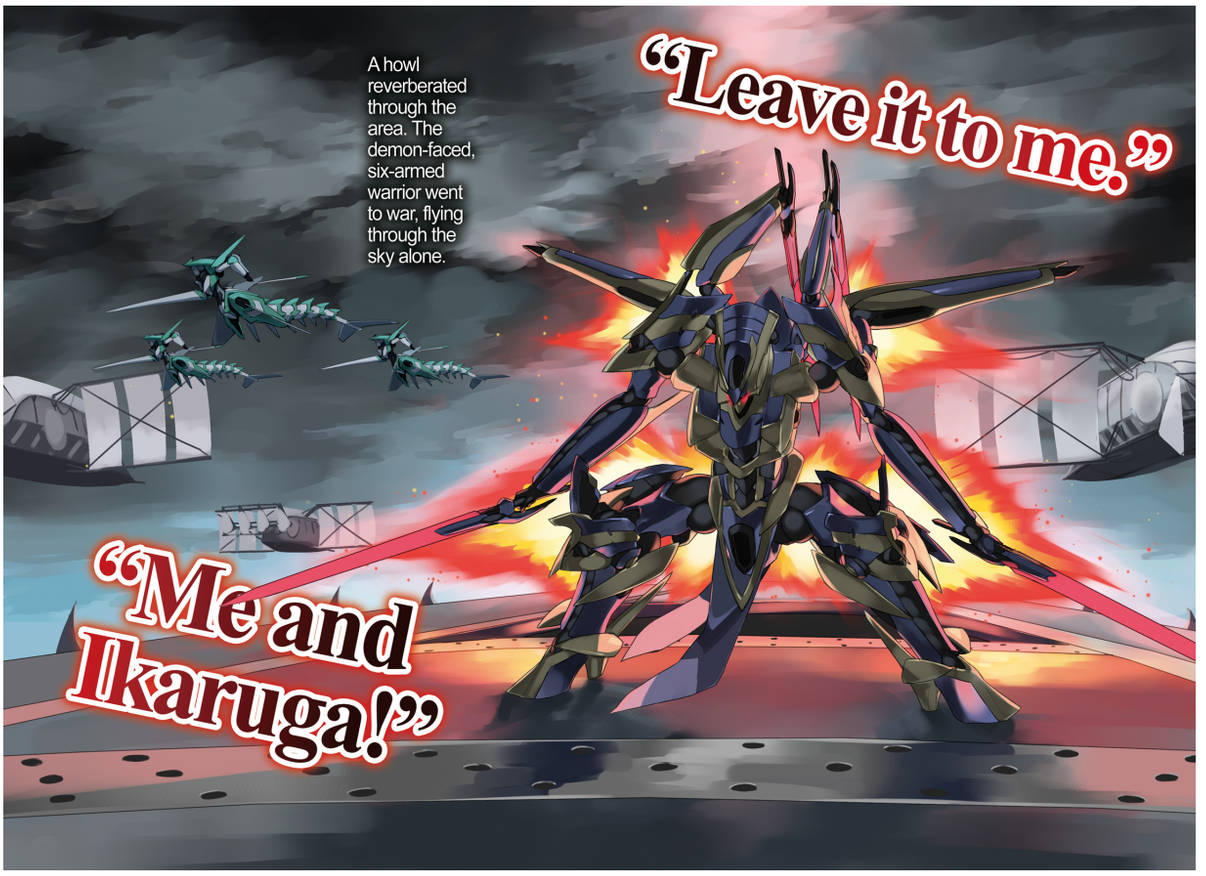
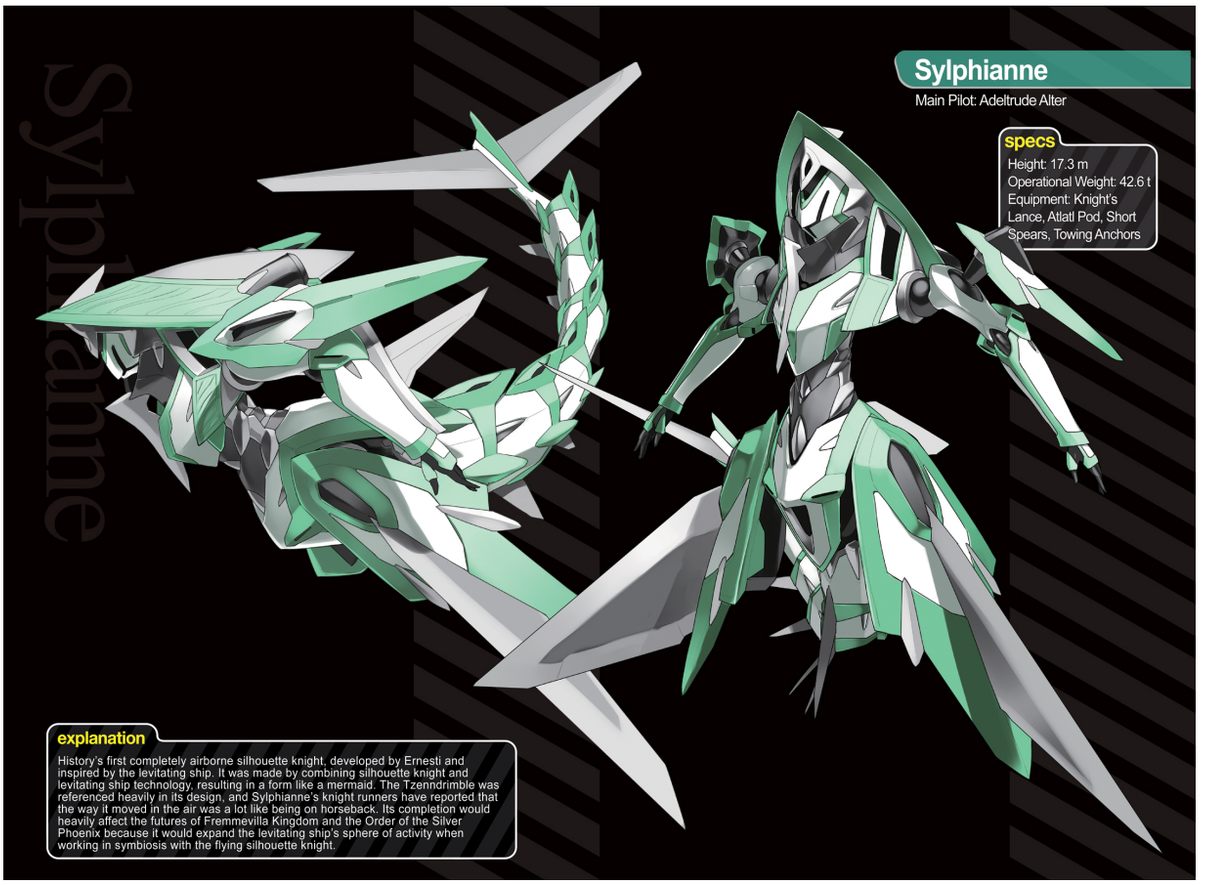

6
story by
HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by
KUROGIN
Knight's
&Magic


6
story by
HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by
KUROGIN
Knight's
&Magic


Knight's & Magic 6
Thank you, Addy!
Ernie kissed her cheek.
story by HISAGO AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by KUROGIN


A howl reverberated through the area. The demon-faced, six-armed warrior went to war, flying through the sky alone.
“Leave it to me.”
“Me and Ikaruga!”

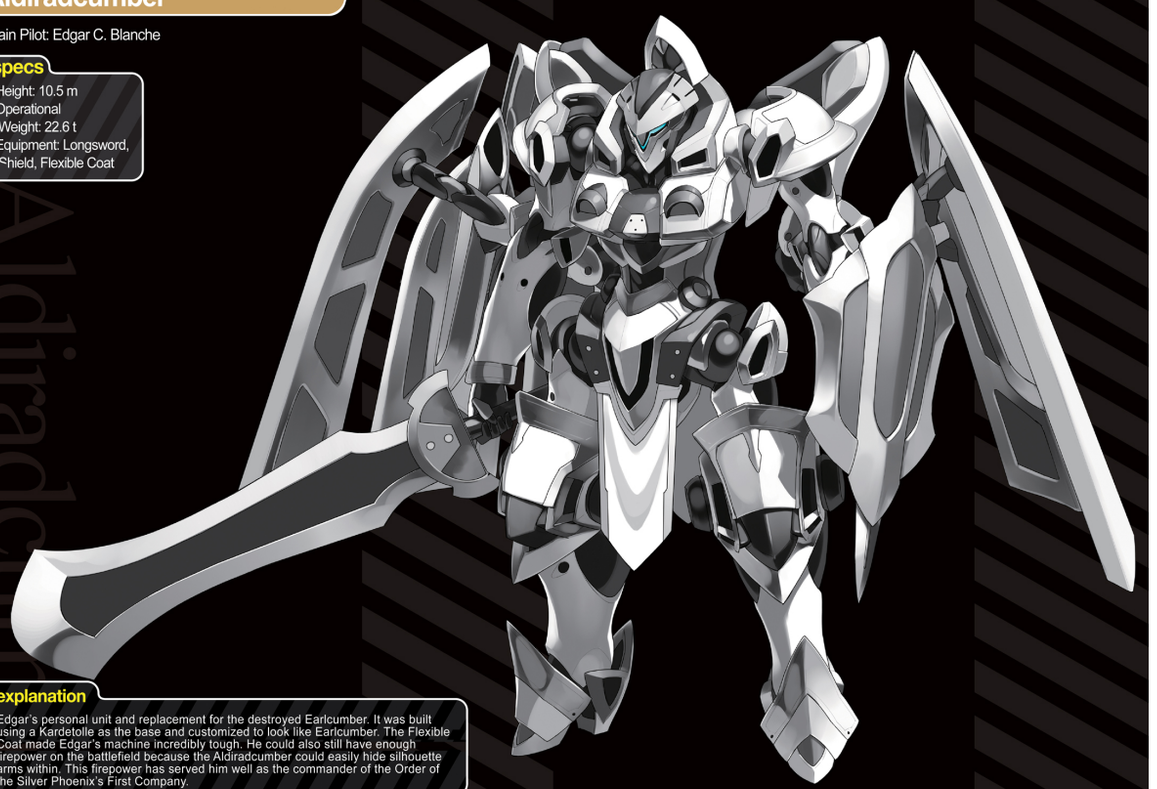

Sylphianne
Sylphianne
Main Pilot: Adeltrude Alter
specs
Height: 17.3 m
Operational Weight: 42.6 t
Equipment: Knight's Lance, Atlatl Pod, Short Spears, Towing Anchors
explanation
History's first completely airborne silhouette knight, developed by Ernesti and inspired by the levitating ship. It was made by combining silhouette knight and levitating ship technology, resulting in a form like a mermaid. The Tzenndrimble was referenced heavily in its design, and Sylphianne's knight runners have reported that the way it moved in the air was a lot like being on horseback. Its completion would heavily affect the futures of Fremmevilla Kingdom and the Order of the Silver Phoenix because it would expand the levitating ship's sphere of activity when working in symbiosis with the flying silhouette knight.

Aldiradcumber

Main Pilot: Edgar C. Blanche

specs

Height: 10.5 m
Operational Weight: 22.6 t
Equipment: Longsword, Shield, Flexible Coat



Aldiradcumber

explanation

Edgar's personal unit and replacement for the destroyed Earlcumber. It was built using a Kardetolle as the base and customized to look like Earlcumber. The Flexible Coat made Edgar's machine incredibly tough. He could also still have enough firepower on the battlefield because the Aldiradcumber could easily hide silhouette arms within. This firepower has served him well as the commander of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's First Company.



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Prologue

The continent of Setterlund was a land rich with humans, giant mechanical knights, and monsters.

At the center of this vast continent towered the steep peaks of the Auvinier Mountains, which separated east from west. On the eastern side lay the country of knights, Fremmevilla Kingdom. In the part of the kingdom's abundant land where the mountainous area blended into the plains it bordered lay the academy city of Laihiala.

One day, Selestina Echevalier was relaxing in her home—located in said academy city—when she suddenly spotted something strange in the sky from the window. It seemed like a ship, but it was parting the clouds in the sky like waves in the ocean, and it was upside-down.

"Oh my. I'll need to hurry and prepare," she said to herself after spending some time watching the ship in a daze. She seemed to have noticed something and jogged off.

She wasn't the only one to have seen this strange ship. Anyone walking the streets, merchants manning outdoor stalls, and the students of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy all stared speechless up at the sky.

Regardless of the uproar being caused by the unknown object's appearance, it slid into the airspace over Laihiala Knight Runner Academy before slowing, and the bottom of the ship which looked like its poop deck opened up. The opening looked like a black maw, from which someone—or something—jumped out. It was a giant humanoid with four limbs wearing metal armor. Naturally, it was one of the greatest weapons available to this world's humans: a silhouette knight.

In a show of extreme recklessness, the silhouette knight had jumped from the ship while it was still high in the air without a single chain to support its fall. Everyone watching gulped, naturally. Fire spewed from the silhouette knight's armor. The fierce jet's recoil allowed the machine to fight against gravity, and it slowed visibly on its way down. Eventually, the silhouette knight touched down in Laihiala's training grounds, throwing up a cloud of dust.

Teachers showed themselves in quick succession, forcing apart the crowd of noisy students. Among them was the combat skills teacher, Matthias Echevalier.

The silhouette knight training grounds in the academy were quite large. As soon as he saw the silhouette knight touching down amid a plume of flame, he let out a sigh. There was no mistaking the machine, with the four arms extending from its back and the mask of anger on its head. Even if one were to search the entirety of Setterlund, it would be impossible to find another such silhouette knight that defied all convention. The knight runner inside was no different.

“I was wondering what this fuss was all about, but of course it was Ikaruga…” he muttered. “Agh, that Ernie. It seems he’s done something ridiculous again.”

Deciding to put his exasperation off for later, he proceeded to Ikaruga’s side through the cloud of dust.

◆

The city’s residents were noisily debating something as they pointed at the ship in the skies above Laihiala Academy. At this point, pretty much everyone in the city had come out from their homes or classrooms and were watching the large floating ship with keen interest.

A small figure slipped through the crowd filling the streets at a quick jog. A light purplish-silver sparkle caused several people to turn around, but the flash of color was quickly lost in the hustle and bustle as it swiftly moved toward a certain spot in town.

Its destination was a large house that somewhat stood out from its neighbors on the street—the Echevalier household. A woman was standing in front of it.

“My, Ernie! Welcome home.”

Tina had been waiting in front of the house, and as soon as she saw Ernie, her expression softened. This caused Ernie to smile as well as he ran up to her.

“I’ve returned, mother! Also, look at this! I brought back a cool ship as a souvenir.” Ernie pointed at the ship floating above Laihiala.

Instead of being ruffled by the unprecedented object, Tina tilted her head in puzzlement. “My, I *knew* that ship was yours,

Ernie. The West must be an amazing place, to be able to make such a big ship fly."

She sounded like she was impressed, and Ernie decided not to try and correct her slight misunderstanding. "Yes, it's a special ship. Do you want to try riding on it? Fremmevilla is quite pretty from the air."

"I can get on it too? But I've barely ridden regular ships... Still, my own son invited me, so I suppose I'll make a visit."

"Okay! Also, I've got lots of other souvenirs..."

Ernie easily made personal plans for a top secret weapon as he went inside his home, happily talking to his mom.

The year was 1283 O.C. Winter had just passed.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had come to the aid of the Kingdom of Kuscheperka—a friendly nation—as the war that would be known as the Grand Storm of the West kicked off. They had saved the nation, and they were now making their triumphant return to Fremmevilla.

◆

On a later day, a commotion much like what happened at Laihiala occurred in the capital of Konkaanen.

The levitating ship that calmly crossed the capital's airspace continued on until it reached the vicinity of the Royal Guards' training grounds. It then folded its sails and slowly descended. Though the Royal Guards nearly sortied for combat, they stopped when they noticed the figure that had appeared from the ship.

Lowered on a jangling chain by crane, a single silhouette knight descended to the ground. Its golden splendor let everyone know it was Goldleo. The assembled men groaned in exasperation as it boldly touched down, and the tension in the air vanished.

"Ha ha ha! It's been a while since I've seen Konkaanen! I'm home!" Emris shouted.

After that, the scene switched to the audience chamber at the center of Schreiber Castle. The king—Leotamus Haalce Fremmevilla—having received reports of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's return, couldn't hold back his sigh after seeing the full-faced smile on Emris, the second prince.

"My word... This fool. How can there be a prince that sails

right over the king's head instead of going straight to him after returning home?!"

"Whoa, there. Sorry, pops. We had to send the silver chief home first!"

"You can't get through this with just a sorry. Do you know how much of an uproar the capital was in after that flying ship passed by?"

"Ha ha ha! I bet you were surprised! That thing's pretty interesting, pops!"

Leotamus hadn't expected to be driven to his wit's end by how badly their conversation was meshing, but he managed to hold it together because he was in front of other lords.

"I am curious as to what that is, but I can hear about that at length later. So...did you win?" He settled back into his seat.

Emris's smile deepened before he threw up his hands. "Yeah, of course! Kuscheperka was lost for a little while, but we managed to restore the kingdom. My aunt, Isadora, and Eleonora are all safe too!"

"I see. Good...so they were safe."

In that moment, Leotamus was not reacting as a king, but simply as a man worried for his family. This was because, aside from their relationship as friendly nations, he was worried for his little sister, Martina, who had wed to Kuscheperka's royal family. But he quickly reined it in, returning to his dignified, kingly demeanor. His gaze went past Emris to the strange ship outside the castle.

"Still, I never expected a ship to fly. You definitely chose an eccentric vehicle for your return. Was that Ernesti's work?" Leotamus asked. Once he'd learned the result of the war, what most interested him next was the levitating ship.

Up until this point, no practical aerial vehicle had existed in this world. Bizarre though it might have been, its invention would shake the world. And Leotamus could only conceive of the boy who led the Order of the Silver Phoenix as the one who could birth such a thing. The surrounding lords thought the same, but Emris surprisingly shook his head.

"Nope! You see, that was actually made by the Kingdom of Jaloudek, the ones who invaded Kuscheperka. We'd never seen or heard of a flying ship. We ended up having to fight those things, and it was tough going..."

Those around them gulped quietly at the response they

would never have expected from the second prince. They could feel the tension of looking up to the sky only to see a large ship. Those who had led knights before imagined themselves fighting, and it only served to make them more nervous.

While those present reacted, the next words out of Emris made all that tension disappear. “But Ernesti was really taken by it! He not only shot them down, but he seized several of them too!”

While Emris puffed out his chest as if it were his own achievement, Leotamus slumped over in his throne, propping himself up by the elbow. The lords present reacted similarly, and they were lucky they weren’t chastised for their rudeness.

“I would say I should’ve expected that, only I’m not sure I should have,” Leotamus replied. “Well, never mind the small details. So, what about the Order of the Silver Phoenix?”

“Ah, right! We left almost all the ships we stole with Kuscheperka! There’s a limit to how much a single ship can hold, so we came back first. The rest of them will be arriving before long.” Emris laughed loudly as his father clutched at his head, but that only lasted for a moment.

“That’s enough of that too. I have to say, though… Convenient though it may be, you only brought one back? That’s troubling… You said it was technology from an enemy nation—does no one else know how to build one?”

“No need to worry on that front! The Order of the Silver Phoenix examined it thoroughly. We’ve shared its construction with Kuscheperka too, so with time, knowledge of it should spread through the Occidents.”

The Order of the Silver Phoenix stood on the cutting edge of technology, running across it with wild, gleeful abandon. No better group existed when it came to examining new technologies—at least, not to the knowledge of anyone present. Emris clapped his hands, and a page came up respectfully, carrying a sheaf of paper. These were the secrets of the levitating ship.

Leotamus looked through the papers before groaning once more. “I see, so we can’t be late to this either. In any case, our ally’s victory is to be celebrated. We must spread the knowledge, this strange ship included. Once the order’s main force returns, we will hold a ceremony.”

With that settled, he left the audience chamber. The lords

each started taking hurried action to deal with this new situation. Only Emris seemed at ease, thinking only of relaxing in his room for the first time in a while.

Leotamus was quietly walking along a passage that led to the inner palace when he made a slight gesture. When he did, a figure appeared in utter silence, bowing behind the king.

“Call Gaizka and Olvàr here right away,” Leotamus ordered. “They’ll probably come running once you tell them it’s about a flying ship.”

He glanced back, but the figure was already gone. He paid that no heed, though, as a premonition of further turmoil seeped through his entire body.

◆

The pair appeared at Schreiber Castle two days after they were called. They were led by soldiers not to the overblown audience chamber, but a plain meeting room deeper in.

When the king eventually made his appearance, he found these men were contrasting in appearances. The young-looking head, Olvàr Brommdall, was as cool as ever, while the workshop chief, Gaizka Johansson, had his prodigious age carved into his body. Still, Gaizka couldn’t hide his uncharacteristic excitement.

Leotamus had expected this, so he smiled wryly as he jumped right into the main subject. “Now then, you two know the reason I’ve brought you here. The flying ship that caused such a fuss in the capital…is more accurately called a levitating ship. I have a request of you engineers. Pretty exciting, no?”

His words sounded more like a confirmation rather than a true question, and the pair nodded back. It had been two days since Ernie and Emris had made their victorious return. The ship was parked on the outskirts of Konkaanen, but neither man knew anything more than that. That was why they’d hurried to respond to the summons.

“Y-Yes! Of course, sire. I wonder what kind of mechanism permits a ship like that to fly. My curiosity knows no bounds…” Gaizka was a little more reserved than he’d been when Ernie had taught him a lesson, but he couldn’t completely hide his tendency to rapidly gesture.

Beside him, Olvàr looked calm, but every once in a while, the king could see something twitching underneath his headwear.

Unlike the previous king, Leotamus didn't have the habit of building tension and keeping people waiting. He pushed the sheaf of papers by his side toward them.

"Here are the details, brought back by the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They called it the Pure Ether Effect, I believe. It's the secret behind making a ship float in the air."

Olvàr made a small gulp as he nervously picked up the papers. "To think that ether behaved like this. The levitating ship…a ship that travels through the sky. What a fearsome thing."

Though Olvàr was a protector, he was still an alv—the race that created ether reactors and knew the essence of magic. He probably had complicated feelings over the existence of the Pure Ether Effect. He seemed totally, uncharacteristically absorbed in the documents.

"Damn that Emris," Leotamus muttered. "Because he just had to boldly fly in on a levitating ship, the city is aflame with speculation."

The king shook his head—he sounded somewhat tired. As he'd said, the capital was boiling over because of the unknown ship, and the rumors about it kept being embellished further and further. If it wasn't put under control soon, there was no telling what kind of misinformation would spread.

"It's already shown its worth in Kuscheperka's war; it will undoubtedly change the future of the world. From what you said, the technology has already spread through the Occidents, and things are getting lively over there, no?" Gaizka's face had gone pale from all the excitement. He was also gradually starting to grasp the enormity of the technological progress that was being made, and what kind of effect it would have.

"That war taught us that our standing isn't unassailable. We must prepare for all eventualities. The National Silhouette Knight Laboratory must use all its power to research these levitating ships," ordered Leotamus.

"As you will!" Olvàr replied.

In the end, both of them accepted the order. That was how they were handed the knowledge to construct levitating ships and returned to their headquarters in Dufort. Once they'd returned, they immediately and eagerly went into action.

After the pair left, Leotamus returned to the inner palace, sighing deeply. "It's only been a scant few years since the Order

of the Silver Phoenix brought us new silhouette knights. That was already an astounding event; but when it comes to them, everything is sudden and hectic.”

Was it lament or delight he was feeling? Leotamus didn’t show his emotions as openly as the previous king or his son, so he was harder to read.

◆

After that, the national lab’s activity was incredible to see. They squeezed out all their skills and pride to learn this new technology.

Luckily, the fundamentals were already written down in detail by the Order of the Silver Phoenix, so it was easy for them to imitate the basics. In the first place, excluding the Etheric Levitator, levitating ships were pretty much entirely just maritime ships in construction. The principle behind the Etheric Levitator wasn’t too difficult either. It didn’t take long for a civilian cargo ship to make its way onto the scene in Fremmevilla.

That was how the entire continent—both east and west—proceeded toward the age of aviation.

The Occidents were still in chaos due to the Grand Storm of the West, but Fremmevilla was steadily mass-producing the newest generation of silhouette knights. The increase in silhouette knight strength was lessening the danger of monster attacks. That tied directly into an increase in their national power.

And in the midst of such leaps in strength, the unknown of a flying ship was thrown in. Something everyone dreamed of.

This new opportunity had people burning with passion and excitement when a certain plan was brought up inside Fremmevilla.

The plan? To use levitating ships to explore the Great Bocuse Forest.

Part 11: Flying Knight Development Arc

Chapter 48: The World He Desires

A while after Emris and Ernie had gone ahead in Silver Veil to return home, the rest of the Order of the Silver Phoenix arrived in Fremmevilla over land, crossing over the Auvinier Mountains for their victorious homecoming. The people of the capital boiled over with excitement as they watched the incoming knights while listening to the report of their victory.

At the same time, the mysterious ship underneath a veil was revealed to the people as a levitating ship. The appearance of a miraculous ship that could sail through the air was more than enough to shock them all. The people were charmed by the prospect of flying through the sky, and they envisioned a future where flying was common.

Then, a ceremony was held to honor their victory, and the members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix were finally able to return to their normal lives.

◆

"Okay, now that we're all back, let's start developing a flying silhouette knight!" Ernesti loudly announced to the order members he'd gathered in their base, Fort Orvesius.

It was the start of their daily lives.

The knight runners and knightsmiths had just barely managed to catch their collective breath after bringing all of the order's silhouette knights back into the fort, and they responded by wordlessly looking at each other with indescribable expressions.

"Okay, you all start work. There won't be any fights for a while, so polish them up properly," ordered the boss, David Hepken.

Taking off all the grime from travel was a lot of work when it came to silhouette knights. They'd performed some maintenance in Kuscheperka before leaving, but long trips necessitated even stricter maintenance than that. The boss efficiently gave his knightsmiths directions before calling the company commanders over with a jerk of his chin.

"So?" he asked first. "Say it, though I've pretty much figured it

out already.”

“So…a flying silhouette knight, huh?” Helvi Olbarri, commander of Third Company, sighed in defeat when the boss started cracking his knuckles.

Edgar C. Blanche, commander of First Company, folded his arms together with a difficult expression. “We’ve already reported to His Majesty about the levitating ship, right? The information was spread pretty wide with that ceremony too.”

“Yep. We were stupid busy, but we worked hard and got those papers together.” The boss spoke passionately, with his fist clenched.

They’d steadily and painstakingly researched every inch of the levitating ship all while waging war against Jaloudek. Now, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was just as well-versed in its construction as those who’d invented it. Leaking that knowledge in the midst of a war had been a tough feat to pull off.

“Indeed. His Majesty ordered the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory to start producing levitating ships even before the announcement at the ceremony. It’s probably a cascading uproar over there right now.”

“Of course they’d lose their minds if you just showed up all of a sudden with plans for a flying ship…” Helvi muttered sympathetically as she thought of the past. Levitating ships were, once again, the world’s first practical flying machines. Ernie’s ability to calmly deal with them was absolutely not the norm; any normal person would have been dumbfounded.

“True, I feel for the national lab. Still, we can’t fall behind the Occidents. Now it’s our country’s turn to start research on flying ships. But that’s exactly why your thoughts differ so greatly from everyone else’s, Ernie. We’re a knight order under the direct control of His Majesty, at least officially, so I think this is a pretty bold move.” At this point, Dietrich Künitz, commander of Second Company, was near the point of resignation.

Ernie nodded sagely in response, but no one present thought that meant he was walking back his previous statement. “Right. However, it won’t do to forget who we are.”

He clenched his fist as he launched into passionate oratory. “Our order is singular and simple: Continue developing more cutting-edge silhouette knights! That order has not changed this entire time. In other words, it’s still in effect!”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right. I guess that’s that, then.” The boss

immediately nodded, but a hand reached in from the side to grab Ernie by the head.

Dietrich mussed the shorter boy's hair as he heaved a long sigh. "You shouldn't fold so easily, boss. He's just quibbling. It's obvious that His Majesty would be more interested in levitating ships anyway, given how useful they are. So what do you plan to do? The order to prioritize levitating ships could come down as soon as tomorrow."

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had been founded to support Ernesti's whims, but even they felt some resistance at the prospect of going against the general will of their kingdom. After all, they were also knights under the direct control of King Leotamus.

"It'll be fine," Ernie assured the group. "You know that I'm not trying to do this out of simple selfishness."

"Huh? You're not? You're really…not?" Addy pointed a doubtful look at Ernie.

He didn't balk, though; his smile was an unflinching iron wall. "That's right. If His Majesty puts high importance on levitating ships, that's all the more reason for silhouette knights to fly."

Edgar and Helvi shot each other looks full of doubt, while Dietrich shrugged. The twins also had question marks above their heads; only the boss's eyes grew sharper.

"As for why… Well, I'm sure you've all already experienced it," Ernie said. "With the appearance of levitating ships on the battlefield, war is no longer waged only on the ground, but has now expanded to the sky as well. For example, think about this: What happens if a silhouette knight has to fight, groundbound, with a levitating ship suppressing them from overhead?"

The answer was easy; it came to them immediately thanks to the experience they'd accumulated.

"We can't underestimate the offensive power of a levitating ship. Attacks from above are a threat. We should swat away the levitating ships beforehand if possible," came Edgar's answer.

"Right. Not even a Tzenndrimble can outrun one, so escape wouldn't be easy," agreed Helvi.

"Exactly," Ernie said. "In short, given the new multifront nature of battles that are sure to come, we must first control the skies…" The twins had brought out a blackboard at some point under Ernie's instruction, and he started writing with a piece of chalk in high spirits. At the bottom of the blackboard was a drawing of a

silhouette knight, while above it was a ship. He drew a circle around the ship and wrote the words “Air Superiority” next to it.

“This leads to the concept of air superiority,” Ernie explained. “Now, here’s a question for you: What should we do to overcome levitating ships and control the skies?”

“Hm, I see what you’re getting at, Ernesti. But that is why we have the wizard-style knights and missile javelins. What need is there to go out of our way to make a flying silhouette knight? Erm… Aside from the fact that you like them.” Edgar looked into Ernie’s blue eyes, a bit troubled.

The boy’s smile deepened. Suddenly, everyone in the group felt the air shift. “Do you really…think that’s enough?” Ernie said.

He continued drawing on the blackboard, his piece of chalk clacking. He added equipment for the ship to engage in long-range spellfire bombardment, as well as the lightning shield that protected the ship: the CIWS equivalent that appeared during their battle against Jaloudek.

“Does human intelligence only amount to that much?” he asked. “Many of the technological developments in that conflict were met with several countermeasures shortly thereafter. I don’t believe the missile javelin will be effective forever.”

He was the one who’d brought the weapon into being, so he understood what it could and couldn’t do very well. More to the point, he’d already figured out that the missile javelin’s advantage against levitating ships wasn’t guaranteed.

“Also,” Ernie continued, “you might have forgotten this, but while they’re all called levitating ships, we encountered a combat-capable version modeled after a drake.”

With that, all the company commanders’ faces got a shade more grim.

He was, of course, referring to Vouivre. While it had only been a single ship, it had been more than a match for an entire battalion of silhouette knights. It had fought off Ikaruga once, and it had only barely been beaten after adding Silver Veil into the mix. Everyone had an intimate understanding of its strength.

“You might have a point, but…Jaloudek’s got to be the only place that could build something like that. And with how serious a blow we dealt them, they won’t start up for a while yet,” Dietrich pointed out.

Ernie nodded in response, but he was thinking of something completely different. “Maybe. At the very least, they won’t make

a new one right away. Still, we aren't the only ones who know about it, so it's only a matter of time before someone else makes an imitation. It's exactly because we won that we need to think of what to do if we see one again."

Creating countermeasures for Vouivre was something only the Order of the Silver Phoenix could do, as the ones with experience fighting it.

Dietrich crossed his arms and sank into thought. The baseline method to oppose a levitating ship was to use spellfire-specialized silhouette knights, or knights with missile javelins. But he knew that such measures wouldn't have been able to shoot Vouivre down.

