a sign that said “Pit Stop. Next Right. Five-hundred Meters.”

“Might be a good chance for a tire change. Could swap some parts, too.”

Paula nodded in affirmation. I made the call to drop into the pit stop. It’d be

hard to keep going with our tires in this condition, if they were damaged along the mountain trail that'd be really bad... Plus, the bumpiness was making me feel kinda carsick.

"Oho! The Silver Star has entered the pit stop, folks! And the Swan has also swung in to change its gear out, but... What's this?! Are you seeing this, folks?! The Red Cat has completely bypassed the pit stop and taken first place! You gotta be kitten me!"

"I'll be taking that first position! Ahaha!"

Nia, what the heck? You're gonna keep on going? I guess you're not the type to get carsick, but are your tires really gonna be okay? I shrugged and decided not to worry about my opponents, then I turned in to the pit stop.

I passed through the magic circle that triggered the **[Gate]** and took me back to the garages.

I moved my Type K to Garage Number Eight, and the minibots swarmed over towards me. They quickly began swapping out the tires and other equipment with pieces better designed for off-road travel.

I looked at the little monitor in the garage to see the current race situation. Strain and Triharan had gotten through the pier section and entered the forest area. The Steel Ax and Felsen were just coming up to the gate that would take them to the forest area too.

Huh, nobody's out yet... I must admit, I'm surprised. Given that Doc Babylon designed this course, I figured it'd be more dangerous. Then again, Felsen would've been out if it wasn't for his crazy strength...

I saw Rosetta and Monica zip past the garage in their Silver Star. It seemed like they'd already finished refitting their vehicle.

Lapis and her Swan returned to the race shortly afterward, seconds before Princess Berlietta and Prince Lupheus came charging into the pit stop. They were neck-and-neck.

"Ghhh...!"

"Nhh...!"

The two of them split off into their respective garages in perfect sync.

Just as I thought they'd be busy, both competitors stepped out of the garages and started glaring at each other with wide grins on their faces.

"You're pretty good, but know that the next zone will spell your doom! You aren't ready for this!"

"Right back at you, fool! Try not to crash and get booted out of the race, okay? It would be boring if I saw you lose like that!"

"Ehehehe..."

"Ahahaha!"

...This is honestly scary. The two of them were smiling wide, but their eyes were full of malice. Frankly, they looked like a perfect match.

Crap, can't let myself get distracted.

I returned to the garage just in time to see my tires being swapped out. Paula and I hopped back into the vehicle, fired up the engine, and high-tailed it out of there.

I went back to the track and noticed the dwarf-made Steel Ax was right behind me. Seemed like Griff had opted not to take the pit stop.

That made sense to me, given that it was clearly a rugged vehicle designed for off-road driving. The Felsen, on the other hand, turned in to the stop and went to swap out its equipment.

"Let's check in on the forest track, folks! We've got the Red Cat in the lead, feline pride represent! Following behind it, we've got the Silver Star, the Swan, the Brunhild, and the Steel Ax! Ah, paws on that a second! The Strain and Triharan have just come out of the pit stop!"

I was listening to Mr. Mittens' coverage of the race as I rounded a turn, but suddenly caught my tire in a patch of uneven dirt. *Gah!*

"...That was definitely placed there deliberately. Looks like I can't let my guard down."

I gripped my steering wheel and stared at the forest-enclosed path ahead.

The race had only just begun.

◇ ◇ ◇

“We’re looking in on the forest track now, people! Nia Vermouth’s Red Cat is still high in the lead, kitty pride! Rosetta and Monica are following in second with their purrfectly serviceable Silver Star! Lapis, the maid extraordinaire, is gaining on them in third!”

I was in fourth place, headed straight for Lapis.

After driving on it for a while, I realized how harsh the forest track was. The trees were so dense it was almost impossible to see up ahead.

“Whoa!”

Plus, the road was so bumpy that if I accelerated too much I’d end up flying up and crashing.

Luckily, we had that basic map of the area pulled up. Paula was helping by holding it up for me to reference now and then.

“So the path splits up ahead...”

A little bit into the forest track, the road split into two.

Path A was a shortcut, but the road was bumpier and it had more obstacles. Path B was the long way round, but it was much less risky. Both paths would merge back into one later down the line.

Typically, one would try to consider which path was the best to take, but I was dead set on B.

This entire race had been designed by two maniacs. I didn’t even want to think about the horrors that would await me on Path A, so I just decided to avoid it.

I didn’t care about winning or losing, I just wanted to make it through in one piece.

“Oho! The Red Cat still holds the lead, and it’s going down Path A! The Silver Star in second place has opted for Path B!”

Rosetta’s team chose B as well, huh? Given how well they know the doc, I’m

not surprised at all. But Nia went for A... She probably just did it without thinking. Knowing her she'll have just chosen it because it was nearer to her.

The Swan in front of me veered left, which meant Lapis was also going for A... I hoped she'd be alright.

I worried a little bit as I made the turn for Path B.

After a short while, the forested area opened up into a scenic road by the sea.

Man... This is a hell of a nice road, there aren't any bumps... And the scenery's great! One of the Merlion statues suddenly blasted a straight jet of water toward Monica and Rosetta. Oh well.

Path B was so straightforward that it didn't have many obstacles surrounding the road, so I could plainly see Rosetta's car up ahead. She and Monica had quite the lead on me.

I was still taking care, since I had a feeling that even if Path B seemed peaceful, it wouldn't be entirely free.

"And Brunhild heads down Path B! Steel Ax veers into Path A, while the Strain follows down B! Ah, Triharan went down A! And there's the Felsen, catching up and opting for B!"

Hmm... Berlietta went for B, while Lupheus went for A. That's a little surprising... I would've pegged them for going the opposite ways.

The Steel Ax and Felsen definitely have enough rugged power to handle A, but for some reason, the Felsen went down B instead... Maybe he's trying to stay on the safer side since he fell off the pier earlier...

Path A had the Red Cat, the Swan, the Steel Ax, and the Triharan.

Path B had the Silver Star, Brunhild, the Strain, and the Felsen.

We'd split into two neat groups.

"Holy delicious smoked mackerels! There's a massive river coming up ahead of the Red Cat! She's going for it, she's going for the jump, and... Oh my whiskers, she made it! She just barely made it!"

J-Just barely? What kind of river was it? I'm glad I chose B...

“And the Swan gracefully made the jump too! Oh, oh! The Steel Ax is coming in for the jump... It’s... It landed! Ohh! But wait, the rear wheels are stuck, it’s falling backward! Oh, oh! No, it composed itself! It’s good!”

The Steel Ax looked like it was really heavy, I was surprised it could even get airborne.

Path A seemed a lot calmer than B. It honestly felt like I was on a relaxing country drive.

I looked behind me and saw Berlietta riding in the Strain, she was charging towards me at an incredible pace.

I wasn’t really aiming to win, so I had no intentions of trying to stop her.

“Pardon me!”

The Strain rushed on, kicking up dust in its wake.

The Strain didn’t let up at all after passing me and went on charging towards the Silver Star. I wondered if pushing her magic engine to the limit like that was okay... But it wasn’t like they overheated or anything. The only risk was if the magical charge overflowed, then it would simply stall the engine.

As I pondered, I heard Mr. Mittens start his commentary up again.

“Oh my goodness gracious me, this is the upset of the century! There’s stuff flying across the racetrack! They’re being fired from the trees! It’s... It’s cream pies! Delicious fresh cream pies, hurtling from the tree branches! They’re pelting the drivers! Nia just got biffed right in the face, forcing her to veer to the roadside! Meow, the humanity! Lapis is deftly avoiding all the pies! The Swan has overtaken Nia and claimed first place!”

Pies. I knew it. I knew Path A was cursed. Sorry Nia, I’m sure you didn’t expect to meet a creamy end.

Nia was still reeling from the surprise creaming, allowing the Steel Ax to get past her.

“The Swan’s continuing along Path A, completely unscathed! The Steel Ax is following close behind, and the pie-smeared Red Cat is starting up again! Oh! Over on Path B we’ve got the Silver Star in first, followed closely by Strain!”

Path B was definitely the safe choice, but it was a slightly bigger detour than I'd expected.

The first of the racers to make it to the merging point was the Swan. The Silver Star was next, followed by the Steel Ax, then the Red Cat, then the Triharan, the Strain, my Brunhild, and finally Felsen. We were finally all back on one path.

Dang it. I was in fourth place before the path split up, but now I'm seventh? I guess it's my fault. I had a leisurely drive along the long road, so... Whoops.

I started driving faster through the rocky area, hoping to catch up to the Strain ahead.

"Whoa!"

We emerged from the rocky, forested area on to a wet, muddy field. It was sort of like a swamp, but a rice paddy probably would've been a closer comparison. The paths for vehicles to drive on were spread out like a sprawling web.

The field didn't bother me as much as the gigantic Merlion statues did, though. There were a ton of them dotted around the place. It made me feel highly uneasy.

I decided to keep on driving while avoiding the muddy areas, I didn't want to get caught in the mud and then sink so deep I couldn't get out.

The other racers were also maneuvering around cautiously, which caused us to end up quite bunched up. As I carefully steered around, trying to avoid the muddy areas, I heard a blasting sound.

"Bwaugh!"

"Owiee!"

"Ohhh! The Silver Star got attacked by a jet of water! What a pawsitively evil trap!"

One of the Merlion statues suddenly blasted a straight jet of water towards Monica and Rosetta. The force of the jet was like that of a fire hose, causing their vehicle to get pushed back into a muddy pit.

“Gaaah!”

The jet finally let up, but only after blasting the vehicle so much that it was flipped on its side in the mud.

I’m in trouble here...

“Ma’am... No, ma’am! This is harassment!”

“Like, goddamnit, and stuff! This is totally unfair!”

Rosetta and Monica, now completely caked in mud, started cursing Babylon’s name as they flipped their car back to position and slowly started driving it back to the pathway.

Everyone else kept driving on, taking extra care to watch the Merlion statues.

The muddy Silver Star finally got back on track a bit ahead of me, and we left the paddy.

As we filed out of the field, the road turned into a rough mountainous one. The bumpy surface was clearly the challenging part of this road... But it was way beyond just bumpy.

“Urhgghughgh...”

The road was so uneven and rough that I felt as though I was riding a rodeo bull machine. Paula started hopping up and down as if she were bouncing on a trampoline. My vehicle had been outfitted for extra durability on this road, so I didn’t even want to imagine how badly the cars that didn’t go in for the pit stop changes were faring.

“Oh?”

I drove past Nia’s Red Cat, which I expected to be ahead of me. It was parked by the roadside. I looked to my left and saw Nia hunched over, holding her own hair back for some reason.

“Bleeeeeegh...”

...I am going to erase that scene from my memory. That’s what you get for skipping on the pit stop, though.

I felt a bit sorry for her, but I had to focus on the race.

“Ohoho! The Steel Ax is showing its might along this path! It just overtook the Swan and claimed first!”

Oh? If I remember right, the Steel Ax skipped on the pit stop too... I have a feeling that it won because of the driver’s hardiness rather than the Ether Vehicle itself, though... Dwarves are made of sterner stuff, after all.

“This... is... too... shaky!”

It was like I was driving on top of a giant washboard. By the time I got done with that bumpy hell of a path, I was struggling to keep Linze’s sandwich from crawling back up out of my mouth.

“That was awful...” I was in no state to drive properly after that horrible jolt to my system. As I slowly proceeded down the road, the Felsen came rushing past me.

“Muahaha! Looks like you’re still a little wet behind the ears, Grand Duke!”

Shut up... I just have a delicate stomach. No, wait... This is a normal reaction! You’re the weirdo here!

“The forest track is nearly over and done with! Steel Ax has taken the lead, followed by the Swan in second! The Triharan’s in third, followed by Strain, the Silver Star, Felsen, Brunhild, and the Red Cat in dead last! You’re a disgrace to the feline persuasion!”

Even though the road was clearer, I was still feeling the aftereffects of that bumpy hellscape. I listened to Mr. Mittens as I picked up the pace a bit in an attempt to catch up. I checked my rearview mirror and saw that Nia’s pie-caked car had managed to get on to the somewhat comfier road too.

“...It’s getting colder, isn’t it?”

As we came to the end of the forest track, the air got chillier. That was probably a result of the next area, the snow track.

“The Steel Ax is the first vehicle out of the gate! The Swan is close behind in second! They’re heading straight towards the snow track! A dangerous, icy path indeed! Put on your kitten mittens, kids!”

The snow track was designed to be hella icy. Without changing the tires to an

appropriate set, there was no way you'd be able to make it through.

I finally passed through the goal gate, coming in at seventh place.

I entered the next area and found the roads already covered in a faint layer of snow. The snow was inauthentic and magically generated, but basically identical to the real thing. Plus, since I was seventh, I had to deal with the extra-slippery aftermath of the previous cars that had driven through the road already.

Just like back at the forest, there was a signpost pointing out the pit stop. Obviously, I was going to use it.

The cold air vanished the moment I was warped to the garage area... Which was pretty obvious, considering the garage was near a nice, warm beach.

I saw a familiar sight in front of garages six and seven. A duo grinning and glaring at each other.

"Ehehehehh..."

"Ahahahahahh..."

It was the princess and the prince, both of them pale in the face. That was probably because of the hellish washboard road they'd just been on.

After I drove the Brunhild into the garage and instructed the minibots to do what they needed to do, I lay down on the floor. I had to do anything I could to mitigate the carsickness I was feeling.

"Paula, hey... Can you bring me some ice?"

I asked Paula to fetch some ice cubes over from the freezer. She was completely fine, obviously. No, wait... It would've been fine if I could cast **[Refresh]** on myself, but magic wasn't allowed.

I broke off a chunk of the ice and tossed it into my mouth. I focused on licking and sucking at it, and my nausea gradually began to subside.

Motion sickness generally arose when your central nervous system was overstimulated and received conflicting messages. That was why focusing on licking a piece of ice could help stabilize your body and make your nervous system think everything was going to be okay... At least that's what I heard on

TV one time.

It might've been a placebo, but it did help.

That apparently worked for hangovers as well, though. Drinking icy water was a solid way to sober up, some even called it an effective hangover cure. But I didn't drink so I wouldn't really know if that was valid.

Apparently, spicy food was also good at stabilizing the central nervous system, but I wasn't really interested in nibbling on chili peppers.

I changed into a thick jacket, which would hopefully help me fight against the cold.

After that, I hopped into Brunhild. It had been outfitted with spiked tires.

The six vehicles that were ahead of me had already rolled out by the time I was done.

Before long, the road had become covered in ice. Apparently, pure ice actually had some decent friction on it, so it wasn't actually awful to drive on. It was only bad when the surface level was slightly melted, creating a slippery water membrane.

"Whoa!"

My tires slipped a bit, so I had to pull on the steering wheel. *Damn... Some of this ice is partly melted, I'll definitely have to take care.*

"Steel Ax is still blazing ahead in first! Its caterpillar tracks are making it impossible for the ice to slip it up! The ice is practically shattering under it!"

We were on a long, U-shaped bend, which gave me a good view of the Steel Ax. *Oh come on... What are you, a tank or a bulldozer or something? Is it even legal to use caterpillar tracks?! It wasn't exactly specified in the rules, but come on!*

Since the dwarves had been working on the Dverg, I wondered if they'd learned about tracks from Babylon or something. I wondered if the next Dverg model they built would use caterpillar tracks.

"But there's no denying that its weight is slowing it purrty heavily down! The Swan is catching up little by little and... Ohh, it passed! The Swan is in first! But

it’ll have to face the ice-walls of doom!”

There were several blocks of ice piled up to form impassable walls that covered parts of the road. They were around a meter tall each. They continued in a pattern. One wall blocking the right side of the road, then one blocking the left, and so on.

If you wanted to avoid crashing, then you’d have to make several sharp zigzag turns. It was a very difficult thing to do, given how slippery the ice was.

“Ghh...”

Lapis began carefully navigating past the walls, but the Steel Ax just began plowing through the ice.

“You think this is enough to stop dwarven engineering?!”

Everyone stared, dumbfounded, as the tank-like vehicle started annihilating every obstacle in its path.

It swiftly took first place back from the Swan. I honestly had no idea if the dwarves were insane or geniuses.

Wait, crap... That definitely looked dumb, but now the ice wall fragments are obstacles for everyone behind him! If he planned this, then... Nah, there’s no way he planned this.

Everyone behind continued on, weaving through the broken ice fragments.

The smaller chunks were easily driven over, but the larger pieces had to be avoided. The Felsen, on the other hand, was able to do a smaller-scale version of what the Silver Ax had just done.

“After the ice walls, we have the slippery slope! Everyone be careful as you drive up, okay?! Especially if you’re behind a vehicle! You never know what might happen if it loses its grip and falls back on to you!”

It was a wide, uphill road with an extra-slippery surface. I assumed that it would probably become a downhill road at some point, though.

Hmm... If I slip here, I’ll fall right to the bottom... The best thing to do here would probably be to drive straight up with a lot of force. As I began to ponder the best way to make it up the hill, it happened. Several massive snowballs,

around two meters in diameter each, appeared at the top of the slope. They all started rolling down towards our vehicles.

...Shit.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Gwaaah!" The Steel Ax, hurtling ahead at the front of the race, suddenly collided with one of the massive snowballs. The snowball did not break, even after the vehicle impacted it, which made me assume they'd been magically reinforced.

The enormous snowball strained against the Steel Ax, pushing a massive weight down on the vehicle.

"Ghhh..."

Griff desperately put his foot down on the accelerator, but it seemed like even staying in the same spot was using up all the power the vehicle had in it.

But the Steel Ax's fate was sealed as another snowball rolled down and pushed against the one that was already straining against the vehicle.

"Gueh?!"

In a flash, the entire vehicle lost its battle against the obstacles, sending it crashing back down the slope along with the snowballs.

"Nuoooooh?!"

The Steel Ax went all the way down to the bottom and pitifully rolled off the course.

"Bless my little kitten mittens, the Steel Ax just went from first to last place in the blink of a cat's eye! He's even gone off-track! Oh my... Ohhhh! No! He's skidding and crashing through ice walls, he's overturned!! Aaah! His emergency teleport kicked in and took him back to the garage, folks!"

Welp... Griff's fine, but I worry about the state of the Steel Ax. Even if he does get it back here I don't think he'll be able to clear this area before the time limit now... Guess he's out.

"That was a shame, guess I'll— Agh!"

Whoa, that was close! How'd I fail to notice that snowball?! Guess I can't let myself get distracted with moving obstacles all around.

Everyone carried on, carefully, up the slope. Lapis and her Swan had taken first place thanks to the Steel Ax's fall. She was closely followed by the Triharan, which was in turn closely followed by the Strain.

I kept on driving up the slope, narrowly avoiding snowball after snowball. *Ugh... This is stressful. If I even get hit once, I'm toast.*

I finally made it to the top of the slope and found a downhill path. It wasn't very steep, so I just kept sliding down while making mostly ineffective brakes now and then.

At the bottom, the road returned to normal... Well, it was still frozen. But normal enough.

"And the Swan has blasted through the frozen hairpin curve! Now comes the hardest part of this section, the great snow maze!"

I blinked in confusion at that final part and glanced toward my map. *They did it... Those idiots really did it.*

The finish line of the snow track lay beyond a giant maze with snow-block walls. All I had to do was get through this last part and wave this icy hell goodbye.

"The Swan already found a dead end in the maze, people! She's taking a U-turn! This isn't really very exciting to comment on! Actually, it's a bit boring!"

This part of the track definitely wasn't exciting, but it made sense. It could eat up a lot of time if you went the wrong way. There was a classic maze-navigating method involving leaving things behind as markers, but I didn't really have time for that.

I followed after the Felsen into the depths of the maze.

I immediately came to a T-junction. The Felsen had turned right, so I opted for the left.

I came to a four-way junction a bit later on, and I took a left there as well. After driving for a while, a massive white wall appeared in front of me. It was a

dead end.

The road was, thankfully, wide enough for me to make a solid U-turn. I turned back toward the four-way junction, but ended up forgetting which way I'd come from in the first place. There were tire tracks on the ground, but multiple people had driven through so I couldn't accurately track mine.

"Oh! The Red Cat finally entered the maze, now everyone's inside! Who's gonna be the first one to make it out?! Stay tuned, folks!"

I looked up in the air and saw one of my summoned Valkyries holding a mass-produced smartphone in her hands. She was filming us for the viewers. All I had to do was synchronize my sight with hers, and I could have won the race in no time at all... But that would have been kind of scummy.