"It *would* be tough to fight an enemy that's taken to the air in a levitating ship. The drake's fearsomeness against land targets needn't be said, but it was actually originally made to be invincible in the air. So what if we made a similar ship to clash with it head-on...? No, that would just be wasteful." Dietrich groaned audibly. He continued cycling through a variety of ideas before throwing his hands into the air and giving up. Then, he switched tacks and asked, "So assuming we *do* make a flying silhouette knight, do you really think it could fight against such a threat?"

If a silhouette knight were to be capable of true flight, it would certainly be able to stand on the same stage as a levitating ship. But that alone wouldn't allow it to fight—there would still be a large gap in combat strength.

"That lightning defense works very well against long-range attacks. That, combined with its mobility, makes it essentially completely immune during ranged combat. So it would actually be easier to win by bringing it into close range," Ernie explained.

"Right, but there's a problem," said Dietrich. "While it may have been possible for Ikaruga to fight, that doesn't mean anyone else would have been able to do the same thing. Seriously..."

"I understand that. Ikaruga is special—I put a lot of painstaking work into it, so I won't ask others to do the same thing. Still, even standard silhouette knights should be able to compete with numbers, formations, and tactics. I don't think they would lose outright."

This type of thought—that a difference in strength could be made up with numbers and strategy—was common in

Fremmevilla, where fighting large monsters was not unheard of.

"I suppose you're right," said Dee. "As things stand, we *are* lacking in ways to battle such a threat. I suppose having more options *would* be better..."

Now that the others had been convinced, Ernie erased the blackboard before turning around with a happy demeanor. "Now then, we've only talked about fighting against levitating ships, but if we're going to present this to His Majesty, what I'm about to say next is probably more important."

No one was surprised that Ernie wasn't done. When it came to silhouette knights, he always erred on the side of *too much*. They'd been in each other's company for a fair while, so everyone here knew his disposition.

"The greatest value the levitating ship holds is its mobility and transport capability. They let you fly farther, faster. Do you really think they'd only aim for the Occidents or Fremmevilla? They won't. The world will shrink at an astonishing rate, which means the next destination would be..."

Now, Ernie drew a map of the Occidents and Fremmevilla on the blackboard. By now, everyone had predicted what he'd say next. The levitating ship—a flying vehicle—could ignore terrain. Which meant...

"The Great Bocuse Forest? Or the mysterious other side of the ocean? Either way, what's certain is that their destination will be fraught with monsters. It would be too dangerous for levitating ships alone, so they'll need something to protect them. And what other choice is there than silhouette knights?"

Edgar, Dietrich, and Helvi let out shallow breaths. Meanwhile, Kid and Addy thought back to the lessons they'd had in school.

"Do you understand?" Ernie asked. "We can no longer be satisfied with just land. We exist to protect the people from monsters—right, knight runners?"

That was the final blow. Knight runners from the Occidents aside, the knights of Fremmevilla existed first and foremost to protect people from monsters, just as silhouette knights were giant knights that did the same. They had swords to strike down the large and powerful monsters, and shields to protect the people as well.

"Our world is constantly growing, and flying ships will only accelerate that. If the next battles will take place in the air, then silhouette knights and the knight runners who pilot them must

change as well. No...*I* will change them. Silhouette knights will walk with us and stay in our world until the end."

Everyone other than Ernie exchanged looks. Ernie had always stood out no matter what he did or said, since he existed so far outside common sense, but they could feel that this was somehow *different*. Instead of just expanding the existing world like before, he was now trying to actively *change* it into his own desired shape. No one could predict what the result would be. The only thing they knew was that it would have silhouette knights.

"I suppose this is par for the course for our captain. Still, as a knight runner, it does sound enticing," admitted Dietrich.

"In the end, we're not shipwrights," the boss said. "Messing with silhouette knights is much more our style."

"Understood. I have no objections, Captain," said Edgar. "So let's put our all into developing new silhouette knights, just like we have done this entire time."

"Oh, well. This is fine, but we'll have to go through even more tests, won't we...?" Helvi muttered.

They all voiced agreement in their own ways, but Ernie, their captain, tilted his head slightly. "What? It won't just be silhouette knights. We'll be making new levitating ships too."

A new, much more silly mood took over. Everyone froze as Ernie started to energetically draw something else on the blackboard. "We'll make silhouette knights that fly. But that means levitating ships can't stay as they are either. We'll be making both. The Order of the Silver Phoenix will aim to complete both a flying silhouette knight and a mother ship to house it!"

They'd returned from one war right into another. The boss formulated a response in his head, but instead of voicing it, he let it all wash away with a sigh.

◆

Later, when the order's knightsmiths had finally finished their maintenance work on the silhouette knights, they found the boss waiting for them with a suspiciously faraway look on his face. The moment they saw him, they realized that something had happened. Things were operating as usual.

"As you all know, His Majesty's gotten real passionate about

levitating ships," the boss started. "Howeeever...we've decided to make silhouette knights that fly. It's another one of the silver kid's whims. But, I mean, I'm sure you all had a feeling this would happen."

None of the knightsmiths were surprised. As the boss said, they'd sort of expected it. They'd known Ernesti for a long time too, after all.

"Well, yeah, of course that's what Ernie would do."

"I figured that's what he'd decide."

"I mean, it's our captain we're talking about!"

After a round of chuckles, the boss looked around and resolved himself, putting power into his voice. "If we didn't have Ikaruga for that fight with Vouivre, we would've been done for. In fact, I should say if we didn't have the *kid* with us, we'd have been done for. As knightsmiths, that's a bit shameful."

They'd been the ones to actually assemble Ikaruga, so they knew best how ridiculous it was. At the same time, they also knew its weak points.

Ikaruga's incredible abilities needed a knight runner as unrivaled as Ernesti to exhibit in full. No one else could use it nearly as well. In fact, they wouldn't even be able to make it move properly—it was, in essence, a defective product. As knightsmiths, they were proud of it, yet they found it detestable; it was a very complicated feeling.

"The captain wants everyone to fly, so why don't we look at this as an opportunity and jump on the bandwagon?" the boss said.

Now it was time for more knight runners other than just Ernie to take to the sky, which would mean a new challenge for the knightsmiths as well. The boss gave a fierce smile, which the other knightsmiths responded to with confidence.

While riding the cheers, the boss muttered some even more important news. "Not only that, but the kid's also designing a new levitating ship."

The knightsmiths froze on the spot.

The boss had said they'd be making a new silhouette knight, but *also* a levitating ship. A hellish dual project would once again be coming to sink the knightsmiths into a summer far too hot to stand. They had no choice but to resolve themselves for what would come next, and the group collectively let out a terribly dry laugh.

“So that’s that, Li’l Bat!” the boss exclaimed. “You’ll be taking charge of the new levitating ship’s construction!”

It took Batson a moment to catch up with that statement, but he leaped to his feet once he did. “Whaaat?! No one told me about this! Why?!”

“Of course not, this was the first time I said it,” the boss replied. “The kid’s been your friend since forever, so you keep him company.”

It was true that Batson was Ernie’s childhood friend, and he had the prior achievement of developing silhouette gears by his side. Still, the young dwarf had some qualms.

“Then…what will you be doing in the meantime, boss?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’ll be making silhouette knights fly.” The boss puffed out his chest.

That bout of childishness got Batson to bite into him. “That sounds way more fun! It’s not fair you’re hogging the best parts for yourself!”

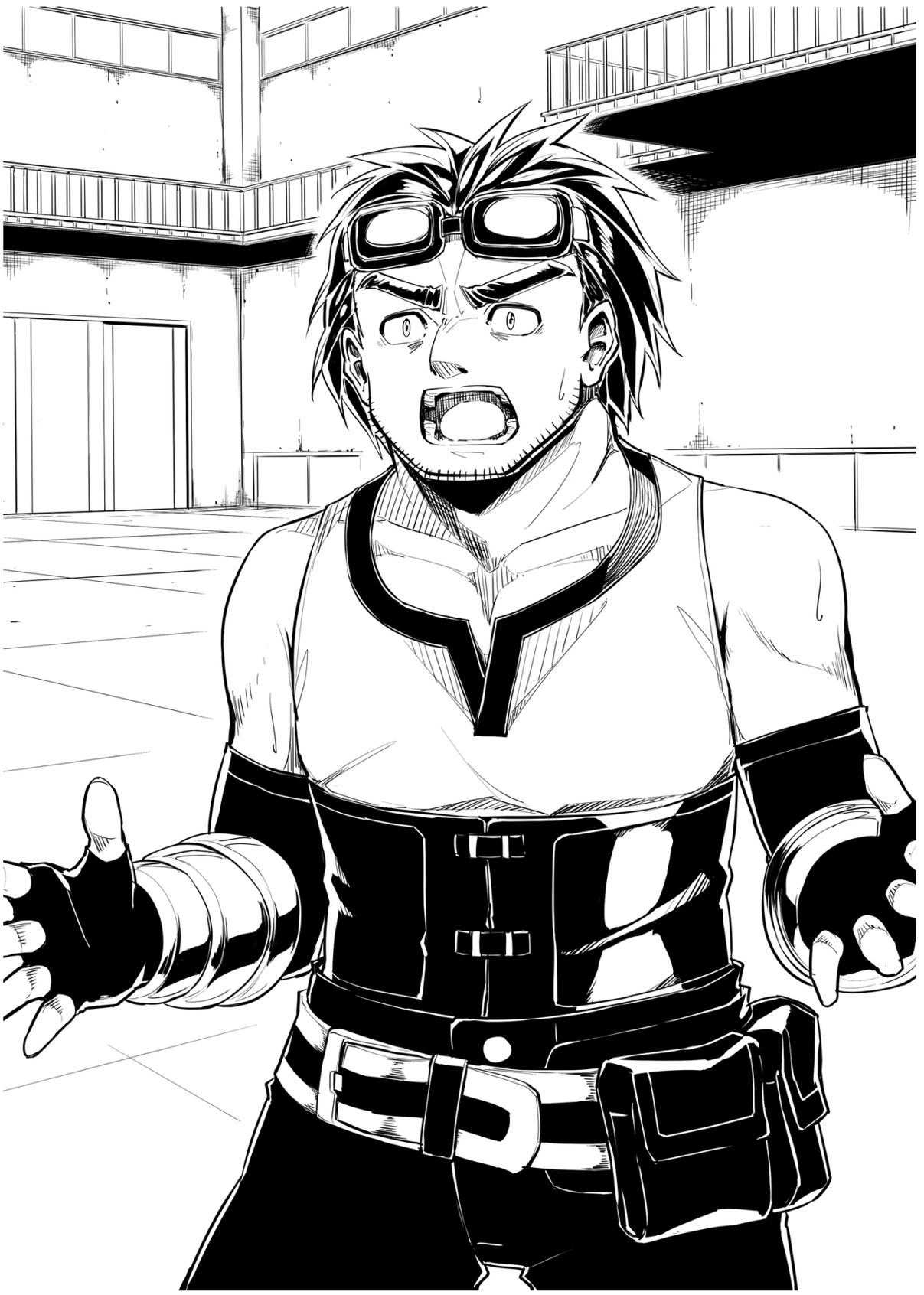
“Shut it! This is my order as the chief.”

“Wow, you really did it! That’s tyranny!”

The pair of dwarves continued arguing loudly as the rest gazed off into the distance with faraway looks. No matter who took the lead of what, they would be bearing the brunt of the work.

And that was how the genius from a different world, Ernesti, led the rampage of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Fremmevilla had just started to adopt the new levitating ships. Would this bring even more strength to the kingdom, or plunge it into chaos? It would be a little longer before Leotamus would find out.



◆

Luckily, no new order came down to the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

It seemed the king knew how to handle them. Either that, or he was focusing on the national lab, who he could trust to move as he wished. Either way, during this time, Ernie's order could run as rampant as they pleased.

"First, let's start by confirming the basics," said Ernie.

"You got it. Ignoring the basics really wouldn't be a good thing. But still...really? This thing?" the boss asked.

They were in the midst of working on the plans for the flying silhouette knight. That being said, it wasn't as if they would be able to draw up a blueprint all of a sudden. Flight is too irregular an objective to be able to reach just by expanding a silhouette knight's abilities, like they had been doing up until now. In order to bring the dream to fruition, they would need to integrate an Etheric Levitator into a silhouette knight.

So it wasn't hard to imagine that they would be forced to make major changes to the silhouette knight's form. Thus, the first thing they needed to do was figure out the function and shape of the final product.

At the moment, Ernie and the boss were looking up to the sky with unreadable expressions. Specifically, they were looking at a large humanoid statue—a silhouette knight, though it seemed devoid of strength, as its limbs hung limply and it was completely still. A device had been attached to its back.

Actually, the device was too big for the word "attached" to truly apply. After all, it was as big as the silhouette knight itself. Thanks to that, it was hard to tell whether it was carrying the device, or the device was carrying it.

They'd started out by trying the most simple and direct methods. In short, they'd stuck a levitating ship's Etheric Levitator to a silhouette knight before suspending it in the air.

"Well, we *did* manage to make it fly," the boss muttered. "Or float, rather. But this won't be of any use." It was his honest impression.

The machine was definitely floating, but that was all. It couldn't move a damn since it was in the air; in fact, it looked like it was being punished for something. The boss's exasperation

was totally understandable.

“This would certainly do the job if all you wanted to do was go up,” said Ernie. “I knew this already, but in the end the Etheric Levitator only makes things float by creating a Levitating Field. It doesn’t provide any propulsion in any direction for movement, so we’ll need to provide that separately.”

“If you knew, then why even try this?” the boss asked.

Ernie laughed. “Because this confirms that we’ll need to miniaturize the Etheric Levitator too!”

“Oh, come on. That should’ve been obvious…”

While the boss was busy being exasperated, Ernie happily started jotting down notes. Regardless of whether this was really necessary, the boss wasn’t able to stop Ernie, even if he’d tried to say no.

He’d expected to be picking a fight with common sense using ridiculous ideas as weapons, but instead they’d started by confirming things that should’ve easily been surmisable. Ernie’s pace was inscrutable, to say the least. Still, that was what had gotten him this far.

Leaving that aside for the moment, the boss launched into an attempt to flush out all the problems with the thing hanging in the air in front of them. “It’s not like you can walk in midair. Are you planning on sticking some Magius Jet Thrusters on it?”

Currently, there were two effective ways to propel oneself through the skies: the Magius Jet Thruster and the Blow Engine. The Blow Engine was just a silhouette arms that caused wind to blow, and it required sails to be worth anything. While that might have worked for ships, the mobility demanded by a combat-ready machine was too much for it.

So, naturally, that only left the Magius Jet Thruster.

“Hm, that would be the choice—barring any new flashes of inspiration.”

At any rate, the seemingly useless experiment at least let them gather their thoughts, one might say. With that, the general concept started to take shape.

The boss summed things up. “In short, we need to make the Etheric Levitator small enough to fit in a silhouette knight, pack in some Magius Jet Thrusters, and supply it with enough mana to fight. I see now… You idiot! Stop asking for the impossible!”

The boss wanted to throw his hammer across the room.

It was impossible to even dream of having a normal

silhouette knight fight in the sky. Almost all the equipment necessary to make that happen would have to be newly created. It would be terribly difficult to compress all that within a silhouette knight's humanoid frame.

"Just so you know, I've thought of two ways to solve this," Ernie said after some thought.

"Wow, you're well prepared. Go ahead, shoot."

Ernie counted down on his fingers as he explained. "The first is to equip a model identical to Ikaruga with an Etheric Levitator. That would only require us to miniaturize the Etheric Levitator."

"Hah! Rejected. You idiot, making another Ikaruga would actually be harder!"

Ikaruga's ability to freely control Magius Jet Thrusters was entirely thanks to the Behemoth's Heart and the Queen's Coronet, two supremely powerful ether reactors. In theory, it was possible to produce another, but unfortunately the machine existed far outside the concept of mass production. There was no way they could apply this idea to mass-producing flight-capable silhouette knights.

"Thought not. Which leaves the other method: to copy off of a success story."

"Success story? There's already a flying silhouette knight?"

"No. What I'm talking about is a bit different... I mean Vouivre."

Vouivre floated with an ether reactor and used Magius Jet Thrusters to move. The magic requirements for this were made up for by having a multitude of ether reactors and a much larger body. *I see*, the boss thought, *so they only added as much as they needed.*

The only problem was that Vouivre was essentially an extension of a levitating ship. The starting point was too far removed to be applied to silhouette knights.

"Every once in a while, I really want to give you a good slap in the face," the boss said after a moment.

"Please don't. I'll burst like a ripe fruit. Anyway, we can't use either of those off the shelf, so we'll need some sort of change in perspective."

Ernie was very energetic for some reason, while the boss's exhaustion was already showing on his face.

◆

Gentle morning light shone down upon Laihiala Academy City.

It was a little later than early morning. Students in various parts of the city were greeting each other as they headed to school. Adeltrude “Addy” Alter was doing the same, strolling happily through the hubbub.

She wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but she could hear snippets of other students’ conversation, and they were talking about levitating ships. But this wasn’t just limited to the academy city; the entire kingdom was alight with rumors of the shocking new vehicle. The students, in particular, were most concerned about whether a new levitating ship department would be established at Laihiala. Addy, who had intimate knowledge of the subject of these rumors (as well as experience shooting them down), couldn’t help but be giddy, her footsteps becoming lighter and more energetic. She continued walking down the street, and before long she reached her destination.

“Good morning. Let’s go to the fort, Erniiieee!”

Familiar with the Echevalier house, she barged right in and greeted Tina before shouting for someone farther inside. Before long, Ernie appeared, dragging along his favorite trunk that was stuffed full of documents.

“Well then, we’ll be off.”

While waving goodbye to Tina, who saw them off, the pair left in good spirits. Fort Orvesius, the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s base, was close to Laihiala Academy City. Since they both lived in Laihiala, they would commute to the fort when necessary using Addy’s Tzenndrimble.

They were headed for the parking area located in the outskirts of the city when the sound of a strong gust of wind came from overhead. Gasping, they looked up along with the students around them.

A ship was plowing through the clear blue sky, its sails on either side swelling with wind. It was the practical cargo ship that had just been developed and constructed by the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory.

It hadn’t been long since the ship had come out of development, so there weren’t enough of them to go around. Thus far they were only being used to ferry goods around the eastern border of the kingdom. Still, everyone had high hopes for the levitating ship—that it would eventually be able to ferry people too. Its value would be particularly immeasurable here in

Fremmevilla, given that travel was greatly limited by the monster population. A flying ship was truly the kingdom's newest dream given shape.

"Heh heh, we can't afford to be left behind. Let's head for the fort, Addy."

"Okaaay."

Two months had passed since the end of the war for Kuscheperka and the Order of the Silver Phoenix's return. In that time, dizzying changes had occurred within the Kingdom of Fremmevilla.

◆

As for what the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been doing during that time...

They'd been researching the fundamental technologies they'd need before even beginning to design a flight-capable silhouette knight. The functions that one would need to fly in the sky were all the product of advanced science.

"We managed to miniaturize the Etheric Levitator surprisingly easily. Now we can install one into a silhouette knight," said Ernie.

"There was no way we could make such a huge thing float, after all," the boss noted.

The original Etheric Levitators were the size of silhouette knights themselves. The new version was much smaller. What made this possible was how simple the device's inner workings were.

The Etheric Levitator, roughly speaking, created a Levitating Field as long as a certain amount of high-purity ether was inside it. A levitating ship's Etheric Levitator was large in order to support the ship's size. But since it was being adapted for a mere silhouette knight, it needed much less ether, and naturally the machine itself could be made smaller as well.

"Next, I tried further developing Ikaruga's Magius Jet Thrusters. It should reduce the weight if we put this together piece by piece," Ernie said, moving on.

"Whoa, I can't even tell what kind of script this is anymore. It sure is packed in..."

Ernie was talking about a combined Magius Jet Thruster made of the same capacity frame that was on it, only with a dense

Emblem Graph carved into it. He'd gone back over the script and optimized it, along with the structure and arrangement of certain pieces, while cutting out some parts to make it smaller in exchange for a loss of some thrust. Though it had less output, its mana-to-thrust efficiency had actually improved, so it was now more suited to air maneuvers. He'd taken out as much as he could—they needed as many of these pieces as possible to make a silhouette knight fly.

"All that's left is the mana supply…and that's going to be a tough one," said Ernie. "It needs thrust to move through the air, and it needs to be able to fight while doing so. According to my calculations, the only way to compensate for this is to use multiple reactors. I'm thinking of taking Ikaruga's layout as an example and plan to mount two."

"Hrm, I guess there's no other choice. It's impossible to make more Ikarugas, but I guess referencing its structure is a good thing," the boss agreed.

With that, Ernie and the boss had gathered together the ether reactor required to float in the air, the Magius Jet Thrusters required to move, and the ether reactors required to supply all that with mana.

"I tried drawing up a blueprint combining all of this," Ernie said.

"Okay, then let's see it."

Ernie retrieved the blueprint from his trunk and spread it out. The silhouette knight he'd chosen as a base was the Kardetolle, Fremmevilla's officially adopted, mass-produced unit. It had high base power and simple construction, so it was perfectly suited for cases like this.

"Hey, this thing…" the boss couldn't help but mutter.

The machine described by the blueprint reused Ikaruga's structure, placing two reactors in its abdomen and back. The miniature Etheric Levitator was also in the back; no matter how much smaller it had gotten, there already wasn't enough room left in the silhouette knight, and it was too tough to fully internalize the device. Not to mention, they needed to pack in the etherite needed to supply the thing with ether. Also, because the Etheric Levitator would lose function if the ether inside were to leak out, it needed heavy protection. Thus, all the most important parts were concentrated into one spot as much as possible and surrounded by armor.

In addition, there were Magius Jet Thrusters attached to the armor. They were placed so as to preserve the machine's ability to fight while also maintaining full mobility in all directions. This was achieved by attaching them to moving appendages, much like sub-arms.

With all this cutting-edge technology concentrated into one machine, the completed blueprint...

"What the heck? It's so fat."

"It's not cute at all..."

The critical parts had been concentrated in the abdomen and back, with plenty of armor surrounding them. With the Magius Jet Thrusters added to that, the new unit's sheer girth made it practically spherical. In short, it was an inflated ball with limbs sticking out of it—and frankly, ugly.

"Hey, Ernesti? If you actually make this, I'm quitting the order," the boss said.

"Surely that's a bit dramatic..." Even Ernie, who'd drawn this blueprint up, had some awareness of how bad it looked. He was acting much less confident than usual as he turned to the boss haltingly, like his joints were rusted over. The boss looked like something was surging up within him, something that wasn't quite anger or confusion.

"Sure, this has all the necessary features. But there's no way we can make something so fat and uncool!" the boss shouted, carrying the will of all knightsmiths on his shoulders. They collectively threw up their arms, shouting their agreement from the soul.

David's sense of aesthetics aside, the problem wasn't just that it didn't look good. All those things concentrated in the body made it hard to move, limiting the silhouette knight's greatest advantage: its mobility. As a result, even if it were to take to the air, it was doubtful whether it would be able to fight.

Ernie had suspected this would happen, but he hadn't expected so much resistance. He folded his arms together as he pondered. "Hrm, this is a problem. As you say, it may be a little lacking in the looks department."

"You call this a 'little' lacking?"

"But still, there are many more challenges to take on in order to fly through the sky. What can we do, and what can't we do? What should we change to improve it? We're still steeped in ignorance," said Ernie.

The noise faded, like a receding tide. The knightsmiths who'd come together to oppose the design were suddenly unsure of what to do with their raised fists.

"Having ideas requires thought, and actual practice is required to engrave knowledge into the mind. This is just a prototype. There's a lot we need to confirm by actually making and operating it, including any problems with its shape and other ways to improve it. So why don't we make one first so we can iron this all out?"

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had been founded to create the most cutting-edge machines along with Ernie. Speaking in extremes, there was no actual need to convince the boss and the other knightsmiths—he could just order them to make the prototype. However, Ernie probably wouldn't resort to that. These knightsmiths were comrades who'd made robots along with him. They aimed for the same things, built the same things, and enjoyed the process by his side. No matter what anyone else thought, Ernie had always considered that to be the order's raison d'être. So, he sought their understanding with straightforward speech.

"I mean, gah... Your devilish whispers are always so unfair. There's no way we could refuse as knightsmiths when you put it like that." But it seemed he'd tickled their innate curiosity as engineers. The boss threw up his hands—like he was throwing in the towel—and heaved a deep sigh. "I guess there's still lots we don't know, even though we managed to fly a levitating ship for a bit. Hmph, you're right about that. It's a little ugly—scratch that, extraordinarily ugly—but it'll still be a challenge."

"The shape of it aside, I guess it's still a silhouette knight we're trying to make fly."

"It's time to show our stuff!"

The sentiment spread through the crowd, and the knightsmiths showed a mix of resignation, exasperation, and excitement. But once they decided to do something, they were swift. With that, the Order of the Silver Phoenix came together to work toward their goal of a flying silhouette knight.

"But! Once we test it thoroughly, we're changing the way the second prototype looks!" The boss had to put the nail in the coffin on that point.

◆

It took about half a month for a prototype to be completed. Though it was packed with unique functions, its actual structure wasn't all that special. Thanks to the skills they'd built up and their silhouette gears, building it was much faster than normal.

Though there were a lot of complaints bandied about, the knightsmiths would never cut corners on anything they built; they'd use all their skills to accomplish the best work they could. The completed flying silhouette knight, prototype number one, was dubbed "Sylphianne."

As in the blueprint, it was round and bloated.

Addy stood dejectedly in front of the Sylphianne, with its torso armor open and exposing the cockpit.

"Urgh, it's way less cute than the name would make you think... Hey, Ernie, do I really have to get in this?" Her shoulders were drooping as she pointed at the prototype, obviously unwilling. Her normal lively energy was nowhere to be found, showing what was in her heart. She'd been chosen as Sylphianne's test runner, and now it was her turn to complain, for obvious reasons.

It couldn't kneel to park because its torso was too big, so it sat with its legs splayed out. This also looked terribly uncool, which slashed Addy's motivation even further.

"Yes," Ernie replied. "You're the only one I can ask, Addy. Some amount of experience in midair maneuvers would be best in order to test the Magius Jet Thrusters. In short, you two are the best candidates since you can use Aero Thrust."

"Doesn't that mean Kid could do it instead?"

"Kid is busy with something else," Ernie said, trailing off before turning back. "Addy, I need you to cut open the way to the skies. Would you please help me?"

Ernie's passionate gaze as he closed in and asked for her aid caused her to falter a little, but the fact that she still didn't agree showed how much she hated the idea. He continued to try persuading her for a while, but she held firm, so he gave up on getting this done the proper way and decided to enact emergency measures.

Addy was looking off into the distance so she wouldn't be so easily swayed, but Ernie sidled up to her and whispered into her ear. "If this goes well, I'll give you a reward."

"Leave it to me, Ernie! I'll make it fly lickety-split!" Immediately, Addy made a complete one-eighty and was at maximum

motivation. She jumped into Sylphianne, and Ernie saw her off, resigned.

The armor closed with the creaking of crystal tissue, and the oddly shaped giant started to move. The faint growling of the ether reactors could be heard inside the silhouette knight as the holomonitor blinked on, shining light into the dark cockpit.

“Okay, it’s not as terrible once I’m inside.” Addy quickly finished readying the machine, upping the reactors’ output among other things. All these basic tasks were the same as on every other silhouette knight.

But when she tried to make the prototype stand up, she realized a key difference. “Ah, I see. Okay then, I’ll start the ether supply. Etheric Levitator, on!” Addy announced through the megaphone before following through.

The scale showing the amount of ether gradually rose. Once it passed a certain level, Sylphianne’s body started to move. Because of its terrible balance, it couldn’t stand up on its own—it needed to borrow the power of a Levitating Field.

“I’m strengthening the Levitating Field! Raising the relative etheric altitude…”

She adjusted the field’s strength, and Sylphianne finally started floating. Those who were watching from the surroundings had been disappointed by how awkward this had been, but they still cheered now that it was in the air.

“It…it’s floating… Feels kinda weird,” noted Addy.

Now, there was a round silhouette knight floating in the air. Its limbs dangled limply, making for a strange sight. The knightsmiths’ excitement died down, and the mood returned to an awkward tension. Heedless of all this, Ernie was taking a copious amount of notes.

“Okay, good, I knew there’d be no problems with the Etheric Levitator. It seems like the limbs are more of a decoration at this point… I wonder if there’s any other use for them? There’s not much wind today, and Sylphianne’s fairly heavy, so it shouldn’t be blown off course too easily… Okay. Addy, please test the thrusters!”

“Got iiit,” she replied in a singsong tone. “Magius Jet Thrusters, here we go…”

With a tense expression, she manipulated a temporary terminal by the side of her pilot’s seat. The Magius Jet Thrusters attached to the machine received mana and instructions from

the script, spitting out thrust.

“Carefully… Carefully… Make sure not to get blasted away. Just a little bit of thrust…” Addy muttered, not wanting to wind up like Ernie had way back when the first iteration had gone berserk. She was very slowly opening up the thrust, and Sylphianne started to slide through the air. Its limbs were still dangling powerlessly, though, so it actually seemed creepy.

“Ohhh, it sure is going. Now that I’m seeing it move, I can’t really ridicule it. Wait, actually, maybe not. Hrm…” The boss stroked his beard, trying to decide if he should really be impressed. Despite its looks, it was able to accomplish what it was made to do. This was a precious bit of experience toward completing their flying silhouette knight.

Up until now, it had been going well. But…

Sylphianne continued to slowly shift forward, but it needed to turn back before it got too far away from the fort.

“Uh…I can’t just turn back. I’ll have to circle around. Like…this? Uh… Huh?”

She’d experienced no problems going forward. However, tragedy struck when she tried to change her heading. Sylphianne had been continuing to spit out thrust, so its momentum was too great when it tried to turn, and it started spinning like a top in midair.

“Wai—! Sto—! WAAAAuurpp…”

This had happened because she’d tried to move the same way she would on land.

Unlike the ground, the air threw up no resistance to turning. Most importantly, Sylphianne had no legs on the ground, and since it had nothing to support it, it couldn’t brace when it needed to. So, when she’d tried to turn around, she’d mistaken the amount of force she’d needed to do so.

“Uh, hey! What’s going on, kid?!” the boss shouted.

“I see. A problem with the thrusters when changing direction…”

Furthermore, when Addy tried to correct her posture in a panic, she ended up throwing Sylphianne completely off-balance. Instead of stopping, it started turning and flying every which way, like a strange midair dance.

“Ernie! Erniiiieee! Save me! Stop this crazy thing!” Addy shouted.

“Do something already, kid!” the boss yelled.

Ernie was about to start thinking up ways to improve the prototype, before the boss's voice forced him back to reality, and he headed for Ikaruga.

Ikaruga had to literally tackle Sylphianne to stop it and save the knight runner inside.

◆

"Jeez, no! Not even for you, Ernie! Until you get it right, I'm never, NEVEEERRR getting in it!!!" Addy shouted.

After being rescued, even Addy had had enough and was rightfully incensed. She was sulking, and even though Ernie brought forward some improvement plans, she wouldn't agree to get back in.

"Hmmm…but if even you can't learn to use it, Addy, we'll have to go all the way back to the drawing board," Ernie muttered.

In a show of dexterity, Addy managed to stay hugging Ernie even while turning away in a sulk. Ernie allowed her to hold him to try to fix her mood as he sank into thought. Even Addy, his disciple and one of the most adaptable knight runners in the order, was incompatible with this silhouette knight. That meant having normal knight runners use it would be an extremely tall order, bordering on the impossible.

The floating type of flight created by an Etheric Levitator brought on exceedingly unique behaviors. In order to stabilize oneself in midair, a new sort of sense would be required.

After the midair spinning top incident, all tests with Sylphianne had been suspended.

In the first place, it was too dangerous to use until some improvements were made. It was understandable that no one wanted to even try; it needed a total redesign. Ernie once again started a staring match with the blueprints—he would work hard so as not to waste Addy's noble sacrifice.

"Giving it so much freedom of movement so suddenly makes controlling it much harder," he said to himself. "So instead, we should limit these movements while adding some measures to keep it on balance."

Thanks to the thrusters equipped all around it, Sylphianne had great mobility in every direction. Put the other way, it would face literally every way it could. That made its piloting difficulty skyrocket while also making it harder to recover if one *did* make

a mistake.

“What we need is something that will balance the machine while keeping its facing, which will still allow agile movements during operation…”

The requirements seemed at odds with each other, but there was hope. The hint lay in his knowledge of Earth’s past. How did the flying machine of Earth, the airplane, secure its stability and maneuverability in the air? It used the flow of air around it, not just its propulsion system. Using that flow, an airplane could achieve both lift and drag.

“Right. What we need are wings.” He was planning to adapt that to silhouette knights.

In order to use a silhouette knight as a fighting machine, it needed to be able to both maneuver and move freely. So, when it came to where he could put the wings…

“I suppose it would have to be the arms?”

In the back of Ernie’s mind, he imagined Sylphianne with wings on its arms. They poked out from its spherical body, while its legs still hung limp.

“What a fat harpy…” he muttered.

No matter how much he didn’t want to admit it, the machine was absolutely lacking in the looks department. On top of that, he couldn’t imagine it having decent mobility in its current state. And how would it fight? Would the knight runners have to kick things to death?

Addy spoke up. “Ernie? Hey, what kind of game are you playing?”

At some point, Ernie had adopted a savage, hawklike pose as he tried to make up his undecided mind, but Addy’s prodding returned him to reality.

“I was thinking about Sylphianne,” Ernie replied. “It just isn’t coming together.”

“Hm? Lemme see…” As if it were natural to her, Addy kept Ernie in her arms as she looked around to see the fat harpy. Her feedback was brief: “It’s super not cute.”

Ernie *was* considering its appearance, but only after all the necessary functions had been packed in. As an active knight runner, he prioritized practicality when designing silhouette knights—though this disposition was also common among Fremmevilla as a whole. Still, there was a limit to everything. Whether it was cute was purely up to Addy’s sensibilities, but

there was no point in a shape that failed to fulfill the practicality necessary in the first place.

“I’ll have to start over entirely, it looks like…” With that, Ernie swept all the blueprints off his desk, placing a fresh piece of paper on it before starting to think.

Etheric Levitator, etherite, ether reactors, Magius Jet Thrusters, and wings. He tried a variety of different combinations, as if it were a puzzle, and he even went as far as to change the shape of the inner skeleton.

“I need to maintain the silhouette knight’s fighting ability while also making sure it has enough stability while flying in the air… This is harder than expected.”

After some trial and error, Ernie had yet to find something that clicked. What was lacking was a design concept that brought all of it together. As things stood, it would just be a scattered collection of abilities that pulled the machine in different directions. He was almost there, but that made it all the more frustrating.

Ernie was growing more and more certain he was at an impasse, so he decided to talk to Addy, who was thinking on her own beside him, for a change of pace. “What would you do, Addy?”

“Well, I can say that I don’t want to spin around anymore,” she replied. “I want it to be more honest and cute. Like Tzenny!”

While Ernie sank back into thought, Addy picked up a blueprint.

“Hey, Ernie, I know we messed up earlier, but why does the levitating ship go forward properly?”

“Well, that’s because levitating ships and silhouette knights are fundamentally different. A levitating ship’s size gives it a stability all its own, and the sails also give it some resistance which—!” Suddenly, Ernie stopped talking.

Addy, confused, tilted her head. “Ernie?”

Ernie’s eyes were open wide as he slowly turned around. He was now facing her, but he wasn’t looking at her. This strange behavior surprised Addy, and she took a step back.

“I see…” Ernie muttered. “It seems I was too attached to the silhouette knight’s shape. No, it’s actually the opposite. We have a success story, so we should just use it. The fighting style will be… Tzenndrimble… Horseback… Wings… Structure… So that was an option… Yes, this could work!”

Like a peal of thunder splitting the night, inspiration came in an overwhelming torrent. All the disparate elements and ideas within him were coalescing into a single line, describing a path to a clear form—his ultimate goal.

Ernie shot to his feet, jumping on Addy, who'd frozen in surprise, and pulling her into a hug. "Thank you, Addy! Now it's looking like this can work. You can get your hopes up while you wait!"

Ernie kissed her cheek before almost prancing back to his desk and starting to draw at incredible speed, his pen dancing across the paper. That left Addy standing rigidly in place, her face completely red.

Eventually, after some time had passed, she restarted and slowly went up to hug Ernie. "Ernie, do that one more time."

"I'm busy. Later."

"Boo."

◆

When the Order of the Silver Phoenix congregated at Fort Orvesius the next day, they could see a Tzenndrimble running wild at breakneck speed. The berserk Tzenndrimble noticed the confused and panicked knightsmiths and immediately put on the brakes, sliding into the fort. Ernie jumped out of the cockpit while the group was frozen out of shock.

"Where's the boss?" he asked. "Also, please gather in the meeting room right away."

He ran off after that without even waiting for a reply. Once he'd gone, the knightsmiths finally woke up from their stupor and had a realization: Ernie only got like that when he was about to do something ridiculous again.

By the time the knightsmiths and knight runners of the order congregated in the fort's meeting room, Ernie had already posted up a large mass of blueprints and was waiting for them. Seeing their way-too-excited captain, the rest of the order's members were a little scared.

"Now then, let's get started," Ernie opened. "I redesigned the flight-capable silhouette knight by changing my point of view. We're still going to make a silhouette knight fly, but the basis of this new design is no longer another silhouette knight."

Ernie seemed to be speaking in riddles, but before the boss

even needed to sink into thought, he took a look at the posted blueprints and gulped. “This is completely different.”

“It is,” Ernie agreed. “There are two successful references for flying vehicles. One is Ikaruga, and the other is the levitating ship. Sylphianne—using Ikaruga as a base—failed. So this time, I based it off of a levitating ship!”

Ernie’s blueprints showed a silhouette knight that was utterly different to any that had been made before.

In a sense, it would be better described as a miniature levitating ship. After all, the upper half was literally a figurehead from a levitating ship, while the bottom half was a boat hull. Yet while levitating ships were normally several times larger than a silhouette knight, this machine was scaled down to a similar size.

A human upper half and a streamlined lower half. And it wasn’t patterned after any old levitating ship either. It looked to have included technological advancements from Vouivre, as parts of the lower half could move. In short, the silhouette knight—

“This is a silhouette knight based off of a miniature levitating ship. If I had to say, it’s like a mermaid,” said Ernie. “Like a fish that swims through the air. Doesn’t that sound interesting?”

—could be described as a mermaid.

The inventor of the levitating ship, Horacio Kojass, had completed Vouivre by incorporating silhouette knight technology. Now, Ernie had done the opposite to achieve a flying silhouette knight. This design philosophy clearly showed how far removed he stood from others.

Also, the shape of this design was not just an imitation. The Order of the Silver Phoenix already had the know-how to put together a similar silhouette knight. Indeed, it was just like the Tzenndrimble. All that was different was that the lower half was more like a fish instead of a horse; it wasn’t worth getting shocked over.

Once everyone’s minds were starting to catch up, Ernie happily started to explain further. “I may have referenced the levitating ship, but many of the parts are reused from the Tzenndrimble. Furthermore, the hull...I mean, the lower half, has been designed to be somewhat mobile. There’s quite a lot of crystal tissue stuffed in there, so its mana pool should be fairly large.”

Just like in the Tzenndrimble, the most important parts were

placed in the lower half. It had grown a little bigger than the Tzenndrimble's because there was so much inside, but it didn't look too awkward since it had no legs. It was designed with the premise of using an Etheric Levitator, so it didn't need legs at all. It was a total aerial battle specialist.

"Well now, this is a familiar sight," came a voice from the crowd. "So how does it handle? Getting tossed around like before isn't on my to-do list."

"The controls are almost entirely the same as the Tzenndrimble's," Ernie answered. "I figured out that the difficulty was because every aspect of its mobility was dependent on the thrusters, so I designed this one to use its entire body to change direction instead. Tighter turns and other small maneuvers will be done using these fin stabilizers."

The Sylphianne's freedom of movement in midair had actually caused control complications. So this time, Ernie designed it to fundamentally only go forward. Any movement left or right would be done by moving the whole body, including the small wings called fin stabilizers. These stabilizers both made sure the machine was stable while flying forward and acted as ailerons when maneuvering.

All this movement, taken as a whole, looked just like a fish swimming in midair, and so the knight runners categorized it as similar to the Tzenndrimble. In effect, both its physical shape and its piloting style were the same.

"Hmmm, so this one's like Tzenny's little sister?" Addy wondered aloud, rapping a fist into her other palm.

The boss heard that and couldn't help but laugh.

"Or a little brother. It's using key parts from the Tzenndorg line, so calling it a sibling might actually be correct," Ernie replied.

"Then we'll need to make it even cuter, like Tzenny!" Addy exclaimed.

"Mm? Then let's put more cool spikes and edges on it."

"What? How is that cute?"

This flying silhouette knight could be said to have had all the most bleeding-edge technologies crammed into it, from both silhouette knights and levitating ships. In the face of that, the engineers were seriously thinking about something as meaningless as how to decorate it. If the contents of this conversation were to be heard by anyone outside the order, that

person would probably faint.

Finally, the boss came down from his bout of laughter. “Well, at least it’s a lot manlier than before. Gah hah hah! I’m feelin’ real motivated now. This thing’s a whole different beast compared to anything we’ve made thus far. We’ll probably need a new term for it.”

Ernie tilted his head, thinking for a moment before muttering a response. “It’s a flying silhouette knight… Let’s dub it ‘windine style.’”

As an aside, the prototypes made using this second blueprint were officially dubbed “Sylphianne II.” However, since those in the order preferred to pretend the first iteration didn’t exist, they simply called this one “Sylphianne.”

Chapter 49: Residents of the Sky

A single ship flew through the air, its sails swelling with the swirling wind around it.

It was one of the cargo ships of the special fleet assigned to the Royal Guards, who served directly under the king of Fremmevilla. Its hold was full of goods that it was transporting to the eastern border—a new role that had only come about in Fremmevilla with the advent of the levitating ship. Colloquially, it was called the “Royal Post.”

“The wind is stronger than usual; hold the wheel tight. This thing’s heavy, after all. Be careful not to raise the speed too much.” The captain’s orders flew throughout the bridge located at the front of the ship.

The ship could move via natural wind in addition to its Blow Engine. That meant it could go even faster, but that wasn’t always a good thing. While going faster would shorten travel time, it would also make controlling the ship harder—it made it more difficult to change headings, for instance. This, in turn, would put a larger strain on the hull, which would shorten the ship’s lifespan.

Levitating ships were historic flying machines that came onto the world stage during the Grand Storm of the West, so not much time had passed since their creation. No one had any expertise in piloting them, so there were a lot of wrinkles to iron out. Despite the newness of all this, the captain had been accumulating knowledge little by little over several trips. In the same fashion, skill in laying these ships was not high enough, and there weren’t enough ships to go around—making them very precious commodities. That was why this ship had been placed directly under the control of His Majesty by way of the Royal Guards, though there were other reasons as well.

“It’d be nice if the rest of this trip was uneventful…”

The captain’s concern was understandable. Up until this point, almost no delivery made by the Royal Post had finished without a hitch, and the current one was about to be no exception.

The soldiers standing watch outside the ship saw an abnormality. They opened up the speaking tubes immediately

and shouted their report as loudly as they could. “Shadows detected ahead of the ship, likely to be monsters! They’re flying! Estimated to be duel-class, numbers are…a little more than ten!”

They could see squirming shadows in the skies ahead. These flying monsters that let out disconcerting cries as they flew were a type of duel-class monster called a bladedancer.

They looked to be some ways away from the ship, but that was a trick of the sky, which had nothing to compare relative distance with. Because both sides had speed befitting this scale of distance, the space between them would disappear in the blink of an eye.

“Lower speed! Emergency turn!” the captain ordered. “We’re making a detour!”

The figurehead used its Blow Engine to manipulate the wind, changing its direction. One sail grew bigger than the other as the levitating ship’s prow diverted. The movement was sluggish because the ship was so laden, though. At this speed, they couldn’t hope to escape the bladedancers’ attention. The captain’s quick decision proved a futile effort, as some of the monsters turned their heads and bared their fangs at these intruders in their territory.

“Looks like we won’t be able to get away,” the captain said. “Then prepare defensive measures. It’s time to fight! But don’t be greedy, we just need to drive them away!”

Part of the ship’s topside armor started to move, making clanking noises as it did. The armor wasn’t actually part of the ship, but wall robes made of capacity frame that greatly expanded a silhouette knight’s mana pool. Many silhouette arms poked out from inside, held by special silhouette knights.

The cargo ship, being as its main purpose was to transport goods, only had a defensive complement of three silhouette knights. Each one activated their back weapons upon receiving the order, pointing them at the incoming flock of monsters.

These, the newest silhouette knights, were the most important reasons why only the Royal Guards had levitating ships. Operating a levitating ship didn’t just necessitate knowledge on controlling the ship, but also the guts and skills to fight in the sky, a completely unknown battlefield. Of course only the Royal Guards, the most skilled knights in the kingdom, had been entrusted with this.

The levitating ship was still bravely attempting to leave while

preparing to intercept. But then they heard the cry of the flying drake-type monsters. They could no longer escape—they were in combat range.

"Start the bombardment!" the captain ordered.

Shining bolts of spellfire flew from the levitating ship toward the horde of monsters, creating a curtain of overspells that was the mainstay of such silhouette knights. Silhouette arms were basically weapons built to fight against tough land-based monsters. They'd kill nimble and light flying monsters in one hit. That is, *if* they hit.

The agility of these light monsters made them hard to pin down, and it was difficult to hit them with spellfire, to say the least. Some fell to the sheer weight of fire, but most continued on and unflinchingly approached the ship.

With a large flap of their wings, the bladedancers suddenly ascended. Once they got over the levitating ship, they folded their wings and dropped. Gravity aided their powerful wing beats, accelerating the monsters in a straight line down at the ship. At first glance, this might have seemed like a reckless charge, but it was actually a deadly attack thanks to the boon of their natural, powerful physical strengthening magic.

The monsters themselves became mighty spearheads, burrowing into the armor plates of the ship.

"Grk! Those bastards!" the captain cursed. "Continue firing! We need to shake them off somehow!"

Goods spilled from holes made in the hull, but the crew didn't have the leeway to care. Their heavy ship was easy and immobile prey to the agile flying monsters. The captain's orders were quickly relayed, and the silhouette knights continued firing, heedless of their mana pools.

Their desperate resistance bore fruit, and they somehow managed to shake off the bladedancers, but the damage to the ship was too heavy to ignore. The only reason they'd managed to escape before being brought down completely was the crew's experience at such things, which allowed them to detect the threat early—as well as some good luck.

After a moment, the captain concluded, "This route's no good. Too much of it is monster territory."

"Looks like we'll need to rewrite the charts again."

The captain racked his brain while staring down at an open map. It was already covered with "x" marks.

The advent of flight had introduced a new problem for Fremmevilla: Encounters with flying monsters had skyrocketed.

The kingdom was protected by giants of steel called silhouette knights. However, the ground-bound weapons had a limited area where they could act: cities, villages, and the roads between. The places they'd mainly protected up until now had a lot of human activity. The reason was, of course, for efficiency.

Outside of those areas, monsters were not proactively purged. Thanks to that, though, the levitating ship had them charging into dangerous territory to make use of it.

In order to be as safe as possible while they flew, they needed to set routes to avoid monsters' territory. These new routes for a new age presented new obstacles. After all, there were still many areas of this kingdom inhospitable to humans.

◆

A letter was delivered to Fort Orvesius, the Order of the Silver Phoenix's base. The envelope was emblazoned with the seal of Fremmevillan royalty, so its origin was clear.

"Is it an order from His Majesty?"

"No. But I can't call it good news either."

Addy was fidgeting and moving unnaturally, obviously wondering whether she should peek at the letter. She was sitting beside Ernie, who had opened it and was reading it, but it was a letter from the king. It was very possible that she wasn't supposed to see it.

"It seems that the Royal Post, which is where all the newly constructed levitating ships have gone, has taken a lot of damage from monsters. It also says they've been managing to break through these troubles thanks to the guard silhouette knights placed on the ship." Ernie gave a wry chuckle as he waved the letter at Addy.

The girl put on her most hard-thinking face and crossed her arms. "Flying monsters are tough to deal with, true. We haven't fought many of them either."

"Indeed. It's hard to escape up there in the sky," Ernie agreed, "and defeating the monsters with just silhouette arms would be too hard. It'll probably be difficult to maintain stable flight routes as things stand."

Flying monsters were, fundamentally, always one class higher

than their ground-locked counterparts. Many of them lacked solid defenses, but that was because hitting them in the first place was a tough task. Up until now, people had avoided dealing with them unless absolutely necessary.

"So they want us to do something about it?" Addy asked.

"Maybe, but the letter said nothing to that effect. Huh, I wonder if we've been found out? Anyway, let's hurry and finish our silhouette knight," Ernie muttered resolutely, his expression grim.

◆

After Ernie had finalized the basic design of the aerial unit, the order's knightsmiths put their impressive energies toward putting it together.

Actually bringing about Ernie's eccentric but effective design was something only they could do. After all, even among all the world's silhouette knight engineers, none had gone through trials as numerous or fearsome as they. Their overdeveloped skills from all this allowed them to take on new challenges with greater ease, forming a circular relationship. Furthermore, the introduction of silhouette gears explosively sped up their work, since they were now able to handle much larger and heavier parts.

"Okay, then. Let's start testing things one by one," Ernie said with a full-faced smile as he looked up at the large humanoid object hanging from the ceiling.

Sylphianne (II) was now looking quite good, but it was clearly still only half finished. While the upper half was almost completely done, the bottom half's inner skeleton was poking out, mid-construction.

While the upper half was basically an extension of a basic silhouette knight, most of the important and revolutionary parts were concentrated in that lower half.

There was nothing shaped like it. Of course there were the most important bits—like the ether reactors and Etheric Levitator—but also space for the etherite that would serve as fuel. Then, it was fitted with the newest outer skin, made out of mobile armor plates and capacity frame, with Magius Jet Thrusters attached. These, in combination with the newest devices for mobility and stability, formed the complete, absurd

puzzle.

Ernie had made his design with the care of an acrobat on a tightrope. The knightsmiths followed this design while ironing out any small problems that occurred during production, or making any necessary minute adjustments, which were all reflected in the designs. It was a combination of the bold introduction of new technologies and detailed trial and error. Making something completely unprecedented needed to be done while keeping this balance.

“Oooh… It’s gotten real cute,” said Addy. Unlike the late first generation, Addy was quite happy with this one.

A lot of “unnecessary” parts had been removed to save weight, and even despite its large lower half, this second generation was much thinner. Its form had also been streamlined to reduce drag, which led to a unique sort of beauty. Addy’s standards were still unclear, but it seemed as if her wishes had been answered.

While the upper half mostly used already existing parts, there were still some changes. The layout of the machine and the placement of these parts had changed greatly; Sylphianne’s cockpit was now placed nearer its back, for example. This was all necessary to accommodate a certain important function that had been added on.

“Hup!” Addy grunted. “Hmmm, the cockpit is a pretty decent size, but with a silhouette gear on, it’s naturally pretty cramped.”

She was this prototype’s test runner, so she’d climbed up to the suspended upper half. It was unclear what business she had with this unfinished machine.

Strangely, as she’d noted, she was wearing a special silhouette gear. It was not a combat model nor a Motolift meant for work, but something entirely new.

First, it was slightly smaller than other models, just a little over two meters in height. Its armor didn’t cover the whole body; it was designed like that to save weight. It had flat, long arms that made it seem unbalanced, so it didn’t look suited for combat.

Sylphianne’s cockpit had been designed so it could be piloted while wearing this silhouette gear. Silhouette knight cockpits had never been especially roomy, but that only got worse with a silhouette gear introduced, no matter how small the gear was.

“It might take some getting used to, but please connect the

gear's arms to the ports on either side of you," said Ernie. "Good. This forms a direct connection, and you should be able to use the gear's controls to pilot the silhouette knight. The arms are for the control yokes, and the legs are for the stirrups. Yes, that's how you move it. I'll leave the rest to you, Addy. Everyone, back up! And please get ready!"

Addy had some trouble with these unfamiliar steps, but Ernie helped her into the cockpit and made sure she was properly connected before closing it. Then, he shouted a warning to anyone in the area before quickly retreating to safety himself. Once he was far enough away and the knightsmiths and other order members had hidden themselves, they lay in wait behind large shields—a completely defensive stance. It was as if they were prepared for something to come flying at them.

"Okay. Addy, please commence the gear ejector!"

"Roger! Poip!" Addy complied with Ernie's instructions, pressing the button that had been added to the controls. Suddenly, the back of the silhouette knight shot off. Armor pieces flew everywhere, and everything inside—including the knight runner in a silhouette gear—was propelled into the air.

"Waaaaaagh?! Th-This thing's pretty fast! Hup!"

Now that she was in the air, Addy twisted around to reorient herself, showing the gear ejector's next function.

The limbs of the silhouette gear, which were on the large side, had Emblem Graphs on them with special script: the Aero Thrust spell, which spurted out jets of air. Addy poured in mana, activating the script and manifesting the spell. Compressed atmosphere jetted out from the limbs, visibly slowing her fall.

"Aaand there we go."

Right before touching down on the ground, she made a flourish by casting Air Suspension for an even smoother landing. With that, the knight runner who had been launched into the sky had managed to land safely. Joy ran through the knightsmiths as they realized their success.

"Good," said Ernie. "It's still got some rough edges, but that wasn't a bad result. This should allow pilots to escape nonfunctional silhouette knights, even in midair."

"Not that you and the little lady couldn't do this already, even without any fancy equipment," joked the boss. "It'd be a bit impossible for your regular knight runner, though. If they're going up to the skies, then they'll be in more danger than ever.

We need an escape option.”

The gear ejector was a new innovation for pilots. Its greatest feature was the escape it was designed for. Activating this feature told the magius engine to intentionally stop reinforcing a part of the silhouette knight before self-destructing the area around the cockpit. Then, an intense jet of compressed air would blow the entire thing away, knight runner and all.

The new silhouette gear designed for this was less a strengthened version of a pilot’s armor than a wearable Emblem Graph. The main purpose was to make Aero Thrust and Air Suspension usable even for those who hadn’t learned the spells. Of course, it still strengthened the user somewhat, allowing the knight runner to stay active even after being flung out of their silhouette knight. This had been created in response to the tragedy of Sylphianne I, in order to further raise knight runner survival rate.

For the moment, the first test had ended with success, and Ernie seemed pleased. “That went great, Addy! I didn’t notice any problems with the knight or the gear, and you managed a safe landing. I knew you could do it—you haven’t been training all this time for nothing. Now we just need to practice this ejection some more to make sure it’ll go like this every time.”

“Eehee hee hee hee hee hee… Huh? Wait, does that mean…?” Addy was on cloud nine, but what he’d said last got her to snap out of it. That last bit was something she couldn’t ignore. He’d just told her to practice using the gear ejector, which meant…

“And so, we’ll be launching you a bunch more!”

“Whaaat?! H-Hey, wait a second, Ernie… You can’t make me do that over and over again!”

She wasn’t the only one who reacted this way. The knightsmiths’ faces also said that they hated the idea, since they’d have to fix the silhouette knight afterward.

Ernie, his expression totally serious, grabbed Addy’s hands. She immediately turned red and flinched, and he didn’t miss that opening. “Addy. Sylphianne is meant to fight high in the sky, unlike any other silhouette knight in history. If you fall, there’s no guarantee for your safety. So I want to run through this to make sure it always goes off without a hitch.”

“Ernie…so you’re that concerned for my safety! Okay, I get it! I’m always going to come back to you, Ernie, no matter what happens, or what situation I find myself in!” Addy was so moved

she wrapped up her childhood friend in a big hug. Inside her arms, Ernie nodded while loosely returning her hug.

“Well, er... I guess since the little lady seems to be happy with it, it’s fine,” said the boss. “You guys heard him. This concerns the knight runner’s life. Use this opportunity to train yourselves well.”

The knightsmiths seemed a little fed up, but what the boss said got them to rethink their stances.

With that decided, Addy spent the next while being launched from cockpits or jumping from tall buildings to practice safe landings.

But this was the girl who was intimately familiar with silhouette gears starting with the Motor Beat, and she was even Ernie’s disciple. She could easily withstand a fall from the height of any local building.

But this served as both training for her and tests for the gear ejector. Though, the question remained: What would they do if they actually encountered a problem in midair? The gear ejector had been improved several times over the course of constructing the Sylphianne, and knight runners other than Addy had been caught over the course of this and forced to experience being launched with the device. All those tests added onto each other, raising the quality of the gear ejector.

◆

The lower half was finally completed a while after the upper half, and Sylphianne II could be seen in its full glory. Now, the upper half with its slightly bulging back and the flowing lines of the bottom half were a singular shape. In the midst of construction, a pair of fin stabilizers had been added to either side, and now it looked even more like a mermaid.

No one was currently in it, so the output of the Etheric Levitator was set to its lowest setting, and Sylphianne was floating stably slightly off the ground. This machine had no legs, as it placed the ability to fly first and foremost, according to Ernie.

“The relative etheric altitude will stay stable, so long as the Etheric Levitator is working,” he had said. “In other words, there’s no need to land every single time. In fact, changing the altitude to land every time would be more work.”

That was why it was normally moored to the surface. The fin stabilizers *could* act as landing gears, and doing so would allow it to also use them to walk, sort of. Even so, that didn't change the fact that it could only move awkwardly on land.

"Slightly raising ether density in the Etheric Levitator. Everything's ready, Ernie." Addy's voice came from Sylphianne's megaphone, announcing that she was prepared.

Ernie nodded, and after he made sure Ikaruga was behind the new unit, he passed out instructions to those around them. "We will now start the propulsion test. Sylphianne, release the mooring!"

Knightsmiths in Motolifts undid the mooring, which elicited a shrill sound of metal scraping together. Freed from its bonds, Sylphianne rose, buoyed by its Levitating Field. They'd kept the supply of ether to the Etheric Levitator low for safety purposes, so the ascent was slow. The fin stabilizers were constantly making minor movements to keep the machine balanced in the light breeze.

"Okay then, I'm going to activate the Magius Jet Thrusters!" Addy announced once she'd reached an altitude where the thrusters wouldn't affect anyone else. "Keep it low at first... Slowly..."

She stepped on the stirrups. The machine responded, its rear shimmering with heat as the Magius Jet Thrusters gradually opened up, the roar of its jets rising in volume. Sylphianne started to slide forward.

Though she was making sure not to go too fast, the silhouette knight was completely stable. It wasn't just the work of the fin stabilizers—the air currents passing around its entire body helped keep the machine steady.

"I think...this is working?" Addy said, unsure. "Okay! Let's get a little serious, Sylphie! Time to really swim!"

She'd been keeping the thrust down due to her bad experience with the first generation, but Addy started getting into it once she realized how stable Sylphianne II was. As she got more and more used to flight, she got bolder—or rather, sloppier. Every time she stepped harder on the stirrups, the roaring of the Magius Jet Engines got louder.

Sylphianne cut through the sky. Its thin, long form created the perfect amount of resistance so it wouldn't suddenly go off-kilter like before. By limiting the thrust to one direction, the controls

were also simplified. These design choices were a resounding success.

To move left and right, the machine simply needed to engage its fin stabilizers while shifting its whole body. Then, it would use its entire body to take advantage of the air currents and turn. The lower half helped this, allowing it to move nimbly. The way the unit looked as it flew forward while twisting every once in a while to turn was exactly like a fish swimming in water.

“Hmmm, it feels pretty much exactly like riding Tzenny,” Addy noted. “I think I can do this!”

Addy perceived it as close to riding in a Tzenndrimble. It wasn’t just the thing’s shape, but its controls as well. That meant she was very familiar with it. She got used to piloting the prototype without much trouble, and the Sylphianne swam freely through the skies.



The assembled crowd cheered with relief once they saw the Sylphianne cruising through the air. The failure of the first generation was carved indelibly into their memories. The knightsmiths had poured their hope and effort into the second-generation Sylphianne to redeem themselves.

Even the boss was in good spirits as he stroked his beard. “It probably needs some more adjustment, but it’s looking good. It’s a relief it didn’t end up like before.”

“Indeed. We’ll need to report this to His Majesty sooner or later. And…I think I’ll try getting in that later too.” Ernie’s sights were on something completely different while the crowd was bubbling over with excitement over this success.

After that, many sightings were reported of some sort of strange, unknown object flying at incredible speed over Laihiala Academy City.

◆

Archid “Kid” Alter was walking alone through a noisy crowd.

He was in the capital of Fremmevilla, Konkaanen. The city was already one of the few settlements in the kingdom of appreciable size, and now it was even more lively thanks to the announcement of the levitating ship. After all, the Royal Guards were the only ones with a levitating ship base in the kingdom.

Kid waved his way through the crowd with practiced ease. He was walking toward a small bar hidden in the outskirts of the city. It was a quiet place, almost like it was hiding away from the hubbub. If he didn’t know of it already, he would probably have had a lot of trouble finding it.

Once he got through the door, he found a fair number of patrons inside enjoying their conversations as they ate.

One of these patrons stood out. His almost-two-meter-tall, muscular build was impossible to contain in his seat, and this effect was only enhanced by the mountain of pasta he was shoveling into his mouth. It was basically impossible for him not to stand out, whether he wanted to or not.

This man, who was now looking up from his pasta and waving his hand, was the one who’d called Kid here: Emris Jeijer Fremmevilla. As the second prince, he was part of this kingdom’s most important bloodline, but the way he acted showed none of the elegance and nobility that would be expected of someone of

his status.

“Hey, Kid! Well met,” the second prince said. “My bad for calling you out on such short notice. Wanna eat too?! This place’s food is great, *and* the portions are huge!”

“Why would you even know that, Your H—young master?” Kid replied.

Emris didn’t actually seem sorry at all, and Kid let out a quiet sigh. Emris tended to use brute force in all aspects of his life, so Kid knew that he wouldn’t last if he fought back on every little thing.

“I will respond to your call anytime, anywhere,” Kid said. “But you chose quite a remote spot, young master.”

“Ha ha ha, this place is basically like my home away from home! Or maybe a hideout!”

Kid was unsure how to respond to this bold yet nonchalant statement. So, he chose to sit across from the second prince and order some food for the moment.

“So, what did you need me for?” he asked. “You even went as far as to tell me not to bring Ernie and Addy, which is concerning.”

“Hmmm, well… I guess I’ll just skip the preamble and get to the point.” Emris was being unusually serious. If it weren’t for the pasta sauce smeared around his mouth, he might have seemed a little dignified.

“After we came back, the old man introduced the levitating ship to everyone. And your chief—that dang Ernesti—is making something interesting, isn’t he? Which means this kingdom’s about to take off. So I decided to go back to Kuscheperka! It’s not to study this time, and there’s no need to be sneaky about it. I’m representing my nation. And given the war, I’m pretty widely known!”

He *was* one of the leading figures behind their victory. There was no doubt that he was the most famous of the royals involved with the war. Even without his contributions, he was still a prince. Kid wondered whether it was really okay to let Emris take on such an important role, but he figured that when it came to Kuscheperka, he’d probably do fine.

Kid had sunk into his own mind, and he was no longer paying attention to what was going on in front of him, but what Emris said next blew all that away.

“So I need to take someone with me… Kid, do you want to be

that someone?”

“Huh?! Me?!” Kid shouted hysterically at the top of his lungs. He’d practically forgotten they were inside. “Kuscheperka, again… Um, that’s a little too sudden, I should say. But…why me?”

Emris grinned wide and puffed out his chest for no reason. “Well, I’ve actually been considering it for a while now! You’re well-known over there too, aren’t you? Also, you were with Ernesti; I figured you’d be good at assisting others! By the way, Marquis Serrati agreed to this immediately.”

“Y-You’re surprisingly thorough about this, young master…”

Given that Emris tended to charge forward single-mindedly the moment he’d decided on something, he tended to act very quickly. The fact that he’d prepared all this before even talking to Kid showed his worth as a royal.

“It’s pretty hard to refuse now, but would you at least let me go back and talk this over with everyone first?” Kid asked.

“Sure, of course!” Emris answered. “If anything happens, don’t hesitate to talk to me about it. I have to speak with Ernesti anyway, since I’ll be borrowing somebody from his order! I’ll take care of everything on that front.”

After that, Kid finished his supposedly delicious food—not that he could taste any of it. Then, after finishing up some small talk, he said goodbye to Emris and returned to Laihiala. He was running his Tzenndrimble, but even on the way back he was feeling restless. The reason was obvious. What—or rather, who—was in Kuscheperka? Kid had some lingering attachments to that kingdom.

“And here I thought I could calm down and think about it once I got back…”

So what should he do? While feeling himself gradually come to a decision, Kid raised his Tzenndrimble’s speed; he knew he needed to consult his family.