Still... with magic forbidden and Paula's map obviously lacking any maze details, I didn't know what to do... Suddenly, I glanced at Paula. She glanced back. I looked upward.

Paula... She's a stuffed animal. She's light. That means I can...

Yeah, this'll work... Paula tried to scramble away as she realized my plan, but it was too late. I had a hold of her.

"Relax, it'll only take a little bit. I promise you'll be safe, I won't let you land on the ground."

Paula shook her head violently in protest. I ignored her (imagined) screams, and hurled her straight up into the air with all the force my body could muster.

"BE SURE TO GET A GOOD LOOK!"

Paula flew up way past the snow walls, paused for a brief moment in the air, then came plummeting back down. I caught her without any problems.

"So? Did you see a way out?"

Paula nonverbally grumbled and sulked for a while, before eventually pointing her arm straight ahead.

Thank you, my lovely little navigator. Now, let's roll.

I kept driving Brunhild through the maze, relying on my pocket PaulaNav

whenever we came to a junction. All I ended up doing was throwing her up into the air, but it worked great.

Paula certainly had an incredible memory. She was never in the sky for long, but she always knew the right way.

Leen had actually told me that Paula had begun doing things or moving in ways she had never programmed her to.

It was possible that, since Leen was a beneficiary of my divinity, it was also flowing into Paula and giving her more autonomy.

Still, for her to be leeching divinity from someone who was already leeching from me...? That would probably put her on the level of a spirit or something. I didn't really think that was possible, though. I wasn't even a fully-fledged god yet!

After being thrown up and down a few more times, Paula gradually started moving a little more slowly, but she still dutifully continued to point out the right path.

Just as I worried if she'd be able to keep it up, we reached the exit.

Hell yeah!

"Meow my goodness! The Brunhild is out, I repeat... The Brunhild is out! It's making a beeline for the exit gate!"

I was a little baffled that I was now somehow in first place, but I decided to focus on the path ahead instead of worrying.

It was a little amusing, though. I hadn't cared about winning at all, but the moment I took first place... I wanted to maintain that position.

"Brunhild has cleared the snow track! It's headed toward the final zone, the obstacle course!"

Oh man... It feels real nice hearing that I'm number one, I can't lie.

As I carried on driving, the ice gradually vanished from the road. *I'm in first, but I should probably step on the gas. I can widen the gap while they're all back in the maze.*

I thought this was meant to be like an obstacle course or something. Where are the obstacles? I figured at the very least there'd be caltrops all over the place or something... Huh? I turned quickly and noticed something on the road ahead.

What is that? Something drawn on the road? It's a black background with a white symbol on it... Wait, is that a skull symbol?! It was too late. By the time I realized what I was looking at, Brunhild had driven over the black panel with a skull painted on it. I heard a distinct clicking sound ring out.

It only took a few moments for the sudden blast to send me flying up into the air. It took a few moments more for my ears to register the sound of the explosion.



Before I knew it, Paula and I were back in the garage. We'd landed headfirst on a mattress.

"Holy smoked mackerel! The Brunhild exploded, folks! I-Is the driver safe? He's safe, people! He was warped out! But what a scary track!"

"Come on, wasn't that a little extreme?!"

A landmine?! Is that legal?! Is that even legal?! I know we're trying to test out the limits of our Ether Vehicles but I didn't realize I was supposed to make an armored truck!

I looked at the monitor in my garage and saw my Brunhild laying on the tracks. It had been damaged pretty badly. Repairs would definitely be possible, but it'd take longer than the race to fix it up. It was regrettable, but I had no choice but to withdraw from the race. I was pretty mad about it.

I contacted the race HQ and told them I was out.

"Oh, the Brunhild is out of the race! What a shame!"

Tsk... I didn't think I'd be the first one to get kicked out. But I guess the Steel Ax is out of commission too, so there are only six racers left.

I told the mini-bots to recover the Brunhild wreck, then went through a **[Gate]** that led me and Paula to the audience seating area on the beach.

"Oh, Touya. Sorry you lost."

"Dang it, lad! I had a bet on you!"

The emperor of Regulus and the beastking glanced over and offered me their comments. I couldn't believe they had a betting pool going.

"Gimme a break, man..."

I sighed slightly as I looked up at the monitor. The other racers were still stuck in the maze.

Looking at it from this angle made me keenly aware of how well-constructed it was. It was definitely going to take them a while yet.

I started to worry a bit when I saw the timer ticking down in the corner of the screen, but I reassured myself when I remembered how close the goal was to

the maze exit.

“Touya, are you okay?”

I looked over and saw Yumina and the other girls seated at a table. Paula hurriedly toddled over to Leen. I followed after and sat down in an empty chair.

“I knew you were fine, I did. But I must admit that when your vehicle exploded I felt a pang of fear, I did.”

“It was scary...”

Yae and Sakura voiced their concerns. I was certainly frightened in the moment as well. I didn’t think a trap like that would be there so soon, so it was a result of my own careless nature.

“You should’ve paid more attention. That trap was totally obvious! It had a skull on it!”

“I was accelerating at the time, and I couldn’t see it properly since I’d just made a turn...”

...Bah, it just sounds like I’m making excuses for myself now. I guess I did let first place go to my head, though.

“We placed it there expecting something like that. We believed the first vehicle through would be the one to trigger it... But I must admit, I’m surprised we got you, Touya.”

“Mhm!”

“You devils...”

I glared over at the labcoat-clad girl and the glasses-adorned woman.

“Don’t you think putting mines down was a bit much?”

“I admit it might’ve been a little far. But we certainly got some good data on the emergency teleport function, didn’t we?”

You assholes... I’m not surprised by this in the least... I was wary from the moment I realized you two would be in charge of designing this race...

“And what would you have done if the teleport didn’t work as planned?”

“That’s simple enough. We built in several safety measures just in case. We were actually worried nobody would trip the mine at all!”

“Didn’t you just say you expected it to happen?!”

Ugh... No matter the world, you magitech nuts have something wrong with your brains.

“Meow my! The Silver Star made it out, and the Felsen’s out behind it!”

I looked up in response to Mr. Mitten’s coverage. Seemed like Rosetta & Monica, along with the Felsen king, had made it out.

The rest of the racers gradually made it out too. The Triharan came out next, then the Swan, then the Strain, and finally the Red Cat.

Nia just barely made it through the goal before the timer ran out.

“And that’s time up for the snow track! The Steel Ax is officially out!”

The Steel Ax had made it back to the track at some point, but unfortunately, it was too far behind to even make it to the maze before time ran out.

I definitely would’ve just thrown in the towel then and there, but it seemed like dwarves didn’t enjoy quitting.

The six remaining vehicles carried on through the obstacle course. They all knew that my car had been blown up, so they were all driving carefully.

They all stayed well away from any skull-marked panels on the road and thus ended up maintaining slow speeds. They all made it to the pit stop without any change in position.

Basically nothing was known about the obstacle course, so nobody knew the best way to specialize their vehicles. In the end, they all opted for a basic setup.

The Silver Star came out of the garage first followed by the Swan, the Felsen, the Triharan, the Strain, and the Red Cat.

There were skull panels all over the track, so nobody accelerated too much. Lapis and her Swan managed to deftly avoid the traps while picking up speed. Lupheus in his Triharan also stood out due to his handling. He just barely scraped the edges of a few panels as he accelerated ahead.

It only took a short while of this for the Swan to reach first place, and the Triharan to reach third.

“Oh goodness me! The landmine stretch is finally over! It’s time for steep cliffs! If you fall down once, then you’re out!”

The monitor showed the next area. Falling wouldn’t do too much damage since the ocean was below, but if anyone did fall they wouldn’t be able to get back up. The drivers would simply teleport back to the garage and be forced to give in.

There weren’t any guard railings either, so even the slightest mistake would result in the vehicle flying wildly away.

“...This is another evil design, I see. But that can’t be all there is to it.”

“Heheh, I guess we’ll see.”

“Fufu... We’ll see!”

I shot a glare at Elluka and Babylon, who were grinning up at the screen. Fenrir, Elluka’s Gollem, let out a small sigh and shook his head. *I didn’t think Gollems could get that exasperated...*

“Meow! The Strain is charging ahead full-throttle! It overtook the Felsen!”

Damn, that’s quite fast... If her vehicle’s optimized for speed, it makes sense she’d want to take advantage of this long stretch.

“Oh! It overtook the Triharan and is on its way to the Silver Star... Wait, what the...?!”

The road in front of the Strain suddenly started bubbling and oozing black liquid. The vehicle started to spin as it drove over the goop.

“Eep!” The Strain was out of control, sending the Ether Vehicle into a frenzied tailspin.

Is that oil?! Was that oil just now?! Princess Berlietta desperately attempted to gain back control of her car, but she started spinning off toward the edge. She was done for...

But suddenly, seconds before the Strain was about to tumble off the edge,

the Triharan came up from behind and smashed into the vehicle. The impact knocked the Strain back toward the middle of the road.

The Strain suddenly upturned, skidded, and came to a halt in the middle of the road. One of its wheels popped off and fell into the ocean below.

The Triharan spun around and quickly came to a stop. Smoke began rising from the hood of the car.

“Meow my goodness me! The Strain and the Triharan crashed! Both drivers got out with their teleports, and they’re safe! I nearly coughed up a hairball out of anxiety just now!”

“...I’ll go check out what just happened.”

As I listened to Mr. Mittens’ commentary, I opened up a **[Gate]** to the garage. I was curious about what had just gone on.

◇ ◇ ◇

As I approached the garage, I heard the two of them arguing. They were bickering so intensely that they didn’t seem to notice my presence.

“Why did you crash into me?! Was there any need to wreck your own vehicle as well?!”

“You’re saying you’d be fine with losing your vehicle off the side of a cliff like that?! I could never allow it!”

“But... But now we’re both going to end up being out!”

Berlietta looked down, her expression was miserable.

“We’re not out yet. Are we? There’s still a chance. We’re both drivers, and we’re both engineers. Nothing is stopping us from fixing our vehicles. It may be impossible for us to reach first place, but we can still try our best.”

Prince Lupheus had a point. If they didn’t tap out, they were still in the race so long as time wasn’t up. Their pit stop teams weren’t allowed to enter the race area, though. Meaning they’d have to do the repairs themselves.

Prince Lupheus gathered some tools together and placed them in a large, unwieldy toolbox.

Princess Berlietta simply stood still, looking down at her feet. Lupheus didn't skip a beat, grabbing her by the hand and leading her along.

"Let's head back. It's not too late, I promise."

"...Okay."

The two of them headed back to the race track through the pit stop portal.

Prince Lupheus was surprisingly proactive... But I did recall that he was the one leading the charge against his old fiancee's arrest, though that might have been more of his personal grievances with her than anything else.

It would've been nice for them to finish the race in time. The final area had a longer time limit than the previous ones, so there was still a chance.

I walked over to my own garage to check up on the mini-bots and Brunhild.

...They're fixing it a lot faster than I expected. Wasn't the damage worse than this...? Wait, there aren't any burn marks here at all... Could... Could that explosion have been illusion magic or something? Was... Was I just thrown upward with Wind magic? Shit, they tricked me! I didn't realize the damage was this basic! Why did I bow out of the race?! I could've gone back!

...Well, maybe I'm just underestimating the mini-bots here. They're the result of some severe ancient technology, so they do work pretty fast and efficiently... I mean, hell, they even maintain the Frame Gears.

"Oh! The Felsen is headed straight into the birdlime zone! He's trying to push through, but he can't quite make it! That's some strong, sticky resin alright! Meow my! He's gotten out and... is trying to lift his vehicle!"

I looked over at the little screen in my garage and saw the king of Felsen trying to lift his vehicle out of the sticky birdlime. This guy was really something else...

Once he lifted it up, he started walking with it in an attempt to get it out of the sticky area, but... he didn't realize his mistake.

He looked down at his own feet and yelled in frustration. He was stuck in the birdlime now. *You dumbass! Why didn't you use your head?!*

He kept trying to move his feet, but the birdlime kept on clinging to him.

Eventually, he fell over, dropping his vehicle.

“Gwaaah!”

Now most of his body was trapped in the birdlime. He kept on wriggling and trying to escape, but he just ended up looking like a specific yet deliberately unnamed insect you might find caught in a kitchen floor trap...

Thus, the Felsen was effectively out of the running.

Lupheus and Berlietta were definitely no longer contenders for first place, so the ones in the race were the Swan, the Silver Star, and the Red Cat. All three were Ether Vehicles that Monica and Rosetta had made, so I didn’t think they were too different in terms of specs. That meant that it would all come down to the talent of the drivers.

The Swan and the Silver Star cleared the birdlime area without any issues, but Nia’s Red Cat just barely made it through by teetering on the edge. I was honestly worried for her safety.

A small side angle shot in the corner of the screen showed the king of Felsen wriggling around like a bug. He was desperate to get out... *It’s time to stop, man.*

Another camera view appeared in the other corner, showing Lupheus and Berlietta heading toward their vehicles. I wondered if they’d be fine.

I decided to open up a **[Gate]** and check on them. I was out of the race and didn’t know much about engines, so I was hardly going to be of any help.

“So? How’s it look?”

“Grand Duke?”

Prince Lupheus was looking into the hood of the car before he raised his head in response to my voice.

“The ether lines have been burned out here... I was definitely hitting the accelerator quite hard at the end. My focus was on strengthening the vehicle’s frame, so I didn’t focus as much on the engine as I should have.”

I could hear a twinge of regret in the prince’s voice. His vehicle’s frame wasn’t in good shape, either. One of the wheels had been mangled pretty badly.

“And what about this one?”

I called over to Princess Berlietta. She’d just finished removing one of the front wheels. With both of its front wheels off, it kind of looked like the kind of cart you’d pull around.

“One of the wheels dropped into the ocean, so I can’t really do much. I was thinking of attaching this wheel to the middle of the front and trying for a three-wheeler...”

What... a trike? I figured that was a sound idea... until she showed me the driver’s seat. I let out a small sigh when I realized the object that had fallen down below it.

It was the steering wheel.

“It broke off... I focused only on engine power, and didn’t give much thought to my car’s frame...”

Damn... Even if she converted it into a three-wheeler, she’s kind of screwed if she can’t steer.

Hold on... I looked from one vehicle to the other, slowly. The two drivers caught on to my motion and started to do the same thing. They then looked at each other.

The thought finally clicked.

Just as I started to suggest the idea, the two of them cut me off by yelling, “I’ve got it!” in unison.

I decided to just keep my mouth shut and let them handle it. They were definitely thinking about what I was thinking, and there was nothing in the rules about drivers not being able to co-operate.

“Is your Strain’s engine the same kind used in Isengard’s Kyeris Freighters?”

“Yes, the Tellion brand ones. They’re extremely high-class, even when it comes to Gollem carriages!”

“Perfect. I’ll work on swapping the engines out.”

“I’ll switch out the Triharan’s twisted tire with one of mine. Oh, take care to

remove that blue pin or else you'll cause an ether spill."

"Got it."

The two of them began to rapidly exchange incomprehensible instructions, working faster and faster on fixing up their vehicle.

"Oh, I see... So you shifted the seal used during mana charge. I was curious about that."

"Ahh... So you raised the durability with this part in a structurally significant spot, I see... Oh, you even installed it here...?"

The two of them were in pretty big trouble in terms of the race, but they had huge smiles on their faces. I wondered what was going on.

"And there it is, you know? This is what brings them closer together."

"Are you sure you're not the god of spying?"

"That's rude! I'm the god of love, you know?"

I let out a sigh when I heard Karen's voice. She was no longer able to surprise me.

"They're starting to see each other for who they are. A very faint love is beginning to blossom, you know?"

"Huh, how about that..."

I wasn't really sure how to verify that... but I decided to trust Karen and roll with it. I couldn't really understand how they'd gotten so close after just yelling at each other, though. Still, they did have the same hobbies, and they had fairly compatible personalities as well. It was probably a case where the right opportunity needed to present itself.

"Holy clowder of kitties! A clowder of kitties has appeared on the track in front of the Swan! I repeat, a whole family of kitty-cats are just leisurely strolling across the track!"

Wait, what? I thought I heard something insane from Mr. Mittens' commentary, so I quickly synchronized my eyesight with the Valkyrie recording the area. Then, I looked down from her position to see a huge line of cats

blocking the road in front of the Swan.

What the?! How many kittens are there?! Why would you use that as an obstacle?! I mean, it's true nobody wants to mow through a group of cats, but... Seriously?!

The Silver Star caught up with the Swan and came to a halt in front of the cat conga line. *Welp... The race is at a standstill...*

The long blockade of cats continued without end. Lapis and Rosetta looked troubled by the prospect of potentially hurting animals, but Monica just looked pissed off. I could sort of understand why she'd be mad, though.

Nia's probably gonna catch up at this rate... Oh, there she is.

Nia, upon seeing the furball fiesta dancing along the road, came to a complete stop. The three racers were all lined up with each other. Nobody was in first or last place at this point.

This was truly the fiercest of traps... Though the cats were incredibly cute.

"Meow my... It's a little awkward to comment on this, given my feline persuasion..."

Oh yeah, Mr. Mittens is a Cat Sith and all.

They're all meowing, too... Are they singing? Maybe there's a hundred and one of them... Wait no, that was dogs...

Monica eventually reached the end of her tether and got out of the car. She stormed over to the kitties in an attempt to move them out the way.

She reached down to grab one of the cats, and...

"Meow my goodness, the cat slipped through her hand! Or rather... her hand slipped through the cat?!"

There were no cats. It was illusion magic. Goddamn illusion magic. Monica tried running around near the other cats, and she went right through them.

Nia's vehicle sped ahead, thankfully finding no real cats mixed in with the illusion. Lapis' Swan accelerated after her. Once Monica returned to the Silver Star, it sped onward as well.

The illusion trap was designed to stall anyone at the front of the race... What a heinous obstacle indeed.

Vrrrrrr... Vrrrrrr...

Prince Lupheus and Princess Berlietta finished their Ether Vehicle. It was a six-wheeler. The two-wheeled Strain had been merged with the Triharan.

...I get that you had to use elements of both vehicles to keep you both in the race, but this kind of looks dangerous...

Also, what do I call this thing? The Triharan? The Strain? The Trihrain? Whatever... The Trihrain's engine kept whirring, but it wasn't turning on properly. The magical power inside was refusing to complete its circuit.

"C'mon... Move!"

"...Please!"

Lupheus sat in the driver's seat, desperate to channel magic power through the vehicle. Berlietta sat in the passenger's seat, praying for dear life.

Oh...? Is it...

"It's working!"

"Wahoo!"

The magical engine suddenly roared to life, particles of light began gently flowing from the muffler.

"Let's floor it!"

"Yeah!"

The six-wheeled hybrid vehicle, the Trihrain, began whooshing down the track at incredible speeds. It went so fast that it only took seconds for it to become a speck in my field of vision.

"Wow, that's fast... They've gone past the horizon already, you know?"

"...Karen, did you just use some of your divinity...?"

"Hm? I don't know what you mean, you know?"

...Don't play dumb with me. I know how badly that engine was failing. I sensed

the divinity, too... Not that I know what you did.

"The prayer of a young maiden can do wonders, you know? I guess that's just the power of love."

Karen flashed a wink my way.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Trihrain blasted onward, clearly making up for lost time.

It blasted straight through the birdlime area in a flash. As the camera panned over it, I noticed the King of Felsen still wiggling around... I wondered why the hell he hadn't just quit already.

As for the kitten obstacle, it had already been revealed as a trick so they blasted straight through it.

"Meow my goodness, the Triharan and Strain hybrid vehicle is plowing through the track like a kitty in a fish market! Meanwhile, the three up ahead have entered the final stretch!" The last part of the race was a straight road with a bunch of panels on the ground. Each panel had a question mark on them.

There were quite a lot of them, so driving while avoiding them would end up eating into your time.

I had used **[Fly]** to look down over the race, so I could see how cleverly it was all arranged.

Everyone was likely picturing how I'd bitten the dust against the explosive trap earlier. Even if it wasn't all that damaging, it looked a lot more serious than that... It was only natural the other racers would be afraid.

"Oho! Looks like there are some lucky panels mixed in with the traps! If you drive over one, you may find an unexpected boon! Meow my, this seems too good to be true!"

There's no way anyone would be stupid enough to drive over a panel just because of that. That sounds suspicious as hell... Oh. Nia just did it. Of course.

"Oh! The Red Cat has come to a standstill, shaming kittykind all over the world! Her penalty is sixty seconds of paralysis!"