◆

The king, Leotamus, was currently in the audience chamber in Schreiber Castle, the royal palace that towered over the center of Konkaanen. He was crossing his arms, groaning and resisting the urge to clutch at his head.

Olvàr Brommdall, head of the National Silhouette Knight

Laboratory, was before him, his hand to his mouth and shoulders shaking. “My word. He’s been quiet recently, so I thought he was just exhausted from the war... I don’t even know what to say.”

“I’ve received reports that he’s up to no good again. I’ve been letting things play out because I thought it would end up in my favor, but...to think he would make a silhouette knight fly after bringing back a flying ship. Damn that Ernesti...but I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, even if I don’t know what to do about this.”

The king’s expression was colored with a complicated mix of emotions. It was all because of a sudden report brought in by the Order of the Silver Phoenix: They’d completed a flying silhouette knight. It was truly shocking news.

“‘If a ship is going to fly through the sky, then silhouette knights should too.’ Such an easy idea to have. But being able to turn that idea into reality is what truly makes him so scary.”

“It’s like something created by an innocent child, isn’t it? That’s why his ideas are so uninhibited, and they always end up with silhouette knights that have entirely new abilities. He’s truly as energetic as ever, though that’s no laughing matter.” Olvàr was truly praising him—not as a protector, but as the head of the national lab. The reason it sounded like teasing was because of who he was talking about.

The king scrunched his face up. “We blocked off the Great Bocuse Forest with walls, so I thought our lands were safe, but...monsters are still running rampant within our borders. The sky is wider than I expected.”

There were many monsters within the Kingdom of Fremmevilla’s borders. But with the strength of the new silhouette knights, Leotamus had thought they were doing a much better job of eliminating them. He was correct in a sense, but he was also mistaken.

Back when this kingdom had first been founded, they’d needed to carefully select locations that were relatively safe to establish their villages and cities. That was why these locations had become stepping stones, connected by thin roads. The lands besides these had not been reached by human hands, and thus they teemed with monsters. The Fremmevillans hadn’t even fully seized the ground, let alone the sky.

“Given the mounting losses the Royal Post has been taking,

we've been in need of some sort of countermeasure. This news is a windfall. Is it possible that he knew this would happen?" Olvàr wondered aloud.

The king could only nod. "At any rate, there's no doubt this is just a consequence of the times we live in. With silhouette knights, we can reclaim the skies and grow our kingdom ever further. It seems you have your work cut out for you again, National Silhouette Knight Laboratory."

"If you wish it, it is my pleasure to grant." Olvàr bowed and left.

Leotamus saw him off before seeming to sink back into thought.

◆

Then, at a later day, a summons from the king came for Ernie. So, he made his way to Schreiber Castle, where Leotamus was waiting for him with a proposal.

"You want to...establish a new squad of these windine-style silhouette knights?"

"Indeed I do," Leotamus said with a nod. "I think this new creation of yours is wonderful, and it will work wonders when our levitating ships take to the sky. Even so, there are too many problems. First, your manufacturing method is strange in the extreme. But also, and more importantly, no one is willing to pilot them."

The biggest issue with the new flying silhouette knights was not the materials needed or method of manufacture, but the pilots. Because Kardetolles were essentially regular silhouette knights with enhanced abilities, the knight runners were familiar with their use and had no problems acclimating. When it came to the much stranger Tzenndrimble, the difference in controls heavily limited who could pilot one. And even the centaur knight at least still ran along the ground, making it possible to learn with practice.

However, the flying silhouette knight was different. Its controls were totally alien from any standard silhouette knight. Learning to pilot it would require even longer and more specialized training.

"We've already got our hands full looking for levitating ship crews," said the king. "Throw in flying silhouette knights, and we

might as well give up. After all, we can't even find enough instructors. I decided we might as well recruit completely new pilots; they might learn faster that way."

"I see. So you're saying we should get someone new for something new, right?"

Leotamus nodded. With how peculiar it was, any knight runner who tried to pilot a flying silhouette knight would need to learn to pilot from scratch again. The king had figured that having less experienced knight runners learn would be better, since they'd be at an earlier stage of training anyway. Of course, there would be some things seasoned knight runners would be better at, but he was expecting a lot from the more inexperienced ones' youthful adaptability.

To be fair, that's not all, but... he thought to himself.

Actually, there was one more major reason for this proposal.

Since its inception, the Order of the Silver Phoenix had been involved in a wide variety of activities, from developing new silhouette knights to using them. They had even served as trump cards against large threats. While being clearly under the control of the king, as implied by their posting directly under him, they'd always been rampaging above and beyond expectations and common sense, moving however their captain wished. Given the circumstances behind their founding, they'd also been doing this with an extremely low influx of new members.

With all that known, there had been quite a few people wanting to join this special order. But that didn't mean the king could carelessly *increase* the people at the disposal of the runaway knight captain, so he'd been forcibly suppressing these requests.

"So I will be putting out a proclamation recruiting the best new knight runners from every area of the kingdom. I want you to lead these new knights and create a flying silhouette knight squadron."

Leotamus had considered this the perfect chance. The Order of the Silver Phoenix was too unique and too closed off. He figured it would be best for them to have a taste of what things were like outside the order. The king was planning to use this opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

He put some strength into his gaze. Ernesti, the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, was sometimes weirdly perceptive. Though more often than not, he just tended to charge ahead in

an unexpected direction.

“Understood. I will establish a company specializing in these windines.” In the end, Ernie obediently agreed. His calm smile was unchanging, and it was difficult to get a read on him.

For now, Leotamus nodded back, trying his hardest to remain calm so the relief wouldn’t show on his face.

And that was how it was decided that the Order of the Silver Phoenix would be creating a unique force of flying silhouette knights.

◆

Some time passed since the conversation between the king and the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. All the academies across the kingdom, starting with Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, were abuzz with a certain rumor.

“Hey, did you hear?!”

“Oh, I’m *positive* I have—everyone’s talking about it. Apparently they’re going to found a new knight order!”

“I know! Listen to this and be surprised: This new order will be given—”

“New flying silhouette knights!”

“Hey, don’t steal my thunder, idiot! But seriously, we just got flying ships the other day, and now silhouette knights. The world’s gone crazy.”

“Oh, come on! Don’t you think it’s interesting? And these are the newest of the new! Bleeding edge! And the ones who made them are—”

“*That* Order of the Silver Phoenix, yeah.”

“Who’s the one who just complained about thunder stealing?!”

The Order of the Silver Phoenix’s name was mixed into the tittering between the young men and women aiming to become knights or knight runners.

This order of engineers was not only responsible for the newest silhouette knights but had even put out Tzenndrimbles and levitating ships. They were also a combat-capable group directly under the command of the king, and their achievements included taking down powerful monsters within the kingdom as well as single-handedly saving a friendly neighboring nation. They were the strongest knight order around.

On top of that, both the order itself and its members were

relatively young. This was common knowledge, which was why so many young, aspiring knight runners admired it.

And then came the sudden reveal of the windine. This newest flying silhouette knight, created by the Order of the Silver Phoenix, would come with a new knight order under the order of the king himself. Anyone would immediately realize that this was the chance of a lifetime.

Truly, rumors tended to change over time.

Originally, people were talking about an experimental squad, but that had blown up into an entire knight order as time went on. The difference between a squad and an entire knight order was, naturally, its size. Because of that, every newly graduated knight candidate from academies all over, along with heirs of small and middling noble families, rushed to the capital to make a name for themselves. This unexpectedly big response would lead to an unexpectedly large consequence later on.

Faced with such an unexpected turnout, everyone, including the king, was at their wit's end. It didn't take long at all for Ernie to be called to the castle. After some awkward, troubled looks, the pair started to plan to bring this situation under control.

"Hey, Ernesti..." the king started. "Since things have come this far, how do you feel about actually creating a new knight order?"

"Uh... I already have to look after the Order of the Silver Phoenix, though."

"Of course, I know that. But...at this point, there's no way we can only add an extra company."

Even the king was feeling a sense of unease. Given how the nations of this world tended to be founded, monarchies were very common. The authority possessed by kings and their royal families was extensive. It would be easy to disperse the crowd if only he were to give an order to the gathered masses.

But since the king had been the one to initiate this gathering, it was harder for him to do so. What made this more complicated were the demands of the nobles from various regions. They all hoped for levitating ships and Windines to clear more land, and they were all desperate to get in on the action. So, many nobles were very *passionate* about this new knight order. Needless to say, there weren't many ways to fix this.

"For now, I'll think about making this company the size of a knight order. But I'll need to talk this over with everyone from the order," said Ernie. "By the way, Your Majesty, I'd like to ask you to

start mass-producing these silhouette knights in preparation for this."

"I suppose that *is* necessary. I'll dedicate a portion of the national lab to it."

Since Ernie managed to sneak in this demand, his mood visibly improved. "Understood. Then I will use everything the Order of the Silver Phoenix has to fulfill your order."

"Good. Sorry, but I'm counting on you," said Leotamus. He seemed somehow exhausted, and relief seeped onto his face.

◆

Ernie immediately gathered the order upon returning to Fort Orvesius. Once they got the gist of the situation, their confusion and bewilderment only got worse.

"And that's the situation," Ernie said. "It's a true conundrum. We were originally only planning to add a company, but...there's most likely enough applicants to fill a brigade and then some."

"Hm, but I don't think there's anything *I* can do about this. I'm just going to pretend I didn't hear it." Immediately, Dietrich decided to attempt escape.

But Ernie didn't let him, a smile on his face the entire time. "This has to do with the spread of our flying silhouette knight. It's also a personal request from His Majesty, so I'm going to need everyone's help to resolve this. Of course, you're helping too, Dee."

There was a long pause as Dee resigned himself. "Okay." He could only hang his head in defeat in the face of Ernie's intimidating smile.

Seeing that, Edgar shrugged. "I suppose I should say, 'we reap what we sow'?"

"Indeed," said Ernie. "Still, given what's at stake, things aren't going to settle down on their own." Though he talked nonchalantly, he couldn't help but let out a sigh, saying that now wasn't the time to be laughing.

"Pretty much everything turns into a huge deal when our captain's involved," Helvi said, shaking her head.

Beside her, Edgar's expression turned grim. "But it's true that this turnout was unexpected. Adding an entire brigade to our numbers is naturally out of the question, but...this uproar won't disappear unless we recruit several companies, or possibly even

an entire battalion, right?"

Of course, they wouldn't be admitting every applicant. Leotamus had promised to thin the numbers through a selection process. However, because so many nobles were involved, the final number would naturally be larger than planned.

"To tell you the truth, we *could* just form a new knight order," said Ernie. "But that would leave a big problem afterward."

"Training, right?"

The purpose of creating this new company, or possibly knight order, was to train future flying silhouette knight pilots. Naturally, that required teachers. It was impossible to tell how much work it would be to teach so many newbies. They all got headaches just thinking about it.

"And so: Edgar, Dee, Helvi, would you three like to try out a flying silhouette knight?"

"Hm? That's sudden," said Edgar. "I *am* interested, but I have no intention of abandoning Aldirad. I'll just leave the flying to the newcomers."

"I don't plan on casting Guarelinde aside either," said Dietrich. "But I'll show up to some of the training sessions."

They weren't the only ones. All the knight runners of the order had silhouette knights that they'd fought and survived in. They were well-worn, familiar, reliable tools, as well as partners who they'd shared pain and joy with. It was normal to become attached.

"I don't mind," Helvi replied. "I mean, Third Company tends to like new things."

She was the only one to easily agree. She was once the test pilot of the Tellestarle as well and possessed a curious spirit.

Still, everyone was at least somewhat interested in the new flying silhouette knight, though perhaps not as much as Helvi. Ernie smiled after hearing the three disparate answers. Instantly, the three company commanders got a bad feeling.

"Of course, I'm not telling you to abandon your partners. I just want the three of you to get some training in so you can learn the ins and outs of the new unit."

"Uh, Ernesti?"

Ernie's smile deepened, as did their bad premonitions.

"Once you do, I'm going to have you help teach these newbies. Though you may be in different companies, you'll still be in the same order. As veterans, you should all help."

Any way you shook it, this would involve an absurd amount of effort, but it seemed their captain was fresh out of mercy. The three exchanged looks and quietly raised their hands in surrender. Monsters weren't the only things the Order of the Silver Phoenix fought against. They needed to deal with the numerous problems Ernie kicked up as well—no matter how painful. In short, they were all in the same boat.

◆

After that, the training of the company commanders and regular order members started. Most of the participants belonged to Third Company. As Helvi had said, they liked new things.

Though they were training, the all-important flying silhouette knights were still in production. Until those were finished, they were mainly practicing with the gear ejectors.

"This was totally someone else's problem when Adeltrude was testing it. But now that I'm about to be sent flying… I know it's necessary, but it's amazing you even thought of something like this," Dietrich said to Ernie and Addy as he was about to practice landing from a high fall again.

If a problem were to occur in the air, there was no way to escape, and this training would be what saved their lives. Everyone understood this, but that didn't make it any easier. Everyone present was already quite exhausted.

Once they started improving at being sent flying, the order got a message from the national lab saying that their advance mass-produced units were done. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief; they would finally be able to actually pilot.

But things weren't going to be so easy. The sky was still an unknown domain, even for the battle-tested Order of the Silver Phoenix.

"There's too many weird buttons. And too many mysterious meters and gauges. Does this thing really need all this to move?" Edgar asked as he first took a seat in the cockpit. He let out a deep sigh.

With the Etheric Levitator, ether supplier, Magius Jet Thrusters, and the unique controls necessitated by its mermaid form on top of that, it would take a lot of effort to drink in all these new devices and the functions necessary for piloting.

At this point, Dietrich found himself able to understand things a little faster, given his experience with Magius Jet Thrusters on Guairelinde.

Once everyone had somehow gotten a grip on their controls, flight training was up next. They started by cruising at low altitude. Then, they gradually went up higher and traveled faster, folding in some mobility exercises as they did so. At first, everyone was fearful and hesitant, but once they started getting used to flight, they began to take formations in the air, among other organized movements.

“This moves surprisingly well once you actually get into it. But it still feels weird that we’re sliding through the air instead of kicking off the ground,” Edgar said as they took a break after training.

“Yeah. If you ignore the floaty feeling, it’s basically a Tzenndrimble. I think I’ll be able to push it a little harder,” Helvi replied lightheartedly.

“I guess that comparison to the Tzenndrimble he made during the design meeting wasn’t a total joke.”

In practice, out of the three company commanders, Helvi was able to move best. Edgar, who basically only had experience with humanoid models, seemed to be still finding his way.

Dietrich, who was listening in from beside them, shrugged. “I’ve gotten a little used to it, but it’s still a bucking horse to me.”

“Hm, but wouldn’t it be a bucking fish in this case?” Edgar asked.

“No. That is some awful wordplay. You’re right that it’s half fish and not half horse, but it definitely moves like a mounted unit. In other words—calling it the ‘bucking horse of the skies’ is totally fine,” Dietrich replied.

In theory, the Etheric Levitator—the fundamental instrument of their flight—would not change altitude as long as it didn’t suffer any outside interference. It was possible to achieve a temporary change in altitude using the Magius Jet Thrusters, but such a change would revert with time. In other words, the flying silhouette knights were tactically locked onto a two-dimensional plane, even in the air.

The machine was still a relative of the silhouette knight in the end, once the pilot was used to the bizarre floating sensation. Probably because of the foundation of its design, it was closely comparable to the Tzenndrimble—a centaur. At the very least,

that was how the company commanders understood it.

"Also, it's hard to use the air currents with the fin stabilizers. I don't really want to think about having to fight monsters up in the air where they can fly freely," Dietrich said.

"It'll be fine!" Addy exclaimed. "Sylly's pretty straightforward, so once you get the trick to it, it'll do anything you ask!"

"Oh no, don't lump in together with you, Miss Test Runner."

While the entire order was still in the trial and error phase, Addy was the only one who could control the Sylphianne freely, since she'd been using it since the beginning. She'd even gotten some precious experience with fighting flying monsters ahead of them.

"You're totally right. It's such a nice and straightforward little thing. Only complete dunces would have trouble, wouldn't they?" Helvi said in mocking agreement.

"I know, right?" Addy responded.

Now banded together, the pair of Tzenndrimble pilots looked at Dietrich and smirked.

"You little... Well, I do have to admit it's interesting. I suppose it was still worth experiencing, in the end," said Dietrich.

Ernie just happened to be passing by, and he drew closer with a smile. "I'm glad to hear you all like it. Then why don't we hold a simple mock battle next? I'll keep you all company!"

"Oh... Talk about stirring up a hornet's nest." After that, Dietrich tried his best, managing to somehow get out of a mock battle with Ikaruga, which would have been pure insanity.

◆

While the knight runners were spending their time training, the knightsmiths of the order were teaching the national lab how to make these flying silhouette knights. And at the same time...

"Ernie... Are we really going to make this?" Batson asked, shuddering, as he looked down at the blueprint spread out in front of them. "We're really *not* shipwrights..."

"Now now, don't be like that," said Ernie. "Don't you think it'll be fun to see this combined with our flying silhouette knight?"

The blueprint in front of Ernie and Batson was one of a giant ship. Of course, it was a levitating model. However, it was quite different from the kingdom's current cargo ships.

“In order to build this as planned, the team will need thorough knowledge of levitating ships *and* silhouette knights, both flying and otherwise. The boss and the others are busy right now, so you’re the only one that can do this, Batson.”

“You always say that just before dragging me into a huge bother! Agh, I knew it—I should have gone with the other team!” Batson was half crying, and the knightsmiths on his team had turned pale. That was how affecting the design on the blueprint was.

“Why do you even want to make a new levitating ship in the first place?” he asked. “Just make it a regular ship.”

They were specialists in building silhouette gears and silhouette knights, so ships were clearly out of their wheelhouse. Levitating ones included, obviously.

“If we’re going to make more flying silhouette knights, this will definitely be necessary,” Ernie answered. “They’re as yet too frail to just stay in the sky forever.”

What was on the blueprint was, naturally, no ordinary levitating ship. It had numerous special functions that would only have been possible for them, with all their skills building silhouette knights. Only Ernie, the one who’d birthed the flying silhouette knight itself, could have designed this ship.

“That is exactly why the knights need this ship to serve as a base, and why we will build this Wing Carrier.”

He had no intention of just aimlessly making flying silhouette knights and then forming an order of them. In order to bring out his new creation’s true value, he needed to go a step further.

So, while the knight runners were training, the knightsmiths continued to build. And in secret, a new ship was being made.

Eventually, after some harsh thinning and selection done by the king, the members for the new group of flying silhouette knights had been decided, and a new order was created in Fremmevilla.

Chapter 50: Formation! Order of the Violet Swallow

A training grounds for the Royal Guards existed near the capital, Konkaanen—where the Tzenndorgs were previously unveiled. Now, it was playing host to a crowd of young knights. These new knight runners had been gathered from all over the kingdom before the king had whittled down their numbers. They stood with their backs straight—a strong, burning will alight in their eyes as they looked forward. Every face was rife with nervousness and a youthful strength. All this was eagerness in response to the honor they were expecting to be given.

The crowd was facing a set of guest seats that rose above them. A figure appeared on a high balcony. It was, naturally, Leotamus, King of Fremmevilla, with some attendant knights in tow.

These new knights now knelt. The king looked over the crowd, nodding, before bidding them to be at ease with a wave of his hand. “You knights have passed through numerous trials to be here today. You have all been chosen to bear the youngest flag of our kingdom. I believe you’ve already heard of why you have been gathered here today.”

Without further ado, the king broached the subject while being bathed in everyone’s rapt attention. “I’m sure you’ve seen it several times already. After the last war, we’ve received levitating ships from the West. These are large, unheard-of vessels that sail through the sky. With that power, we are able to challenge an entirely new world—a place that we hadn’t even thought of, until now. The vast skies!”

Leotamus gestured up to the infinite sky. It was a blue world that seemed to go on forever. Up until now, they had naturally been unable to touch this place, but a single new invention had changed all that. “Still, levitating ships are now widely spread in the Occidents. There’s no doubt that many will eventually try to rule the skies. We cannot afford to simply bow aside and accept them leaving us behind. But we have another, equally important new invention: something of ours, that we have over the

Occidents."

He paused for a breath. "And that is a flying silhouette knight. We aren't just relying on ships, knight runners! Now, your battlefield is no longer just the ground."

The king could sense the crowd wordlessly gulping. Just being able to hear the king's voice as new knights told of how big a deal this was. Furthermore, they were starting to realize the gravity of what they were about to take on.

The new knights stiffened under Leotamus's gaze before he once again opened his mouth. "You will all be placed into a new knight order, specially formed for flying knights. At the same time, your main duties will be a sort of test. If you bring forth good results, more will follow. So don't forget that! Right then, I shall now introduce you to the one leading your new order."

With that, the king raised his hand. The new knights all fixed their postures, but for the next while, nothing happened and no one moved. Silence crept over the large training grounds, and doubt ran through the crowd of new knights. They couldn't help but look around, and that was when it happened.

A shadow appeared in the horizon, undulating. It seemed to stain the wide blue sky as it crept forward, slowly getting bigger. Was this shadow a levitating ship? No—it was actually a multitude of objects, all smaller than a ship.

They all gracefully swam through the sky before eventually settling in the air above the training grounds. The new knights couldn't suppress the stir that ran through their group. An explosive sound rumbled through the sky, and the new knights could clearly see each individual figure.

"Incredible… The silhouette knights—they're really flying!"

It wasn't just the new knights. All the Royal Guards assembled in the area were also staring up at the sky in shock. Silhouette knights were supposed to be humanoid weapons. Even though the form had been changing recently with the advent of the Tzenndrimble, those were still far in the minority.

The flying knights seemed to take after the centaur knights. Their outer skin was smooth and streamlined, and the body within the armor was truly bizarre. The upper half was indeed human, but the lower half was completely different. It looked like a fish—the kind of thing that swam through water.

Furthermore, while they had winglike fins, they had no legs with which to stand on the ground. In a sense, they were even

more specialized than the centaur knights.

Ahead of the crowd of knights that were frozen in shock, four mermaids circled around, rainbow light spewing from behind them.

“They’re…descending?!”

It was clear to see that the silhouette knights were gradually losing altitude. They continued to drop while bathed in the nervous stares of the crowd. The rainbow light coming out of their backs grew larger, which in turn slowed their descents.

Once it got close to the surface, the crowd was able to hear loud exhaust sounds. The four mermaid silhouette knights used their thrusters with a light touch to make for an empty area of the training grounds they prepared to touch down.

Towing anchors shot out with a sharp jetting noise. These anchors stuck themselves into the ground, tethering the units.

The wires made audible noise as they were wound in, lowering the machines. In the meantime, their thrusters deactivated, so there was no cloud of dust. In fact, it was almost unnatural how quietly they settled down. The crowd watched this silent procession, swallowing with tension.

Eventually, the mermaids lowered their altitude enough, allowing their fins to work as legs and support them on the ground. The towing anchors and fins firmly grounded the silhouette knights before they fully deactivated. The intake and exhaust sounds continued for a while longer, but silence returned to the area once the ether reactors calmed down.

This was the first time anyone had seen a flying silhouette knight, and their eyes were glued to the new machines. No one made any noise, even to cough; they were so entranced.

Leotamus looked around at the crowd and sighed. “My word, that Ernesti. Apparently he likes to shock people.”

He secretly complained about the culprit behind this little show. It was through stunts like these that Ernesti’s inner child was clearly visible. Though, the king himself *had* asked the boy to make a big impression on the new knights.

Meanwhile, the mermaid knights were moving. Their protruding back armor released pressurized air and opened up, as their cockpits were on the back. Figures clad in silhouette gears appeared with everyone’s eyes gathered on them.

Normal silhouette knights were entered from the front, and you weren’t expected to be wearing a silhouette gear in them

either. While the crowd's shock got somehow more intense, the knight runners moved with surprising alacrity in their heavy equipment. They got in front of the crowd of new knight runners before the armors opened up. The pilots inside removed the belts used to fix them in place inside the silhouette gears before getting out.

Another ripple of shock ran through the crowd. The knight runners of those mermaid silhouette knights were just as young as they were. Well, they might have been a *little* older, but it wasn't much of a difference. The four knight runners in front of the crowd had completely different builds, but they all turned to the king and bowed.

"Four Windines from the Order of the Silver Phoenix have come in response to your summons, my liege."

Leotamus nodded before turning around to the still-frozen crowd and raising his voice. "Knights! Burn this sight into your minds! These are the new silhouette knights you will be controlling: flying knights of the windine style!"

The new knights were speechless. Their mouths were dry, and their legs unsteady. First came flying ships, and now flying silhouette knights. This was a totally unknown world, and just hearing about it would not do it justice. The shock they felt was from seeing these things in real life for the first time. Truly, seeing was believing.

For the sake of the future, it wouldn't do for them to underestimate this. Seeing the real thing was good for giving them a shock, but it was too much of a show. The king couldn't be blamed for thinking Ernie had gone too far.

But he did not show any sign of that regret as he said, "I hereby declare the formation of a new knight order by the name of the Order of the Violet Swallow. The knights of this order shall soar through the skies. For the time being, you will work with the Order of the Silver Phoenix."

It would've been fine for the flying knights to belong to the Order of the Silver Phoenix, but their paths would definitely diverge eventually from the rest of the order, which moved to the beat of Ernie's whims. So instead, it was decided to establish them as a separate order.

"Levitating ships have set off for the sky, and now silhouette knights have been created to protect them. Now, our kingdom will take a step into the future with you as the vanguard. I expect

great results."

Starting with the new knights, everyone stood up straighter—even the Royal Guards—as they all energetically proclaimed their acceptance of this duty. The king nodded, satisfied, before finally turning to the four knight runners who'd just landed.

"Also, you will be learning the basics from the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Come forward, Knight Captain..." Leotamus said. In a quieter voice, he muttered to the boy behind him. "I leave the rest to you, Ernesti. Do...try your best to hold back."

"I understand."

Leotamus let out a small sigh of worry, but he decided to let it go and step back for the moment. In his place, the small figure who had been waiting behind him came forward. It looked like he was going to immediately give a speech, but instead he jumped from the balcony to land in the training grounds.

The gazes of the new knights concentrated on the small boy, and he put on his usual smile. "I give my thanks to His Majesty for introducing me. I am the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier."

This was a sudden turn, after a fashion, and the new knights looked at Ernie, clearly stupefied.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix's captain was recognizable to anyone in the know. All the rumors about him had taken on a life of their own. This was because, outside of those who lived in Laihiala Academy City itself, there was rarely ever a chance for people to see him.

The most well-known thing about him was that he'd been making silhouette knights since he was still in school, and that he had piloted these cutting-edge machines himself to get the king to give him his own knight order.

No one would be able to immediately accept that such a storybook figure was in fact this small boy who was pretty like a girl, who had not a speck of the dashing dignity expected of such a legend.

Of course, Ernie continued to talk, heedless of that. "Now then, all of you gathered here will have to learn how to control these flying silhouette knights created by my order. While levitating ships *can* fly, this kingdom's skies are too dangerous for them. It is imperative that we raise knights who can protect these ships."

In this situation, where doubt swirled through the entire

crowd, the knight runners of the flying silhouette knights placed themselves behind Ernie as if it were only natural. Looking closer, it was clear to see how battle-hardened three of the four knight runners were, while the fourth was a girl who seemed to be about the same age as the new knights. The four were Edgar, Dietrich, Helvi, and Addy.

Judging from the loyalty they were showing, it seemed Ernie really was the leader of their knight order. Slowly, the new knights' minds were catching up to reality.

But that was when... "Eventually, you will come into your own. When that happens, the Order of the Violet Swallow will split from ours. By that time, I'm sure that levitating ships will have gone far—possibly even past the bounds of this land. If that does come to pass, wouldn't you think it's unfair for only ships to get to do that? It's fine for silhouette knights to fly, so we can send them anywhere and everywhere in this world—"

"Hold on, Captain. You're getting off track." Edgar came forward to whisper this warning into Ernie's ear.

A beat later, Ernie cleared his throat and corrected himself. "Anyway, all of you here will be taught by your seniors, who you see behind me, so you can gain the skills you need. I hope you will carve your names into history as the pilots of the first flying silhouette knights."

Though they hadn't totally caught up with what was happening, the new knights went with the flow and gave a unified salute. And that was how the Order of the Violet Swallow started, albeit in a very strange atmosphere.

◆

Some time had passed since the meeting that had served as a magnificent opening.

The Order of the Violet Swallow was sharing Fort Orvesius with the Order of the Silver Phoenix. The surrounding forest had been cleared some more to be used as an airfield.

On this airfield was an entire company (ten units) of completely untouched windine style silhouette knights, lined up in a neat row. These were the advance prototype units mass-produced by the full might of the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory, a model named Twedianne. The mechanisms in this version had been developed further than the Sylphianne,

becoming even more polished. Still, they hadn't gathered enough data yet, so there were still parts to work on.

The practical training the Order of the Violet Swallow was about to go through was also going to serve as a test-drive for these new units. They would operate these under a variety of conditions to help record detailed data. Then, the national lab would take another look at the Twedianne's design. They were still a long way off from putting out a full mass-produced model.

The new knights of the Order of the Violet Swallow couldn't help but steal glances over to their side at the silently standing Twediannes as they started their training. Just like the day of their inception, Ernie was standing in front of them, giving them a briefing.

"As you can see, we've procured some units, so I would like for you to get in them right away. But before that, you must complete some basic exercises. I cannot allow you to pilot these Twediannes without having completely mastered these."

The Violet Swallows were overflowing with motivation, their expressions filled with determination. With their goal physically in front of them, it was only natural for them to get excited. Though, it would only be a little more time until they would learn that the training mainly involved falling from high places, and their determination would soon change to screams.

◆

"This is, uh...different from what I imagined."

A few days later, the new knight runners were in the middle of their harsh training without any breaks, and they were groaning with overcast faces.

"I was actually moved when I saw flying silhouette knights before too."

"We haven't been able to get in one at all."

The training they'd gone through up until now had started with learning how to put on Descendrads—the silhouette gear for use with the gear ejector—and practicing with the gear ejector. Then, they'd had to run with the silhouette gears on; the main focus of their training up until now seemed to be building up their endurance and muscle memory. To the order members who had just graduated from all the basic training-type exercises they'd been forced to do in the course of their curricula in school,

it felt like they'd been forced back to square one. They complied because they were told it was necessary, but they couldn't help but feel at least some amount of disappointment.

The newbies were being taught by the company commanders of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, plus some regular order members.

First, Edgar led the efforts, teaching them how to put on the Descendrads as well as how to stick a landing.

"All of this training has a purpose," he'd said. "There's no way other than steady repetition to build up the conditioned responses you'll need to be able to react in any situation."

With that, he made them repeat the training until their bodies themselves remembered the steps. Every time they got used to it, they were forced to jump from greater heights while also being put in more and more difficult situations.

Edgar led by easily, but thoroughly, going through the motions, and the new knight runners quickly came to fear him as a demon of a teacher.

Between those training sessions, Dietrich would lead other newbies on runs wearing silhouette gears.

"Okay, keep running!" he'd yell. "For knight runners, it all comes down to stamina and magic power! You need to train *thoroughly*, so you'll be fine even if something happens to your silhouette knights and you drop right out of the sky! This will determine whether you live or die!"

As the leader of the Order of the Silver Phoenix's "assault company," Dietrich had gotten through especially harsh battle conditions. He wasn't the only one—every member of the order had more experience with scenes of carnage than normal for their age. Naturally, their stamina had been trained fearsomely high.

After some intense running, the new knight runners were practically on the ground, utterly exhausted, while Dietrich alone was still standing as if nothing had happened. He was a monster, and he became feared as a demonic instructor only second to Edgar. There was no salvation for these newly minted knight runners.

Outside of that hellish training, they were also given lectures on basic knowledge. Addy, the youngest of the teachers, played the part of their lecturer.

Edgar and Dietrich were already comparatively young knights,

but she was part of a very rare club indeed. Though the new knight runners found it a little odd to get lectures from a girl so close to their own ages, her liveliness and youth was like an oasis among all their other harsh training. Or, at least, it should have been.

“To control windine style silhouette knights, you first need to use the Etheric Levitator to float while adjusting the output nicely. When you want to go forward, move quickly, like you’re trying to catch the wind itself!” Addy exclaimed.

“Um, Instructor... I have no idea what you’re talking about...”

Her lectures turned out to be hellish in a different sense. Ernie and the boss had thought up all the teaching tools she was using, so those were pretty handy, but Addy’s explanations were fatally reliant on gut feeling. Her lectures were littered with sound effects, making them difficult to even begin to understand, and the new knight runners were on the verge of tears as they were forced to cling to the teaching materials for dear life.



“She…might be no good,” the boss said.

“Should we go save her?” asked Helvi. “If this keeps up, it might impact their ability to pilot.”

Ernie sighed. “Oh, Addy. I told her over and over not to use sound effects…”

Having given up on Addy’s ability to teach, Helvi ended up employed as an assistant lecturer to supplement her explanations. Her experience learning how to control the Tzenndrimble from Addy wasn’t for nothing. Once the new knight runners heard her logical explanations, the light of hope came back to their eyes.

Thanks to that, Helvi was dubbed the “Goddess of Healing” of their little training camp.

◆

After their monthslong and hellish basic training, the Order of the Violet Swallow was finally allowed to get in their long-awaited Twediannes. That said, because there weren’t enough machines, they had to take turns, and the hellish training continued for those who were waiting.

“Finally, the time has come. Now, you will take to the skies. You haven’t forgotten your training thus far, have you? All hands, don your Descendrads! Prepare to board!” Edgar shouted.

“Yes, sir!”

Thanks to Edgar’s thorough training, the knight runners’ preparations had clearly gotten faster. They quickly donned their Descendrads and stuck their Pattern Identificators into their slots.

Once they undid the restraints on the silhouette gears, the new knight runners all did quick checks on their movement, and once they found that nothing was amiss, they lined up in front of Edgar.

Both expectation and nervousness were visible on their faces. They’d gone through a lot of training, but this was the first time they’d actually be flying.

“Okay. Now, get in your machines. You’ve been taught the steps, but if any of you are confused, speak up,” Edgar said.

The trainees responded enthusiastically and got in their rides. The cockpits stayed open as they sat down and made sure to first connect their Descendrads.

“Urk! I know they told us about this already, but there really are a lot of meters and gauges. Seriously…this many?”

Even those who had experience piloting silhouette knights flinched a little when they first got in a flying silhouette knight. After all, these had an overwhelmingly larger number of buttons, levers, and meters than any normal silhouette knight.

This was a common drawback to the new models developed by the Order of the Silver Phoenix. All the extra functions they added came with new devices and buttons to control each of them. The more abilities these silhouette knights tacked on, the harder they became to pilot. The ultimate expression of that was Ikaruga, but these flying silhouette knights, which had more than one device packed in to help them fly, had a different sort of difficulty.

“Don’t panic! Just do as Adeltrude—I mean, Helvi taught you,” said Edgar. “First, raise the density in the Etheric Levitator bit by bit. Don’t put in too much at once! For now, just concentrate on stable floatation.”

The knight runners followed Edgar’s advice, regaining their calm and slowly shifting their levers as they were told. The ether suppliers activated, giving the Etheric Levitators high-purity ether. Before long, the machines created their personal Levitating Fields and started to float. They were still anchored to the ground, but the wires were now taut.

“Okay, stow your towing anchors. Be careful, you’ll start floating upward as soon as the anchors are released. Don’t panic, just maintain your balance!”

Once the trainees stowed their machines’ towing anchors, they were free to ascend. Feeling themselves actually rising in the air under their own power was thrilling.

The first goal of this training session was to have them safely ascend. Some lost their balance once they’d done so, but that problem was fixed over the course of this training. Once in a while, someone had to be saved by the gear ejector.

With this initial flight as the starting point, the Order of the Violet Swallow began real flight training. Every session saw them reaching greater altitudes, and eventually they started to train with the thrusters as well. The range of their movement increased, as did their speed, and they started to freely swim through the air like a true order of mermaids.

◆

Edgar was flying in a commander's unit, and the lights on the edges of its fin stabilizers lit up. Its flickering relayed his orders to those following him, who raised their speed to keep up. The fin stabilizers spread and caught the air currents, allowing the flying silhouette knight to nimbly swim. Each pilot followed their training, changing formation as instructed into an arrowhead shape in midair.

"Okay, you're shaping up," he said.

Up in the air, with the swirling winds, even the slightest distance was enough to make one inaudible. That was why the flying silhouette knights used Magisgraphs to communicate. The flickering of these magic lights could be used as signals.

Though there were far fewer obstacles up in the sky, there was just as much information for them to process as on the ground. They would need to train even more to fight in the air, starting with taking formations.

"This may just be a stopgap measure, but we have yet to even develop any tactics for this type of combat, so I feel like you've gotten pretty good."

Edgar had gotten used to being a teacher, so he naturally started to score everyone's performance. That was when a Sylphianne blew past their squadron.

"My word..." Edgar muttered. "Adeltrude really moves well. If only she was as skilled at teaching."

Compared to their Twediannes, Addy's Sylphianne was clearly much smoother in its movements. If they were coaxing action out of their machines, she had become one with hers to ride the air currents.

Her skills were enough to entrance the newbies. Addy was an awful teacher whose lectures were unintelligible, but there was no doubt that her skills in the air were first-rate. And in the end, they couldn't help but wish that she was just a little better at teaching.

"I suppose I should say it's amazing she's tamed this rowdy fish to this extent," Edgar said. "Her experience with the Tzenndrimble probably played a large part, with how similar they are. Still, I don't want to lose to her."

Edgar gave the order to accelerate, like he was trying to chase Addy's Sylphianne. His students all followed him.

◆

Then, a few days of this training later...

"Edgar, Dee, Helvi—I'd like to see you and everyone else, please," Ernie requested.

"Did something happen?" Dietrich asked.

Ernie had shown himself for the first time in a while, gathering the company commanders. He broached the subject with a troubled face. "It's not as if there's been some huge incident, but...His Majesty told me something. Our new silhouette knight's gotten a lot of fanfare, but now people are voicing doubts about its usefulness."

"Enough that His Majesty is worried about it?" Dietrich's brow furrowed. The king had summoned people from across the country to form the Order of the Violet Swallow, so it was hard to believe that people were voicing doubts *now*.

Ernie let out a wry chuckle, but he didn't deny it. "There are several ulterior motives mixed in, but I'm pretty sure it's all just lies. In essence, they just really want to see the power of these new flying silhouette knights."

Everyone nodded in understanding. But at the same time, they sighed.

"A lot of nobles came together to make a petition, and even His Majesty seems troubled as to what to do. He ordered us to make a show and secure some sort of achievement."

"An achievement, eh? The newbies have certainly gotten a lot better, but this is still a little too soon," Edgar groaned.

They were definitely getting more proficient, but they still hadn't run enough mock battles, and their prowess in real combat wasn't a sure thing. It was a bit premature to be talking about real battles.

"Yes, His Majesty is worried about that too," Ernie clarified. "Which is why we need to create a stage in which they're supported as much as possible. I'm thinking of having them guard a Royal Post shipment. It'll have a levitating ship completely decked out for battle at the center, and we can include all of you as well."

"Wow, this is sounding really big."

The company commanders exchanged looks. There were still a lot of unknowns about aerial battles, but this was something they'd have to go through eventually anyway. So it wasn't a bad

idea to go through it with as strong a force as possible.

"Well, if we're allowed to help, then I guess this is fine? I'll fight hard in Sylly! Ah, what will you be doing, Ernie?" Addy asked.

"The Order of the Silver Phoenix will be sending as many units as possible as well, not just you, Addy. I will...unfortunately—terribly, terribly unfortunately...seriously, incredibly unfortunately—not be participating. This sortie needs to be done with only windine style units, so Ikaruga can't be part of it..." Ernie clenched a trembling fist, seeming to have to squeeze out those words.

"I mean...if you're that frustrated about it, why not just get in one of those instead of Ikaruga?" Dietrich threw out.

Ernie's eyes snapped open wide. "If I do that, I'll end up killing everything myself! Wait, maybe that's okay... No, they want to see its average performance. So I can't..."

When it came to Ernie, any silhouette knight would end up giving a chart-topping performance. That went for the flying silhouette knights too; his fears weren't groundless.

With the rude thought of surprise that Ernie was actually self-aware in his mind, Edgar couldn't help but nod. "Ah, right. I understand. Since it's His Majesty's order, we can't just ignore it. And this would have to happen eventually, anyway. I'll pick the best pilots we have."

"Please and thank you."

With that, it was decided that the Orders of the Violet Swallow and Silver Phoenix would cooperate with the Royal Guard's levitating ships to take on their first blooding.

◆

The Fremmevillan capital, Konkaanen:

A peaceful forest spread out from the foot of the Auvinier Mountains and surrounded the city. And at the moment, there were large shadows in the skies above.

A cargo ship that served under the aegis of the Royal Guard filled its sails with wind created by its Blow Engine, sailing through the billowing currents of the skies and plowing through the wind around it.

Eventually, the ship lowered its speed. There were no obstacles in the sky, but there *was* an incongruous dot up ahead. It seemed to be flying at great speed, as it was growing bigger

by the moment.

“Something’s coming up ahead! You’re all ready, right? Deploy for combat, Kiharavati squad!” Edgar shouted into a speaking tube from the ship’s bridge. His voice was transmitted from some megaphones outside the ship to the large knights standing by beside the vehicle.

“Yes, sir. Once we uncouple, we’ll take some distance and get in formation!”

Along with the ship was a group of mechanical knights: mermaids whose top halves were human and bottom halves fish. These were windine style silhouette knights—Twediannes. They were what made up history’s first completely airborne knight order, the Order of the Violet Swallow.

They’d been moored to the levitating ship using their towing anchors to get carried all this way. The towing anchors released from their attachment points, granting the silhouette knights freedom. Their Etheric Levitators had already been provided with ether to keep them at the same altitude, so when they got loose, all they had to do was swim into the wind.

For a while, the squad’s fin stabilizers shifted and twitched, carrying them calmly along the surrounding air currents. Eventually, though, they separated farther from the ship so they wouldn’t affect it and fired up their thrusters. The Magius Jet Thrusters went into action all at once, leaving behind an explosive, fiery roar as they flew off. The amount of propulsion was in another league compared to a Blow Engine. The silhouette knights with their steel outer skin almost seemed to be flung forward.

Thus the company of silhouette knights flew ahead of the ship, swiftly taking formation—one to intercept enemies coming from ahead.

“It’s expected to be in front of us. Kiharavati squad, taking off!” A voice came from one of the flying silhouette knights who seemed to be taking on the role of leader. The unit’s Magisgraph flickered energetically, sending instructions to the others.

While the Order of the Violet Swallow took formation, the anomaly had been getting closer. The thing flying straight for the levitating ship was also a flying silhouette knight, but it was different from the ones protecting the ship: It was Addy’s prototype, the Sylphianne. This battle was, in fact, a training session with her posing as an enemy.

“We don’t need to hold back against Instructor Alter! Remember your training—we’re going to surround her right away!” The leader pulled a little ahead and waved its arm forward. At the same time, its Magisgraph flickered.

◆

The others split off into smaller groups of three and spread out to either flank. The Sylphianne was alone, so they could use their numbers advantage.

Around when both sides were entering silhouette arms range, the situation changed drastically.

The Twediannes of the Order of the Violet Swallow opened fire. They unleashed their spellfire ahead of Sylphianne’s path, attempting to curb her movement. In the meantime, others approached, preparing for close combat. Each of them had been given different roles, and by sticking to them, they’d improved their teamwork, allowing them to coordinate smoothly.

Sylphianne didn’t hesitate to fly straight into this trap. It was practically ignoring the flying bolts of spellfire.

Even the low-power spells they were using for this exercise packed a punch. At the very least, they could hinder movement. Despite the seemingly reckless charge of Sylphianne—or rather, Addy—even she didn’t care to be hit.

Sylphianne twisted, creating extra momentum as it freely controlled its Magius Jet Thrusters to rapidly climb like a fish leaping out of the water. That translated seamlessly into a parabolic dive.

Given the Etheric Levitator’s properties, everything that used one would attempt to maintain a set altitude. Still, that didn’t mean they had to obey this set altitude at all times. Sylphianne treated the relative etheric altitude as a boundary it could play with to move around freely. It ascended and descended with its fin stabilizers, never showing any simple maneuver for even a moment. With that, it got through the multitude of bolts flying its way while even increasing its speed.

Edgar watched the mock battle from the levitating ship’s bridge as he spoke to the man sitting in the captain’s seat. “What do you think of the flying silhouette knight? And of the Order of the Violet Swallow?”

“Hm, both are beyond expectations. I honestly doubted

whether silhouette knights would be able to fight properly in the sky, even if they could fly, but… This is just as if they were on land. And I believe I heard that the Order of the Violet Swallow is composed entirely of new knight runners?" The one sitting in the captain's seat was both the captain of this levitating ship and the one in charge of the Royal Guards' levitating ship component.

Edgar nodded. "The members of the Order of the Violet Swallow you see fighting today are the best the order had to offer. Even without our instruction, they would surely have performed well as knights."

"I see. I know the ground and sky are completely different, but their encirclement tactics were impressive. Still… If that's what you think, the knight playing the enemy is even more impressive for magnificently evading it all." The captain was paying rapt attention to Sylphianne, who was even now flying freely through the sky. "Her movements are utterly unique. How reassuring it would be if they could all move like that—we wouldn't hear an ounce of complaint."

"She's…one of the top talents of our order," Edgar replied. "She normally teaches the Order of the Violet Swallow along with us."

"I see. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised." The captain groaned and leaned back in his seat. Then, he looked around the bridge. "In any case…using a levitating ship as a mother ship, group tactics, and teamwork—the Silver Phoenix's captain certainly thinks of interesting ideas."

"He certainly does. According to our captain, the flying silhouette knights need a place to rest during long sorties since they can't land very often. In that case, coordinating with levitating ships will be necessary. That is why we should get in some training for it ahead of time." Edgar recited what he recalled.

Unlike normal silhouette knights, the flying variety needed a lot of work to descend to the ground. On top of that, even if they excelled at fighting in the air, they weren't particularly livable—no one would want to be stuck in one for long periods of time.

Considering the expected role of the flying silhouette knight—guarding levitating ships—a lot of adjustment was needed in the symbiotic relation between them. This was the first thing Ernesti had proposed once the plan to take on actual combat took form.

"That's Ernesti Echevalier for you," said the captain. "He doesn't just make new models, but he even knows their

weaknesses and can mitigate them.”

Of course, this hadn’t just been Ernie’s idea. It had been based on the concept of aircraft carriers and carrier-based aircraft of Earth. That said, there was no way for anyone else to know that.

The captain reached acceptance on his own and nodded. “Anyway, what’s important right now is the flying silhouette knight. It isn’t as underdeveloped as I was told; I have to say, it’s fine as-is. But it’s impossible to tell how a battle will go. You should train them more in preparation for every possibility.”

“Of course. We won’t hold back on that front,” Edgar replied.

“Right. I’m counting on you.”

While they talked, a sudden wind blew across the levitating ship. Luckily, it wasn’t that strong, only causing the ship to sway slightly, but nervousness still ran through the entire bridge.

The wind’s origin was quickly apparent. Sylphianne, having slipped past the Order of the Violet Swallow’s interception, had also passed by the ship. In other words, they’d failed the interception exercise.

The captain put his hand to his chin, his expression turning grim. “As I thought, they’re still wet behind the ears.”

“My apologies. It seems they need more training,” Edgar said. He put a hand to his forehead, looked up at the ceiling, and muttered, “Come on, Adeltrude… This is practice. I told you so many times to hold back a little.”

Utterly unaware of this, Sylphianne circled around, drew parallel to the levitating ship, and waved a hand.

While accepting such failures, the Order of the Violet Swallow prepared for what was to come through repeated training sessions.

◆

Once the mock battle was over, the levitating ship returned to Konkaanen along with the Order of the Violet Swallow and their silhouette knights. The members of the new order, who had been very nervous to fight while being watched by the Royal Guard, were finally able to let loose.

“Agh, it happened again! We couldn’t get even a single hit in on Instructor Alter!”

“Uergh… We failed in front of the Royal Guard. She doesn’t even have a shred of mercy.”

“But I gotta wonder how she controls it so freely? The spellfire aside, we could barely even get close to her.”

The young knight runners expressed their impressions one by one. In the end, the most popular subject was Addy’s piloting. With the way she moved, it was hard to believe they were in the same type of machine. In fact, more accurately, she was piloting a Sylphianne, a previous prototype iteration that should have been less powerful.

“It’s probably natural that she’s stronger than us since she’s our teacher, but it feels like the more we try, the farther ahead of us she seems.”

The instructors from the Order of the Silver Phoenix were all too skilled to be dismissed for their relative youth. None among them was younger or stronger than Adeltrude Alter—she was basically the same as the new knights of the Order of the Violet Swallow. Even so, there was a world of difference in their piloting skill. She was able to fight them, even under the concentrated fire of an entire company. How much experience did one need to fight like that? It was hard for them to even imagine.

That was when one person hesitantly opened his mouth. “Hey, we won’t be excluded from the real fight just because the instructor managed to beat us in this mock battle, right?”

Instantly, the group fell silent. Despite them being part of the Order of the Violet Swallow, they were barely better than trainees. They couldn’t afford to be taken off the stage if they wanted to be recognized as fully fledged.

The one to break this suffocating silence was the boy who’d taken on the role of their leader. “No, that won’t happen. We’re doing this training *because* we were chosen. There’s no way they’d take that back now…I think.”

He was more wishing than making an actual deduction, but the others still breathed a sigh of relief.

“Y-You’re right. I guess there’s no point in wallowing just because we lost. We need to do what we can.”

“Yeah. We’ll get better. Still, can you believe we’re going to get in those flying silhouette knights to fight monsters?”

“We won’t get a second chance. After all, the king himself is expecting a lot.”

Each of them spoke up to encourage the group. In the end, the leader boy nodded. “Exactly. If we do well there, we’ll be heroes. I’m sure of it.”

Heroes. These days, that title basically exclusively belonged to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. They'd defeated a variety of monsters big and small, protected cities, and even saved an allied nation. At this point, any silhouette knight in the kingdom not derived from their inventions was considered obsolete.

Even if they were to succeed here with their flying silhouette knights, they still wouldn't come close to the level of achievement that the Order of the Silver Phoenix had climbed to. Still, it was obvious that succeeding as the world's first flying knight order would guarantee fame and honor. At the very least, they believed so.

"Then we can't afford to sit still. We need to reflect on what happened today and practice more while we can. Yeah, I really think our pincer move was too loose..."

"No, I think we were too caught up with movement..."

The new knight runners instantly felt more positive, and after a bit of rest, they brought out some models to start going over theoretical tactics. The leader of this group, Raphael Kiharavati, watched this happen from a chair a little bit removed, smiling faintly with satisfaction.

As Edgar had said, this training in coordination with a levitating ship was in preparation for the real sortie. So, the fact that they were here at all meant they were the best their order had to offer.

The live combat that would be the Order of the Violet Swallow's unveiling would involve a company of ten Twediannes. So, the top ten knight runners had been chosen to form Kiharavati's company. Raphael had been chosen as the commander for his piloting skill, his ability to remain calm, and most importantly, his ability to lead those around him.

He was the third son of a minor viscount from Fremmevilla's eastern region. While he might have been a noble, as the third son he couldn't just live off his family's wealth—even before considering that, he was only a minor noble. This kingdom's nobility followed the normal rules of succession, and while the second son might have had some wiggle room as a spare, it was custom here that any children after that had to learn to fend for themselves.

He had joined a large number of others with similar circumstances in polishing his skills as a knight, the most common choice, and aiming to become a knight runner. His

story was a dime a dozen in Fremmevilla. However, Raphael's timing was what set him apart. By the time he was about to finish studying the skills he'd need to be a knight runner, a rare chance fell in his lap. The kingdom was recruiting for a posting in history's first flying silhouette knight order.

There was even the unprecedented condition of being as young as possible. Up until now, such a special role would naturally have gone to the more experienced.

Raphael, who'd scored well in his knight runner classes, was helped along by some good luck, managing to secure a spot on the roster. From there, the effort he put into training coupled with his natural talent to distinguish himself from the crowd got him chosen as a leader—though only of a company.

He was still young, as was his knight order. Further fame was definitely not beyond their reach depending on their actions. Such ambitions were not unique to them; everyone in the Order of the Violet Swallow wanted the same thing to some degree. It was the source of their youthful zeal. Even the Kingdom of Fremmevilla itself, bursting with new inventions, was going to challenge the unknown skies. The success of this sortie would promise them a bright future.

"We're definitely going to make this work." Raphael's quiet utterance was met with enthusiastic nods from his subordinates. They came together as one to prepare for the fight to come.

But, while their resolve was firm, Edgar's grueling training got even worse after the mock battle. After days spent like that, the entire fledgling order was screaming.

◆

Time continued to flow, and eventually the fateful day arrived. The levitating ship attached to the Royal Guard was waiting on the airfield outside of Konkaanen, solemnly preparing for departure. Beside it was the company of Twediannes belonging to the Order of the Violet Swallow. These were accompanied by a Sylphianne and several more Twediannes belonging to the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Kiharavati's company was assembled, its members unable to hide their nerves from reaching their faces, and Edgar stood in front of them and puffed out his chest. "It is finally time to show the results of all the training you've poured your hearts and

souls into."

The rest of the detachment from the Order of the Silver Phoenix were busy inspecting their machines or preparing along with the Royal Guard. Rather than them being diligent or hardworking, it was more like they wanted to push all of the responsibilities for the Order of the Violet Swallow onto Edgar. As for the man himself, he didn't seem to mind taking on this extra responsibility.

"The main stars of this battle will be you and the flying silhouette knight. Of course, we have no idea what will happen up there. So we will be coming with you."

"R-Right!!!"

Even knowing that they would have the Order of the Silver Phoenix's aid didn't ease the tension from their faces. Despite their having gone through thorough, intense training, the real thing was still different in the end.

Edgar looked around at them, and his expression softened. "Don't worry. Most monsters aren't as strong as Adeltrude."

A confused silence descended around them. Though the younger knight runners knew this was a joke, they still needed a few moments to process it. Then, they were lost as to how to respond.

In the end, Edgar opened his mouth to speak again, acting as if nothing had happened. "Certainly, each individual monster may be nothing special. But the real threat lies in their numbers. That, however, is the same for you. No matter what happens, don't let them single you out. Maintain your teamwork, and don't let your guards down."

"Y-Yes, sir..."

Edgar spent some more time trying to encourage them before they received word that preparations were finished.

"Okay. Well then, Order of the Violet Swallow, move out."

"Yes, sir!"

With the Royal Guards' levitating ship at the center, the flying silhouette knights took to the sky. The Order of the Violet Swallow was still a newborn chick, a knight order in name only. But now, they would truly take off on their own wings.

◆

The levitating ship cut through the strong winds of the upper

atmosphere.

“We’re about to enter into monster territory. We had our hands full just getting away last time, but now we’ve made preparations,” the captain muttered, stiff.

When he’d come through this area last as part of the Royal Post, his ship had taken major damage due to monsters. The ship, with a complement of wizard-style silhouette knights, had tried its best to combat the airborne monsters, but it had come up short and just barely managed a retreat.

But this time, things were different. Now, the ship’s holds were filled with the newest flying silhouette knights instead of goods for transport.

“Now then, let’s see what these young bucks can do. Message the Order of the Violet Swallow! Tell them to prepare for combat!”

The captain’s order traveled through the speaking tubes to fill the hold with noise. The silhouette knights started to breathe as soon as the knight runners got into them, and the giants began producing large amounts of mana.

“They’re about to inject the ether! All hands, stand back!”

After that signal to retreat, the lower bay doors of the levitating ship opened. The pilot of the first Twedianne had no time to enjoy the flowing scenery below before it was dropped into the air.

Naturally, it didn’t drop all the way to the ground. Its Etheric Levitator was already injected with ether, so it only fell a little before being buoyed by its own Levitating Field, allowing it to start swimming through the air. Seeing the silhouette knight’s Magius Jet Thrusters roar to life, the ship’s crew immediately moved to drop the next one.

Besides the ones in the ship’s hold, flying silhouette knights moored to the outside of the ship also detached themselves one by one. These had been on standby outside in case of emergencies.

The mermaid knights who were now flitting through the sky distanced themselves from the ships. Once they were far enough away, they launched forward as jets spewed from their thrusters. The difference in propulsion was clear between them and the levitating ship, and they quickly left it behind.

“I’m going to be paying close attention to how they fight.” The captain narrowed his eyes as he followed the contrails and heat

shimmer the Magius Jet Thrusters left behind.

"Up ahead, a group of monsters! They're pretty spread out."

The flying silhouette knights of the deployed Kiharavati Company quickly took formation in response to the gathering shadows ahead of them.

These were bladedancers—large, monstrous birds that made a loud squawking sound as they flapped their wings. They were relatively common in Fremmevilla and were rated duel-class.

They were quick to notice intruders in their territory, and immediately showed clear hostility. It didn't matter if the intruder was coming from land or sky. They couldn't afford to let their homes and feeding grounds be taken away.

The only response they had for intruders was death. With shrill cries, they shot off one after another toward the knights. The faint shine of magical phenomena was visible on their bodies, and their powerful wing beats accelerated them even faster thanks to magical manipulation of the air.

With that, the world's first aerial dogfight between silhouette knights and monsters began.

"Our instructor was right—there are quite a few of them," Raphael said as he tried to count the monster silhouettes on his holomonitor, but he gave up halfway. While the order's presence here was one company, the bladedancers outnumbered them five to one. On paper, this placed them at an overwhelming disadvantage. "Still, they don't have the intelligence to do anything other than swarm. Change to a bombardment formation."

Raphael's unit sent his orders through its Magisgraph, and his wingmates obeyed, quickly changing formation. Meanwhile, the monsters just rushed forward in a barely cohesive group.

In battles against monsters, the silhouette knight's specs were important, but the knight runner's tactics were even more so. Good positioning and good choice of formations could multiply a knight's strength several times.

"Start from the fringes of the group so we don't get surrounded! Don't get too close! Ready your silhouette arms!"

The company followed Raphael's unit, changing direction. Instead of charging straight into the horde of bladedancers, they circled around the monsters before taking aim with their silhouette arms.

The tips of these weapons lit up faintly before shooting out

bolts of spellfire. These orange bolts that enclosed a roiling explosion burned through the air, directly striking the bladedancers that were trying to leap at Kiharavati Company. The bolts burst in flashy explosions.

The bombardment continued, blasting several of the monsters to dust. But the bladedancers were not sitting ducks. They used their agility to "dance" freely through the air, avoiding the spellfire to close the distance.

"As expected, they're fast. We won't be able to grind them down with just spellfire. But that's not our only weapon. Ready up, we're charging in with lances! Arrowhead formation, we're busting straight through!"

The flying silhouette knights changed formation once again, the tip of which pointed straight at the horde of monsters as they accelerated. The thrust provided by their Magius Jet Thrusters skyrocketed, propelling them explosively at their target.

What was the difference between a melee battle on the ground and one in the sky? The ground wasn't there to support the combatants, absorbing the recoil of their attacks. Given that it was impossible to brace oneself in thin air, a fair amount of momentum was needed to produce enough attacking power. The flying silhouette knights, as large masses of metal, were heavy. Once they'd gotten enough speed, they wouldn't lose in a clash.

The flying silhouette knights shot forward like loosed arrows, their long lances piercing holes into the horde of monsters. Though they were also large with their wings, the bladedancers' bodies were thin, and the lances sliced them clean in two. There was no way for their soft bodies to stop the charge.

Kiharavati Company pierced straight through the swarm, but they didn't drop speed right away. Instead, they kept going for a little while, opening up the distance before circling around.

"Okay, this is working! We killed quite a lot of them!" Raphael cheered, his confidence growing. The bladedancers, despite being built to charge in using Physical Boost, did not match up well against steel knights who did the same thing.

Land-based monsters were tough to make up for the lack of flight, but their lethality was also not in doubt. Meanwhile, flying monsters were fast, but not particularly tough.

The horde of bladedancers, having been dealt a heavy blow,

suddenly started to act differently. While they'd acted as one earlier, they now scattered. The monsters spread out, trying to overwhelm and surround Kiharavati Company. The knights' tight formation enabled the bladedancers to attack them all at once. The monsters were at least intelligent enough to realize that.

"We can no longer kill them in one go. But that doesn't mean we're out of moves. We get them one by one! Split into platoons!"

The flying silhouette knights won handily when it came to individual power. Even if they split up, they wouldn't lose their advantage so easily. Now in smaller platoons, the new groups charged toward different bladedancers that were attacking them.

A section of the swarm started a dogfight with the flying silhouette knights. Meanwhile, a different section started to ascend. Bladedancers flew thanks to their wings, not the use of ether. Thanks to that, they had more freedom of movement compared to these machines that relied on Etheric Levitators, and they could change altitudes much easier.

The ascending bladedancers immediately prepared to drop down on their enemies. The strength of their natural Physical Boost spells shot up, turning their bodies into deadly spears. This was the bladedancers' most potent attack.

Attacks from a different elevation could be said to be a weakness of flying silhouette knights, not just attacks from above. The Levitating Field created by Etheric Levitators couldn't be altered all that quickly, which made it impossible to get into melee combat with opponents on a different altitude. The flying silhouette knights had noticed the monsters above them. They didn't panic, though, even as the monsters dropped down at them.

"Indeed, having height is an advantage. But we considered that!" Raphael pressed a button that was next to a control yoke, activating a certain weapon. The atlatl pod that was attached to the bottom half of his Twedianne turned to point upward, opening partially to reveal a keenly pointed spear.

"Come on, taste this short spear!"

The short spear flew out of the atlatl pod, trailing intense fire. It was literally a miniaturized missile javelin. Just like the aforementioned weapon, it was connected to a silver nerve which provided it with mana from the user as well as a script for control.

The biggest feature was how light it was, which came at no cost to its thrust, so it was now able to get up to speed in a much shorter time. These had been adjusted to work well in a dogfight.

The launched projectile flew straight for a flying monster. The bladedancer did not have the agility to dodge the attack, and it clashed with the spear, which sent the monster's head flying. Naturally, the bladedancer died instantly, the rest of its body falling in a tailspin now that it had lost balance.

"I did it! I hit! And it killed in a single hit, what power! But I didn't expect it to be this hard to control. It's basically impossible while I'm moving."

To these young knight runners, lacking so much in experience, controlling missile javelin-type weapons would be extremely tough. They had to concentrate so much on the projectile that they stopped paying attention to what their silhouette knight was doing; it was impossible for them to handle both at once. Still, the weapon had proven its worth as a trump card.

Raphael had struck down his foe, but his relief left a slight opening. Unfortunately, the bladedancer he'd killed wasn't the only one. There was another hiding in the first's shadow.

He only noticed this second monster the moment he was about to be struck.

"Wha—?! Damn!"

Even if he tried to accelerate, he wouldn't be able to get away in time. Raphael raised his unit's shield, trying to resist as much as he could. Then, the bladedancer rushed him with fierce speed.

But a single silhouette knight came cutting through the air from behind, aiming for this moment.

This newcomer caught the diving bladedancer on its lance, sending the beast flying. The charging silhouette knight continued to pass by, eventually dropping speed and turning to return to Raphael's side.

"It's all well and good to celebrate your victories, but you let your guard down. You aren't just facing one monster. Also, you're the company commander—don't tunnel vision. Your men are too scattered. Reform your formation."

"Instructor Blanche! Y-Yes, sir. My apologies!" Raphael shouted.

Once Edgar confirmed Raphael's safety, he left some advice before departing. Raphael followed, returning to the fray.

The light of a Magisgraph blinked, and the company gathered around it. Then, they once again took formation, and Kiharavati Company was once again whole and on the attack.

The battle continued to favor the Order of the Violet Swallow after that. Though they met with some danger, they were saved each time by Edgar and the other instructors, so they didn't take much damage. The battle ended with Kiharavati Company's overwhelming victory.

Unlike the spellfire-specialized silhouette knights, the flying ones could engage in both long- and short-ranged combat, and each unit boasted much more combat strength. As long as they were in the air, just one flying silhouette knight was the equal of several duel-class monsters.

The captain crossed his arms as he watched the Order of the Violet Swallow, who were excited over their victory. "Amazing. This will change everything. From here on out, he who controls the sky controls the world. The age of the flying silhouette knight is undoubtedly coming. But it remains to be seen whether it's a good thing that we're at the forefront of this."