“NOOO!” Nia yelled out in frustration, practically tugging at her hair. Too bad for her... She probably figured it’d be easier to drive straight and hope for the best.

Lapis in her Swan continued to weave past the panels, with Rosetta and Monica’s Silver Star in hot pursuit.

The Swan was the first one to escape the panel zone, but the Silver Star refused to let up. They were practically neck and neck.

They bumped into each other’s sides gently as they shot through the zone’s gate.

“Meow my! We’ve got the final stretch now! It’s the last run to the finish line back where the race began! My whiskers are bristling in anticipation!” The two of them charged toward the finish, neither one of them relenting to the other. Since the finish line was right across from the seating area, I came back down to the ground and watched with everyone else.

The two vehicles passed around the last corner and entered our field of vision. *Guess they’re even... Wait, no! The Swan’s a little faster?! I guess having two people in the car is slowing the Silver Star down.*

Ohhh, and they’re going for it! They’re almost there! We’re about to find out who the winner is!

Suddenly, just before the Swan and Silver Star reached the finish line... The road slanted down, forcing the two vehicles to drive underground and miss it entirely.

“...Excuse meow?” Everyone stared in confusion at the sudden slanted road.

What just happened? They vanished like a magic trick... The ground returned to normal after swallowing up the two drivers, prompting a sudden outburst of laughter from Doctor Babylon.

“A real driver knows not to bank on your victory until you’ve won. Carelessness is the true enemy, in the end. One must always be wary of the darkness that— Ow! Owowowow! Touya, ow! Stop! It was just a prank, bro! Don’t bully me, I’m a little girl! You’ll develop a kink for it if you keep this up! Aaah!”

“Shut it.”

I gave Doctor Babylon the dreaded double-fisted noogie. That trap was in such bad taste that I couldn’t stand to think about what could’ve made her place it there... It had nothing to do with testing the vehicles at all!

“Where did they go?!”

“So long as they keep going through the underground portion, they’ll make it out the other side. Owie... Stop, stop! If you don’t let go I’m gonna start leaking... Nnh!” I had no interest in finding out what was going to start leaking, so I relented.

Mr. Mittens stopped eavesdropping on us and started commentating again.

“Um, well... Th-They’re safe! We know that much! Safe as a cat in a burlap sack! Ah, we were all distracted by the fuss, but the Triharan and Strain combo has made it to the panel zone!”

I looked up at the monitor and saw the Trihrain weaving past all the trap panels while maintaining top speed.

“Alright, that’s sixty seconds!”

Nia was finally free from her penalty. *Okay, good. Now she can... Wh— She’s driving toward another panel?! Is she stupid?!*

“Oooh! Bless my whiskers, the Red Cat has activated the clear panel! All the other panels have been wiped from the race!”

“...Huh. She actually got the clear panel... There was only one of those, too. Lucky girl.”

Doctor Babylon grumbled quietly to herself. I honestly didn’t believe she’d put in any panels with positive effects, so I was surprised.

The Red Cat and the Trihrain sped on through the clear area.

They went past the gate for the obstacle track and headed straight for the finish line.

“Oh?! The Silver Star and the Swan made it back from the underground! They’re making a U-turn as fast as they can, just as the Triharan/Strain hybrid

and the Red Cat make the final turn! They're all rushing for the finish line!"

Wow! We've got the Red Cat and the Trihrain from one side, but the Swan and Silver Star are coming in from the other! The finish line is right in the middle of them, this is neck and neck! Who's gonna make it?!

Only one of the vehicles could reach first place, and the winner was...

"GOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLL!"

Elluka waved a checkered flag as the four vehicles sped past the finish line and just narrowly avoided each other.

"Wh-Who...? Who won?"

"It happened so fast..."

"What's the call?!"

The audience murmured amongst themselves, but I'd already seen it thanks to my enhanced senses. Karen probably saw it too.

"We're putting a replay up on the monitor now!"

Elluka played the replay, then left it on a freezeframe. By a teeny, tiny margin... there was a clear winner. The result was not one I had expected.

"And the winner is... The Red Cat! Nia Belmot!! Bringing pride to kitties worldwide!"

"Yahoo!"

Nia pumped both of her arms in the air in celebration. *...Nia, you're still driving. Hands on the wheel!*

The few members of the Red Cats in the audience cheered for their boss.

The audience began applauding, but the queen of Strain shuffled over and whispered in my ear.

"Grand Duke... This may be a tad late for me to mention it, but that Red Cat... I wondered..."

Oh shit.

I'm a dumbass. The Red Cats are wanted in both Allent and Strain... Why did I

bring Nia here?! I-I'll just have to play dumb.

"...H-Huh? Whatever do you meaaan?"

"...I see. Forgive my misunderstanding, I thought that they could've been members of a wanted gang of self-proclaimed chivalrous thieves that punish the unjust. My mistake."

...There's knowledge hiding behind that smile, lady... I can tell you're on to me. Damn it, I should've at least had her change her car's name.

Lapis came in second place, while Rosetta and Monica came in third. Fourth place was taken by Berlietta and Lupheus.

I walked over toward the two of them and gave them a wave.

"Sorry you guys lost."

"I'm certainly not. It is a small shame we didn't win, but I'm simply happy that we were able to see it through to the end. It was considerably fun."

"I concur!"

The two of them smiled brightly, and it was then that I knew I'd made the right decision by inviting them. A smaller part of me felt like I'd just made things too complex and should've left them to it.

"Princess Berlietta."

"Yes?"

Prince Lupheus turned toward the princess and took her by the hand. Then, he knelt down on one knee.

"You are a beautiful and ingenious woman. This experience with you has given me confidence that we can stand by each other with pride. If it's okay with you, I would ask that you join me in Triharan, for I wish for you to be with me."

"...Y-Yes, of course..."

Princess Berlietta squeezed the prince's hand. There was a light blush on her face. I was certainly surprised by how forward he'd been.

"My, my... Looks like it's all coming together."

“Indeed it is. That’s a weight off my shoulders, I must say.”

The queen of Strain and the king of Triharan nodded and smiled at each other. Apparently that was settled. *Adversity strengthens the foundations of love, I suppose. Still, they did like each other from the start, they were just awkward.*

The race had finally concluded, so we cleared up and prepared for the afterparty. We had a special venue set up on the beach with delicacies from different nations. We’d even brought in royal chefs from both worlds, especially for the event.

I just came up with it on the fly. I figured the nations could bond better over the food of their people. It’d also be a good chance for them to meet and greet a little.

Lupheus and Berlietta formally announced their engagement and were met with congratulations all around. I was glad they’d done it here, since all the nations attending would definitely remember them.

“All’s well that ends well, hm?”

“Looks like it. Even if they end up bickering over small differences, I’m pretty confident they’ll both make it okay.”

Yumina and I smiled over at the happy couple. I had a feeling those two were going to be just fine.

“A little embarrassing that the event organizer was the first one out of the race, isn’t it?”

“Ghh... That wasn’t my fault!”



I grumbled a little in response to Elze's teasing before the king of Felsen walked over to see me.

"Good job out there today, lad. Shame we both missed our chance at a win, eh?"

The king of Felsen sat down on a seat next to me. Apparently, he'd been so completely covered in birdlime by the end of the race that he needed to take a soothing bath afterward. He certainly seemed calmer than he was out on the track.

"The race was most interesting. It showed me a lot of potential adjustments for the Ether Vehicles... I'm certainly eager to see how they continue changing from here on."

"I'm glad you had a good time."

"Aye, that I did... And the people from the other world... They ain't so different from us, are they?"

The king of Felsen looked over at the newly-engaged couple. *Wait... he's engaged, isn't he?*

Oh yeah, that's right. He's actually gonna be related to me through marriage, since he's engaged to Lu's older sister... Ellicia, I think her name was. I guess I just erased that thought from my memory.

"Oh right, I've gotten word from my country's ministers a small while ago. It's about Horn."

"What about them?"

Wasn't that the country on the verge of civil war? The king's grandson and the king's brother had opposing factions or something? I guess it makes sense Felsen would be in the know, since they share borders.

"Both factions have tried approaching us for assistance, but we've committed to neutrality. Ideally, we'd want both sides to come to a peaceful agreement. It seems like they've finally taken our advice. They're going to hold a conference with Felsen representatives as mediators. It'll happen in three days."

I see. It makes sense to have a foreign mediator in attendance... Hopefully

they can avoid a civil war breaking out.

"I'd like you to join in on the meeting, Grand Duke. Something doesn't sit well with me about this entire situation if I'm honest. The last king of Horn was a just and wise man, it makes little sense that he'd leave behind such anarchy... I think there has to be more to it."

The story allegedly went that the now-dead king of Horn had entrusted the nation to his younger brother. The reasoning was that he believed his son was unfit for rule. But that was only one side of the story. The prime minister argued that the now-dead king had mentioned wanting to make amends with his son, and never suggested revoking his succession rights.

These two claims contradicted each other. Either the now-dead king lied to one of the parties, or one of the parties was lying. Then again, we couldn't exactly rule out that the now-dead king was actually just stupid and did tell them both contradictory things.

There was also that unsettling rumor Tsubaki had reported to me... Yulong's black ops might have been involved in all of this. If they were working with the brother or the prime minister, things could get messy.

There were even rumors that the organization had a Null-spell wielding assassin amidst their ranks.

"Alright, I gotcha. I'll participate in the meeting, no worries. I want Horn to join the league of nations and come for the multidimensional summit anyway."

"Wonderful, that's a relief. Knowing you're there, Grand Duke? I won't have to worry as much." The king of Felsen smiled and walked off.

Hmph... Maybe I should see if Her Holiness the Pope can help me sniff through those lies. She has the mystic eye for it, after all.

With the pope on my side, it'd be easy to determine whether the younger brother or the prime minister was lying. The polygraph test that Doctor Babylon had created would probably work too... But it'd be better to go with the subtle approach.

I stood up and walked over toward the pope, who was seated at another table.

Chapter IV: The Puzzling Horn Concerto

The Kingdom of Horn.

It was an agricultural country toward the east of the continent. It had temperate weather and fertile farmland, causing it to develop a unique farming culture. They rarely interacted with other nations.

Their fertile land was one of the main reasons for Yulong targeting them for invasion.

Around a hundred years ago, Horn had additional territory to the north. Unfortunately, it was all seized by Yulong's greedy hands.

Horn reacted quickly to the attack, closing off all diplomatic relations with the Yulongese, and establishing a defensive pact with Felsen. For the following hundred years, they continued to tend to their land in isolation.

It was nice to say that Horn was unique and pleasant, but isolation also meant cultural stagnation. They didn't even incorporate any of Felsen's culture into their own.

The previous king of Horn, Tonam Da Horn, understood the potential dangers of this mindset. As did his son, Kamra Da Horn.

Horn would remain the same unless something changed. Prince Kamra raised these concerns with his father. He asked that they become a more multicultural society, that they incorporate more from the outside world.

Even though the king understood his son's plight, he did not approve of such radical reformation. A wedge was driven between the two men, one that would lead them to frequently argue. They were both stubborn men with steadfast personalities, and thus neither side yielded.

But then, tragedy suddenly struck the royal bloodline.

The prince died in a tragic accident. One rainy day, he was stolen away at the mere age of twenty-one... tumbling off a cliff with his horse-drawn carriage.

A massive funeral procession was held, and the entire country went into

mourning. But salt was to be added to the open wound... As the king himself died only a week after the passing of his son.

Some said that the stress of his job coupled with the loss of his son did him in. Others claimed it was the result of his declining physical health.

Another large funeral was held, and the country mourned yet again. They had been battered and bruised on a national level, twice in such a short span of time.

But the tragedies of the Horn Kingdom did not end here.

The prince was set to inherit the throne once the king died... But that son was already dead. The standard procedure would then say that the prince's one-year-old son, Kuoh Da Horn, would inherit the throne in his father's stead.

Of course, a baby couldn't reign as a world leader. That was why the people expected Schwein Adante, the prime minister, to act as regent until the boy came of age. After all, Schwein was the boy's maternal grandfather.

But Ganossa Da Horn, younger brother to the late king, raised an objection.

He stated that his brother had always intended to take the inheritance away from the prince, and thus he was the rightful ruler of Horn. His statement came with the accusation that Schwein was attempting to steal away power from the royal family.

But the prime minister stated the king wished to mend the strained relationship with his son, and refuted the idea that he would have appointed the brother instead.

"So neither side backed down, creating a tense conflict between the two opposing sides? The nation is on the brink of civil war, you say?"

"Indeed."

The king of Felsen nodded at the pope.

We were in Railmin, Horn's capital city. We'd traveled by carriage from Felsen, and were traveling along toward Horn Castle. We could have traveled by Ether Vehicle, but that would make us stand out too much in a place like Horn.

The carriage was at least comfortable. Her Holiness the Pope sat across from

me, next to the king of Felsen.

Yae and Sakura were sitting by my side. They'd agreed to come as my guards.

"Felsen wants to act as a mediator between the two groups. We're hoping that we can use your power to determine who might be lying."

"Which means Felsen will work with the honest side?"

"Mhm. Our backing should stop a civil war breaking out."

That seems pretty fair to me... I don't exactly know why I'm here, though. I don't have a role to play.

"Touya, I want you to keep an eye on any magic meddling. I doubt it'll happen, but there could be those seeking to hurt the prime minister or the king's brother. Your job is to notice what we might not see."

That definitely made sense. If Yulong's old intelligence unit was involved, there could be a serious issue. They even tried suicide bombing me once, so there was no guarantee of safety in any case.

I let out a small sigh as the carriage came to a halt. We'd arrived at the gate.

The castle was smaller than the ones in Belfast and Regulus, it was also pretty plain in its decoration.

If I had to compare it to something, I'd compare it to Shuri Castle without any red coloration and a little less splendor to it.

We continued through to the main compound in our carriage. The gates weren't nearly as fanciful as the Shureimon, though.

The carriage ahead of us opened up, revealing the Felsen guardsmen within. Similarly, the carriage behind us opened up for the Ramissh Templars. Both groups walked toward our carriage.

One of the guard captains opened up our carriage door. The king of Felsen left first, then the pope, and then me and my fiancees.

"I extend you a warm welcome to the Kingdom of Horn. It is a pleasure to meet with all of you."

A man stood by the castle's main entrance. He was around thirty years old

and had brushed-back black hair. A pair of glasses rested against his nose. He seemed like a regular civil servant, but he had hawk-like eyes. He wore asymmetrical clothing native to Horn, as well as a sash over his shoulder.

"And you are?"

"Ah, I'm Tauren Hanoi. I'm the east sea marquis, one of the Four Grand Marquis here in Horn. It's a pleasure."

"What are the Four Grand Marquis?" I'd never heard that term before, so I voiced my curiosity.

"In Horn, there are four marquis with large amounts of territory. I govern over the land bordering the east sea, hence my title."

Apparently, Horn had four large territories governed by the Four Grand Marquis. There was the east sea marquis, the west forest marquis, the north mountain marquis, and the south spring marquis.

It seemed that north and west supported the late king's younger brother, while east and south supported the prime minister. It was a perfect split.

That meant the man in front of me was part of the prime minister's group.

Marquis Tauren... Or rather, the east sea marquis, guided us into the castle.

"I must admit I did not expect the grand duke of Brunhild and the eminent pope of Ramissh to be joining us."

"I've always wanted to see the famous plains of Horn with my own eyes, as has the Grand Duke. We're thankful to the king of Felsen for granting our audacious request."

"Ah, I see. That makes sense, given that our nation hasn't interacted with any foreigners other than Felsen... Personally, I'm of the opinion we should be branching out more. I'm quite glad we have more witnesses present for the meeting, in all honesty."

The east sea marquis smiled wryly. *Hmm... So he's in favor of reformation. Wonder if he has any preconceived ideas about what kind of people we are, given that we come from foreign lands...*

The marquis walked us along until we reached the conference room.

It was a luxurious room with lines of gold on the support pillars and walls. The ceiling had an enormous dragon carved into it. The castle outside looked extremely simple, so this was comparatively ornate. We sat at the north of the square table, and our guards took their positions behind us.

The east sea marquis left the room to fetch the two representatives we'd be meeting with. I felt a faint trace of magic power in the area, so I glanced around and found the source.

"Hm..."

"Touya-dono, have you found a problem?"

Yae noticed what I was staring at.

"That dragon engraving up there. More specifically, the eye and the gemstone it's clutching in its hand. They're both enchanted magical artifacts."

"Oh?"

"I don't think it's anything dangerous, though. Seems like one of the effects is similar to **[Silence],** which prevents sound from leaving this room... There are two other effects, I think. One's a magical barrier that blocks teleportation, and the other's a simple protective shield spell."

The effects in this room would prevent anyone from teleporting in or out, prevent sound from leaking out, and if anyone were attacked they'd be instantly guarded by a shield. I didn't really know the power of the enchantments, but they seemed like standard safety measures.

After a short while the doors opened up, and the two representatives entered in unison.

None of them were above us in terms of social status, so we remained seated. Yae and Sakura stood up to nod in acknowledgment, though.

We exchanged greetings after they sat down.

On our left was Prime Minister Schwein Adante with the east sea marquis. Joining them was Nabyteo Schellmin, the south spring marquis.

Prime Minister Schwein was nearing his seventies, but he had a clear determination in his eyes. The patches of white beard on his face, along with his

aging wrinkles and pointed nose gave him the look of a strong and determined man. He seemed like the kind of guy who wouldn't really laugh if you made a joke.

The south spring marquis looked to be in his thirties. A chubby man with sweat dripping down his brow. He kept nervously glancing around and wiping at his forehead with his handkerchief... Whatever was up with him, the guy seemed like a pushover.

To our right we had Ganossa Da Horn, the king's younger brother. He was accompanied by North Mountain Marquis Hawkes Manius and West Forest Marquis Seylia Swill.

If I recalled correctly, Ganossa was just about to turn forty. He was a very well-built man with a lot of muscle, and his black mustache took a few years off his actual age. All of that combined with his fierce glare made him seem more like a warrior than a diplomat.

The north mountain marquis was an older man. He had to be in his sixties. He didn't seem like the kind of man who said much, which added to the mysterious air about him. He sort of reminded me of Naito. In short, he seemed like an inattentive kind of guy.

Then there was Seylia, the west forest marquis. She was the only woman in the group and had a luxurious head of brown hair.

She seemed like she was in her early twenties, which made her the youngest of the lot. But the vibe she gave off was an authoritarian one that would make anyone listen to her. I couldn't exactly tell at a glance, but she gave off the impression of being an obstinate and uncompromising person. She was beautiful, but likely the type who would intimidate men who might otherwise be interested.

Each group had a small unit of guards with them as well.

Thus, we had our gathering of people...

Prime Minister Schwein.

East Sea Marquis Tauren.

South Spring Marquis Nabyteo.

The King’s brother, Ganossa.

North Mountain Marquis Hawkes.

West Forest Marquis Seylia.

We were all gathered at the meeting that may have very well determined Horn’s future as a nation.

◇ ◇ ◇

“My brother disagreed with Prince Kamra. He was afraid that such radical reform would shatter the foundations of our nation! That was why he promised that I would be king instead of his son.”

“You cannot possibly prove that he promised you such a thing. Perhaps you’d have had a point if Prince Kamra were still alive to be stripped of his succession rights, but as it stands we must follow procedure. That procedure states that Kamra’s son is the rightful heir.”

“You mean to call me a liar, Prime Minister?”

“I did not say that. But it is true the king had a troubled relationship with his son, and I will believe there was a possibility of him saying something reckless when he was burdened with emotional baggage.”

Ganossa and Schwein were constantly fighting each other on different points, neither one willing to back down.

It was possible that the king might have said something like that when he was drunk, or emotionally heated after arguing with his son, even if he didn’t really mean it.

The only issue here would be that if that was the case, then the younger brother truly believed it to be the late king’s will.

“I want to ask you something, Prime Minister. Is it true that on the day of my brother’s death, you argued with him?”

“...That is true, yes. What of it?”

“According to the castle workers, my brother had everyone clear out so you

two could discuss something important. Would you mind sharing the topic of your discussion?”

Ganossa narrowed his eyes toward the prime minister, prompting the other man to open his mouth in response.

“...We talked of his dead son’s legacy. At the time of his death, Kamra still believed that Horn needed to open itself up to the world. The king, however, was still opposed to the idea... He was emotional, and we got into an argument on the matter.”