He looked at the flying silhouette knights with a serious look on his face, as if he were trying to see through something.

◆

The levitating ships and the flying silhouette knights made their triumphant return to report their first victory to the king. Now that the flying silhouette knight's usefulness had been proven with this victory, their status was guaranteed.

They wouldn't be mass-produced due to how expensive they were, but their numbers *would* be increased in concert with the levitating ship. Linking up with levitating ships allowed flying silhouette knights to drastically increase the range in which they could act, and they would become famous throughout the kingdom.

In the midst of all this, the Order of the Violet Swallow continued to make rapid progress, and eventually they even started to affect their "parent," the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Chapter 51: The Order of the Silver Phoenix's Choice

The results of the Order of the Violet Swallow's battle spread throughout Fremmevilla in the blink of an eye.

In the first place, ever since the arrival of the levitating ship, all gazes had been focused on the sky. The success of windine style silhouette knights further enhanced the impact of this, making the people even more excited.

The usage of levitating ships had still been unstable because of the existence of monsters, but that would likely change dramatically now.

With the entire kingdom in such a frenzy, the Order of the Violet Swallow found themselves caught in a vortex of happenstance, unable to find any peace. They'd been prioritizing obtaining the units they'd need to fight, putting off any thought about their outward appearance for later, but finally it was time for them to really think about the organization of their order, including the new knight captain and other leaders.

"I sent those of the Royal Guard who have experience with levitating ships to the Order of the Violet Swallow. Now they'll be leading flying silhouette knights."

"From here on out, the Order of the Violet Swallow will be taking steps toward independence. Now even the sky is the domain of silhouette knights… How wonderful."

The first knight captain of the Order of the Violet Swallow was the very person who was leading the levitating ship segment of the Royal Guards. He had been the captain of the levitating ship involved in the aerial battle test: Tolsti Koskensarro.

Ever since that battle, the flying silhouette knights had been training in concert with levitating ships. Levitating ships and flying silhouette knights were paired existences that made up for each other's faults so that they could each further exhibit their strengths. In a sense, it was inevitable that someone knowledgeable in the use of levitating ships would end up the leader of the Order of the Violet Swallow.

"Our relationship with levitating ships is trying to settle into

the best shape possible. I'm sure we are but the first of many such knight orders."

"And I'm sure the Order of the Violet Swallow will serve as a good reference for the others."

Other than the advent of their materializing command structure, things ran as usual for the fledgling order. At the moment, only Kiharavati's company was at full strength, but they were planning on fixing that as time went on.

"We've only been requesting ships thus far. From now on, though, we'll need flying silhouette knights to match. The knightsmiths will be worked to the bone for a while yet."

"Of course—it will be our pleasure."

Looking at this a different way, the Order of the Violet Swallow's independence meant they were the first knight order to be allowed levitating ships outside of the Royal Guard. It was a sure bet that they weren't going to be the only order like this. There were still very few levitating ships and flying silhouette knights, and it was imperative they train the knightsmiths who would be manufacturing these.

"Don't worry, that's why I sent our boss," said Ernie.

The boss—David Hepken—had taken several of his knightsmiths to the National Silhouette Knight Laboratory. Both levitating ships and flying silhouette knights were too precious to let just any noble get their hands on one. Having the state manage them would be the best way things could shake out.

The boss was one of the few people who was well-versed in both key machines. He'd grown almost as important as Ernesti.

And this important man had gone in person to the national lab to train their knightsmiths. Furthermore, after some intellectual exchanges with their engineers, they'd further polished the Twedianne, progressing that design on the path to a formal mass-produced model. They were steadily nearing their goal of being able to steadily pump out these key machines.

"Work hard, everyone. Now we just need to make progress on this side as well."

◆

While the entire kingdom was paying rapt attention to recent events, Leotamus used his name to gather a conference of every noble in the kingdom. The topic was obvious; as soon as they'd

heard the order, all the nobles had rushed to Konkaanen.

"I'm sure you all are already aware of what the Order of the Silver Phoenix has brought back from the West," the king said. "And also, about the flying silhouette knights they developed to fly alongside the levitating ship... I want to discuss their management." This elicited a ripple of major reactions among the gathered nobles. The draft prepared under the king's order proposed heavy restrictions on both levitating ships and flying silhouette knights.

First, it strictly specified limitations to ownership for levitating ships, establishing an upper bound on the number that families and knight orders could have. Even stricter were the restrictions on use. Levitating ships could only travel upon established routes and would be heavily punished if they were to stray. Flying silhouette knights were treated just as strictly, if not even more so, in their limitations.

These extremely cautious and tight measures didn't change much over the course of the conference, and the plan was put into action afterward. The sky offered too much freedom, and the value of flying silhouette knights was completely different from normal ones. While it was absolutely unthinkable to be late on this bandwagon, that didn't mean they were willing to invite danger by being too hasty. The nobles agreed with this, choosing a gentler introduction to this new technology.

Unlike the initial frenzy that came with this new discovery, the conference went smoothly and calmly, though it lasted a fairly long time.

"Another request for permission to build levitating ships and post windine style silhouette knights? Now there's no one who hasn't asked," Leotamus commented.

Absolutely everyone wanted these new wonders. Determining the routes for each noble took up the most time of any topic during the conference. Next was the order in which they'd receive levitating ships and flying silhouette knights. All this was hammered out in detail.

This was the eve of the age of aviation, and preparations were being made.

◆

A huge wave of change had come to Fremmevilla's shores. It

affected everyone equally; even the Order of the Silver Phoenix, the originator of this wave, was no exception.

Ernesti made his appearance at Schreiber Castle. He repeatedly went to visit the king during the conference to give all sorts of advice and opinions. He wasn't going to hold anything back to see the (half) humanoid weapon he'd created spread across the land.

The conference stretched across several consecutive days, but Leotamus kept up with the ever indiscriminately energetic boy without showing any sign of exhaustion.

"It seems like the flying silhouette knight you all made will be deployed throughout the land, Ernesti," Leotamus said. "But I want to talk to you about your knight order."

Ernie tilted his head, curiosity piqued by the somewhat unusual opening.

"I'm talking about your company commanders," Leotamus clarified.

"Edgar, Dietrich, and Helvi? What about them?" Ernie would talk at length about the silhouette knights he'd made, but it was rare for him to be asked about his order.

Leotamus nodded with an affirmative grunt, leaving a beat of silence before actually speaking. "There are many who want levitating ships and flying silhouette knights. That desire will probably only grow once they get their hands on their first ones. But...there are many problems left with taking that first step. One is the training of knight runners. Piloting a flying silhouette knight requires completely different training from regular knight runners. That's why we need teachers."

Ernie caught on to what he was implying. "I see. So you want those three for the role."

"Exactly," affirmed Leotamus. "Essentially, I want them to do what they did with the Order of the Violet Swallow. Also..." There was more. In a sense, this was his true aim. "Ernesti, would you be willing to let those three go?"

Ernie blinked repeatedly in response to the unexpected question. The silence stretched on for some time before he slowly opened his mouth to respond. "But, Your Majesty, the reason we founded the Order of the Silver Phoenix was because they would come with me."

"Indeed. I heard about this from your father. But, Ernesti, much has changed since then. Almost everything, in fact."

Leotamus had likely expected this. He continued his gentle persuasion. “Now, no one in this nation would underestimate you. In fact, it’s the opposite. Of course, they’ve been with you all this time; I understand that you’re attached to them. But just like you, they’ve grown a lot through what you’ve experienced. Most importantly, it’d be a waste to just leave them as simple knights.”

Ernie narrowed his eyes slightly, a sign he was thinking hard.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had experienced several battles against multiple especially ferocious monsters, and they’d even taken part in a neighboring nation’s war. Naturally, they’d faced more and harder battles than any other knight order in Fremmevilla.

Having gotten through all of that, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was a group of extremely hardened veterans. This was especially true for the three company commanders, who had gained fearsome skill in not only piloting, but also leading forces and adaptability to new technologies. Because the order had existed under the leadership of someone like Ernesti—basically a monster himself—everyone in it had been trained to an unreasonable degree.

“With the advent of the flying silhouette knight, a time of great change has come to this kingdom. Skilled knight runners will be needed everywhere, especially those who know how to pilot flying silhouette knights,” Leotamus said.

Ernie was listening, but unusually, he wasn’t responding since he was so deep in thought.

“Of course,” Leotamus continued. “I will arrange for replacements and make sure that the Order of the Silver Phoenix will continue operating as usual. I…won’t insist on this, but will you think about it?”

Ernie seemed to come to a conclusion, and he nodded. “I understand. I’ll talk to the people involved first. If that’s what they want, then…”

◆

While Ernie and the king were discussing the future of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, several other people had come to visit Fort Orvesius.

While none of them were wearing armor, they were still dressed well, and they each had a grace to them. Furthermore,

they possessed a letter of introduction featuring the crests of several nobles, ensuring their status…outside of one strange point.

"You have business with us…and not the knight captain?"

The visitors had requested to see Edgar, Dietrich, and Helvi, the company commanders. These three had come to meet the visitors in the fort's meeting room-slash-parlor.

One man spoke calmly as the representative of the group. "Quite so. Sir Blanche, Sir Künitz, Lady Olbarri, we have indeed come to speak with you. We are affiliated with various knight orders from all over the kingdom and have come by request of certain nobles."

"You serve as company commanders for the now vaunted Order of the Silver Phoenix," he continued, "and your feats are spoken of all over the land. Even we have heard about them several times over. So…we wanted to ask if you had any willingness to work somewhere else. While this would obviously depend on how this conversation goes…we have prepared positions in our own knight orders."

There was a pause before any of them replied. Dietrich's expression froze with his brow furrowed, and it even took Edgar a long moment before he truly understood what he'd just been asked. Only Helvi had the leeway to seem concerned about Edgar's state. This topic had come out of nowhere—in a completely different way from how abnormal their order's normal usually was.

"This is…rather sudden. We just lead a few companies. Being asked to lead an entire knight order is, well…surprising," one of them responded.

The man gave an exaggerated nod to the trio, who were clearly not hiding their consternation. "It seems none of you quite understand your position, so it's only natural for you to be confused. However, that just means we must have you understand. If this were a normal knight order, you would have a point, but things are different when it comes to the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Given all the military achievements you have, it's only natural for you to receive such offers."

Edgar's usual stern expression had stiffened to become half again more scary, but the representative didn't seem to mind.

"Certainly, the order has achieved a great many things. But that is only an extension of our knight captain's actions."

“I see. You’re correct in that Lord Captain Echevalier has contributed much to this country, all of it unprecedented. However, I do not believe you should discount your own contributions.” The man paused, smiling and giving the company commanders a moment to mentally process what he’d said. “The reason you all were able to come this far with the lord captain was because you had the strength to do so. Furthermore, each of you possesses your own personal silhouette knights, which are customarily only given to knight captains. Taking this into account, you could say that you’re each as powerful as a knight captain yourselves.”

All three company commanders were surprised, blinking and giving each other looks. Since the formation of the order, their captain had been going berserk, so they hadn’t had the leeway to calmly look back at what they’d done. They realized that their recognition of the current situation did not mesh with everyone else’s.

“Anyone who’s even slightly sensible would know of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, who’ve created so many new silhouette knights. And you, who lead companies and distinguish yourselves greatly in battle, are bright stars of hope for the young ones. Or, rather, I suppose I should say targets of envy?”

“That’s, well…”

The man didn’t miss the conversational opening they showed because they were shaken by this surprising truth, and he continued. “Winning this much recognition at your age is thanks to your talent. Given that, I believe you shouldn’t be satisfied as simple company commanders.”

“So you would, uh, ask us to leave the Order of the Silver Phoenix?”

“I am not here to force you. I simply wanted to let you know you have a choice. It seemed like none of you realized your own value, so I decided to explain that first. What you choose after that is, of course, up to you.”

The trio’s attitudes had changed from their initial doubtfulness. The man was satisfied, as it seemed to him that they were honestly thinking about this. He’d accomplished what he’d come here to do. “Indeed, as I said initially, we are prepared to welcome you under very beneficial conditions. If you want my opinion, it’s only natural for those of your skill to be leading a knight order or two. As you can see from all the noble names I

have introducing me, everyone desires to recruit talent."

"I...would like to consult with the captain first."

"Naturally. Please think about this carefully. Once you reach your decisions, you only need to contact us. We will immediately arrange a meeting." With that, the man stood and left, leaving behind only a courteous bow and his contact information.

This left Edgar, Dietrich, and Helvi alone in the room. They were still in shock from the conversation, and they made no move to leave. While Edgar was seriously thinking, Dietrich let out a huge sigh and cracked his neck.

"Hrm, I see," he said. "Honestly, that was surprising. True, though—now that I think about it, we've done a lot."

"Let's gratefully accept their high opinions of us," said Edgar. "But leaving the order... I've never even thought of it."

"With our combination, it was only natural for us to be here, after all," reasoned Helvi.

Edgar looked up finally, seeming to have come to a sort of conclusion for the moment. "The Order of the Silver Phoenix was formed on the spur of the moment, but it was all for Ernesti's sake. We didn't want to let what we were doing at the time end either. We thought we needed to take a stand...with Earlcumber, Dee, Helvi, the boss...all of us."

"But the promise we made then—the reason we joined—one of them's already been fulfilled, right?" Helvi said.

"Yeah... It has," Edgar agreed.

It had come to fruition in the far-off land of Kuscheperka. The enemy who'd stolen their Tellestarle was no longer in this world.

On top of that, there was no longer any reason for Ernesti to keep the Order of the Silver Phoenix as it was either. Ernie had built up quite an immense status. In a sense, he had taken a unique position that could rival the king. What's more, thanks to war, his influence extended beyond Fremmevilla. No one would underestimate Ernie now, even with a changed knight order. It might cause other problems, but...

"If we get more flying silhouette knights, and the culture of our order changes...will we really be needed here?" Edgar's eyes were wide; this was the first time he'd had that thought. It sounded half like a question and half like he was talking to himself.

Helvi was quiet, but Dietrich shrugged. "Who knows? But if we stay here, we'll definitely get plenty of experience with Ernesti's

new creations. That was basically why I joined in the first place, and I want to stay with him if I can. Sure, having my own knight order somewhere has its attractions, but…I don't think looking after so many people is for me."

He sounded like he'd already figured out his course. Dietrich was about to lightheartedly make his exit, but Edgar couldn't just let him go. "It sounds like you've already made your decision. Then…"

"Edgar," Dietrich said seriously, "don't worry about me, and don't worry about First Company. The only one you have to answer to is yourself."

"Dee, I—"

Dietrich didn't wait for the rest of the reply. He left with only some parting words. "No matter what you decide, just make sure you don't stand still."

Edgar sat dazed in his seat as he watched Dietrich leave. Helvi stood up to follow.

"Helvi…" Edgar muttered.

"Nope," she replied. "You need to think about this for yourself, Edgar. No one else can decide for you, and you shouldn't force them to either."

She flicked Edgar's forehead and waved as she left. Edgar sat in the room for the next while, deep in thought.



◆

As soon as Ernie returned to Fort Orvesius, he called for the company commanders. Before he even opened this mouth, though, Dietrich told him of the visitors they'd had earlier in the day.

"I see," Ernie said in reaction. "That was quick."

"So you've already heard?" Dietrich asked.

Ernie made a rather ambiguous face. "Someone *did* talk to me about this, but only recently, so this timing is a little strange. It feels like I just avoided someone going over my head."

Ernie was just crossing his arms as he hemmed and hawed, but Adeltrude, who *was* hearing this for the first time, made the reaction they were all expecting. She froze in shock, her eyes wide.

"So…what do you think of this?" Ernie asked.

"What do I think? Well… After taking a look at you, I don't think I want to lead a knight order," Dietrich replied.

"Huh?! Why does it sound like this is my fault?"

Dietrich chuckled. "Anyway, I think it's more relaxing being a company commander. Or what, did you want me to leave?"

"Hmmm… Well, we've made it all this way together, so no. I'd be sad to see you go."

"Y-Yeah!" Addy interjected in a panic after restarting her system. "There's no need for you to leave! That'd be—"

"But!" Ernie cut her off. "Leading a knight order is one of the highest honors for a knight runner. There aren't many reasons not to do it."

Addy reflexively closed her mouth, as did Dietrich, Edgar, and Helvi. Ernie sounded so serious that all of them hesitated to reply. It was as if he was facing a silhouette knight—no, he was actually *more* serious.

"I would like you all to give it some careful thought and come up with your own answers. If, after all that, you wish to leave, I will support you."

The expressions of the three company commanders stiffened as they nodded, overpowered by Ernie's demeanor. Their captain then turned and left, Addy hurriedly following after.

"Ernie! Are you really okay with them leaving?!" she shouted.

She couldn't believe that Ernie would support such a thing.

Despite their order having been made on the spur of the moment, they'd gone through so much together. She'd expected things to stay the same forever, and so she was shocked Ernie was okay with the notion of them leaving.

"Only if they truly wish to do so," Ernie replied.

"But—" Addy started.

"Addy." Ernie quietly turned to look directly at her. In the face of how serious he was, Addy could do nothing but shut her mouth. "People don't live forever. If they have a chance to make their dreams come true while they're alive, they should take it. If they have something they want, they shouldn't hold back. They can't hesitate or freeze. They have to obtain their desires, no matter what. Loss can happen afterward."

There was no hesitation. This was the logic that had driven Ernie all this way. He'd lived this philosophy from the moment he was born—an abnormal existence with no brakes.

"Even if they leave the order, it's not like we'll suddenly stop being friends. So what's important is what they want to do," he said.

Addy didn't seem quite satisfied, but she couldn't find the words to refute him. Instead, she glommed on tight to Ernie, who gently stroked her head in return.

"Because otherwise, you'll just die carrying dreams. If there's nothing after this, I'll end up lost and wandering."

That last part would likely mean nothing to anyone in this world. It was a piece of reasoning just for him.

◆

Time continued to flow with the kingdom in a feverish state, and a restless mood persisted throughout the land.

Actual, practical shipping routes had been laid out and put to use in a part of Fremmevilla and proven able to move both people and goods much faster than anything before. The people were shocked by the convenience, and it didn't take long for the ships to become an invaluable part of their lives.

In the midst of all this…

"An expeditionary flight into the Great Bocuse Forest?" Ernie asked.

"Indeed," said King Leotamus. "Our routes are stabilizing, and trust in the flying silhouette knights is growing by the day. Their

biggest role will be to create a foothold into the Great Bocuse Forest, which has been inviolable to us thus far."

Ernie saw the king's grim expression and prepared for another bout of trouble, but the words that came out of his mouth far surpassed his expectations. "And there is no possibility of it ending in a simple bit of exploration," Ernie said.

"Naturally not. Eventually, we will form an expeditionary strike force to send into the forest. There's no avoiding that. I figured it was only a matter of time until these opinions would start to appear, and I was right."

An expeditionary force... Something that was extremely important in the past, back when Fremmevilla was first founded. Forces like these were how the western half of Setterlund (now called the Occidents) had been completely cleansed back when humanity had first created silhouette knights.

At the time, humanity found themselves with a surplus of power, and they used it to cross the Auvinier Mountains and invade the eastern half of the continent. But the East was still home to numerous powerful monsters hiding deep within the Great Bocuse Forest. Mankind had yet to bring the East under control.

Thus, humanity scuttled back to safety, leaving only a country founded at the foot of the Auvinier Mountains so as to retain some sort of profit from the venture. That country was now Fremmevilla.

Much time had passed since then. The Occidents stabilized, as did Fremmevilla, though changed from its original state. That was what created this current situation, where many nations had forgotten about monsters, while one was forced to act as a shield for the others.

With such important events occurring, details on the past offensives into the forest were vague thanks to the confusion of the time. What *was* clear, however, was that the force met some sort of powerful monster on par with a behemoth. Some sources claimed that this expeditionary force consisted of several hundred silhouette knights, and they were annihilated by this mysterious monster.

This journey would be following in their footsteps. Given the previous reasoning, going by land would be nearly impossible. This proposal would never have come up if not for both the advent of sky travel and flying silhouette knights.

“True, there are a lot of advantages to levitating ships and flying silhouette knights,” Ernie said. “Yet this still seems too sudden.”

“Levitating ships are too powerful a travel option. And now that we have flying silhouette knights to make air travel less dangerous, this nation is rapidly starting to feel smaller. Furthermore, this is thanks to the influence of the Kardetolles you all made. Dealing with monsters within our borders has gotten easier. Frankly, we’ve gained the leeway to do this.”

“And so our interest turns to the outside.” Though Ernie only referenced something as general as “the outside,” the West was already packed with various nations. He could only have meant the unknown area of the Great Bocuse Forest. “You’re saying this duty has fallen to the Order of the Silver Phoenix?”

“Don’t think of this as the short end of the stick. You’ve answered everyone’s expectations…*too* well.”

Currently, the nobles who lived along the border of the Great Bocuse Forest only knew its shallowest parts. Several hundred years had passed since the expeditionary force was annihilated. Now, the deeper parts of the forest were a completely unknown world. If they carelessly stimulated whatever lurked within, they could end up attracting another behemoth.

That was why they couldn’t afford to go into the Great Bocuse Forest without a plan. Even the nobles understood that. After all, they’d spent entire generations learning how to hold back monsters. Anyone without at least a certain amount of caution wouldn’t survive their position. Fremmevillan nobility all had an uncommonly strong sense of solidarity, considering the other nobles their fellows instead of rivals. This came from living so close to those deadly disasters known as monsters.

As a result, they’d petitioned for someone to lead from the front, forging ahead of the nobles and commonfolk: the king. But in this kingdom, stealing a march was not a smart choice. Given that, the nobles’ aim was clear as day.

They wanted the deployment of a certain knight order, whose ability to deal with trouble was the greatest in the nation.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix—no, Ernesti would probably bounce back from any difficulty he’d experience. For better or worse, he’d piled up enough achievements and skill for this to be assumed of him.

“In the first place, there’s no organization in this kingdom that

can withstand long periods of flight other than yours. I recently got a report on this 'Wing Carrier' you're working on... Don't you think this would be the perfect chance to show it off?"

Ernie started calculating. The Wing Carrier was a large levitating ship designed to be used with the fliers the order had. How could it be used to its fullest? "Then...please lend me the Order of the Violet Swallow to bolster our forces."

"Hm. You want them, eh? Certainly, they're familiar with flying silhouette knights and are getting more skilled by the day. But..." The king's reply was rather unexpected.

"I know the Order of the Silver Phoenix is mainly centered around ground units," explained Ernie. "True, we do have a company of flying silhouette knights, but... Given your proposal, I know they all want time to think. So I want to borrow the strength of the Order of the Violet Swallow. I will bring my Wing Carrier and Ikaruga."

"If you're sure, then very well," the king replied. "The Order of the Violet Swallow does indeed possess the most flying silhouette knights at the moment. I'll notify them."

It would be reckless for even the Order of the Silver Phoenix to descend on the monster-filled Great Bocuse Forest alone. Naturally, this operation would depend on levitating ships and flying silhouette knights.

"Other than that...if I'm going to deploy the Wing Carrier, I'll need to ask the boss." Ernie started to put together the briefing he'd had to give the ship's "captain."

With that, humanity was set to once again challenge the Great Bocuse Forest. What trials and tribulations awaited Ernesti and the Order of the Violet Swallow? They would need thorough preparations to combat these unknown threats.

Part 12: Second Forest Expedition Arc

Chapter 52: Departure of the Advance Exploratory Fleet

That day, every single one of Konkaanen's citizens looked upward.

The sky was slightly cloudy, cutting off the already unreliable light of the sun. Large shadows stretched across the townscape as *it* calmly slid through the sky—one of the levitating ships that had been causing much excitement in Fremmevilla recently. Some ships were even affiliated with the king's Royal Guard, and the capital's citizens were starting to get used to the sight of them.

The reason they were looking up in a daze despite this was that this particular ship was especially, shockingly large. Levitating ships had always been large enough to accommodate several silhouette knights, but it was insane to these spectators that this one was nearly twice as big as even the cargo ships possessed by the Royal Guard and the Order of the Violet Swallow. But they weren't just imagining it—it was definitely flying over the capital right now.

"It's so…huge. Who does it belong to?"

The prevailing question was quickly answered. Each side of the ship's hull had several sails that spread out like wings. These sails showed off both the crest of Fremmevilla Kingdom and the boldly spread wings of a silver phoenix.

"So that's the Order of the Silver Phoenix's Wing Carrier. This is my first time actually seeing it." King Leotamus narrowed his eyes as he looked at the ship from one of Schreiber Castle's balconies. The reason that ship had come to the capital was clear; he'd ordered it to.

They were preparing for an expeditionary flight into the Great Bocuse Forest. For this purpose, the Order of the Silver Phoenix would form a fleet with their Wing Carrier as the flagship, complemented by the cargo ships of the Order of the Violet Swallow.

Even if levitating ships had the advantage in the skies, they were heading deep into monster territory. The fleet had ended

up quite large, as no one knew how much preparation they'd need.

Considering most of the Occidents were still in the middle of desperately implementing levitating ships, this fleet was likely one of the largest in the world. Its only possible rival could have been Jaloudek's former fleet.

"Still... I never even imagined it would be this big. I suppose I shouldn't have told them to bring it over to the capital for the departure ceremony," Leotamus muttered. He thought of the commotion that must be occurring in the city and groaned.

"Aha ha ha ha! Hee hee ha ha ha!!! Look and be amazed! It took a *lot* of work to make this, after all! Ha ha ha! Come on, look!" Batson shouted.

"I feel for the citizens; they must be shocked. But let's have them burn the sight of this ship, the *Izumo*—first in the Wing Carrier class—into their minds," said Ernie.

Batson was pressed up against the bridge window, hooting and hollering and waving his arms around in a mad dance. Ernesti had a smile full of intrigue as he also looked through the window down at the cityscape.

The first ship of the Wing Carrier line: the *Izumo*. This ship, designed to carry windine style silhouette knights, was extraordinarily large, allowing it to hold an entire company of ten units.

Batson's team of knightsmiths-slash-shipwrights had gone through a lot of pain to bring this ship to reality. They had Silver Veil, brought back from Kuscheperka, as an example, but the abilities this design called for had far outstripped it.

What was needed more than anything to carry flying silhouette knights was space—appropriately sized facilities. This was reflected in the ship's bulk, thanks to which an entirely new design was required, and the team had basically gone crazy halfway through before coming to this final form.

Though they weren't quite in a right state of mind, they'd still managed to complete the project. Batson's team was through the roof with excitement, and even now, the team was in the ship's hold celebrating with booze.

David watched Batson's excitement from the captain's seat. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. We've shown them enough now, right? Reverse the Blow Engine! Drop speed and circle around. We're leaving the city. At this rate, we'll crash into the castle."

That line seemed to absolutely ignore his usual behavior.

In any case, after they'd enjoyed the success of their little prank, they finally started to get serious.

"Well then," Ernie started, "I'll go down in Ikaruga and greet His Majesty."

The little captain did just as he said he would, leaving the bridge as the crew was busily carrying out their orders. He boarded Ikaruga and descended to the castle.

◆

"Wow, did I get yelled at," Ernie said bashfully.

"Of course you did. In fact, I'm surprised you managed to get away with your life after this stunt. Though, I guess I shouldn't be..." The captain of the Order of the Violet Swallow, Tolsti Koskensarro, let out a sigh and put his hand to his forehead after seeing Ernie's innocent smile.

Though the *Izumo*'s appearance generated considerable confusion, the departure ceremony ended without much trouble. In the end, the sight of the massive ship actually garnered significant support, and the king was able to proceed with the ceremony without losing any dignity. But that still didn't mean he could let the prank go.

"There's no doubt that it's an incredible ship, though," Tolsti said as he looked out of the window at the fleet around them. The *Izumo* was at the center of several cargo ships. These, along with two companies of Twediannes, represented the full strength of the Order of the Violet Swallow.

One of the companies would be carried within the *Izumo*. The rest would be deployed around them on alert or moored to the outside of the ships. All decisions regarding the flying silhouette knights would be left to the Wing Carrier. In exchange, the cargo ships' holds were filled with a variety of supplies—enough to allow this force to operate for an entire year.

They would be flying over land, not the ocean, at least, so they had the option of landing to gather supplies. However, considering the danger the levitating ships would be facing, as well as the strain on their etherite, this would have to be a last-ditch emergency measure. The plan was to stretch what they had.

Tolsti's gaze turned to the *Izumo*'s bridge. His gaze was

colored with envy as he looked around at the bridge's equipment. "Still, this ship is huge. It was obvious from the outside, but you can feel it even more intensely from in here. Our cargo ships aren't that uncomfortable, but this still makes me jealous."

The Order of the Violet Swallow's levitating ships were basically identical to the original design. So it was hard to say that a lot of attention had been paid to the inside's livability. The *Izumo*, however, used its greater size to improve in that respect. Furthermore, since the designer and the user were one and the same in this situation—a rarity—Batson and the others had adjusted the interior to be easier to use for them. This journey was looking like it would take a long time, so the *Izumo* had the advantage in this regard.

"Anyway... We'll be relying on you during this expedition, Captain Echevalier."

"And I you, Captain Koskensarro."

The two captains exchanged a firm handshake, though from the side it looked like an adult humoring a child. Would anyone unaware believe that they were both knight captains heading orders that served directly under the king? Not only that, but in terms of standing, the child was higher.

"Still...you aren't going to sit in that seat?" Tolsti asked, glancing toward the captain's chair, which was currently occupied by a dwarven boy. He himself was serving as the captain of the order's flagship as well as the captain of the order itself. Considering the chain of command between a ship and the rest of the order, this made sense, and it would be inherited by the other knight orders that were established in the Violet Swallow's shadow.

On the other hand, Ernie was *not* serving as the *Izumo*'s captain. So their structure was somewhat strange to Tolsti.

Ernie smiled with a slight nod. "Yes, because I'll be deploying in my silhouette knight if a battle breaks out. I'm leaving command of the ship to him."

"I... I see. Your silhouette knight...Ikaruga, was it? I heard that it's capable of fighting in the sky despite not being a flying silhouette knight." Tolsti thought of the strange silhouette knight in the *Izumo*'s hangar. It was a demon-faced, six-armed warrior, and there was no other like it in the entire world. Before the advent of the flying silhouette knight, it had been the only one

capable of taking to the sky.

"Indeed," Ernie replied. "You'll be able to see it in action at some point during this expedition, I'm sure."

"Then I'll be looking forward to it. Being able to rely on your strength is as heartening as I'd expected." Tolsti gave another once-over of the small boy with an airy smile. Despite the fact that their only goal was a preliminary investigation, they were still heading for a den of monsters. Considering how important this undertaking would be, as well as how much pressure they would be under to succeed, the presence of this young boy—already more than qualified to be Fremmevilla's hero—would be necessary.

They opened up more to each other after this, engaging in lively conversation as the fleet made their way onward.

◆

The fleet, with the *Izumo* at the center, flew unhurriedly across Fremmevilla, casting a large shadow across the towns along its route. Laihiala Academy City and Fort Orvesius were no exception.

"Um... There, that biggest ship. Apparently Ernie is in that one," Selestina Echevalier muttered as she looked up at the fleet. She indicated the largest one at the center, so big it was almost unbelievable it was staying so high in the sky.

Her husband, Matthias, looked up as well, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand, before turning to look at his wife. "Ah, Ernie's so busy, isn't he? So... What's wrong? You don't look too good. Are you worried about something?"

Tina was a wise and brave woman. Even when Ernie had gone off to stick his nose in another country's war, she'd sent him off with a smile. While she seemed gentle and calm, she was very strong at her core. She truly was Ernie's mother, and in a sense he took after her. So it was rare for her to be so evasive.

"Yes, I suppose, a little. Right... He's very strong, so I know he'll be fine. But I don't know why...I have this feeling deep in my heart."

"I see... Well, he *is* going to the Bocuse," Matthias reasoned. "It's only natural to be worried, even if this is Ernie we're talking about."

The Great Bocuse Forest had been a constant source of

danger since Fremmevilla's founding. Every citizen of the kingdom had learned to fear it, and this fear couldn't easily be extinguished. After all, it was used to frighten naughty children.

However, Tina's unease couldn't be explained away with just that. The danger alone shouldn't be an issue—Ernie could fight a division-class monster by himself.

Seeing her expression remain clouded, Matthias once again turned his eyes to the sky. "The kid's gotten through every bit of trouble he's found himself in so far, and he's never broken a promise. He promised to let you ride in a levitating ship, didn't he? That means he'll definitely be back."