“Oh? Are you sure that was all? Are you sure he didn’t talk to you about his plan to give me the throne? You know, there were many strange things about my brother’s death, Prime Minister. Would you be able to shed some light on any of that?”

“...I’m not entirely sure what you’re implying.”

Is he trying to suggest the prime minister killed the king? Why would he do that? I can’t even think of a good enough reason, but... Oh... Right. If the king died, then the prime minister could have all the power as acting regent for his grandson.

The two of them remained silent, eyes narrowed. Personally, I thought they were both fishy. That was why I had brought the pope with me, though.

Not many people at all knew that she held the power to detect lies. Plus, Horn was already isolated as it was, I had no doubts that it was a complete secret to everyone in the room.

I quietly spoke to the pope by my side.

“Well? Who’s lying?”

“Well...”

She frowned slightly.

“Neither of them are lying...”

“Huh? How does that work?”

“My mystic eye didn’t react at all. Either they’re both telling the truth, or they

legitimately believe themselves to be truthful... Though there's the possibility of there being magical interference with my power."

When you considered that mystic eyes were basically a Null spell embedded into the body, it stood to reason that they'd be able to be nullified. I remembered that the prince of Gardio was wearing an item that inhibited his own mystic eye.

I couldn't sense anything like that, though.

"You're the grandfather of Prince Kuoh, Prime Minister. If you became regent in the boy's stead, you could exercise power to your heart's content. But of course, with Lord Ganossa in your way, it poses a bit of an issue for you, doesn't it?"

"What are you trying to say, North Mountain Marquis?" The east sea marquis glared over at the man who'd spoken his thoughts.

"Oh, not much. But I must say that... on our way to the castle, Lord Ganossa's carriage had a malfunction and lost a wheel. He almost suffered injuries, even. Had it gone any worse, he may have died."

"Excuse me?"

The prime minister's faction voiced their concern.

"I thought perhaps it was a simple mishap due to the age of the carriage, but I have to wonder... Prince Kamra died in a carriage accident, did he not? I wonder if you'd know anything about that, Prime Minister."

"I know nothing of the sort. I'm baffled you'd even raise this subject with me."

"Whatever you say..."

The north mountain marquis grinned slightly as he trained his eyes on the prime minister. I wondered if it really was an accident or not...

I turned to the pope once more, but she just gave me a small shrug of her shoulders. There was no real reason I could think of for the prime minister to kill prince Kamra. After all, that was his son-in-law.

"...Let's take a small recess for now."

The king of Felsen spoke up, and the other parties filed out of the room in response. I leaned back and let out an irritated sigh. The mood was way too tense for my liking... It was just glare after glare during the discussions.

The Horn maids, or who I assumed were maids despite their odd attire, poured us all some tea. It was pretty nice and refreshing. Similar to Eashenese tea, but slightly different. I looked over and saw Sakura munching on a cookie.

“It’s good... Try some, Grand Duke.”

“Oh? Sure... Mm... You’re right.”

“Mhm. We should bring some back...”

Sakura smiled softly. The tense air that had previously flooded the room suddenly dissipated. I was glad to have something soothing after all of that nonsense.

The king of Felsen grumbled quietly to himself as he sat with his arms folded.

“Grand Duke, what are your thoughts on what just happened?”

“I can’t say. Both sides seem to believe what they’re saying, but there’s also weird stuff that feels a bit off.”

“Mmh... I feel as if we’re just walking in circles.”

“I’m sorry about this. It seems like I’m not much use here...”

“Now, now, your Holiness... This isn’t your fault.”

The king of Felsen reassured the pope. I was about to console her as well, when...

“EEEEEEEEEKKK!”

We heard the sudden sound of a woman screaming from outside. There was a soundproofing magical barrier around the room, but sound could still come in from outside.

We charged out the door, then headed to the location the sound came from.

There was a large gathering of people down the hallway. They were crowded around a pale-looking woman who was kneeling on the ground. She was probably the one that had shrieked.

I flung open the door next to her and was met with the sight of a man face-down on the ground. A puddle of blood oozed on the carpet next to him, and I got a little closer. It was none other than the south spring marquis, Nabyteo Schellmin. He was dead.

◇ ◇ ◇

The meeting was put on pause, and we asked Prime Minister Schwein to prevent anyone from leaving the premises.

The room showed no signs of a struggle. Given that there was a teacup on the ground near the corpse, one could assume he was poisoned. This was also driven in by the fact that the victim had blood around his mouth and chin. He'd vomited up the blood that I'd seen on entry.

"[Search]: Toxic Substances."

My spell got a positive reaction from the liquid in front of me. I had suspected as much.

The nearby table had a basic serving tray, along with a teapot and a porcelain pourer.

"Who made this tea?"

"The prime minister asked that tea be delivered to everyone before the meeting. The rooms don't have locks, so anyone could've entered while we were busy."

The king of Felsen gave me a prompt answer. In other words, this could've been done by anyone. Obviously, the people who had been in the meeting were absolved directly for the time being, but they could've easily ordered a subordinate to do the deed. That even included the prime minister.

What I found strange was the fact that guards had been posted outside his door, so how could it be that they hadn't heard him collapse?

I pondered that before looking up and noticing a familiar dragon engraving on the ceiling. That explained it. The room was soundproofed.

I decided to call Flora from the alchemy lab to run an analysis on the tea. Finding out what kind of poison it was could give us a crucial clue.

“But why would someone wanna kill the south spring marquis? I don’t wanna sound rude, but he’s not exactly the most important fella here.”

The king of Felsen grumbled as he pondered. He raised a fair point. Perhaps it was to intimidate someone, or to send a message.

“U-Uhm, actually...”

As we thought about the issues, a female servant timidly raised her hand.

“Th-This room was actually meant to be the prime minister’s...”

“Huh?”

“The prime minister arranged a room with a window facing the south for the south spring marquis, but the marquis insisted he take this room instead... He said he preferred smaller spaces.”

The servant pointed at another door down the hall as she spoke. Once she pointed it out, I noticed that this room was north-facing, while the other guest rooms faced the south.

“That means that the prime minister could have died, he could.”

Everyone froze in shock after Yae spoke up. It was possible that the prime minister was the intended target, but the sudden room switch meant the south spring marquis died instead... I thought that was a sound explanation for the time being. Though it was still possible the marquis had people after his life.

The faction that supported the king’s brother would obviously look at the prime minister and his allies as potential enemies, so it wouldn’t be out of the question for them to try and kill the south spring marquis... But if they could pull that off, then they’d have been better off killing the prime minister himself.

The room was reasonably sized. It had a table, a couch, a closet, and a north-facing window. There was also a string by the door that rang a bell to summon servants.

I checked the closet, but it was empty. I wasn’t too surprised, since this was more like a relaxation room than an actual place people would stay overnight.

I realized that I could probably bring the marquis back to life if I cast the **[Resurrection]** spell on him...

It was high-tier magic that could only be used on fresh bodies. If you waited more than an hour, it'd be impossible to bring the person back. It also voraciously ate at one's magic and even risked the life of the caster.

Typically, the spell was only used by people who were really close to the deceased, because the spell could potentially kill the person casting it.

It wasn't uncommon for the one casting it to die, and for the whole thing to just fail entirely. There were barely any records of successful revival cases throughout history. From what I understood, the success rate was lower than twenty percent.

I figured I'd be able to handle it without any risks, but after asking Karen about it, she told me that there was a risk of me overloading the target with too much life energy. I could end up warping the person beyond recognition.

She had said, "If you refreeze a melted ice sculpture, it'll be ice again, but not the sculpture... You know?"

"I pray mercy for his soul, for his spirit to find peace in the lands above. God Almighty, please watch over him and grant him repose."

The pope spoke a small prayer for the deceased. The souls of the dead didn't go toward the divine realm where gods lived. They ended up settling in the heavenly realm just a little bit below.

Souls were purified in the heavenly realm before being incarnated into new bodies, though souls with sufficient pollution could only reincarnate as animals... Hopefully, this guy wasn't poor of heart.

I rifled through the dead man's pockets and belongings in a search for possible clues.

There was nothing that really stood out to me. There was a pen, a pocket watch, some tobacco leaves, and a little case with a tobacco compactor inside, along with some matches and a pipe. That was everything.

I figured I'd ask Flora to investigate the body as well, just in case.

"Grand Duke, here..."

Sakura motioned for me to follow. I wondered what it was she wanted. I left

the room and went after her, Yae was there as well.

“Something up?”

“Sort of... Uhm... Sometimes I can hear better than usual.”

“Huh?”

What does she mean by that?

“I can hear people talking from really far away sometimes... Karen said it was because of your influence...”

“Huh, seriously?!”

“Sakura-dono... You have awakened a Touya skill thanks to his divinity, you have. I am quite jealous, I am.”

Yae seemed surprised by the sudden news.

Wait, huh? A Touya skill?! Don’t go making up names!

“Do you not know, Touya-dono? Yumina-dono also awakened such a skill, she did. With her visions.”

“Yumina did? Oh... You mean that power she got after receiving my divine protection?”

Those blessed by the grace of the gods ended up awakening to unique powers. Yumina manifested a form of future sight in her eyes, though it only let her see a few seconds ahead.

Seemed like Sakura’s ears had been blessed. Given that she often sang to Sousuke’s musical accompaniment, and Suika would dance to their music as she drank. It was possible that she’d received some of their grace too.

Yae often trained with Moroha, but so did Hilde... It was possible that their progress was slowing due to sharing a secondary source.

“Um, well... I heard something falling in the room where the man died... It was like... fwump... so I started focusing my hearing on the room...”

“Huh? But isn’t the room soundproofed...? Oh, wait...”

Since their manifested powers were rooted in divinity, it made sense that

regular magic wouldn't be able to interfere with them. The fwump sound was probably the guy falling over.

"And then... I only heard a little bit after that... But I heard latching sounds, and then a window being opened..."

"Hold on... That's a little odd, isn't it?"

"Mhm... That's why I mentioned it..."

What does that mean, though? Assuming he died after falling, then there shouldn't have been any other noises. Does that mean there was another person in the room with him?

Or maybe the poison was slow-acting, and he moved around after feeling the effects and falling down... But that doesn't sound right. If I wanted to kill someone, I'd use a fast-acting poison.

"Are you sure you didn't mistake the rooms?"

"Yes... I can use **[Teleport]**... I know spatial locations..."

*Oh, right. I guess I understand, since I can use **[Teleport]** too.*

But there were still some confusing aspects to all of this. If the culprit was using poison, then why would he bother being in the actual room? Unless of course he just wanted to watch his victim die.

But if he wanted to do that, then he should've just stabbed him or something. The south spring marquis wasn't exactly a physically able man, so it would've been a lot more straightforward.

But if the culprit was in the room, then that completely threw out the idea that the prime minister was the intended target. It would mean that the south spring marquis was the guy who was supposed to die.

"Ugh..."

I scratched at my head and grumbled slightly, much like a certain famous hakama-wearing detective. *I don't understand this at all!*

I walked back into the crime scene, and opened up the window. The window opened to a contained courtyard full of trees. There was nobody out there.

“The window wasn’t locked, so this is the only place a person could’ve escaped to.”

I hopped through the window. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see any footprints. I considered the culprit could’ve leaped toward the trees, but there’s no way that could’ve been the case. There were five meters between the window and the nearest tree... I could’ve made the jump, but I couldn’t imagine many others being capable of that.

Elze, Yae, Hilde, Homura, and the other intelligence corps members probably could, too...

“The ground here’s soft, though. So why aren’t there any footprints?”

So how did the culprit escape? Unless they had some kind of teleportation magic... No, the room has an enchantment preventing that. It’s possible they could’ve flown away like me, though.

...Wait, all of this is lining up so the perfect culprit is me! I never thought about that.

Pff... Obviously, that won’t hold water. I have an alibi. I should stop messing around and look for clues. I looked down and noticed something below the window outside.

“...Wood shavings?”

There were a few two-centimeter long wood shavings. They’d probably come from the window frame.

Just as I was pondering, Yae came running in.

“Touya-dono! There is a problem with the east sea marquis and the west forest marquis, there is!”

I hurried after Yae to the meeting room and found the two people staring each other down.

Prime Minister Schwein wasn’t around, neither was Ganossa. But the north mountain marquis was there, standing off to the side with crossed arms.

“I won’t tolerate these accusations! Why would we want him dead?!”

“The culprit targeted the prime minister, not the south spring marquis. He ended up dying in our prime minister’s stead due to the last-minute room change. Now tell me, who was it that considered the prime minister to be a thorn in their sides, hm? Who?!”

“Why would we kill him?! That’s utterly barbaric!”

“Well, perhaps you wouldn’t have opted to, but what about the others on your side?”

The north mountain marquis unfolded his arms in response to those words, glaring over at the east sea marquis.

“...Well now. Are you perhaps referring to myself?”

“I know your type, old friend. You’re the kind who’ll take any method at hand if it benefits him.”

“Well, you’re not entirely wrong. My northern mountains bordered Yulong, so I’ve always had to act as harshly as possible, lest I risk my own life. Anyone would be hardened by living so close to foreign danger, though I must thank the grand duke of Brunhild for dismantling Yulong for me.”

The north mountain marquis grinned in my direction. It seemed like he misunderstood my intentions in dealing with Yulong.

“I didn’t dismantle Yulong or anything, alright? They had a few chances to rebuild, but they were too rotten from within. It’s not like I had an active hand, I just left them to their own devices and they died on their own.”

“...Did you not destroy their capital city, Grand Duke?” The east sea marquis probed at me with another misunderstanding.

“The Phrase did that, not me. The people of Yulong have been making outlandish claims like I destroyed them, or that I brought the crystal invasion to them... but that’s all nonsense. If I hadn’t intervened, then every last man, woman, and child in Yulong would be dead right now. There wouldn’t have even been a country left to collapse.”

“...I see. So really the people of Yulong owe you a debt of gratitude. Is that what you’re saying? I can’t say I’m surprised by this knowledge, Grand Duke.

You’re truly a commendable man.”

The east sea marquis smiled and brought his hands together.

Hrm... That felt a little backhanded... He didn’t seem this rude when he was showing us into the area earlier on. Did he maybe have family in Yulong or something?

“Well, Grand Duke. Have you perhaps figured out the culprit already?”

“No, I haven’t... Right now, we can’t even rule out that it was a suicide.”

C’mon, man... Don’t raise your expectations that high. We still don’t have enough to go off.

The east sea marquis cleaned off his glasses before turning to glare at the west forest marquis once more.

“This may seem disrespectful to his memory, but it is better that the south spring marquis died than the prime minister. Even with Prince Kuoh on our side, if the prime minister was dead, we’d have lost our cause in an instant...”

“So you’ll continue to assume we’re to blame?”

“I’m not explicitly implicating you, of course. There may be others on your side that did this without telling you.”

The two were about to start another glaring match when Prime Minister Schwein came back into the room, along with Ganossa.

“We’ve just got done explaining the situation to the south spring marquis’ men. Apologies, but we’ll have everyone stay in the castle until this is dealt with. Your rooms have been arranged.”

“Lord Ganossa, is this okay?”

After the prime minister finished talking, the north mountain marquis turned to his leader for reassurance. The royal castle was considered home turf for the prime minister’s group, so it was natural for them to be concerned.

“It’s quite fine, we have nothing to hide. I’m certain this’ll be dealt with promptly.”

Ganossa answered casually. He was either completely innocent or completely

confident there was no evidence to his crime.

We honestly didn't have anything to go off. It was possible that nobody here was involved at all, and it was some kind of separate plot done without permission.

"Well then, we'll show you to your quarters. I apologize for this mess, King Felsen. We'll have guards take you to your room posthaste."

"Ah, before that... I'd like to have your attention for a moment."

Her Holiness the Ramissh Pope raised her hand. I wondered what she was doing.

"With god as your witness, you must swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Were you responsible for the death of the south spring marquis, either directly or indirectly? Can you in good conscience say that you had no involvement in the man's death?" Everyone answered the same, that they were in no way related to his death.

The prime minister left the room, followed by the king's brother and the marquis. After a short time, some soldiers came along to take us over to the royal guest room.

I looked up at the ceiling and saw the dragon engraving again, which meant it had the same enchantments. I thought it was better to be safe than sorry.

"[Silence]."

I cast a secondary layer of soundproofing magic over the room, just in case. That would mean there was no chance of anyone outside learning about this. If someone was hiding in the room they'd still be able to hear it, but I couldn't sense anyone else.

I turned to the pope.

"So, what are your findings? Did your mystic eye detect a liar?"

"It did, yes. One person told a lie in response to the question."

The question's terms had been so specific that anyone lying was involved with the murder of the south spring marquis.

“Who was the liar, who was it?”

Yae asked the pope, and the older woman turned to answer.

“The liar was none other than East Sea Marquis Tauren Hanoi.”

◇ ◇ ◇

“This is a poison called yuloneifred, you see. It is synthesized from the yuloneisha plant... A rather potent one, you see. It resonates with a person’s internal mana source after making contact with the mouth and utterly annihilates the internal organs, you see.”

Flora had come by from the research laboratory and gave us her analysis of the poison.

“And that plant you mentioned...”

“It mostly grows in the mountains of north Yulong... You can rarely find it in Xenoahs, though...”

Sakura answered instead of Flora. She was certainly more knowledgeable than I’d have expected.

“The poison has been used in Xenoahs before... It’s a really nasty way to kill people, so it’s usually used to send a message...”

That made sense. Sakura was the overlord’s daughter, so she’d have probably been informed of those kinds of risks. Still, given that the plant was mostly found in Yulong, I had definite reason to believe that those bastards were at it again.

“Could the east sea marquis be an agent of Yulong, could he?”

“It’s more likely he hired Yulongese assassins, I think.”

Even if he was a scumbag, he was still one of the Four Grand Marquis of Horn. It wasn’t likely he’d be working on behalf of Yulong... If anything, he’d be the one using them.

“Master. From the report I ran on the body, there’s something else. There were heavy traces of sleeping medication in his bloodstream, you see. It seems like he was put to sleep first before being made to ingest the poison, you see.”

“What?”

Why would they go to the trouble of doing that? As far as I get it, the sequence of events was like... The meeting ended, the south spring marquis asked to be put in the new room, he then fell asleep, he was poisoned after falling asleep... And then he died. But that means someone would’ve been in his room to administer the poison after putting him to sleep.

Was the culprit hiding in the closet and waiting for him to come back from the meeting? But that wouldn’t make much sense...

Oh, maybe... Maybe he was waiting in the closet for the prime minister, but found the south spring marquis instead. So he put him to sleep, but killed him afterward because his face had been seen... Or something?

“...I’m lost here.”

This makes no sense. It’d be less convoluted just to use a knife. Why poison? Is it a calling card, maybe?

“The culprit is already determined as the east sea marquis, it is. We should simply have him confess, we should.”

“That sounds like something out of a bad police mystery drama.”

“I do not know what you mean, I do not.”

I sighed quietly at Yae’s puzzled expression. Obviously she wouldn’t know, but more importantly, I didn’t know anything about this case. The fastest way probably would be just to interrogate the guy...

But that method had its own slew of issues, too. We didn’t have much diplomatic clout with Horn, so suddenly accusing one of their top seats of government would be brash of us.

If we had permission from the leader of the country it’d be one thing, but this country didn’t technically have a leader right now.

Not to mention the fact that the pope’s mystic eye wasn’t conclusive evidence either. I certainly knew she wouldn’t make anything up, but that didn’t make it admissible proof.

Ultimately, we needed to find hard proof. I left the room and saw the king of

Felsen walking down the hall.

“Ah, Grand Duke. There you are. I just got done speaking with Ganossa and the prime minister. We’ll be talking more about succession rights tomorrow, so we’re staying here tonight. What about you?”

He was basically asking if I was going to use my magic to warp home. It was tempting, but I didn’t want to run the risk of something happening while I was away. Even though we had alibis and no real motives, the girls and I were technically suspects as well... So we’d need to stick around.

“Where are the other marquis at?”

“They all have private homes in the capital, but obviously we won’t let them go back. They’ll all be staying here tonight as well... And we’ll be keeping a close watch on that east sea marquis.”

The king of Felsen murmured that last part. *Bah, I still don’t really know anything. Why would the east sea marquis have the south spring marquis killed? Maybe it’s something completely unrelated to this issue and is just a personal matter or something.*

But still... the south spring marquis seemed like a harmless guy. He sure didn’t look like the kind of guy that would upset anyone, but I guess being a noble can put you on certain shitlists just by virtue of being one.

Honestly, Yae’s plan is starting to sound a little tempting. We could sneak into the east sea marquis’ room tonight, then have him confess to everything... Then I could just wipe his memories. No... No, I need to save that as a last resort.

Ultimately, things were uncertain but still stable. So long as we didn’t let the guy get away, everything would be just fine.

◇ ◇ ◇

“...You gotta be kidding me.”

“We let him get away, we did.”

Yae and I sighed slightly, our mouths agape at the sudden sight. The east sea marquis got away from us... He’d gone and escaped to the next life.

At our feet, evening sunset washing over him, was the corpse of the east sea

marquis. Obviously we weren't the perpetrators.

We'd been discussing our plans when the king of Felsen suddenly burst in to give us the bad news.

Apparently the east sea marquis had closed himself off in his room about two hours prior, saying he wanted to have some rest. A maid had entered the room to see what he wanted for dinner, and it was then that the body was discovered.

This was definitely not a suicide, either. He lay face-down by the side of his bed, a scarf bound tightly around his neck.

"At least the method was simple this time, strangulation."

"Was he betrayed by the assassin he hired, was he?"

"That's definitely possible."

Hmm... That scarf doesn't look cheap... It's silky and smooth, definitely a luxurious item. It also seems to have a coat of arms sewn into it.

Everyone gradually turned around and focused their gaze on a woman in the room.

"West Forest Marquis... Why does this scarf bear your coat of arms?"

Prime Minister Schwein glared at the west forest marquis. Apparently the coat of arms on the scarf was the Swill family crest.

The west forest marquis went pale, shaking her head from side to side.

"I-I... That scarf is indeed mine, but... I thought I had misplaced it yesterday, I assure you! I have no reason to lie!"

"You were involved in an argument with the east sea marquis earlier, weren't you?"

"Y-Yes, but I wouldn't kill him! And how could I have even made it past his guards?!"

That was a fair point. Also, using a scarf with your family crest on it as the murder weapon would be both incredibly brazen and incredibly stupid. Even if she had done it, she'd have taken it back with her to hide the evidence.

Flora leaned in and used a few magical devices to scan the corpse. She had a portable device that had been enchanted with the **[Analyze]** spell. It vaguely resembled a certain item used by medical staff in a particular sci-fi TV drama that was popular in the west.

Flora frowned slightly as she looked at the device's readings.

"What is it?"

"This is quite strange, you see." I asked Flora to elaborate.

Once she explained it to me, I agreed. That made no sense at all.

"Is the analyzer busted, maybe?"

Once I asked her this, Flora made a few manual confirmations on the body itself, turning over limbs and checking key points of the body.

"The closer inspection matches the analyzer's results, you see... There's no mistaking it."

"Then that means he was..."

Did they use magic, perhaps? Or maybe an artifact... If Flora's right, this changes everything. But if the perpetrator is capable of magic like that, we can't let him escape. Given that nobody's left the castle yet, he should still be here.

Welp... Guess we're gonna have to do what Yae suggested. The old-fashioned bad police mystery drama method...

Well, I'm hardly what people would call a great detective, anyways. In the end, this isn't a mystery drama. It's a story where bad guys get punched until the plot moves along. In the end, there's no reason for me to hold back when it comes to merciless assassins, anyway. Let's get this over with.

I channeled divinity through my eyes and triggered my divine sight, then I glanced at everyone in the room. *Prime Minister Schwein, Ganossa, West Forest Marquis, North Mountain Marquis... It's not them. And obviously, it's not the king of Felsen or the pope, either.*

"G-Grand Duke? What is it?"

The pope, who was likely growing uneasy at the sudden silence, called out to

question my behavior.

“Sorry about that. Just checking something.”

I smiled at the pope before heading outside and glancing over the nearby staff. I gazed at the maids and the guardsmen who were either standing or walking around. Then I saw who I was looking for, and made a beeline for him.

The man in front of me was the kind of generic guard you’d see in a videogame. He had short brown hair and didn’t stand out in any way at all. He had a soft, non-threatening face, and was clad in the armor of Horn. He had a standard-issue sword about his waist, and a standard-issue spear in his right hand. At a glance, he was just another castle guard.

“C-Can I help you?”

The guardsman forced an awkward smile as he glanced around. I smiled back as I placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Too bad, man.”

“H-Huh?”

“[Gravity].”

“Gaugh!”

The man crumpled to the ground under the force of the additional weight I’d pulsed into him. He couldn’t move a muscle, but he stared up at me, eyes filled with a mixture of malice and confusion.

“G-Grand Duke, what is the meaning of this?!”

The prime minister came running over in a panic. Obviously he’d be concerned, given that one of Horn’s castle guards had just been assaulted by the leader of another nation.

“Don’t worry, I’m just peeling back the skin on the snake in our midst. Give me a moment.”

I used **[Storage]** to bring out some metal wiring, which I used to firmly bind his limbs. What I was about to do would remove the effects of **[Gravity],** so I didn’t want him getting away.

“Alrighty then... **[Absorb].**”

“Wh-What?!”

My spell sucked up any and all magic surrounding the soldier, immediately undoing the **[Gravity]** spell I’d cast on him. But more importantly than that, it decloaked the disguise that I’d already seen through with my divine sight.

His appearance shifted almost instantly. His brown hair lengthened and turned a dark black. His plain face morphed into one with narrow, foxlike eyes. His rounded features vanished, replaced by a stubbled, sharp chin. He no longer resembled a young man, but an older well-built man. His muscles were distinctly more visible as well.

“Wh-What in the world?”

Ganossa stared in absolute shock. The one on the ground was no longer taking on the form of a harmless and surprised young man. He was now a suspicious-looking fellow with furious eyes.

“Magic that lets you change how you look, huh. Not bad. Was it an artifact, or perhaps a Null spell? Either way, it was perfect for undercover operations. You almost had me fooled.”

“...Bastard. How did you know?”

“The time of death didn’t match up, you see.”

Flora came over to give her response. She was right. It was all thanks to that one piece of information that I managed to make it all come together.

“Magic in the body depletes after death, you see. The amount left in the body we found suggested that he had died five or six hours ago, you see.”

“Which means that the east sea marquis died around the same time as the south spring marquis. Which got me to wondering... Just who was the east sea marquis I spoke to? Who was the one that shut himself in his room? Obviously that meant there was an imposter. One with a powerful magic disguise at his disposal, too. Since nobody had yet left the castle, I assumed you were still here, just disguised as someone else since they’d found the east sea marquis’ body... And then I found you.”

“Grrgh!

Given that he was still sticking around, I could only assume it was to kill more people. Otherwise, he would’ve just run away.

The man gritted his teeth and glared up at us. I could sense hatred in those eyes of his, but it was a much deeper hate than just having been found out. Clearly, he had a personal problem with me.

“I knew it. You’re with Qulau, aren’t you.”

“What?!”

His frenzied glare turned to shock for a brief moment. I leaned down and fished around inside the man’s clothing before producing a black mask that resembled the kind you’d find in Beijing opera. Just as I’d suspected, he was one of them.

“Tell me, now. What are Yulong’s former black ops squad doing in Horn? Are you trying to kick off a civil war?”

“Heheheh... Qulau will always exist, no matter how you oppress us. I have no words for you, murderer. Feel free to end my life right now, but this country is already finished. We’ve made sure of that. Soon enough, Yulong’s wrath will come for you, and it w—”

“Yawn. Boring. Who gives a shit? Let’s get your confession already. **[Hypnosis].**”

“Gwuh?!”

I cast a spell that immediately rendered the assassin unconscious. He definitely should’ve had some anti-magic charms or something. What a dumbass.

Alright, mister spy. Time for you to let me prod around your brains.

◇ ◇ ◇

The assassin, who wasn’t protected at all by any anti-magic countermeasures, immediately became susceptible after I cast **[Hypnosis].** I did realize a bit later that had he worn anti-magic equipment, his disguise wouldn’t have worked... so that was just a risk he had opted to take.

Either way, we got the following information out of him.

• The south spring marquis had been rendered unconscious and put in the closet before the meeting.

• The south spring marquis who had showed up at the beginning of the conference was therefore the imposter in disguise.

• When we took the break later on, he immediately asked the prime minister to swap rooms, so that it would look like a failed attempt to kill the prime minister.

• After securing the room, he dragged the sleeping south spring marquis out from the closet and used the poison to kill him, which made him puke up blood. This also caused the sound that Sakura ended up hearing.

• He escaped to the roof through the window afterward, using a rope and hook to clamber upward. That was also what caused the wood shavings I noticed.

• From the rooftop, he made his way to the east sea marquis' room and strangled the man to death with the scarf he'd stolen from the west forest marquis. He then changed his appearance to that of the east sea marquis.

The magic he used was called **[Mimicry].** It was a Null spell exclusive to him that allowed him to copy the features of others.

This spell was completely different to my illusions, as it actually reformed his body. Others wouldn't even be able to tell through physical contact that it wasn't the real person there, and the vocal cords were also identically mimicked.

There were a few drawbacks, though. You couldn't use the spell on anyone smaller than you, which meant short people and children couldn't be mimicked.

The caster also had to make physical contact with the target, and the target needed to be alive at the time of mimicry.

Also, the maximum duration for the spell was just six hours. Once the spell wore off, the caster needed to touch the target again in order to assume their form.

Regardless of its limitations, it was still an incredible spell.

He used this spell to disguise himself as the east sea marquis, deliberately raising tensions between the prime minister's faction and the king's brother's faction. After he retired to his room, he put the corpse of the east sea marquis in a visible area and made his escape.

After that, he transformed into a regular guard, but I caught him. And that was that. The real guard that he'd mimicked was found unconscious in a cleaning closet elsewhere in the castle.

But the most disturbing thing I found on him... was a storage card.

The storage cards were items I had believed to be unique to the Reverse World. They didn't freeze time for things kept inside them, but were useful for transporting money, objects, and Gollems.

He'd been using that to store the corpse of the east sea marquis while he mimicked the man. Apparently the south spring marquis was left unconscious in the closet because the poison used to kill him was fast-acting, and the assassin didn't want anyone suspecting he'd died too soon.

After all, unlike my **[Storage],** time would have still passed for the corpses in the storage card.

When I asked where he found the card, it became clear that Qulau discovered a lost refugee from the Reverse World, tortured him to death, and stole all of his magical tools.

Either way, we'd solved who was behind the murders. Now we could all live happily ever after... Well, maybe not quite. The interrogation revealed something even worse.

"The spy infiltrated Horn well over a year ago. He's been seeking to cause discord here the whole time. He's the one responsible for your conflict."

"What?!"

"Impossible!"

Prime Minister Schwein, along with Ganossa, looked taken aback. It was already nearing dawn, and the two of them were clearly exhausted, but they

were still awake and attentive.

The Qulau agent confirmed that he had mimicked the late king, and used that form to promise Ganossa succession rights. The goal was to then kill the king, and have the king's brother conflict with the king's son. The ultimate goal was a civil war. But the prince ended up dying in a completely random accident, which nearly screwed up Qulau's plans. He considered abandoning that plan entirely, but then Prime Minister Schwein began making preparations to have the late king's grandson ascend to the throne. That was when the spy decided to carry on with the plan and kill the king while making it look as though sickness claimed him.

So instead of the original plan, which was the prince's faction being pitted against the king's brother's faction, it instead became the prince's son's faction being pitted against the king's brother's faction.

"S-So you're saying we've been played like a damn fiddle..."

Ganossa trembled gently as he sat down in a chair, shocked. Prime Minister Schwein offered him a sympathetic nod before opening his mouth.

"What is their aim, here?"

"Hear me out here, but... if civil war broke out... Is there something the two of you would end up using in combat?"

The two of them looked at me in shock. They hadn't expected me to know about it, but I did. Slowly, they glanced at each other before I opened my mouth again.

"You have a Steel Battalion here, don't you."

The two men flinched at the mention. The Steel Battalion was the name given to a platoon of Steel Soldiers invented by Bowman, a scientist from Roadmare. It was more plagiarism than an invention, though, since the man just ripped off the Frame Gears to the best of his abilities. He'd had backing from the secret golden order, Gordian.

They were different from the dwarven-made Dverg in that the Steel Soldiers were constructed entirely as weapons of war.

“You’ve been importing Steel Soldiers into your country, haven’t you? Both sides, right? You both received an offer from a mysterious third party to supply you with Steel Soldiers that you could use to fight the enemy.”

Both men remained silent. This all came back to the storage card I’d seen earlier. The original owner, a drifter from the Reverse World, was killed by Qulau... and his belongings were all conveniently stored within this card. Including something that Qulau found extremely interesting... Gollems.

Based on the information I got out of the spy, the drifter from the Reverse World was probably a high-clearance worker in a Gollem factory.

His storage card contained over three-thousand military Soldat Gollems, the kind you’d find employed in places like Isengard.

A single person holding that many Gollems meant he had to be an important guy in the sales or manufacturing sector. No single person could stand against an army of that many, even if they were mass-produced models. The man was probably delivering them to a customer when he was spirited away to Yulong’s territory.

But it got even worse. Remnants from Gordian had joined ranks with the remnants of Qulau. Two groups that hated Brunhild the worst had joined forces under one banner.

Qulau now had Steel Soldiers at its disposal, as well as thousands of Gollems. Their plan was to sell hundreds of these things to both the prime minister and the king’s brother, marketing them as the thing that could win the civil conflict if it came down to it.

Of course, their motivation wasn’t financial at all.

Their plan was to wear down Horn using the civil war, and having Steel Battalions fighting on both sides would devastate the national infrastructure. The largest battles would be around the capital city, leaving the borders relatively unmanned and unguarded. That included the territory to the north, which was the territory governed by Ganossa and the north mountain marquis... The territory bordering Yulong.

These new Steel Soldiers weren’t quite the same as the old ones... They had

Gollem technology incorporated into them.

As the civil war in Horn kicked into full swing, a full Steel Battalion would start invading the country from the north.

While that happened, the Steel Soldiers that were ostensibly serving the side of the prime minister or the king's brother would begin to operate autonomously as their Qulau programming set in. They would attack soldiers belonging to Horn and conquer the land for Qulau, which would then allow them to establish a new Yulong dynasty.

"That's how I think it would've gone, at least. Well, there are parts I can't say for sure... But something to that effect."

It may have been rude to say out loud, but Horn was relatively less advanced when it came to other nations. They were stagnant in their understanding of magic and tech. They only used things that they knew worked for older generations, and Qulau took full advantage of that gap in their knowledge.

To be honest, before they got their hands on Gollem tech, they were probably planning on invading Horn anyway. They just would've done it more subtly, by weakening the country through subterfuge and replacing people with their own. Gradually, they would've had people from Qulau invade high positions of power in Horn, in order to turn it into a Yulongese-controlled government over time.

That was probably the initial plan before Gordian got involved. A gradual plan based on slow encroachment. Before they knew it, the people of Horn would be replaced... That was mostly conjecture on my part, but I could totally imagine them doing that.

"Grand Duke... My elder brother, he... Was he really killed by their hand?"

Ganossa glared down at his feet. I could see his clenched fists shaking, the whites of his knuckles plain as day.

The king of Felsen and the pope gave a curious glance my way. I figured it was probably best to make things clear.

"...I have no doubt that's the case, yes. Producing real evidence would be hard given how long ago it happened, but..."

I began projecting a video into the air in front of Ganossa and the prime minister. I'd forcibly extracted memories from the spy using a combination of **[Hypnosis]** and **[Recall]**, and then projected them into the air with **[Mirage].**

The scene showed a servant in the castle of Horn mixing a tiny amount of poison into the tea leaves that the king would have brewed daily. Obviously, the servant was the spy himself.

The other servants, the ones that brewed the tea and then brought the tea to the king, were innocent. The spy had simply disguised himself and contaminated the leaves pre-brewing. The tea leaves were long gone, given that it was over a year ago... so there was no way we had conclusive evidence.

"There's nothing else than this memory taken from the man's mind. I'll understand if you think this is some parlor trick, but I assure you it isn't."

[Recall] wasn't exactly a well-known spell, so I could understand why they might be suspicious of me showing them something like that.

Suddenly, Ganossa stood up and began marching toward a nearby room, the room holding the captured spy. He had a glint of fury in his eyes.

Oh crap! I chased after Ganossa and saw the spy laying bound on the carpet. I'd also cast **[Paralyze]** on him to prevent him from biting off his tongue.

There were multiple guards posted inside the room, along with Yae and Sakura. Ganossa ignored the shocked guards as he stomped into the room. He reached to his waist, unsheathed his blade, and brought it swooshing down toward the bound man.

"Grgh!"

Just before it could make contact with the man, the sword deflected off the **[Prison]** I had cast around him.

"Why stop me from exacting vengeance?!"

"I don't really think he deserves to live, but I think you should consider how he needs to die."

Ganossa might have been the king's brother, but he wasn't the king himself. That meant he didn't really have the right to kill, even in retaliation for regicide.

At the very least something like that would require the consent of the prime minister. He was also guilty of other crimes, not just the killing of the king. I deactivated the **[Prison]** around the man.

"...You raise a valid point. We must have him executed in public, his crimes exposed for all to see."

"Grh..."

Ganossa furrowed his brow as the prime minister spoke.

Even from a foreign standpoint, it was obvious that the people of Horn would be wary of the government due to all the recent tension.

Revealing that it was all due to the machinations of an evil group would allow the country to direct their hostility on a united front. *Man, I just hope the people don't take it as a half-assed excuse or something... Huh?*

Even though the man was under the effects of my **[Paralyze]** spell, he was still glaring harshly in my direction. Even though I could see hatred burning in his gaze, I sensed a glimpse of self-satisfaction behind his face.

"[Recovery]."

I undid his paralysis. If he bit his tongue off while I was in the room, I'd just use my magic to make him grow another back.

"Something on your mind, assassin?"

"Hehheheheh... Horn is done for, you fool. There's a contingency in place. If I didn't report back in time, Qulau would begin its next move. A Steel Battalion of three-thousand Steel Soldiers, along with three-thousand armor-fitted Wooden Golems will be marching on this country from the north as we speak. The New Yulong Dynasty will rise, with this ravaged nation as its first claim!"

"No way, I can't believe this!"

"Seriously?!"

Ganossa and Schwein cried out in a panic. That was definitely an intimidating number... If the Steel Soldiers had been modified with Gollem-based tech, then they wouldn't need as many pilots anymore. The Wooden Golems didn't even need pilots to begin with, either.

If the total was six-thousand, then the number of controllers would be around a fifth of half that amount... so roughly six-hundred. Just about a tenth.

I had no idea that the Wooden Golems would be making a comeback... They probably created them based on information from Gordian... I had no doubt that Yulong's territory had no shortage of submission collars.

"We can't just stand here! I'll head to the north immediately!"

Ganossa began storming out of the room, but he bumped into a soldier who was himself running into the room.

"You whelp, what is your name?!"

"F-Forgive me sir, but I have an urgent warning! Several enormous metal giants are destroying the capital city! We need an immediate response!"

"What?!"

Prime Minister Schwein stared in horror at the bowing soldier's words.

"Hehehehh... Ahahahaa! Too late, now! You should probably make a run for it, fools. After all, you don't want to risk the life of your dearly departed prince's son, do you?"

"Bastard!"

Ganossa charged toward the spy, gripping him by the collar and hoisting him into the air. Even in the throes of the large man's grip, the Yulongese man's grin remained steadfast.

"Horn was always meant to belong to Yulong. Felsen just happened to interfere and prolong the inevitable. You imbecilic little dolts, too ignorant and genetically inferior. You should have taken our heavenly emperor's generous offer and agreed to submit. It's disgusting that lesser creatures like you get to live in peace while we've lost our home..."

"So you did this because you were jealous? That's pathetic."

I grinned slightly, prompting the man to glare at me.

"Silence, impure filth! You're the one who destroyed our glorious homeland to begin with! Have you never stopped to consider what you put those

innocents through?!”

“I already told you. The Phrase are what destroyed Yulong, not me. Cry me a river.”

“Silence! Did I not say to be silent! If you had obediently handed over your mechanical weapons to our glorious Heavenly Emperor, then Yulong would have survived! You scum, you insipid, arrogant filth! You alone condemned the people of Yulong to the eternal flames!”

This guy... He’s completely deranged. That’s the issue when it comes to dealing with drunk people or ignorant people, they’re just incomprehensible at times. Obviously not everyone in Yulong is like this, but it sure seems like a lot of them are.