"Right... You're right. Ernie's never broken a promise." Tina brought her hands up over her chest. Though her heart was beating fast with impatience and panic, she didn't know why. Still, no matter how worried she was, all she could do was pray and see them off. She stared up at the fleet of ships.

◆

The fleet continued east over Fort Orvesius. The remaining members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix gathered to look up to the sky.

"Finally, the *Izumo* takes off. Ernesti and Batson were both so excited," said Edgar.

"Indeed. Still, I didn't expect for us to be left behind, even if so many things hadn't overlapped on top of each other," Dietrich groused.

"We weren't left behind," Edgar said. "We're just protecting home base. Also, this expedition's centered on flying silhouette knights. We wouldn't have had much opportunity to do anything anyway, since Aldirad and Guairelinde can't fly."

"Then couldn't my Third Company have gone?" Helvi asked.

"Bringing only one company along would seem uneven," Edgar replied.

The company commanders were among the crowd. None of the Silver Phoenix's companies were taking part in this mission. Despite most of the order being left at home, Fort Orvesius was suddenly a lot quieter without Ernie.

"Now, we may be protecting home base, but it's not as if we have anything urgent to attend to. Guess I'll take it easy for the first time in a while," said Dietrich.

For form's sake, the commanders had each been tasked with protecting the fort while their captain was gone, but Fort Orvesius wasn't made for combat in the first place. In essence, they'd been handed a vacation.

As soon as Edgar heard that, he dropped his gaze from the sky. "About that… I'm going to leave for a while. I leave the fort to you two while I'm gone. There's someone I have to talk to."

Dietrich's eyebrow shot upward, while Helvi nodded in understanding. There was only one person that could be.

"About *that*, right?" Dietrich asked.

"Yeah. To tell you the truth, I haven't decided yet whether I'll accept. But nothing will happen if I don't talk about it first."

"Yep, exactly," Helvi agreed. "Nothing good will come from just us thinking about it by ourselves."

Edgar shook his head as he spoke, but he actually sounded pretty eager about this. It seemed the recruiters were really trying to win him over.

Dietrich made an exaggerated shrug. "Sounds like I'll have to say yes. Not that anyone would bother coming to this fort without our 'lord captain' around. That reminds me, I don't think we've ever had a real vacation since we formed the order. Yeah… Now that I think about it, that's pretty scary. I'll need to rest while I can."

Dietrich seemed dejected after realizing that truth while Edgar once again looked up at the fleet.

It was heading east with the *Izumo* at the center. The Great Bocuse Forest had been proof against invasion until this venture. There was no doubt that the result of this mission would greatly sway Fremmevilla's future. Ernesti and the others were at the forefront, cutting upon this path. In fact, that small boy was always ahead of his time. Possibly even *too* far.

"We can't afford to stand still. It might be time to take a step forward into a new future," Edgar said.

The ships proceeded on their way, eventually reaching the border. From here on out, it was monster paradise. The fleet quietly slid forward into the sea of thick vegetation.

◆

"So this is the sky above the Great Bocuse Forest. Hm, it's perfectly ominous." Ernie took a deep breath on the upper deck

of the *Izumo*.

The feeling of the wind caressing his skin wasn't much different from the feeling he got in Fremmevilla, but he could sense a strange, unique presence.

The scenery in front of his eyes was an infinitely stretching, speckled sea of green. The thick tree cover overlapped, leaving no gaps, and continued on to the horizon, though the forest did slope up and down in places. It was possible to make out hazy mountain ridges far off in the distance.

Suddenly, as he was absentmindedly looking out at the forest, a pair of arms stretched out from behind him. These arms trapped him in an embrace.

Ernie adopted a slightly fed up expression as he turned around to look up at Addy, who was now engaging in her favorite pastime.

"Come on, Addy, stop that. I told you, the Order of the Violet Swallow is here too, so you can't do this."

"Yep yep, I know! But no one's around right now, so it's all good!" Addy teased, resting her head on Ernie's shoulders.

Ernie was, more or less, the Order of the Silver Phoenix's captain, and the *Izumo* was under his command. Given that his looks did not particularly lend him any gravity, how he appeared to those around him had become a real concern, so he'd banned Addy from hugging him. But clearly, that hadn't gotten through to her. Ernie let out a quiet sigh.

Originally, only Ernie and the knightsmiths who crewed the *Izumo* were going to participate in this expedition. However, Addy had slipped in like it was only natural she went anywhere Ernie did. In the end, both Ikaruga and Sylphianne had been packed into the *Izumo*. She was a skilled enough pilot to teach the Order of the Violet Swallow, so she definitely had the qualifications to take part.

"Jeez... Just this once, okay? You need to remember that we're not the only ones on this trip," said Ernie.

"Mmm...but I don't think anyone will mind, just like usual? Also, you're so cute that it doesn't matter that you don't put out an air of authority or whatever!"

"That's not the problem..."

After that, Ernie took Addy back into the ship. As soon as they were inside, he inspected their surroundings. There were more levitating ships floating around the *Izumo* at fixed intervals. In

the space between ships, flying silhouette knights swam comfortably like a school of fish. These units from the Order of the Violet Swallow were guarding the fleet and scouting ahead in shifts. Though there were no obstacles in the sky to block sight, they couldn't afford to leave themselves unprotected.

When they returned to the bridge, they found Tolsti waiting for them with a spread-open map. The boss was in his captain's seat, seeming to pay no attention to their visitor. He was planning to force absolutely everything but the crewing of the ship and maintenance onto other people, and it seemed Batson —who was manning the wheel—was the same.

"We're finally about to enter the Bocuse proper. I want to confirm our plans for the foreseeable future," said Tolsti. A plume of smoke rose from the forest accompanied by the clear sound of falling trees, despite how far away the ships were. This was most likely a monster's work, as more smoke plumes rose intermittently before eventually calming down.

As they watched this, they nodded to each other. "In the end, this is a forest of monsters. We would have been in a lot of trouble if we'd tried to go over the ground."

"Even if we'd had our entire order," said the boss. "I bet we'd just have been worn down somewhere in the end. Air travel's amazing."

"It is! It was so worth all the trouble it took to build the *Izumo*..." Ernie gushed.

Below the tree line, it was a world of eat-or-be-eaten featuring a whole host of various monsters, but that didn't stretch all the way to the sky. Once again, the group was reminded of the value and advantage of levitating ships.

Ernie peered down at the map. "The shallower parts of the forest have been explored to some extent. Let's raise our speed for a while and then increase our guard once we're a bit deeper in."

"Right, even the Bocuse doesn't have that many flying monsters. We need to be on guard, but we'll just exhaust ourselves if we do so right from the start," Tolsti agreed.

The map in front of them detailed Fremmevilla's eastern border and a little bit beyond. From here on, they would need to fill it in as they went; this was one of their objectives.

After that, they planned out the patrol routes and times of the scouting parties. Once they'd settled on the new plan, the crew

transmitted it to the rest of the fleet. The *Izumo* spread its wing sails to catch the wind, gaining speed to go deeper into the forest. The surrounding ships and flying silhouette knights followed suit.

"Finally, the Great Bocuse Forest…"

The members of the Order of the Violet Swallow whispered to each other in the ship's hold as they felt the *Izumo* accelerate.

"I never would have imagined we'd end up with such an important role."

They looked at the Twediannes that were fixed in place beside them. Everyone in the country held strong feelings toward the Great Bocuse Forest, so these knight runners sounded deeply impressed.

"We're not the only ones, though."

Their gazes turned from the flying silhouette knights to what they could see farther in: a large, silent, armored warrior—a silhouette knight even stranger in form than the flying silhouette knights.

"The Order of the Silver Phoenix… But it seems like our instructors aren't here."

"I saw Instructor Alter. That tiny knight captain too."

"But they're not the leading actors of this play." Raphael, who'd been silent up until now, cut into the conversation. "This is a huge chance for us. This ship may belong to the Silver Phoenix, but the combat force is centered around us. This is our fight."

Though his face clearly displayed his intense pride at knowing he was the leader of a company, uneasiness crept its way into his features every once in a while. That was how important this role was.

"I hear that flying silhouette knights are being distributed to various regions already. We may be the start, but that doesn't mean we're safe," Raphael said.

The other members nodded. They might have been the first pilots of flying silhouette knights, but others were definitely giving it their all to catch up. After all, the entire kingdom was in a frenzy to reach out for the sky.

"We must make this mission succeed," said Raphael. "We'll win honor with our own hands."

"Yeah, let's do it! Glory to the Order of the Violet Swallow!"

The group formed a circle and put their fists together. It was impossible to tell what difficulties they'd face on this journey, but

nevertheless, their motivation rose.

The ship continued deeper into the forest, carrying all sorts of thoughts and wishes as it went.

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As one might expect of a great forest, all they saw once they got over it was trees. Visibility was clear, with nothing to block their sight. That being said, they were in a land feared as a den of monsters. There was no way they'd be able to proceed without encountering any problems.

"Something's ahead of us! Alert the others!"

The flying silhouette knights that were scouting ahead detected an abnormality and flashed their Magisgraphs in warning. The observers saw the signal, and the fleet immediately went into action.

"Orders! Signals from the scouting platoon are warning of something strange. Knight runners on standby, to your battle stations! Please get ready to sortie!" Ernie shouted orders into the speaking tube. Then, he turned to the captain's seat. "I'm going to go get Ikaruga ready too. If something happens, I'm counting on you."

"Sure thing. Leave the bridge to me," the boss replied.

"I'm going to Sylly too," said Addy. "Let's go together, Ernie!"

"Fight hard, you two," Batson called behind him.

After watching them leave the bridge, the boss directed a stern gaze out the front of the ship. Batson's body stiffened with nerves as he handled the steering wheel.

Meanwhile, the scouting platoon that'd detected the abnormality was approaching a large *mass* that seemed to be wavering and wobbling.

"Is that a...monster? I mean, is it even alive?"

"Dunno. It just looks like a rock to me, only it's floating. It's like a shellcase, maybe...?"

The mass was rough like a rock, though it only looked like a shell at a stretch. It wasn't alone either; there were several similar masses all around the area. The flying silhouette knights dropped speed and observed them with caution.

"They're big. Each one's the size of several silhouette knights. How are they in the air?"

"Who knows? Maybe they're also using ether? If they're just

floating and won't impede the fleet, then we *could* just pass them by."

They were lost as to what to do given the lack of response from these floating objects. It wouldn't be smart to carelessly mess with them and end up getting burned.

As the Fremmevillans floundered, the masses' surfaces started to change. Small, tightly packed holes opened up to reveal smooth objects poking out. These extended some sort of membranous appendages—though not quite fins—and took flight. The knight runners shivered at the sight of these many creatures beginning to reveal themselves.

"I see. These aren't monsters—they're nests!"

"Oh crap, they can fly! And there's so many of them! Retreat! Hurry and regroup with the main force!"

They stomped hard on their stirrups. Their Magius Jet Thrusters instantly roared and spat fire to launch their machines forward. Their fin stabilizers moved, allowing the platoon to make a sharp turn back toward the fleet.

As this was happening, more of the small monsters left their nests before the swarm moved. It flew, gaining speed toward the retreating scout platoon.

"Those monsters are pretty fast… Is it because they're so small?"

The small monsters were only a little larger than an average human. They had no feathers and were completely smooth and teardrop shaped. The finlike appendages acted like wings, but since they weren't flapping, the beasts were probably using magic for propulsion.

"Hey, they're still coming out. Look how many there are! Oh, crap, we need to thin them out as much as we can before they hit the fleet."

As the scout platoon flew, they pointed their silhouette arms behind them and fired. The monsters were numerous—absurdly so. The knight runners didn't even need to aim; no matter where they shot, they'd hit something. The fiery projectiles smashed into the swarm, incinerating many of the small monsters, but none of the others seemed to mind. There were so many of them that losing a few meant nothing.

"What the heck is *that*?! Damn, there's so many!" The teeming mass of monsters was visible from the *Izumo*'s bridge. The boss jumped for the speaking tubes, ripping one open to shout

orders into. “It’s an emergency! Change heading! We need to avoid that swarm! Prepare the wizard-style forces—blast ’em away when they’re in range!”

“This is gonna get a little rough, boss! Get back to your seat!” Batson’s shout got the boss to hurry back and cling to the captain’s seat.

The *Izumo* immediately started to turn, creaking from the intense forces being placed on its frame. At the same time, the other ships received the boss’s angry orders and started doing the same. But these large ships weren’t all that nimble.

Meanwhile, the self-defense wizard-style silhouette knights attached to each ship were activating, pointing their silhouette arms at the incoming threat.

The same went for the *Izumo* and its upper deck. These silhouette knights were both the ship’s shield and its spear. The ones deployed by the *Izumo* had a unique feature: Their wall robes were directly connected to the ship. They were sharing mana pools—essentially a larger-scale version of the system Vouivre had used. With this, the *Izumo*’s defensive complement could fight several times longer than any other.

While preparations to intercept were underway, a portion of the *Izumo*’s upper deck opened, and Ikaruga came up from the hangar.

“Okay then, the monster this time seems quite annoying, huh? With those numbers, the flying silhouette knights probably won’t be able to handle this themselves… Fire a signal flare! We’re going to shave away at them using spellfire starting with whatever comes close.”

The signal flare shone brightly in the sky. Below it, the *Izumo*’s hangar was basically a war zone. The knight runners waiting in the ship jumped in their Twediannes.

“Inject the initial ether into your Etheric Levitators! Make sure not to turn on your thrusters until you get outside!”

The *Izumo* was stuffed with a large amount of etherite, so its complement of flying silhouette knights started up with etherite from the ship’s supply.

Shrieking intake sounds resounded through the hangar. With the knight runners inside, the machines awakened as their ether reactors spun up and raised outputs, coming to this scream as they finished preparing to sortie.

“Go! They’re launching! Puuush!!!”

The maintenance team, wearing silhouette gears, grabbed on to a silhouette knight. Inside the hangar, the units had to be manually moved. They'd already created a weak Levitating Field with their Etheric Levitators, so the machines hung slightly off the floor. While their masses were still the same, they were at least movable with the help of silhouette gears.

The *Izumo*'s rear hatch opened wide, and the maintenance team shoved the silhouette knight out toward the open air.

"Okay, it's your turn! The rest is up to you."

With that, one of the maintenance team members posted up next to the exit. One of his arms was stuck to a strange device on the wall—a large mechanical arm, almost like a silhouette knight's... Actually, it was exactly like a silhouette knight's arm.

"Hraaagh!" With a shout of effort, he sent mana into the device. In essence, it worked like a silhouette gear. A single person's mana reserve couldn't make a silhouette knight move, but what if it was only a single limb? This normally wouldn't be possible either, but the problem was solved by massively simplifying its structure.

As for why this contraption existed? The answer was easy.

The giant arm stretched out with an open hand to grab on to the flying silhouette knight and *toss* it outside. Flying silhouette knights needed a certain amount of speed when launching so as not to interfere with others that were also deploying, and this was the machine that gave them that speed. This machine, acting like a catapult, was called a crane arm.

The arm continued to throw silhouette knight after silhouette knight as the maintenance team kept shoving them over, but the operator was growing more and more exhausted.

"Haaah... Whew! Not yet... I can do one more!"

"Hey now, you're exhausted already. Just switch out."

Though the crane arm's structure had been heavily simplified, it still required a lot of mana and couldn't be operated continuously by a single person. Despite that, the operator didn't want to switch.

"No, I can still do this!"

"Shut it! Don't put up a front in the condition you're in—it's my turn! Hurry up and switch with me!"

"No, not yet! I want to throw more!"

The crane arm, which grabbed silhouette knights to throw (read: launch) them, was for some reason a huge hit among the

maintenance team. This meant that there'd been a lot of infighting over who got the position—but that wasn't important at the moment.

Once the flying silhouette knights had launched from the *Izumo*, they took formation in the air. Addy was at the head of said formation in her Sylphianne.

"Wow, there really are a whole bunch of 'em. And they're all so small. They look real annoying!"

She signaled a message to her students behind her with her Magisgraph. The rest of the group received her order and split into two groups: one to follow Sylphianne and one to circle around the other side.

"We'll split into two groups and whittle them down from the outside. Once we herd them into a single area, the wizards can bathe them in concentrated fire! Let's go, follow me!" Addy said.

"Roger!"

With a roar of Magius Jet Thrusters spitting fire, the flying silhouette knights took off for the swarm. They shot some down with silhouette arms, gored others with their lances, and generally killed as many of the small monsters as they could as they flitted across the sky. The swarm concentrated together as the silhouette knights pincered them, gathering at the center of their flock.

Still, the monsters wouldn't take all this abuse silently. Part of the swarm flew the other way. The knights changed course in response to avoid being surrounded.

That was when the small monsters started to move strangely. They swelled in size as they flew. The knights were somewhat confused by this, with their sense of distance from the swarm thrown off-kilter. Still, no matter what the monsters did, that didn't change the fact that the knights had to eliminate them. So, the knights continued bombarding the swarm, but they realized why the monsters had swollen immediately after the spellfire hit.

Powerful explosions bloomed in the sky, much stronger than anything their silhouette arms could manage, as the swollen monsters burst.

"This can't be!" One of the knight runners was flabbergasted for a moment, but that feeling quickly gave way to fear. Between the swollen monsters and that huge explosion, there was only one conclusion to be reached.

"These things attack by self-destructing!"

“Stop the lance charge! We don’t know which ones will explode, so switch to attacking from long range with silhouette arms!”

This unexpected development caused the flying silhouette knights’ assault to dull for a moment. These fliers were still a type of melee-centric silhouette knight, so their inability to fight at close range drastically reduced their offensive ability.

These small monsters were as fragile as they looked, and they couldn’t withstand silhouette knight attacks. On the other hand, their ability to self-destruct was a real threat. A single explosion was dangerous for a flying silhouette knight, and multiple could threaten even a levitating ship. In fact, the levitating ships were actually in more danger because of how slow they were. On the off chance a ship were to be sunk, the flying silhouette knights would lose a bit of their safe harbor. The tension underlying this battle shot up instantly.

While the flying silhouette knights worked hard to whittle down the small monsters, the swarm had yet to give up approaching the levitating ships.

“They’re in bombardment range. We can’t let them reach the ships—shoot them down!” Ikaruga pointed its Bladed Cannon in place of a commander’s baton from atop the *Izumo*’s deck. Instantly, spellfire-specialized silhouette knights made it rain fire.

The spellfire flew, leaving behind faint trails in the sky. The successive explosions incinerated the monsters in flowers of flame. The wizard-style knights, sharing mana with the *Izumo*, were able to pour on spellfire unceasingly. These were punctuated with the occasional larger explosion of a monster self-destructing.

“Agh, there’s just too many of them! We can’t hold them back forever!”

“Oh no, some of them slipped through! Please stop them!”

But then, shouts and cries started to come from the defensive complement. The swarm of monsters was like an attacking cloud, and the curtain of spellfire couldn’t keep them away. The swarm was steadily approaching the levitating ships.

“If all those monsters explode, there’s no way we’ll escape unscathed!”

The flying silhouette knights started to panic, even as they continued their bombardment. Raphael’s company regrouped with Sylphianne.

“Instructor Alter, the levitating ships are in danger! We need a plan—” Raphael started.

“The wizards will take care of any of the ones close to the ships,” Addy replied. “We’ll only get caught up in it if we get in there too. We can only shave away the ones in the back!”

They took some distance from the levitating ships and the storm of explosions, continuing their work of thinning the swarm. Yet more monsters were coming from the nests—far too many for them to deal with.

“There’s too many of them! We need to stop more reinforcements from coming somehow… Maybe we need to break the nests?!” Addy hesitated. Her only idea was to leave this area to attack the monsters’ nests directly, and she considered it a good one. The problem was, however, that it would leave the levitating ships in danger. She couldn’t afford to put her idea into action carelessly.

Then, a roaring intake sound pierced through the din of battle.

“Behemoth’s Heart, Queen’s Coronet, both to maximum output!” From on top of the *Izumo*, Ikaruga was showing its will to fight.

Ikaruga responded to Ernie’s commands, shifting to war footing. It had six Bladed Cannons in each of its available hands. These combined six weapons were pointed at the swarm of monsters. It then braced with both legs and poured all of its mana not toward the Magius Jet Thrusters, but its weapons.

“Exploding monsters… I wonder why they self-destruct? It’s strange to have an ability that doesn’t even consider the creature’s survival. What is it for?” Ernie looked through the incoming swarm to what was behind it. “Something’s off. Those small monsters are just living bombs. If they’re just a means of attack, that means the real monsters are…”

His holomonitor’s reticle was over a specific point in the sky: a hazy shadow far off in the distance.

“I’ll show you Ikaruga’s true worth. It’s not in the amount of moves it can make but in the power of a single strike!”

The next instant was consumed by a bright flash of light as lances of intense fire were launched through the sky like comets.

They traveled in a straight line, eating through any small monsters in their path as they proceeded toward their actual target: the nests. The lances excelled in both power and range,

so they were able to strike the nests directly despite the distance.

The intense heat of these overspells allowed the shining orange bolts to bore through the nests' surfaces to their insides. After a mere beat, the script commanding these overspells detonated the bolts.

More than one spear reached the nests. Multiple explosions went off, wrapping several nests in fire and causing them to burst from the inside. The pieces scattered, burning and falling to the ground. Some pieces were like rocks, while others were more fluid or meat-like.

"In short, either the real things or the big bosses of these small ones are in the nests," said Ernie. "Now then, your heads are in danger. What will you do?"

Ikaruga did not stop firing at the nests, heedless of the incoming swarm. Spears of intense flame continued to fly, destroying even more nests.

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"The monsters are moving differently now?!"

Finally, the moment arrived. Something changed within the swarm attacking the fleet. Up until now, it had been single-minded in its determination to attack the ships, but then it suddenly changed direction. It turned around, heading back to its nests, all while being bathed in fire.

Eventually, the swarm left the knights runners' bombardment range and reached its nests. Yet none of the monsters returned to the intact nests, instead choosing to cling to the outsides. The nests then began to move.

"So they're using the small monsters as propulsion," Ernie noted.

The nests were distancing themselves from the fleet, a large number of monsters still clinging to their surfaces. These nests were fairly large, which spoke to how many monsters there were. They steadily picked up speed, and eventually they disappeared into the haze of the distance.

"There's no need to chase them, as long as the fleet is safe. We're not here to eradicate the monsters," said Ernie.

The *Izumo* and the flying silhouette knights saw the monsters off, refusing to let down their guards. Luckily, none of the small

monsters had reached the levitating ships. No fatal damage had been done, and the flying silhouette knights were likewise fine. It was a miraculous result, considering the nature of the monsters they'd fought.

"I'm glad it all turned out okay. I was worried there for a while." Tolsti let out a long sigh of relief from the Order of the Violet Swallow's flagship.

He might have expected a monster that was powerful on its own, like a behemoth, but he'd never prepared for a species that was powerful in numbers. If they hadn't been able to take advantage of their weakness—the nests—they would have had to prepare themselves to sacrifice at least one ship.

His gaze shifted to the armored warrior standing atop the *Izumo*. "So that's Ikaruga, the personal silhouette knight of the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. It looks very intimidating, compared to its pilot. Still, that bombardment was insane."

The Order of the Silver Phoenix was also known for its incredible proficiency in combat. Though its captain, Ernesti, always started with his creations when talking about achievements.

They were already head and shoulders above the other knight orders, and yet Ikaruga still had *this much* power. At this point, Tolsti was just being repeatedly impressed by how incredible the Order of the Silver Phoenix was.

"Of course His Majesty would rely on them. Having him protecting this fleet is nothing but reassuring." Tolsti's faith in the success of this journey rose considerably.

The flying silhouette knights continued to be vigilant of their surroundings as the monsters left, but after a while they returned to the ships.

Raphael looked out at the once-again-quiet skies and bit his lip. "In the end, we weren't enough to protect the ships. Why are we even here...?"

The *Izumo*'s rear hatch opened, and the crane arm grabbed the units and brought them inside.

Eventually, it came to Raphael's turn, and he could feel some slight shaking as the crane arm pulled his unit in. After the crane arm, it was the silhouette gear's turn. The knight runners couldn't get out until their units were properly secured. In the meantime, he absentmindedly gazed out at the goings-on in the

hangar.

Eventually his eyes settled on Ikaruga, which was secured in the rear of the hangar.

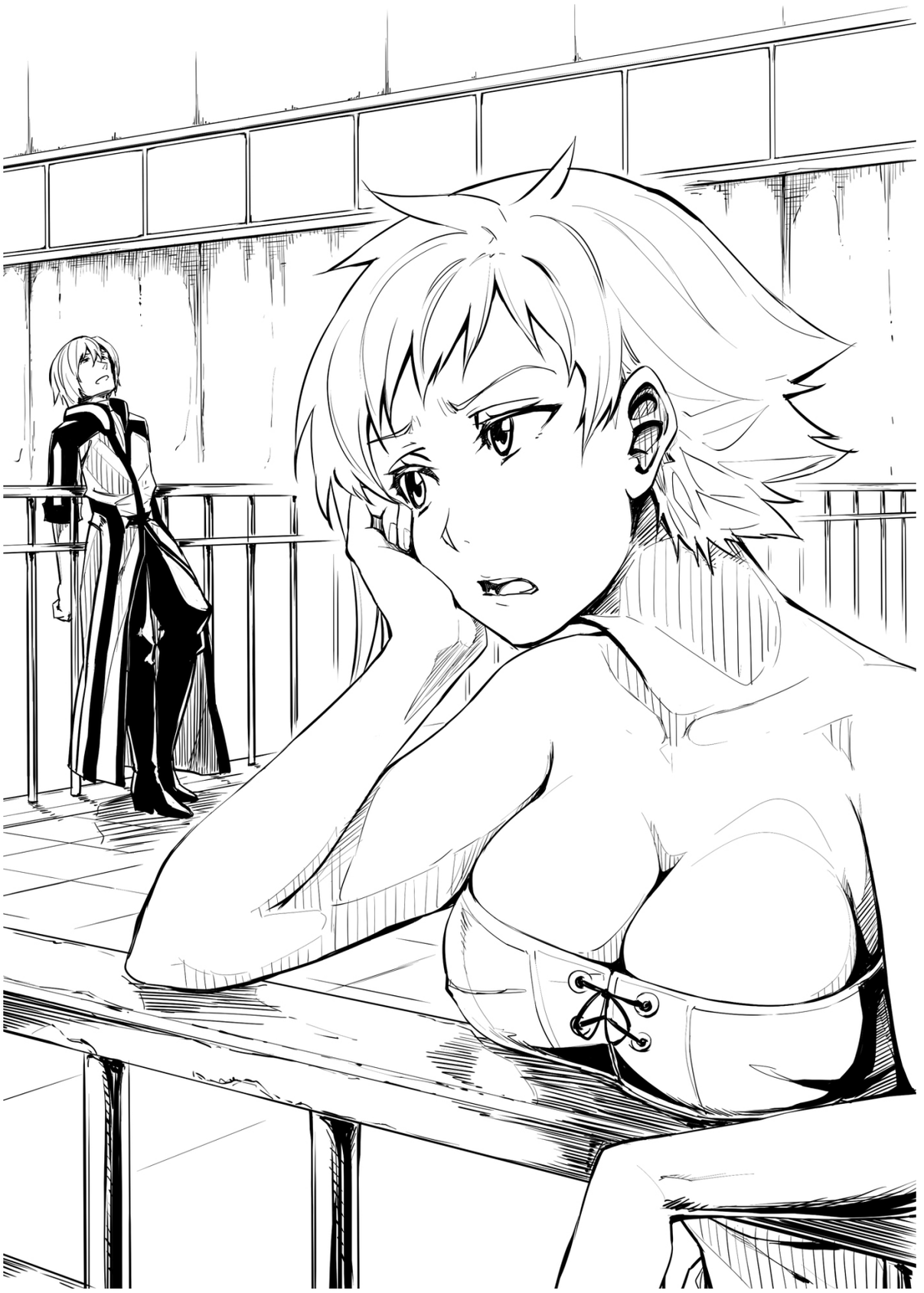
“The leader unit of the Order of the Silver Phoenix... As expected of the real thing. But we don’t plan on staying in the supporting role!” As soon as Raphael disembarked, he walked off with renewed determination.

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Almost a month had passed since Ernesti had left for the Great Bocuse Forest.

Today, in the Kingdom of Fremmevilla—more specifically, Fort Orvesius—Dietrich, Second Company’s commander, was lazing around. “I wonder how Ernesti and the others are doing right now?”

“Probably defeating monsters left and right,” Helvi replied listlessly. She was also lazing around.



“The Bocuse is absolutely crawling with monsters, after all…”

Dietrich and Helvi weren’t alone. The entire fort was wrapped in a laid-back—or rather, totally listless—mood. The reason was simple: Most of their order was essentially on vacation and had nothing to do.

Without their captain, the order had basically stopped. Though they would be asked to help eliminate monsters every once in a while, it wasn’t much different from a full vacation compared to the flurry of activity when Ernie was around.

Thanks to that, Dietrich was lazing around in front of the workshop.

“In the end, Guairelinde fits me way more than a flying silhouette knight,” he said as he looked at his personal unit, which was sitting on a maintenance table. He clenched his fist tightly.

Beside him, Helvi stretched her arms up to the sky. “Hm… As for my company, we’ve gotten pretty used to them. I think I’m okay with either at this point.”

“Of course Third Company would be like that. But does that mean you won’t be using your Tzenndrimbles anymore?”

“I don’t think so. In the end, when First and Second Companies need moving, we’ll have to go back to the carriages.” Despite what Helvi said, it’d been a while since they’d last used Tzenndrimbles, since flying silhouette knights had been the order of the day for the past while. She didn’t sound too confident.

“If you guys are just gonna stay in the same units, does that mean Third Company’s going to be the only ones fighting in the sky?”

“Ah…you know the new equipment for melee silhouette knights? It’s not something I really want to use in aerial combat. It’s more of a support piece.” Dietrich crossed his arms, thinking of the new equipment he was shown before the *Izumo* left. “Also, most of the knightsmiths left on the *Izumo*. Without the captain or the boss, I can’t just test it as I please.”

Without the people that would fix things if something went wrong, there was no point in conducting tests. The new equipment would have to wait, gathering dust, until the others were back.

“There’s not much to do, so why not just rest?” Helvi asked.

“Are you sure you should be saying that when you’ve been

training in a flying silhouette knight too?"

"Oh, come on, what's wrong with that? Testing out new models is my hobby."

"You sound like Ernesti..."

Helvi groaned at that and averted her gaze.

Dietrich shrugged. "So? In the end, you refused too, didn't you?"

"Hm? Oh, well, yeah." Helvi's gaze met his again, but her expression was still unclear.

"Oh, I get it. You'll go with Edgar, whatever he decides, right?"

"Grk! I'm actually anxious about that. If anything, my reasoning is close to yours, Dee." Helvi looked over at her flying silhouette knight. "Part of me thinks it'd be fun to continue being a test runner while sometimes fighting in a Tzenndrimble or a Twedianne."

Long ago now, when the Tellestarle had been made, she'd been appointed the test runner. She had accepted in order to recover from her loss, but that didn't mean she hadn't enjoyed it. She'd gotten to stay with the new models as they took shape, stood on their own two feet, and were eventually sent off to battle. Anyone would have gotten at least somewhat attached. Also, they'd stayed at the forefront of things with the Tzenndrimble and the Twedianne, sharing both pain and joy.

"And in the end, I don't think I'm suited to being a knight captain," said Helvi. "I'm honestly amazed I made it as a company commander." She shook her head with a wry smile.

"You were chosen to lead Third Company *because* you like new things so much," said Dietrich.

"By that logic, you'd be the only one capable of leading Second Company." Helvi couldn't help but laugh thinking of Second Company's unofficial designation. Meanwhile, it was Dee's turn for a wry smile.

A single silhouette knight appeared while Dietrich and Helvi were talking. It was a pure-white machine: Edgar's Aldiradcumber.

Dietrich watched the white silhouette knight walk into the workshop while the ground rumbled around it, and he raised his hand in a very apathetic greeting. "Well, if it isn't Fremmevilla's newest lord knight captain. It's been a while."

Edgar had been away from the fort for some time. Once he disembarked from his machine, he hung his coat nearby and

took an empty seat. “Hearing you call me that is really weird. Anyway, things have been going well, I’d say.”

Edgar had contacted the scouts who’d come to Fort Orvesius the other day and gone off to talk to them.