“You’re only saying stuff that supports your narrative. What exactly is so glorious about what you’re doing now, huh? I wonder if there’s a person from Yulong out there right now, trying in earnest to bring his country back. What would he think of your despicable methods, huh? All you do is take, take, take. You can’t talk about glorious dynasties or the good things you deserve, because it’s all nonsense. You act like petty thieves. You’re nothing but a goddamn parasite.”

“You scum!”

“Guess Qulau was nothing more than a group of petty, jealous little losers. You’re disgusting. Let me tell you now, I’m not the one sullying the image of Yulong. You are.”

Yulong still existed as a region because neighboring countries didn’t want to become involved in Yulongese politics, and the people of Yulong were still clinging on to ways to rebuild their country. If nobody was trying to reform the country, the territory would’ve probably been split between Hannock, Xenoahs, Roadmare, Felsen, and so on.

“I don’t care about the pride of petty thieves, at the end of the day. Qulau is going to be destroyed, and I’m the man for the job. Don’t think I’ve just forgotten that you guys tried to kill me and people that I care about. Run search. Steel Soldiers in the Horn capital.”

The map projected into the air and displayed several pins.

“Search complete. Thirty-one matches.”

“That’s not so bad. Yae. You good to go?”

“I can handle that, I can.”

I turned to Yae, and she responded with an earnest smile. I was glad. If I ended up calling in Reginleif, it might’ve caused collateral damage to the city.

Yae flung open the window and jumped out toward the courtyard. She raised her left hand to the sky, almost capturing the rising sun in her grasp.

“Come to me, you will! Schwertleite!”

Yae’s engagement ring began to shine, calling forth an enormous purple samurai machine from the pocket dimension within. With a rumbling landing, Yae’s Frame Gear descended upon Horn’s capital city.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Wh-What the hell?”

“It’s huge... I-Is that the giant warrior of Brunhild I’d heard so much about?!”

Ganossa, along with Prime Minister Schwein, the two marquis, and all the Horn soldiers all looked up in stiffened shock. It was their first time seeing a Frame Gear, after all.

They probably imagined something similar in size to the Steel Soldiers. Given their isolation, it made sense they wouldn’t know too much about Brunhild’s capabilities. Hell, it was only because of their isolation that Qulau managed to get this plan rolling to begin with.

If they had heard of the incident with Gordian, then they definitely wouldn’t have considered buying any Steel Battalions at all. It was possible they could’ve heard about it from Felsen, but given that the matter involved the death of their former king, it was probably a sensitive subject they didn’t feel the need to raise.

Yae hopped into the open cockpit, using various footholds to scale her way up there. She didn’t even bother waiting for the wire to climb. Yae was a nimble

sort, so I wasn't worried about it. It was probably faster.

The cockpit hatch closed with a hissing sound, and a low hum started ringing out as the engine fired up. Various crystal segments on the Frame Gear started to light up.

"I'll go after her. Sakura, I doubt there'll be any direct attacks on the castle... But just in case, use Rossweisse to defend the people here."

"Got it..."

Sakura nodded. She had her own unique form of magic with her songs, as well as her own Frame Gear inside her engagement ring. I wasn't worried at all.

I used **[Fly]** to soar into the air, but Prime Minister Schwein called out after me.

"G-Grand Duke, the capital!"

"It's okay. I'll have them out of the capital in a moment. You guys focus on getting the citizens to safety."

I nodded to Prime Minister Schwein before blasting off high into the sky.

"Target lock. All Steel Soldiers within the capital city. Activate **[Gate].**"

"Understood. Activating **[Gate].**"

The capital lit up in various places as several portals opened up. I then used my magic to link those portals to a barren field some distance away from the city.

"Yae, it's time."

"Okey dokey."

Yae's Schwertleite leaped into a portal I summoned, and I immediately used **[Teleport]** to warp myself to the same destination.

[Teleport] was my spell of choice for short-distance personal travel. **[Gate]** was the best when I needed to move lots of things quickly, though.

The Steel Soldiers were getting their bearings when I arrived on the field. We'd be able to fight without holding back in this area. *...Wait. I'm an idiot. I could've just used Reginleif to fight here and not worry about collateral at all. Ah*

well, Yae seems excited, and if I went too hard with Reginleif I'd probably end up creating craters or mountains.

I landed on Schwertleite's shoulder and watched our enemies. They were a bit larger than the old Steel Soldiers. Roughly seven meters tall, I'd have wagered. They also had slightly bulkier armor. They were similar to the old models in design, except there were a few minor differences. The cockpit hatch on the back, for example, was now completely missing.

These were completely unmanned drones. It made sense, since they'd clearly been modified with Gollem characteristics based on the Soldats. There were probably a few manned commanders in amongst them, giving out orders... Or so I'd thought.

I didn't know for sure, but it was possible that they'd transplanted the G-Cubes and Q-Crystals from the Soldats into these larger shells. While I had initially thought some of them were manned, it didn't look like any of them actually were. Still, that meant they'd all be easy to deal with. Simple machines with simple reactions.

We had carefully attempted to fuse Frame Gear and Gollem technology to create the Over Gear, but it felt like these guys just mashed the two concepts together a lot more sloppily.

Still, some things were bugging me about the whole situation. Even if the Steel Battalion was made up of Frame Gear knockoffs, how did they manage to reconstruct them?

The man who was originally responsible for them, Bowman, was executed in Roadmare forever ago. Everyone else involved in the Steel Battalion creation was arrested, too. I was also certain we'd taken out all the facilities producing them, so something didn't feel right.

I also didn't think people in this world would be able to handle Gollem technology as adeptly as those in the Reverse World. It was possible that other Gollem technicians had come with the guy who'd left the storage card behind, but there was nothing suggesting that in the spy's memories. Still, if the man had been on a delivery trip for those Soldats, it wouldn't have been strange for him to be with an entourage of capable Gollem technicians.

I decided to focus on taking out the army in front of me before worrying about that kind of stuff. I also had the army in the north to face off against afterward.

“Try to immobilize them by taking out the limbs. I think Doctor Babylon and Elluka would appreciate checking these things out.”

“That is understood, it is.”

I leaped from Schwertleite’s shoulder as the Steel Soldiers finally started charging toward us, lances in hand.

They moved in coordinated motions, five machines charging forward in a V-shaped formation. They were definitely using Soldat Gollem technology.

Soldats typically performed poorly compared to other Gollems, but they made up for that in sheer numbers. Because of that, their ability to fight in a coordinated group was vital, and they definitely had higher-than-average maneuverability in formations. However...

“Kokonoe Secret Style: Flying Swallow Rend!”

Schwertleite’s boosters kicked in, increasing the speed of the machine as it charged head-on into the V formation.

The result was almost instant, with four of the machines blasting off backward.

The fifth, the leading unit in the charge, was skewered through by Schwertleite’s massive katana. Just as I’d suspected, they were unmanned. They were definitely working through something similar to my **[Program]** spell. Their orders were probably to destroy Horn’s capital and try to kill anything that resisted. The one Yae pierced was probably that sub-unit’s commander because the other four immediately fell into disarray and started swinging their weapons at random. Each was skillfully taken down by Schwertleite’s blade.

They were nothing when compared to the power of a Frame Gear, after all. The other Steel Soldiers grouped up and began charging Schwertleite, but each group fell, one after another.

“They’re definitely stronger than the older models. Their sturdiness is higher,

too... I remember the older models lost parts if you'd rattle them a bit."

Maybe I should call them the Steel Battalion Mk. II... No real point, though. They're still just Frame Gear knockoffs.

After a few minutes, they were all reduced to scrap. Their remains lay strewn around the field. All of them were unmanned, in the end. I noticed a G-Cube visible in the cracked remains of one of them, the final confirmation I needed that they'd been created with modified Gollem tech.

There was also a similar substance to Ether Liquid leaking out of them. It barely transmitted any magic at all, though... And it was a dirty brown. If Ether Liquid was carbonated water, then this was carbonated water that had been left out until it had virtually no carbonation left. It was honestly so inferior that I could hardly call it a copy of Ether Liquid, it was so much worse that it was its own original thing. They were probably using them to channel the magical pulses from the G-Cubes to the rest of the machine, but it was so diluted it barely functioned.

I put a few of the busted Steel Soldiers into **[Storage]**, and opened up a map of the capital.

"What is it you are looking for, what is it?"

Yae had returned her Frame Gear to her ring and now looked up at the map with curious eyes.

"They're using Gollem tech in these machines, so they have to have a master controller nearby. Given how many there were, there were probably six or seven of them. And if they're members of Qulau, they'll be easy to recognize, so... Got it."

Since they had to remotely channel orders to the machines, I doubted they'd be holding anti-magic talismans. I also had a feeling they'd all have those stupid-looking masks. In the end, they brought their own trouble on top of them.

Looks like they're riding a carriage out of the capital's north gate... Trying to make a break for it. Like I'm gonna let that happen.

"Let's roll, Yae."

“Understood.”

I took Yae by the hand, and used **[Teleport].** It was time to catch those bastards in the act.

◇ ◇ ◇

The tarp-covered wagon sped away from the capital as the early morning sun rose above. Everyone within was confused as to how things could have gone so wrong. Their plan was perfect. All they had to do was gradually guide Horn into all-out civil war... But suddenly they were forced to make an attack, and their amazing machines ended up vanishing out of nowhere.

It was all that man’s fault. That cursed man... That damnable grand duke from Brunhild. Why did he have to appear and ruin everything?

“I told you guys, didn’t I?! I said we needed to kill that guy before we even began the Horn plan, but nooo! Nobody ever listens!”

“That’s enough, man! You know we tried! Think about how many assassins we sent out there! Think about how many came back! Zero! None of them! That guy’s a beast!”

Every time they sent an assassin to Brunhild, they vanished before even making it there. It was so scary, that rumors of Brunhild having an elite intelligence unit spread quickly amongst the members of Qulau. The stories went that a team of shinobi from Eashen were allied with the Brunhild knight order.

Brunhild was an enemy that they could never allow to survive... But it was also the enemy that they could never truly oppose.

Their plan was simple at first. Slowly infiltrate Horn. Replace people, some important, some less so... Gradual control of the population. A slow invasion. That way they’d allow a New Yulong Dynasty to rise. After all, there were many loyalists to Yulong in the world. All they needed to do was secure the territory, and then the people would come.

But then came the day that Qulau acquired the Gollems.

They were strange machines that appeared quite by chance, almost as if the

divine had left them to restore Yulong's glory.

The members of Qulau thought that, perhaps with the power of Gollems, they might finally stop fearing Brunhild's wrath. In retrospect, the members of Qulau would realize they were led too far astray by the remnants of Gordian.

They had joined with Qulau, but their focus was on improving the machines. Going along with them was the wrong decision. They should have stuck to the plan, create a glorious new empire of heaven from the ashes of Horn. They did not need to fight Brunhild yet. It was too soon.

"We should never have dabbled with those machines! They're what brought the devil duke to us!"

"There's no point crying about it now. It's happened! All we need to do is regroup, and..."

"Gwuh?!"

Ahead of the wagon stood a lone girl in the middle of the road. Upon seeing the girl, the driver did not stop. He whipped his horses and picked up the speed.

I know her... The samurai from the east... The devil duke's family. I mustn't run away. I must kill her here and now. Any true son of Yulong would feel the same!

The four horses neighed loudly as they charged toward the girl.

She vanished into thin air, promptly reappearing behind the wagon with her sword drawn. The horse reins were cut. The wagon fell on its side.



◇ ◇ ◇

Yae jumped through the air and cut the reins on the horses, freeing them. The horses were innocent in this, after all.

I fired a bullet from Brunhild into one of the covered wagon's front wheels.

This caused the wagon to lose control and slam into the ground on its side. Thanks to my magic, I'd already confirmed that everyone aboard was a member of Qulau. Didn't want to hurt any innocents, after all.

A group of men wearing those goofy-ass black masks emerged from the fallen wagon.

"Do you guys really think there's any getting out of this?"

"I-It's him!"

One of the men suddenly launched a dart my way. At first I thought it was a kunai, like the kind Tsubaki used, but it was much simpler.

"[Shield]."

The projectile was instantly deflected. As it fell to the ground, I noticed it was tipped with poison.

"SHYAAAAAAH! Taste the wrath of Yulong, you miserable little wooorm!"

"How. Many. Times. Do. I. Have. To. Say. It? I did not have anything to do with Yulong getting wrecked. Are you guys idiots? You know what, don't even answer that. I know you are."

These assholes clearly have selective hearing. All they do is spread fake propaganda, twist the truth until it fits their narrative, and use it to justify whatever the hell they want. Even more disgustingly, they call it patriotism. It isn't. It's self-serving arrogance designed as a moral justification for bigotry.

I fired a few paralyzing rounds at a couple of the men. Yae handled the rest of them, knocking them unconscious with the blunt side of her blade.

I took all the masks away from the men and used magic to dispose of them. I was not in the mood for any more suicide bombing crap, they'd be taken back to Horn and judged for their crimes.

“You guys’ll never forgive me, huh? Well, Horn’s never gonna forgive you for this. Good job slandering the name of the precious Yulong you love so much, idiot. Once news of your plan gets out, I wouldn’t be surprised if even your fellow Yulongese countrymen denounce you.”

“Gruh...”

I grabbed one of the paralyzed men by the head, and used a combination of **[Hypnosis]** and **[Recall]** to forcibly extract memories containing the information I needed. Obviously I didn’t give a damn about his personal memories, but he was a valuable information source.

Goddamnit. So Gordian’s leader left behind one final production facility, huh...? I guess it was hasty of me to torture him to the point of insanity with that foul-smelling box... Ah well, he’s dead now anyway. But still, the rest of the information is worrying too...

“Did you learn something bad, did you?”

“Yeah. There was a Gollem technician from the Reverse World, Qulau has him set up with a submission collar. The poor bastard’s been put to work this whole time.”

I quickly explained to Yae about what I’d seen in the memories. He was probably quite the skilled technician, especially if he was the one who managed to fuse Gollem tech with the Steel Soldiers.

Apparently he could roughly communicate with his captors, even though he didn’t really have a grasp on the language spoken in this world.

“That is terrible, it is... If he had not landed in Yulong, then he would have been taken home, he would.” It would’ve been bad if he landed in Sandora, too... I heard that place had basically turned into a free-for-all area.

Still, it was largely populated by liberated slaves, so at least there wasn’t a lot of oppression going on.

I’d already asked the world leaders in contact with me to report in if they found any people who’d drifted in... But they didn’t emit wavelengths like the Phrase, so it was hard to pick up on them as soon as they appeared. When the two worlds merged together, it’d stop happening... But it remained to be seen

whether or not the long-lasting repercussions of the union would be worse or better than the current situation.

I tied up the Qulau perpetrators, and used **[Gate]** to return us all to the castle courtyard.

“Oh, Grand Duke!”

“Ah, hey. These guys were controlling the attack on the capital. They’re Yulongese, and members of Qulau.”

Prime minister Schwein glared down furiously at the bound men. The soldiers by his side looked equally as angry.

“To the dungeons with them! Be sure they have healers on standby. We won’t let them kill themselves before their executions.”

The Horn guardsmen dragged away the unconscious and paralyzed men. Now all I had to do was take care of the invaders from the north.

I wondered how well they’d be moving together if they didn’t have smartphones to communicate amongst themselves, but when I thought about it more, I realized that they’d definitely have wireless communicators thanks to the Reverse World tech. Even Nia and the other members of the Red Cats had those. I’d know how organized they were if I used a search spell.

“Run search. How many Steel Soldiers and Wood Golems toward the northern region of Yulong.”

“Search complete. Displaying results.”

Red pins started falling down on the map here and there. They’d clearly begun their move.

It was hard to tell the Wood Golems from the rest, since all the markers were red.

“Change the Wood Golems’ pins to yellow.”

“Acknowledged. Performing change.”

...That didn’t really help at all. Now the screen’s just red and yellow mushed together... Kinda hurts my eyes, yeesh.

“How many in total?”

“Three-thousand-and-twenty-one Steel Soldiers, three-thousand-one-hundred-and-twenty-two Wood Golems. Six-thousand-one-hundred-and-forty-three in total.”

That was around what I expected. Seems like there’s no Qulau members mixed in there, though.

“My turn now...?”

Sakura looked up at the map and asked if she could fight. She’d once nearly died at the hands of Qulau assassins, which took her a while to recover from. That was also how I came to meet her, come to think of it.

Sakura was strong enough at this point to kill a whole group of assassins, even if they all attacked her at once. But still, it was impossible for her Rossweisse to kill six-thousand enemies by itself. Even if we factored in Yae’s Schwertleite, that’d be three-thousand each. If we factored in my Reginleif that’d be two-thousand each, too... I doubted we’d be able to take care of all of them with enough time to spare.

Guess there’s one thing for it, I’ll call in the knight order for this one. Since it’s up on the Yulong border, it shouldn’t cause any real issues if we engage.

Oh, right... I took out my smartphone and started to make a call. Hopefully the person on the other side would be awake. It was early, but she usually stayed up pretty late anyway.

“Hewwo...?”

“Doc, you awake?”

“I’m schweepy... I just finished my project, so I was about to go nap...”

“Wait, you finished it? Sorry to bug you, but can we deploy it immediately?”

“Huh? Immediately? I mean, sure... but what’s the situation?”

Doctor Babylon snapped out of her sleepy stupor, so I explained the situation to her.

“Ohoho. That’s quite the conspiracy, hm? They’ll definitely make good

enemies for our test, you were right to call me. Plus, they're unmanned, so we won't have to hold back. Roger that. I'll have both black and red units ready to go in a flash. You get their pilots ready."

And that was that.

The two people I needed now were kind of cranky, though... I imagined they hated being woken up early, and could possibly even ignore my call.

That was why I opted for another path. I simply called a reliable individual with connections to both of them. After all, they were all staying in the same inn.

I went down my contact list and dialed the number.

"Oh, hey, Est? Sorry to bother you at this time, but I need you to do something for me. And, well..."

I was certain she'd be able to wake up both pilots without too much hassle. She wasn't the second in command of the Red Cats for no reason.

Now all I had to handle was getting the knight order together. They were probably already in the middle of their morning training.

I did feel a little bad about calling them out to clean up so early, so I made a mental note to put a bonus in their pay packets.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Can't say I expected to ride this thing so early..."

A grumbling voice rang out from the enormous black lion that stood along the Yulong border.

Leo Noir. It was a mechanical beast built from the same base as Frame Gears, only it had Gollem technology at its core. We called those types of machines the Over Gears.

Since this Over Gear was exclusive to the black crown, Noir, it was only natural that its pilot would be that Gollem's master, Norn.

Though she didn't sound all that thrilled to be piloting it so early in the morning.

“Really? But I’m totally ready for this!”

Opposite to the black lion came the voice of Nia, leader of the Red Cats and master of Rouge, the red crown.

She was seated inside a massive, deep-red tiger. It was our newest Over Gear, Tiger Rouge.

It was about the same size as Leo Noir. A few silver metal lines ran across its body, reflecting the sun. Its phrasium parts also glimmered in a similar fashion.

“The problems from earlier were fixed, right?” Norn switched the broadcast channel, allowing her voice to come out of the doctor’s smartphone.

“Sure were. Shock absorption and general resistance is much higher. You can also freely adjust the power controls from within. There should be a gear lever on your right for that.”

In our earlier test, the amount of power was so intense that she could barely control it, and got really sick afterward. Thankfully, that had been fixed.

It was Nia’s first time in an actual Over Gear, but she’d been training a ton in simulations, so I had no doubts that she’d be okay. Well, so long as she didn’t get full of herself...

I opened up comms to speak with the Black Knight Frame Gear nearby.

“Est, be sure to keep an eye on Nia.”

“Roger. If she doesn’t behave, then I’ll force her to wear half-dried underwear for a week.”

“Hey! Quit talking about me like that!”

Est spoke over the common channel, so Nia responded with some irritation.

Ten members of the Red Cats were also participating in this fight. They were all using Chevaliers that had been painted a deep red, aside from Est who was piloting a Knight Baron. Naturally, her Frame Gear was also red.

Hmm... I guess I can’t really refer to it as a black knight if it’s painted red... Maybe Red Baron? Nah... I like Red Lynx. Sounds cooler.

Forty members of our knight order would also be joining the fray. The

commander and her second-in-commands were also participating, but we didn't have many troops fighting this time. Counting Yumina and the others, that brought us all up to about sixty combatants.

Given that the enemy was six-thousand strong, it would mean a hundred enemies to a single unit. That was certainly doable.

"Sue, you focus on the Wood Golems."

"I gotcha! It'll be fun!"

Sue merrily spoke from her Ortlinde, which had already transformed into Overlord form.

Wood Golems were much bigger than Frame Gears. If an average Frame Gear was ten meters, then a Wood Golem would usually be fifteen or sixteen meters. In some rare cases, they could even get as tall as twenty meters. But Sue's Ortlinde was over twenty-five meters tall in Overlord mode.

It wasn't known as the gold giant for no reason. It was so big that friendly fire was hard to avoid, so it had a special alert installed in the cockpit for when friendly units were too close by. But this wasn't a protection mission like the kind we might have during a Phrase attack. Instead, it was just a simple extermination. I was sure she could freely go all-out.

"Touya. They're coming in hot."

Yumina spoke through comms from her silver Frame Gear, Brunnhilde. It was perched on a nearby rocky outcrop. Given she was our sniper, Yumina's job was to look at range for enemy sightings.

I used **[Long Sense]** and projected my vision northward. Yumina was right as ever. A whole trash heap of shitty stuff was headed our way.

They shouldn't be able to see us yet.

"Wait, actually..."

I looked up at the massive golden giant standing next to me, and let out a little sigh. *There's no way they'd be able to miss a landmark like that.*

That meant they were charging toward us with the intention of fighting. That made things simpler.

“Grand Duke, what shall we do?”

Commander Lain spoke through the comms from her Shining Count. The answer was obvious.

“It’s time for combat, everyone. We’ll have the two Over Gears lead the charge. Knights, you pair with the Red Cats and take out the Steel Soldiers. Yumina, Sakura, offer support to whoever needs it. Elze, Linze, Yae, Hilde, Lu, Leen, Sue... focus on the Wood Golems.”

Yumina and Sakura could fight at a distance, so they were better suited to support roles. Leen’s Grimgerde had plenty of distance attacks, too... But they were area-of-effect, and would hit our targets if she went that route. It was better for her to target the Wood Golems.

Rossweisse began broadcasting Sakura’s singing voice across the battlefield... I recognized the song immediately.



It was a song performed by a Jamaican singer, and a cover of it had been used in a movie's end credits before. That movie was pretty funny. It was about a panda who did kung fu.

The song was... sort of appropriate for a battle, I supposed.

"Alright Rouge, let's roll!"

"Understood."

"Shall we, Noir?"

"Confirmed. Booting."

The black beast and the red beast dashed forward at the same time. They were fast. But the Red Cats charged after them, doing their best to keep up.

Leo Noir and Tiger Rouge sped up toward the enemies in a flash, taking out a whole group of Steel Soldiers with a speedy charge.

"Wow... They went flying that easily?"

I was surveying the battlefield from a distance through my smartphone, and found myself quite surprised at how easily the Steel Soldiers went down.

"Over Gears can project magical barriers around themselves while they're running. They can also be used offensively to knock enemies away."

Elluka, Norn's older sister, quickly explained. Her hair was messy as ever, but she also had big bags under her eyes. She clearly hadn't slept a wink last night.

But I could see a smile of satisfaction on her face as she watched the Over Gears effortlessly pulverize their foes. Her Gollem, Fenrir, didn't quite seem so enthused. He simply looked up at his master with an expression that seemed to signify exasperation.

Magic barrier, huh...? Kind of like how I put a shield up around myself when I go flying, I guess.

Tiger Rouge's fangs sank into a Steel Soldier, crushing it to bits. Meanwhile, Leo Noir's claws tore a nearby Wood Golem to ribbons.

Neither the Wood Golems nor the Steel Soldiers could compete with the Over Gears in terms of speed. It was clear as day just who was predator and who was

prey over there.

“They’re real idiots. They’re completely wasting the utility of soldat technology. But what do you expect? They’re all unmanned drones.”

“Hm?”

I was curious about what Elluka meant, but doctor Babylon stepped in to explain.

“There isn’t a human commander out there with them, so they’re a mob of useless mooks. Soldats typically work in units of five. Those fives can then group up with other fives for maximum results, but they can’t do that here because each one is unmanned. All they can do is listen to the commands they were given, and not evolve beyond that. Soldats are supposed to be able to co-ordinate to gang up on their enemies in groups of up to a hundred, so this seems like a needless waste to me.”

If there were three human commanders called A, B, and C... Then the three would control five soldats each, creating a unified team that could work well together.

But in this case, A, B, and C just gave out a basic order to kill the enemy, and then sat back and waited for things to happen. Without any active commands on the fields, they couldn’t efficiently co-ordinate at all.

“There’s no way in hell victory would shine upon cowards and losers like them.”

The doctor grinned a bit before taking out a small cigarette. She puffed on it a few times and continued watching the carnage. *Aren’t you a little girl? Is that okay?*

“Hm? What’s with that face? Oh, this isn’t tobacco. It’s an Ether Cigarette, I had Flora make it. It’s nice, calming, and not really addictive. Wanna try?”

Even if there’s no nicotine in that thing, I can’t shake the feeling that there’s probably something equally as nefarious. I won’t be puffing the devil’s pipe today, thank you very much.

“Oh, right... That person over there, cutting the Steel Soldiers one after the

other. Isn't that your sister?"

"What?!"

I looked at the little display that Doc Babylon pointed to... and saw Moroha swinging a big crystal blade around. Karina was there too, swinging a crystal ax.

...Well, that cements it. Our win is a hundred percent guaranteed.

I was convinced we had no chance of losing now.

"Hm... I expected to see one more eager fighter out there, though."

"Right here!"

"What?!"

Uncle Takeru appeared behind me with a broad grin and folded arms.

Ack, that scared me! When'd you start appearing out of nowhere like Karen does? His honed body, worn-out uniform, and red hairband stood tall. Thus, the god of combat descended.

Karen wasn't here, and I had a feeling she was napping elsewhere. This battle had nothing to do with romance, after all.

I wondered how Takeru found out about this, but I was even more concerned about the dead-eyed guy standing next to him.

"What brings you here, Ende?"

"Don't bother asking, Touya... I'm not allowed to refuse..."

Ende stared at the ground with resignation in his eyes. The situation was pretty clear. Takeru somehow found out about this and dragged the poor guy over to fight.

"Well, what brings you guys here?"

"Hoho. Ain't it obvious? We don't need to fight these machines, we should mete justice out to the ones who sent them. You were thinking of going, right?"

Uncle Takeru let out a big laugh. *Ah, now I see.*

He was right, I was planning to leave the Steel Soldiers and Wood Golems to everyone else while I went to crush the guys behind Qulau on my own. I'd

already figured out their base thanks to the memories I'd stolen, and I also sensed the presence of people watching the battle from afar. They were probably extremely worried due to how hard their side was getting bodied, though.

There weren't many, though... so it was obvious all of the Qulau members weren't right there. It was likely that they were either back at their base, or out on a separate mission.

Either way, they were done for.

"Don't kill them, alright?"

"Perish the thought, my boy! Today's lesson is all about non-lethal takedowns! Ain't that right, Ende?"

"Wh-What?! Me?! What about you?!"

"I'll watch from afar, of course! And I'll decide on what to do with you next based on how well you perform!"

Ende stared ahead. I looked into his soulless, hollow eyes. I turned to Takeru, partly out of concern.

"If he fails, what'll you do?"

"Hm... Something basic, I guess? Oh, how about a one-hundred-and-sixty hour running marathon?"

Ende started to shiver violently. *What?! That's a full week! Ende can't run non-stop for a week!*

Ende seemed to be having a pretty bad time, so I threw out an olive branch to the poor bastard.

"W-Well, how about giving him a rest day as a reward if he does well? All fighters need their rest, don't you think?"

"Hmm... You raise a fair point there. Alright! That sounds good!"

Ende quietly walked over to me, tears streaming down his face as he pulled me in for a hug. *Hey, hey, knock it off... I don't like that kinda stuff.*

Now all we had to do was take care of the enemy. I left Elluka, Fenrir, and Doc

Babylon behind as I headed out.

There was a group of roughly three-hundred hiding nearby. We'd deal with them first. Uncle Takeru said to leave them all to Ende, and I said that seemed fair enough. Anything that meant I had to deal with less crap was fine in my book.

We all used **[Teleport]** to reach the area, surprising the horse-mounted masked men.

"Wha... Who?! Bastards!"

"[Prison]."

I shrugged slightly and cast a barrier around us. Didn't want anyone getting out, after all.

It was cast over a broad area so it was weaker than my usual ones, but it was still about as dense as steel armor.

"Rest's up to you. Go get 'em, tiger."

"Tch... You can't even help a little bit?"

Ende grumbled a bit. *Now, now... It's your training session, not mine.*

"Three minutes, Ende. You have three minutes to take them all down. If you go even one second over that, then you'll fail the lesson!"

"What?! Master, that's wild!"

Uncle Takeru simply shook his head and folded his arms. He was no god at all. This man was a true demon.

Man, that's an average of ten people every six seconds. Good luck.

"Ghuh!"

"Gwuh?!"

As I started running numbers mentally, Ende leaped right into action.

"Wh-What's with him?!"

"It's just one man, stop him!"

"Sorry, guys! But you gotta stop running. This is a timed mission!"

He leaped from horse to horse, effortlessly smashing the masks each man wore. I could sense his desperation. Honestly, I understood it, given that he had a potential day of rest on the line. If he lost, it'd be a living hell.

Ende continued to leap from horse to horse, never once touching the ground. *Who the hell are you, Minamoto no Yoshitsune?*

They thrusted spears up at him as he leaped, but he just balanced on top of them to gain even more mobility.

"Damn... That's pretty cool."

Ende kept spinning around and around, blasting away each enemy he approached. His long scarf trailed behind him, almost acting as an echo of his motions.

I'd only set the barrier to prevent humans from escaping, so the horses scattered and eventually left the area.

Some dumbasses tried to escape, but they promptly ran into the walls of the barrier and fell from their horses.

Before long there were only half the men left. He was keeping a surprising pace.

"One minute left!"

Uncle Takeru yelled out all of a sudden. *Oh damn, already? Guess it's harder to fight while holding back than you'd expect.*

"He still hasn't perfected the art of holding himself back against human enemies. But I'm not surprised. He might be untrained, but he's still a formidable fighter. He's certainly a genius in the classical sense."

"A genius, huh...? I dunno... Maybe you should make him run for a week straight even if he passes."

"Hey, I heard that!"

The alleged genius known as Ende yelled out to us with fear in his voice. *Hey, don't waste time listening in, you have enemies to beat!*

"Here's... The last one!"

Ende delivered a fearsome roundhouse kick to the final enemy standing, shattering his mask to bits.

There were corpses all over the place. Actually, none of them were dead. So it was just unconscious men all over the place. I briefly wondered if we even needed to fight if we weren't going to kill them... But some beating would probably do them a world of good anyway.

"What's my time?"

"Two minutes, forty-seven seconds."

Uncle Takeru looked up from the timer app on his smartphone. Luckily for Ende, he seemed to have avoided a grim fate. He brought a hand to his chest and let out a relieved sigh.

"But..."

Ende and I glanced at Takeru, concerned. *Huh? But what?*

"The man you just kicked. He's dying, rapidly."

"Huh?! Wait! Hold on! Don't die, man! At least not now! Die later instead!"

Ende shook the man's shoulders. He was bleeding profusely from his face. That dumbass was probably just making things worse, so I promptly cast **[Mega Heal]** on the wounded guy. I didn't want to let Ende lose all hope whatsoever, after all. I wasn't cruel.

"Gwuh...? I..."

"Oh thank goodness! You're not dead, thank goodness! Now I'll just bash you a little softer in the face."

"Gwuh?!"

Ende quickly punched the man in the nose, a bit weaker than his kick form before.

...Wow.

"What's my time, Master?!"

"Two minutes, fifty-nine seconds. You passed. Good job."

If the master was so nonchalant about beating people up so savagely, then his student was truly not far behind... I worried about the effect they could have on Elze.

I looked over at the battlefield. It had only been three minutes, so obviously it was far from over. The knights and Over Gears focused on the Steel Soldiers, while Elze and the others focused on the Wood Golems.

I saw Elze's Frame Gear, Gerhilde, waltzing across the battlefield with similar motions to the ones I'd just seen from Ende. Its left pile bunker smashed a hole through a Wood Golem, knocking it down. She followed that up with an uppercut, piercing the core through with the pile bunker on the right. She was merciless.

"Hah... Smash!"

I wondered if they'd had an influence on her already, or if she'd always been like this.

Either way, it was time to get all these unconscious people back to Horn's castle. I imagine they'd all be tried and either executed or sent to the mines for life.

I wouldn't let the ones at the hideout escape, either. I also had an innocent Gollem technician to save.

"I'll be fighting at the hideout, alright?"

"Fine by us. We're the ones tagging along, anyway."

I looked behind uncle Takeru and saw Ende breathing a huge sigh of relief. It was a little pitiful.

"So, where is it?"

"Northward... Right there."

I pointed to it on the map I'd projected into the air. It was pretty close to the city where I'd taken out the fake emperor of Yulong a while back. There were about three-hundred people there, in a small fortified area.

It was definitely a hard-to-find place, surrounded by hills and boulders. If the memories I'd stolen from that guy were right, there was also an underground

production facility there too.

We didn't have any time to waste, I didn't want a single guy escaping. We had to go in, and we had to go in hard.

After confirming the location, we all teleported to our destination.

◇ ◇ ◇

The base was surrounded by steep, jagged rocks, much like the ones from the famous Hollow Needle novel. It was a masterwork of engineering. The building fitting snugly inside a fissure in the earth.

I saw a man on a guard tower in the distance. He stared at us as we appeared out of nothing, his eyes wide. Before us was a massive, sturdy door. It was the only thing keeping us from getting inside.

"Kablam!"

The sturdy door was rendered useless by just one of uncle Takeru's mighty punches.

"Don't you think we could've gone about this a bit sneakier?"

"Fool! A man must always charge ahead! Anything else is a waste of time!"

...You're a pretty simple guy. But I can't really say anything, I was about to destroy it too.

"E-Enemies! Enemies at the gate!" The lookout started to bash a hammer against a loud bell. A large group of mask-wearing, black-clothed men poured out of the base in response.

Hm? These guys have gold tints on their masks. Are they the elites of Qulau?

"Well, trash is trash at the end of the day."

I took out my gunsword and began peppering the men in front of me with paralyzing bullets.

Takeru and Ende leaped into the fray, knocking down man after man.

I could've handled them all at once using my smartphone's target lock, but I didn't want to run the risk of letting any non-mask-wearing guys escape. Plus, Ende needed more practice.

“Bring out the Steel Soldiers!” I raised an eyebrow as large summoning circles appeared near us. Two gold-tinged Steel Soldiers rose out of them. *Yep, this is Gordian’s doing alright.*

One of the unnecessarily shiny Steel Soldiers took a step forward... before immediately being smashed into a cliff face and torn to pieces. I was taken aback for a moment. I turned to look at the other Steel Soldier, and witnessed the figure of uncle Takeru rising upward, his fist held high as it uppercut the machine.

I looked upward as the Steel Soldier was catapulted far off into the sky.

Eventually, it landed on the ground, clattering to pieces.

F.

“...Seeing that really is frightening...”

Ende muttered quietly. I could understand why. It was how I felt whenever I fought against Moroha. The very idea of comparing ourselves to full gods was a mistake, though.

“A-A monster!”

“Run! Run away, everyone!”

Those idiots didn’t know that I’d already cast a wide-scale barrier around the area to prevent their escape. A Steel Soldier could probably muster up enough power, though. Still, even if I felt it break, I could instantly repair it.

“Whoopsie.”

I turned my body, narrowly avoiding the dagger that had just been hurled my way. I hadn’t even noticed it until it was about to hit me.

I turned and saw a man wearing the blackest mask I’d seen yet. I’d sensed the smell of death on the other men, but this guy reeked of it the most. He was clearly a man who survived on the suffering of others.

“Are you Qulau’s leader, then?”

“You would be correct... I am the shadow lurking within Yulong’s memory, I am the... Gaugh?!”

“Oh.”

As the leader began to monologue, Ende suddenly came in from the side and punched him. He flew off a short distance with his body bent in a sideways V-shape.

“...Hey.”

“Oh, sorry. Did you want to listen to his whole speech?”

“Nah, I was actually gonna shoot him halfway through.”

“Oh, then it’s all good then.”

I mean, sure it’s good, but... I kinda wanted to beat him!

I grumbled a bit, spitefully shooting the fallen, squirming leader with a paralysis bullet. I restrained him and then pulled off his mask. He just looked like an ordinary guy in his forties.

I figured the whole point of being an assassin was to blend in, though... so it seemed reasonable.

“Sorry, pal. Your plans all come to an end right here. If you really wanted to rebuild Yulong, you should’ve put those daggers down and picked up a farming tool.”

I left the leader behind to wallow in anguish, regret, pain, or whatever it was... and headed deeper into the fortress.

I beat back numerous small-fry enemies before finding the teleport sigil that would take me underground. This hideout was originally built by Gordian, who intended to create a magical imperium and rule over the world. As such, the fort had several magical items littered around it.

I poured my magic into the sigil and teleported underground, leaving Takeru and Ende to mop up the stragglers outside.

The place I ended up in looked like a massive underground cave. There were building materials scattered around here and there. It kind of reminded me of a hangar. I looked around and clearly saw a few items that had their origins in the Reverse World.

There were a few Steel Soldiers here as well, though none were completely assembled. There were no doubts now. This place was where they were making them. Given that there were only incomplete ones down there, it seemed like they'd deployed all their usable ones.

After a few moments, ten men wearing Qulau masks surrounded me.

"Back off, idiots."

"Guh?!"

"Gyuh!"

I took them all out with my gun. I didn't care about those guys. Instead, I cared more about the group of ragged-looking men near the Steel Soldiers.

They weren't wearing masks, but tattered clothes. They clearly weren't Qulau members. Not only that, but they had submission collars around their necks.

An elderly man walked toward me. He was clearly well into his sixties. He had a scraggly white beard that flowed freely down his chin, and he wore a little pair of glasses. I could sense the determination behind his eyes, even if he seemed unsteady on his feet.

"We. Go. With. You Not Kill. Please."

He spoke in broken sentences, almost pleading with me. I thought they only had one guy from the Reverse World, not this whole group.

Not kill, huh? Guess they're scared I'll use my gun.

I quickly cast translation magic on all the men before me. I decided talking would be best here.

"Are you guys Gollem technicians?"

"Y-You understand us? Yes! We're all Gollem technicians. We were on our way to Isengard, bringing a delivery to the witch-king, when we found ourselves in this strange place... We were forced into servitude by those masked men!"

The witch-king? Holy shit. If they don't know that he's been defeated then they must have been here a long time.

"I'll hear the rest later. How many of you are there?"

“E-Eighteen to begin with, but fifteen now. Three of us were tortured to death when we were captured... Could you tell me where we are, exactly? The technology and language here... It’s almost like we’re in another world.” He was exactly right, but I wanted to save the explanations for later.

I took off their submission collars and freed them of their confines. Some of them even wept with happiness when I did that. They must have suffered quite a lot.

“We’re leaving this place. Anything you need to bring?”

“Ah, excuse me a moment.”

The old man dug a little hole nearby, and eventually produced a tiny card.

“What’s this?”

“It’s my own personal storage card. I didn’t want them to take it away, so I buried it there when I first got here.”

Pretty smart, old man. I guess it’s true what they say. Wisdom comes with age.

I decided to bring them to Elluka, since she was a fellow denizen of the Reverse World. And so, I used **[Gate]** to connect us all to the location she and Doc Babylon were sitting at.

The two of them turned their attention from the battlefield to us as we came through, but Elluka’s eyes went wide as she ran over to the old man.

“Professor, is that you?!”

“Wh-What?! Restore Queen, is that actually you?!”

The two of them just started pointing at each other and making vague noises.

“You guys know each other?”

“Ah, yeah... This man’s an incredibly famous Gollem technician in my world. Does that mean that his whole team got caught?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s his whole team.”

“Lass, what’s going on here? Where even are we? This is a bit hard to follow.”

“Um... How should I put this...”

I decided to leave the explaining to Elluka, and promptly returned to the fortress.

Takeru and Ende had almost completely taken out everyone there by the time I got back. I teleported all those guys to Castle Horn, as the officials there would take care of the rest.

I definitely had to be sure I didn’t miss anyone. If I didn’t completely pull them out at the roots, then these weeds would just keep coming back.

I used **[Search]** to confirm nobody was left, and we walked out of the front gate again.

Takeru said he was going to finish the job, whatever that meant.

“Now listen up. Wherever there’s life, there’s chi. Chi is found in the air, the earth, and in the sun’s light. If you want to master chi, you must master nature itself. Properly controlling it will allow you to do things like this...”

Takeru thrust his arms forward, wiggling his hands like he was grasping for something. After a short while, a ball of energy I could tell was distinct from magic gathered in his hands.

Slowly, the mass grew until it was the size of an exercise balance ball, and the very air around it began to oscillate and shimmer.

“Haaah!”

Takeru yelled, thrusting his arms forward and firing out the mass.

The orb sailed forward before it suddenly detonated, creating a catastrophic explosion akin to a nearby bomb blast.

When the dust settled, the fort we’d just cleared out was completely gone. All that remained was a smoldering crater... Even the nearby cliff faces were eradicated.

The power was on the level of an Upper Construct-tier Phrase firing off its railgun attack. I couldn’t believe what I’d seen.

I was amazed that such a power was possible, even without the use of magic

or divinity.

Thus, the Qulau hideout, along with the underground facility, were completely wiped out.

“I-I suppose I have a long way to go in my training...”

“...Honestly I don’t know if I want more people doing attacks like that...”

I replied to Ende’s blank-faced mutterings with a dumbfounded comment of my own.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Qulau members were all handed over to the Horn government. The army of Steel Soldiers and Wood Golems were taken out without a hitch, too. With that, the plot to take over Horn had failed.

Qulau’s leader and all of its elite members were publicly executed. The rest of Qulau were given the lifelong sentence of hard labor in the mines. They would never see the sun again.

A few days later, a new king of Horn was crowned. Kuoh Da Horn, the one-year-old boy.

As that happened, Prime minister Schwein Adante announced his resignation, and recommended Ganossa Da Horn, the late king’s former brother, as his successor.

Thus, the uncle became regent for his nephew, ruling as king until the boy came of age. This was the best outcome from the start, really.

The Kingdom of Horn decided to join the rest of the world, and end its long-imposed isolation. They started an exchange program for their young academics, sending them out to learn about the world.

Thus, Horn would enter a golden age of cultural growth, learning more about other nations and how to improve their own as a result. They would work hard to be a shining example, the opposite of the Yulongese who had clung to the past so desperately and shamelessly.

It was fine to be proud of one’s past, but you could not hinge your entire existence around it. Otherwise, you’d be someone trapped looking backward all

your life.

I had to hope that the new generation in the remnants of Yulong would grow up to understand that.

As for the rescued Gollem technicians...

All of them except one worked at a factory in Isengard. The one in charge of the factories in Isengard was the witch-king.

Unfortunately, as far as the public knew, the witch-king was missing, and none knew if he was alive or dead. Isengard ended up devolving into chaos as a result, and currently stood fragmented without a leader.

Even after I told them that, the majority of the men still wanted to return home, so I took them back.

I could understand why. They had families and stuff back there. But it had been so long since they went missing that they were considered dead in Isengard, and their jobs had been filled up. I was also worried that they might be treated poorly by authorities because they lost the three-thousand Gollems they had with them. Frankly, it would be dangerous to have them live in Isengard.

That was why I went to speak with the former prince of Gardio, Lucrecion. He was now in charge of Lowe, after all, so I asked if he would take the men and their families in. Thankfully, he accepted. Though I knew he would. They were all exceptionally talented men.

Thus, the men decided to live a new life within Lowe's territory.

Only one man stayed behind...

"So, that old man... or, uh, professor? What's he gonna do?"

"He said he wanted to travel this world and see all the countries."

Elluka grumbled a bit as she chewed a straw in her mouth. The ice cubes inside her glass of orange juice clinked around as the straw moved.

"Isn't it a little risky for him to be roaming around alone? He's pretty old."

"He made a few basic Gollems using dwarven tech before he left. Apparently

he had some G-Cubes and Q-Crystals on him. At a glance, they'd look like five armored knights walking with him, so I imagine he'll be fine."

Damn, he really made that many Gollems in such a short time? He really must be pretty famous.

"I wanted him to help me out a bit, but he said he wanted to see the sights first and foremost. I guess he probably wants to forget the harrowing experience he had building those crude machines."

That was fair. At the very least, the fact that he willingly built some on his own meant the trauma wasn't too deep. He probably just didn't want to do any intensive Gollem building for a while.

"Hey, dumbasses! Your break's like, totally over and stuff! You should help out already."

"Geez... You're so mean, Monie..."

We were sitting and having a drink during our chat, which prompted Monica to come out and yell at us.



The two Over Gears were behind her, awaiting a diagnostics report.

Elluka grumbled quietly before getting up and walking toward them with Fenrir.

Just as I was about to leave, my smartphone began ringing.

Hm? Oh, God Almighty, huh? How rare.

“Heyo!”

“Ah, young Touya. There is something I wish to speak of. Could you come to my realm for a spell?”

I had no plans, so I said that wouldn’t be a problem before ending the call. I wondered what he wanted from me. *Ah, I think I should swing by the kitchen and get him something before going, though... I don’t wanna show up without a treat.*

Crea had made some tasty yokan desserts, so assuming Karen hadn’t eaten them all, they’d be good to bring along.

I was in luck. Karen’s greedy gaze had not yet fallen upon the tasty treats, so I managed to bring some to the divine realm with me.

I found myself in that familiar room that floated amidst a cloudy backdrop. There were no walls nor ceiling, it was simply us.

“Hey there. I brought you a gift. Here you go.”

“Ah, lovely. I shall make some tea to go with it.”

God took out some plates and a knife, then placed them down on the table with some tea. Tea along with yokan was a very nice combo indeed.

“So, what’d you wanna discuss?”

“Ah, yes. It is happening in three days.”

“Huh?”

God spoke quietly as he sliced up the yokan into smaller pieces.

What’s happening in three days?

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“The two worlds are going to complete their overlap. They will fuse into one new world in exactly three days. That is when they will leave my jurisdiction, and be guarded only by you.”

“WHAAAT?!”

I blurted out my confusion. *I knew you’d tell me in advance, but isn’t this a little short notice?! I didn’t even hold the multidimensional summit yet! Agh... I mean, I guess this could be a positive. Somehow. If it actually happens, then nobody’ll be able to deny it, so they’ll have to listen to me. That way the leaders of the Reverse World might be more inclined to listen to me, too.*

“I do apologize. It was rather hard to predict, you see. This world was supposed to be destroyed due to its unpredictability, after all. It grows yet more unpredictable by the day.”

“Hm... I see... Three days, huh?”

Wonder what I can do in such a short time.

“What about cataclysmic events and stuff?”

“That is likely to happen in most cases, but you recently attained dominion over spirits, did you not? I am sure if you speak with the relevant spirits, you can mitigate the potential damage. There may be some small earthquakes here and there, but I am sure that the worlds will join simply enough. At the very most, the maps of both worlds may be slightly altered.”

Landmasses being altered is kinda scary, but as long as I can avoid disaster-movie type scenarios, I’ll be fine. The people would definitely freak out way too hard if really bad stuff happens.

“Once the merge begins, the world will be out of my hands. Since I do technically owe you for the short notice, I will use my power to make both worlds speak the same language. Or rather, I will simply make them believe they are all speaking the same language.”

Holy cow, that’s something else... You’re basically casting translation magic over the whole world. I don’t think I could do something like that.

Well, maybe I could... but it’d definitely take my smartphone well over a week

to lock on to that many people.

"Is that okay? I thought it was against the rules to interfere with lesser realms."

"Well, that is true... But in this case, I think the advent of a wicked god is cause for this one little cheat. Plus, this world is about to be out of my hands anyway, so it matters little."

I guess it's like tossing away a troublesome book that was once in a library. Once it's tossed, it isn't owned by the library anymore so they have no obligation to keep it checked on. After that it's just a matter of whoever gets their hands on the book next.

"This is your job now, young Touya. You must exorcise that wicked god from the newborn world. Once you do that, the world will earn its right among other worlds, and the god of destruction will be satisfied as well."

"Man, this sure is a problem..."

"Now, now... You are a beneficiary of my own power. The enemy is spawned from a failure of a god. By all rights, you have no reason to worry about losing. However, that wicked god is a tricky one. There is no telling what they might do. Keep your wits about you."

"Sure thing."

I guess it's like me taking over a project or something. I'm the newbie entrusted with the workload by the veteran, or something like that...

"You have seven gods supporting you right now. I am quite sure you will prevail."

"...I feel like they treat it more like a vacation than anything else, though..."

I had the god of love, the god of swords, the god of agriculture, the god of hunting, the god of music, the god of alcohol, and the god of combat on my side. They weren't exactly like the seven lucky gods of Japanese folklore, though... They were mostly just pains in the ass.

"Well, even if they enjoy themselves, they help in their own way. Sometimes, it is simply the way of things. Though, if I am quite honest, I would not be

surprised if that world became some kind of resort for the gods after you take full management."

I'm not sure how to feel about that... Surely there are better vacation worlds out there in the vast cosmos... Well, whatever. I don't need to worry about that stuff yet. This'll all come after the wicked god's dealt with.

I need to go speak with the spirits, then meet with the other world leaders. No idea what'll happen from here-on, so we'll need to stay as alert as we can...

I quietly ate my yokan and sipped my tea, resolving to make things go as smoothly as possible.

But, three days later... An entire country was wiped off the map of the newly-joined world.

Afterword

Hello again, I hope you enjoyed reading In Another World With My Smartphone Volume 17. Thanks for sticking around as always.

It's currently May as I write this, so the book won't be released for a few months. It's getting hot already, though... What's the deal with that?! I can't stand it. I wonder if summer's gonna be a scorcher this year. To be honest, my productivity plummets in the summer months... I just get tired all the time.

I eat, then I get a stomachache, then I get fatigued, and then I get all hot and bothered. It's tiresome.

Summer months are like hell to me. If I leave the air conditioner on, I just end up feeling queasy after a while... That's why I hope from the bottom of my heart that summer passes fast.

I bought a massage chair recently because I had trouble sleeping, but the front door of my house had to come off when bringing it in... I ordered it without taking proper measurements, whoops.

First time I used it, I was all like "Owowow... Oof..." but I quickly got used to it. Now I can fall asleep on that thing like a baby.

However, since it's in a room that doesn't have air conditioning, I have a sinking feeling that it's going to become a torture device in the summer months...

Either way, I'm glad I've been working more efficiently lately.

It's been four years since the books started releasing in Japan. I can't believe we're already at seventeen volumes! It feels like it was just yesterday that I got a call about novelizing my story.

Thanks for your continued support, everyone.

And here are my other thanks, as usual.

Thank you to Eiji Usatsuka, I appreciate you always coming through with your illustrations despite your packed schedule.

Thank you to Tomofumi Ogasawara, your mecha designs are on point as ever. We finally got to see Rossweisse in illustrated form, and I really appreciate that.

Of course, K, and everyone else at Hobby Japan's editorial department. This series wouldn't have even become a full novel series without you. Thank you to everyone involved in the process of publishing this book.

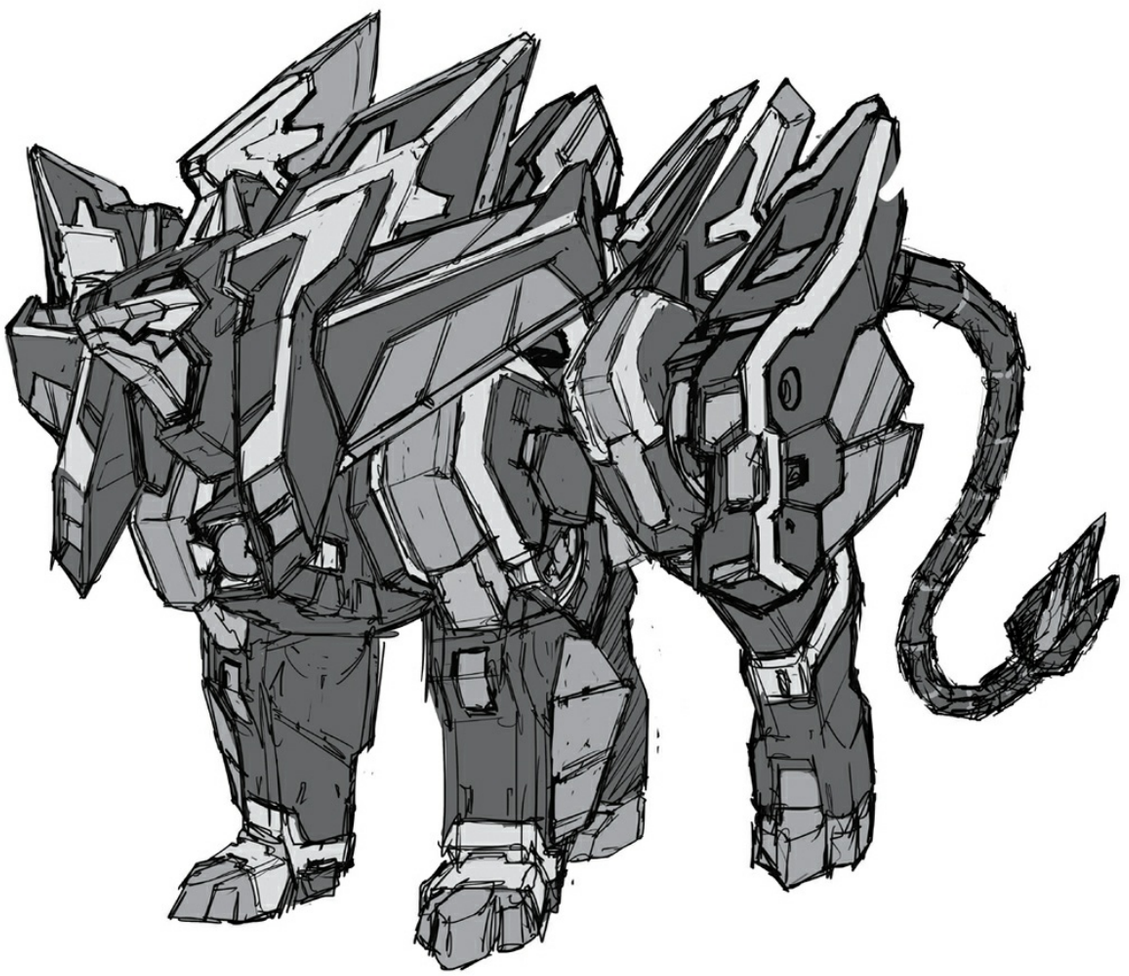
And to everyone who supported me on Shousetsuka ni Narou, I thank you all as well.

Patora Fuyuhara

In Another World With My Smartphone

Mecha Design Specs

Leo Noir



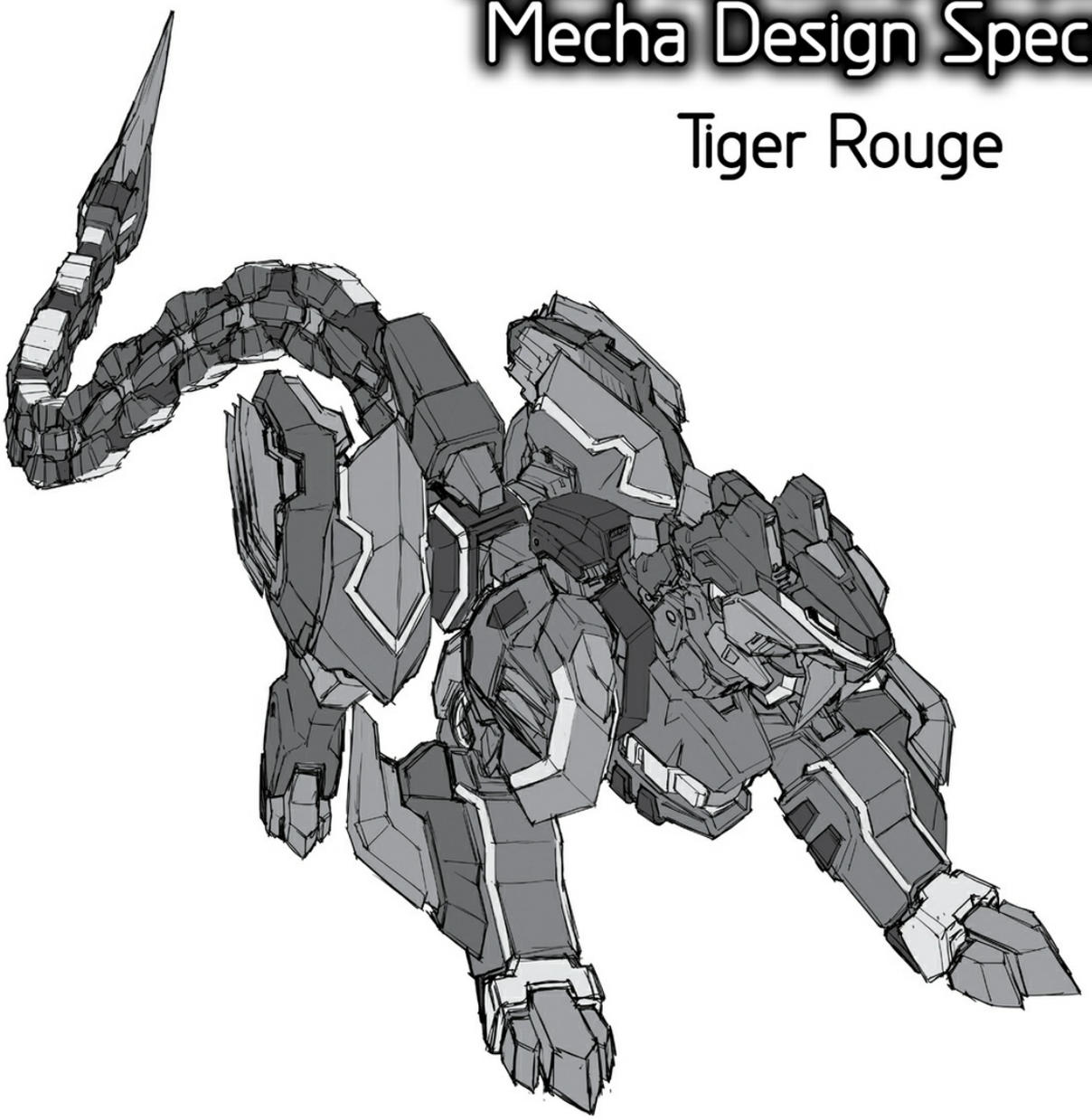
Developers: Regina Babylon, Elluka Patolakshe
Maintainer: High Rosetta
Administrator: Fredmonica
Affiliation: Duchy of Brunhild
Compatible Pilot: Norn Patolakshe
Height: 26.8m
Weight: 32.8t
Maximum Capacity: 1 Person (+ Gollem)
Armaments: Saber Fangs x2, Laser Claws x4, Strike Blades x2

An Over Gear, a new technology created by joining Gollem and Frame Gear sciences together.
These animalistic machines interface directly with Gollems, creating little to no input lag for movement.
Leo Noir is highly maneuverable, and can deploy a magical forcefield around itself, allowing it
to operate as a battering ram that charges through enemy ranks.
Despite its enhanced mobility, it is less comfortable to ride than a Frame Gear.

In Another World With My Smartphone

Mecha Design Specs

Tiger Rouge



Developers: Regina Babylon, Elluka Patolakshe
Maintainer: High Rosetta
Administrator: Fredmonica
Affiliation: Duchy of Brunhild
Compatible Pilot: Nia Belmott
Height: 29.6m **Weight**: 34.7t **Maximum Capacity**: 1 Person (+ Gollem)
Armaments: Saber Fangs x2, Laser Claws x4, Strike Blades x2

An Over Gear, a new technology created by joining Gollem and Frame Gear sciences together.
Tiger Rouge was developed alongside Leo Noir, but wasn't developed with the focus on mobility that Leo Noir was. Tiger Rouge was designed for sturdiness, in order to match the rough and rowdy nature of its rider.
It's also possible for a Frame Gear to mount this Over Gear for combat purposes.
Much like Leo Noir, it has not been optimized for pilot comfort.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 18 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member-

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

In Another World With My Smartphone: Volume 17

by Patora Fuyuhara

Translated by Andrew Hodgson

Edited by DxS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 Patora Fuyuhara

Illustrations Copyright © 2019 Eiji Usatsuka

Cover illustration by Eiji Usatsuka

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: October 2019

In Another World With My Smartphone

17

Patora Fuyuhara

illustration・Eiji Usatsuka