“To tell you the truth, I met with a certain noble,” Edgar confessed. “He saw Aldirad and was very impressed. His first offer was to head up a guardian knight order of a fairly large city, but from the way he was talking, the offer might get bigger.”

Dietrich’s immediate reaction was to whistle. “That’s amazing. Leading a guardian knight order normally requires a lot of prior achievements and a pretty significant amount of trust. You’ve managed to surpass that requirement. I’d expect nothing less, milord.”

“I told you that’s weird. Knock it off,” said Edgar. “I can’t stand it.”

“Can’t stand it? Now who’s being weird?” Dietrich retorted.

“But now you’ve joined Ernie as a knight captain,” said Helvi.

“And now I’m suddenly not sure I should be happy about that,” said Edgar.

It was understandable, given what their nearest example of a knight commander was like. In a sense, Ernie had a wealth of trust and achievements, but at the same time he was an incorrigible silhouette knight nerd and was basically always running riot. The same image came to all three of their minds, and they exchanged looks before bursting out laughing.

Their laughter calmed down after a while, and Dietrich took this opportunity to ask another question. “Leading a knight order is a dream any knight would have. Anyone would be happy to have it so close to coming true. So what’s up with that look on your face?”

Edgar froze, surprised, and he looked over at Helvi.

“He’s right. You’re about fifty percent more tedious than usual,” she confirmed.

“What?” Edgar’s brows shot up in shock. Dietrich was one thing, but even Helvi had agreed. He was usually calm, with a lot of self-restraint, so his expression was hard to read, but that didn’t apply to the other two; they’d known him for too long. He reflexively let out a breath and a strained chuckle. “It’s good that things are going so smoothly. Just… I’m worried about what will happen to First Company.”

“Right. Isn’t someone supposed to come to replace you?” Helvi

tilted her head.

“I heard about that, but I’ve been with them all this time. It’s only natural to wonder what’ll happen to them, right? Especially since this is basically me being selfish.” Edgar’s gaze went to the Kardetolles in the workshop. The ones with white crosses on them belonged to First Company.

“Jeez, you’re so serious. You don’t need to worry about that. It doesn’t really matter who takes the job, before the might of our lord knight captain. In fact, I’d be more worried if the newbie would be able to keep up…”

The Order of the Silver Phoenix’s most important mission was to support its captain’s stunts. That, and to challenge powerful monsters that could shake the very earth. Either way, no one normal would last very long among its ranks.

“Actually, no, it’d work out no matter what,” said Dietrich. “If whoever comes lacks the skills, I can just beat them into shape. I won’t let the successor of our generation’s greatest make a fool of themselves.”

“You… Did you actually enjoy playing instructor?” Edgar looked exasperated at Dietrich’s creepy smile. It seemed something had awakened within Dietrich when they’d trained the Order of the Violet Swallow. *Special* training from an elite veteran of a war in the west would be waiting for this mysterious successor.

“Well, basically what I’m saying is that you don’t need to worry, Edgar,” said Dietrich. “You can feel free to go down the path you’ve chosen.”

Edgar gasped, his eyes widening. They’d seen through what had been niggling inside of him. Now he could only laugh. Finally, the crease in Edgar’s brow disappeared. “Yeah, I owe you one. I’ll definitely pay you back someday.”

“Sure, I’ll wait. Not that I’m expecting much.”

Helvi had been listening while leaning back in her seat, and now she looked up to the sky with a full-faced smile. The sky was nice and clear, and while it was quiet now, in the near future it might be filled with passing levitating ships.

“Mmm!” she said with a big stretch. “Now then, I wonder when our little captain will be back? Let’s keep taking it easy until then.”

With that, the three thought of what lay far to the East.

Chapter 53: Poison-Spreading Monster

The fleet continued across the skies over the Great Bocuse Forest, proceeding with increased vigilance after their encounter with those unknown monsters.

They were avoiding danger as much as possible while watching out for any abnormalities. All this effort bore fruit; while they occasionally encountered monsters, most of these ended peacefully with them able to make detours.

Even if combat were to break out, they had two companies of flying silhouette knights, spellfire-specialized silhouette knights, and Ikaruga to complete an iron wall; not many monsters could pierce through such a defense. Monsters with special abilities or the tendency to attack with massive numbers were a rarity.

At any rate, they had safely traveled through the sky for two months.

“The map’s gotten a lot bigger,” Ernie said.

“We got into some scrapes, but I’d still say this trip’s been going smoothly,” replied Tolsti. “We’ve done well gathering the information needed to chart detour routes.”

The two knight captains were conversing as they peered down at a map. This map charted aerial routes, marking where they’d been along with some topographical details of the surrounding area. It had gotten much bigger compared to its original state.

“It seems there aren’t as many monsters in the forest as we thought either. And this is just referencing the view from the sky, but it didn’t look like there were that many powerful ones.”

It was normal for extremely powerful monsters that could be categorized into division-class or above to be suitably large. Their size would make them easily noticeable from far away, and they’d leave behind large traces as well. Any monster not visible from the sky likely wasn’t powerful enough to be that big.

“We have enough leeway with our supplies. But we should think about how far we want to go,” said Ernie.

“An easy distance for levitating ships would be difficult in the extreme to traverse on the ground. Even if we referenced this map, it would be hard to go this far all at once. Considering that,

it might be best to return while we still have some leeway, but…”

They exchanged opinions before coming to a decision. They hadn’t encountered many monsters, and the initial nerves were leaving the group. Furthermore, they’d been spending some time living in the sky now, and both the knight runners and maintenance team were starting to miss the ground.

Also, they needed to bring these results back; but right when they decided to head back, *it* happened.

◆

A flock of birds rode the wind through the sky. Eventually, they noticed something large approaching from behind them, and they turned around with large flaps of their wings.

Flying boats—called levitating ships—parted the air through where the flock of birds had just been. This was the exploration fleet for the Great Bocuse Forest formed by Fremmevilla Kingdom’s Order of the Silver Phoenix, with their Wing Carrier—the *Izumo*—as the flagship. Ernesti watched the birds absentmindedly from the *Izumo*’s bridge as the ship traveled at the head of the fleet.

“To starboard. It seems we’re at a dead end,” shouted the boss.

David’s loud voice came from behind Ernesti, and the bridge crew echoed the orders. Batson spun the wheel, eliciting slight creaks, and the view outside the glass slowly started flowing to the side. The flock of birds left view, and Ernie pouted a little.

In front of the fleet, far off in the distance, lay a range of mountains shrouded in clouds. With how the levitating ships were designed, changing elevation consumed a lot of resources. If they tried to rise high enough to cross the mountains in front of them, they’d quickly eat through their etherite reserves.

So, the fleet slowly changed headings, grazing the feet of the mountains instead. Ernie looked down, finding a river and following it along its path.

“Those are some steep mountains,” he said. “Like the Auvinier Mountains.”

“Maybe even bigger,” the boss replied. “The upper reaches are so cloudy I can’t see their peaks.”

This natural wall created by the steep peaks continued so high up that the sky itself seemed to hide their true height. As the

boss said, they could have been even taller than the Auvinier Mountains.

“There’s a river flowing down from the mountains, and the terrain here at the base is full of gentle slopes. If we manage to get this far, this could be the site of a second Fremmevilla,” Ernie noted.

“Seems we found a good souvenir just as we were about to turn back.”

They made sure to note the details of this new, promising land they’d found on the map. That was when they noticed the first stirrings of what was to come.

The first one to notice was the patrolling Twedianne platoon. A section of the forest suddenly erupted in noise as something strange appeared. It rose before their eyes, approaching the fleet. The trained knight runners had sharp vision, and they quickly caught onto the shadow that was approaching.

“Is that a monster? It seems different to what we’ve seen so far.”

“A warning to the *Izumo*: Hurry! This one seems at least duel-class. Don’t let your guards down!”

The knight runners immediately lit up their Magisgraphs. The fleet behind them received their warning signals and tensed up. During this time, the flying silhouette knights turned to get a good look at their enemy.

“That shape… A bug type, I see. It’s big; I said it was duel-class, but it might be more.”

The monster was completely covered in a shell—a beetle type with wings spread out of its back. Especially noteworthy were the long horns extending out of its head. All combined, the creature was longer than the flying silhouette knights. It buzzed its wings, emitting a low sound as it ascended.

“Watch out for those horns. Seems like it could gore even a Twedianne.”

“I know. But…there’s only one? Let’s just kill it with spellfire.”

The scout platoon continued to be vigilant of the surroundings for a while, but nothing strange popped up other than the monster in front of them. So, they decided to eliminate it with a preemptive attack. The platoon separated from each other, positioning themselves so as to surround the monster before bathing it in spellfire. The bug-type monster saw the scarlet firebolts coming at it and attempted to ascend faster.

The bug-type monster displayed unusual agility for its size, dodging all of the spellfire assaulting it.

“Grrr! This thing’s faster than expected. We won’t be able to hit it like this—close the encirclement!”

The blooming explosions were visible from the *Izumo*. The speaking tubes were filled with reports being shouted back and forth, and the bridge was in an uproar.

“According to reports, there’s only one monster! The scouting platoon is planning to eliminate it themselves!”

“Stand by just in case more come afterward. We don’t know where more monsters will appear, so tell the deployed knights to stay vigilant of their surroundings.” Ernie was giving orders from the bridge while considering getting in Ikaruga. There was only one hostile, and if the scouting platoon were able to deal with it by themselves, it would be better for him to stay where he was. If he were to deploy in Ikaruga, the chain of command would take a hit.

That was when the crew member who was observing the battle through a telescope shouted in a high-pitched voice. “Th-That’s…impossible!”

“What’s wrong? Show me, please.” Ernie took the proffered telescope and peered into it. He saw the worst sight possible.

Despite the platoon’s encirclement, the monster continued to easily evade their bombardment. It was able to move freely in all directions in the air, and its nimble movements were hard to predict. Hitting it while having to move forward in the air wasn’t easy for the flying silhouette knights.

Before long, one of the platoon members screamed in frustration. “There’s no end to this! I’ll kill it in close combat, back me up!”

“Don’t be careless! It has horns—you can’t assume you’re stronger than it up close!” The platoon leader warned against it, but the knight runner was already charging in.

“It’s better than missing with spellfire. If it looks dangerous, I’ll just retreat!”

“Grrr, fine. Continue the bombardment—we need to corner it!”

They continued to fire in support of the approaching Twedianne. Even though the monster was dodging almost all of their ranged attacks, they were still able to limit its options. The approaching Twedianne read how the bug-type monster would

dodge to aim its lance charge.

The monster noticed the quickly approaching Twedianne and spread the legs it had folded under itself, pointing them at the approaching silhouette knight. Bodily fluids came seeping out of the bent legs' joints. The fluid pooled into spheres, which were immediately caught by the wind that was whipping around it. This effect was magical; flying wasn't this bug monster's only ability.

This wind-type magic wrapped around the droplets of fluid and shot them out at high speed. They flew through the air, and just when the knight runner realized something was flying at it and was about to evade, they *burst*.

The spherical droplets of bodily fluid vaporized explosively, quickly becoming a white cloud that expanded with fierce speed to envelop the flying silhouette knight.

"What's this? Is it really trying to put up a smoke...scre—Krhak! Khoff!"

It started quickly. The white cloud enveloping the flying silhouette knight was sucked into the machine's intake and brought inside the cockpit. Flying silhouette knights were designed to operate at high altitudes, so the air the knight runner needed was provided by this intake system. That was how the pilot ended up breathing in this white smoke that had infiltrated the cockpit before he'd realized what was happening.

Immediately after, he started coughing up blood and convulsing as his eyes rolled into the back of his head. It was poison. This bodily fluid that was aerosolized like a cloud was made of powerful poison—one that a human could not resist. The knight runner convulsed three times before never moving again.

With the knight runner's death, the Twedianne lost control and stopped. The Levitating Field kept it in the air, but it was just drifting now.

However, this wasn't the end of the abnormality.

The surviving members of the scout platoon saw it up close. The white cloud enveloping the machine caused its armor to foam and warp. It eroded the entire machine before their very eyes, until finally the armor crumbled and peeled away. And it wasn't just the outer skin—even the crystal tissue underneath was melting away. It didn't take long for the erosion to eat through the entire thing, and the flying silhouette knight fell

from the sky in pieces.

Ernie saw the whole thing from the *Izumo*'s bridge. He was gripping the telescope so tight his hands were trembling, and he forced himself to put the thing down.

"So that monster can shoot out highly volatile and soluble fluid!" he exclaimed. It was a disgusting truth.

There was basically no way to defend against this acid cloud attack that could turn the space itself lethal, especially not in the sky with its lack of cover.

Shock ran through the rest of the scout platoon as they saw the awful end of their comrade. They didn't know their friend had died from poison, but they knew there was no way the person inside was alive after seeing his machine break apart like that. After seeing their friend's tragic end, they resolved themselves.

"We can't let it get close... It must never be allowed near the ships! This monster can sink a ship by itself! We need to kill it here and now!"

"S-Sir! Th-That's...!"

While the knight runner in charge of the platoon was ready to sacrifice them to save the fleet, his wingmates raised trembling voices, and he looked to where they were pointing.

There, he saw despair: The figures of more bug-type monsters rising up behind the first. One, two, three, five, ten—an entire swarm of them was coming up out of the forest.

"Th-This one was a scout, just like us. This is the worst-case scenario; we had our hands full with just one. This isn't a duel-class encounter—it's company—no, battalion-class!"

Even just one of the bug-type monsters was a huge threat. They could only imagine what a swarm of them could wreak upon the fleet.

Agitation spread throughout the entire fleet as they were faced with this swarm of vicious monsters.

Ernie took action, breaking through this confusion. "All ships, turn around, full speed! We're retreating as fast as we can!"

"We're already doing that!" cried Batson. "But those monsters are quick... Do you really think we'll be able to get away?"

Ernie didn't feel he had the time to answer Batson specifically, so instead he opened a speaking tube. "No, not as things stand. Sortie all the Twediannes! We lose everything if the ships sink—we must protect them at all costs!"

Ernie then immediately cast magic and pretty much flew out of the bridge. He was, naturally, going for his partner. He blew into the hangar and followed his momentum, making a beeline for Ikaruga's cockpit.

Flying silhouette knights spilled out the back of the *Izumo*. Ikaruga didn't wait for the upper deck to open completely, scraping the doors as it flew out.

Ernie used Ikaruga's megaphone at full blast to give his orders. "Twediannes, leave behind only the bare minimum of guards. The rest of you, attach yourselves to the ships!"

"What are you planning, Captain Echevalier?!"

"We're going to imitate what the monsters we met earlier did. By attaching to the ships, we can use the flying silhouette knights as thrusters. They'll catch us if we just rely on the Blow Engines!"

"But that's just too reckless! Who will be left to hold back those bugs?!"

"Leave it to me. Me and Ikaruga!"

A howl reverberated through the area. Ikaruga's two large generators revved up to their maximum output, and its Magius Jet Thrusters screamed powerfully as it trailed a long shimmer of heat. All six of its arms held Bladed Cannons as the demon-faced warrior went to war.

Just as Ikaruga was about to accelerate further, the Sylphianne came up beside it. "Ernie! I'll help too!"

"You're the final line of defense, Addy. If I miss one, you have to finish them off instead."

"Hey! Ernie, don't—"

Ikaruga didn't wait for the full response. It accelerated all at once; its thrusters were both more powerful and more numerous.

Addy watched Ikaruga's form shrink into the distance. "Gah! He always just does what he wants in situations like this! Agh, fine! Hurry and push the ships! If monsters come close, hold them back with spellfire!"

Ikaruga flew forth alone. Ernie didn't leave Addy behind out of pure selfishness; he had realized something from the flying silhouette knight's demise.

"A cloud of strong acid that can even melt a silhouette knight... Flying silhouette knights lack long-range firepower and close-range maneuverability, so the matchup is awful."

Ikaruga's ether reactor got louder as its Magius Jet Thrusters continued to scream; it was cutting through the air at roughly the same speed as a bolt of spellfire.

"Ikaruga and I will be the ones to down this monster!"

Ikaruga brought up the Bladed Cannons in all six of its hands. It blew by the retreating knights and aimed at the scout monster.

The scout had positioned itself inside its own cloud of acid—it seemed it was able to perfectly resist its own fluids.

Ikaruga slammed the cloud of acid with lances of hellish flame. The spellfire flew so fast it was almost like an ambush, stabbing into the monster and blowing it and the cloud of acid apart. The creature fell from the sky in burning pieces, but that also spread its fluids in the area around it, which quickly aerosolized and created an even bigger cloud of acid where it used to be.

"Damn, it's annoying both dead and alive!"

Ikaruga used its thrusters to circle around the large cloud of acid now in front of it. It never stopped firing even as it did, flinging spellfire beyond the cloud.

The target was the following swarm. Their comrade had just been blown apart in front of them. The bug-type monsters knew the danger of these flame lances, so they all made evasive maneuvers. But this meant that they started blocking each other off, and their wings buzzed in an annoyed fashion.

"I won't let you past here."

Ikaruga stood still in the sky, wreathed in flames from its thrusters. Its face mask, twisted in anger, glared at the monsters.

The scene captured in its crystal eye was displayed on the cockpit's holomonitor. Ernie observed the bug-type monsters with care and realized something. Behind the energetically oscillating wings supporting the monsters' mobility was another wing, quietly emitting a rainbow-colored light.

"What is that light? I think those bugs are using ether to fly as well... So *that's* the secret behind their speed. Then Ikaruga has the advantage in mobility."

Ikaruga didn't use an Etheric Levitator, relying entirely on its Magius Jet Thrusters for flight power. While this ate a scary amount of mana, it had the advantage of allowing true freedom in the air. This would allow it to move better than the bug-type monsters, who looked to only move in flat planes.

The monsters lobbed another round of fluid projectiles, which

flew through the air before exploding into clouds of acid. The white clouds separated Ikaruga and the monsters.

“So you don’t want to let me get close? It’s no use. My Bladed Cannons can shoot through these clouds!”

Ernie brought up his Bladed Cannons, pointed at the shadows of the bugs on the other side of the acid cloud, and fired. The bug-type monsters recognized that these projectiles were lethal and quickly used their agility to dodge. They wouldn’t be hit by the same move again.

“It looks like they’re at least more nimble than flying silhouette knights. Not only that, but it’ll be extremely dangerous for me to get too close.”

Ernie shot several more volleys, but the monsters dodged them all. Ikaruga couldn’t approach through the acid clouds either, so time just burned away. A doubt rose within Ernie’s mind.

“This is strange. Why aren’t they trying to come closer? I want to buy time, but they don’t. And it’s not like their attacks would be ineffectual at close range.”

Certainly, the acid clouds were effective at making sure Ikaruga couldn’t approach, but the bug-type monsters weren’t shackled with the same restrictions. Were they really waiting for him to make a stupid move and charge into the cloud? The moment Ernie tilted his head, trying to puzzle this out, a flash of a terrifying possibility went off inside his mind.

“No way, that’s impossible… No!”

His eyes widened and he turned Ikaruga around in a panic. The scene captured in its crystal eye showed that his bad premonition had been spot on. Three bug-type monsters had ignored Ikaruga to attack the fleet. The other silhouette knights were currently bombarding them to keep them away.

Ernie shivered. The meaning of the lingering cloud of acid in front of him changed in an instant.

“This wasn’t an offensive or defensive maneuver, but a smoke screen! These ones are bait! I can’t believe it… Monsters are using tactics?!”

No monster had ever been known to make a strategic move. Some species would gather together in groups, but none ever had the intelligence to plan such a complicated maneuver.

Ernie had never even considered this possibility. In fact, the more seasoned a knight runner was, the more likely they were to

fall for this.

“You’ve done it now!”

None of the other silhouette knights had an effective counter to the acid clouds. Though Ernie realized that he’d fallen for the enemy’s trap, he had no choice but to withdraw.

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The fleet was putting out a curtain of fire, trying to stop the persistently approaching bug-type monsters. The flying silhouette knights couldn’t approach into melee range because of the fluid projectiles, and allowing the monsters anywhere close would put the levitating ships in danger. They were lacking in effective ways to resist, so this fight was painful.

“Damn, it’s no good. Our speed isn’t increasing; we won’t be able to get away!”

“Stop complaining and just shoot! We’re done for if they get close!”

Their bombardment, relying on weight of fire, was working for the moment. There were three bug-type monsters chasing them. Naturally, they wouldn’t be able to tolerate much spellfire. That was entirely why they had yet to get within range of their fluid projectiles.

But suddenly, the monsters changed how they were approaching. They’d originally been charging forward in a straight line toward the firing silhouette knights, but now they made a temporary retreat in the face of the bombardment before accelerating forward on a new beeline *ahead* of the fleet. This change meant only one thing.

“Crap… These things are trying to get ahead of us!”

Several flying silhouette knights split from the fleet to stop them, but they were so wary of the acid clouds that they couldn’t close too aggressively. The bug-type monsters easily shook off their sparse spellfire, casually flinging their fluid projectiles. These burst one after the other, creating deadly clouds of poisonous acid in the fleet’s path.

“They’ve blocked our path! Go around it or we’ll die!” the boss shouted.

“Hurry and stop those bugs already, or they’ll get in front of us!” Batson screamed a reply as he turned the wheel. With their path blocked, the fleet hurriedly changed direction. However,

now that they'd been put on the back foot, they had no way out.

As if to ridicule their efforts, the bug-type monsters continued to throw acid clouds in their way. Though the ships were trying to accelerate using the flying silhouette knights as thrusters, their sheer size meant they were still slow. It was basically impossible for the fleet to take the initiative from the monsters now.

They continued their bombardment, trying to secure some kind of path, but their efforts were in vain. The acid clouds spreading through the sky gradually cut off all safe paths; they were already almost surrounded.

"This isn't working! We'll soon be forced to head into the cloud of acid!" the boss shouted.

Finally, the acid clouds closed off all escape for the fleet. Addy in her Sylphianne was paying close attention to how the clouds themselves moved, even as the rest of the fleet sank into despair.

The lingering white clouds were not stationary. They were slow, but they were indeed moving. "Don't give up!" she shouted. "Look closely, those acid clouds are slowly falling. They're heavy, so we can escape upward! Hurry and supply the Etheric Levitators!"

They were willing to clutch at straws, so each ship poured more ether into their Etheric Levitators. With more powerful Levitating Fields, they started to climb.

But before that, the bug-type monsters charged through the acid clouds. There was no way they'd leisurely wait for their prey to ascend now that they'd been stopped in their tracks.

"Intercept them with spellfire! Hurry with the ascent, please! At this rate..."

Spellfire flew from the ships to try and stop the monsters' approach. But the fleet's confusion, along with the monsters' agility, kept anything from hitting.

That was when Raphael made his move.

"We'll stop them here! Don't let them get close to the ships, no matter what!" he howled, bravely charging in to intercept the approaching monsters. He was fighting one-on-one, but considering the strength of the monster, this was a hopeless fight. Still, he wasn't afraid.

"There's more than one knight protecting these ships!" For an instant, Raphael looked off into the distance, imagining the sight of the hero that was there. The jet of fire coming out of his

thrusters immediately lengthened. The platoon of flying silhouette knights, wielding both lances and silhouette arms, fired intermittent volleys of spellfire while closing in.

The buzzing of the bug-type monsters' wings was unpleasantly shrill as they nimbly dodged the spellfire before launching fluid projectiles at the charging knights.

"Spread out! Evasive maneuvers!" Raphael called out.

The flying silhouette knights twisted and changed course. They could feel the acid clouds expanding behind them as they detoured around the shots and resumed their charge. As if to scoff at this, the monsters coolly passed by their acid clouds, heading for the ships.

"We won't let you! We still have our trump card!" Suddenly, Raphael's unit threw away its lance and silhouette arms. It left behind its shocked wingmates, using its newly unburdened status to fiercely accelerate. It closed the distance to one of the monsters near instantly, and he let go of the controls. "I'll leave the rest to you, Instructor!"

The atlatl pod on the unit's back twisted around. The cover opened, and a short spear flew out. Raphael was fully concentrated on controlling this weapon, throwing aside all thoughts of evasion—a suicide attack.

The monsters noticed the approaching short spear and switched to evasive maneuvers. The weapon, being controlled by wire, followed. The monsters reacted in turn by spewing their fluid all around them, which quickly aerosolized into acid clouds.

The short spear flew in after its target. The spear itself lasted a while even after charging into the cloud, but the attached silver nerve wasn't so tough. Once the line melted away, the short spear lost its mana supply and its controller, so it unceremoniously fell out of the sky.

"No way... This didn't work either?! What monsters!"

The monsters left behind the Twedianne that had lost all attack options in favor of going after the fleet. Fluid seeped out of their leg joints and formed droplets. Once these were launched and turned into acid clouds, they would envelop both the levitating ships and the flying silhouette knights moored around them with poison.

"Why...? This can't be happening! Someone! Please! Stop those...things!"

Just as the monsters were about to launch their final volley, a

burning lance stabbed into one of them from behind. This resulted in an explosion so strong it was hard to believe it came from a silhouette arms, which blew the monster apart. The carcass then fell from the sky, leaving behind a cloud of acid.

Raphael turned around in shock. His holomonitor displayed something trailing fire like a comet as it flew toward him.

“That’s one! Next!”

It was Ikaruga, and it had managed to take the bug-type monsters by surprise because they were distracted by Raphael. It continued to fire its Bladed Cannon, taking down another of the monsters.

“Now for the last o— Crap, it’s close!” Ikaruga pointed a Bladed Cannon at the last monster, but it hesitated to shoot.

While Ikaruga had been shooting down the other two, the last monster had been able to get close to the ships. It was near enough now that the resultant explosion from its death would probably catch the fleet, and there was no telling how many casualties that might cause.

Ernie pumped up the output of his thrusters to the max. Ikaruga flew like it was shot out of a cannon, crashing straight into the bug-type monster.

The monster’s shell cracked upon taking Ikaruga’s tackle, but no fluid came out. Its shell was naturally quite tough, given the creature’s size. Outside of weapons to pierce through it or spellfire to bust past it, it was able to stop most attacks.

Ernie used that to his advantage. Ikaruga’s thrusters made a long tail of fire as it pushed the bug-type monster away. It used four thrusters at max capacity to overwhelm the monster and force some distance from the fleet before it slammed a fire lance into the creature. The last monster finally fell, leaving behind a cloud as well.

“So that’s the power of Ikaruga…the leader of the Order of the Silver Phoenix!” Raphael muttered in a daze, having watched the whole thing from start to finish. The demon-faced warrior had overwhelmed the enemy they’d had so much trouble with. In the face of the kingdom’s most powerful, he felt shivers run through his entire frame.

After Ikaruga had eliminated the approaching monsters, the fleet stopped its ascent in favor of speeding up. Ernie felt some measure of relief as Sylphianne approached.

“Let’s go back, Ernie. We should run!”

“No, Addy. Look, the main force of monsters is right there. They’re still planning on chasing us; they don’t intend to let us get away.”

The bug-type monsters’ main force had begun to approach as soon as Ikaruga had seen through their ruse. They were rising, rainbow-colored light coming from their backs.

“Addy, take command of the Twediannes. Leave those to me.”

“Ernie! Agggh! Why does he always leave me behind?!”

Ikaruga turned around, flying off once again for the swarm of monsters. Addy’s shout wasn’t fast enough to reach him, in the end.

◆

“How dare you lure me into a trap,” Ernie said.

Ikaruga had gone out to intercept the bug-type monsters, and it was firing off its Bladed Cannons in quick succession to slow them down. Surprisingly, the monsters didn’t chase after the retreating fleet. They dodged the spellfire, but instead of raising speed to give chase, they pointed their legs at Ikaruga.

“Heh heh heh, good. Now come. This makes that rampage worth it.”

The bug-type monsters recognized Ikaruga, possessing powerful attacks and able to fly freely through the sky at high speeds, as their biggest threat. That was why they were trying to defeat it first.

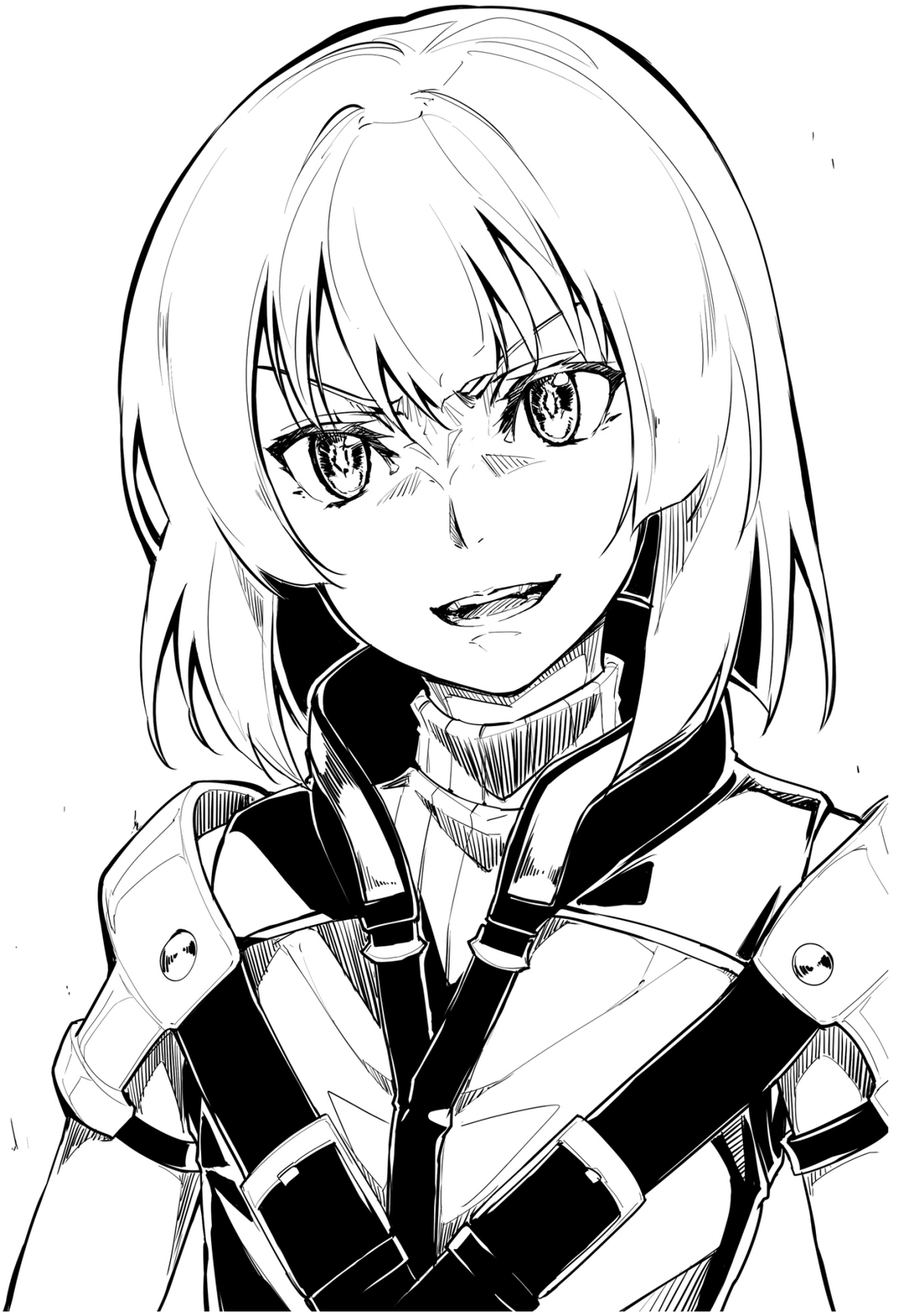
“But that also means I can’t just leave. Oh well, that’s fine.”

The swarm attempted to surround Ikaruga with a circle of acid clouds, but it pushed them back with spears of hellish flame. Yet, not even Ikaruga could resist the acid clouds, and it was slowly being cornered by the swarm. However, Ernie’s eyes held no fear or despair.

“I’m the one who won’t let *you* escape.”

Instead, his eyes were alight with bottomless anger. It was a boiling desire to annihilate that burned hotter than the spears of fire he was shooting.

“You bug monsters, with your acidic fluids, are the natural enemy of metal silhouette knights.” The silhouette knight-loving lunatic naturally couldn’t forgive their existence.



“That makes you my sworn enemies, and I cannot allow you to live. Not even one of you!”

Behemoth’s Heart and Queen’s Coronet ramped up their output to the max, and the demon-faced, six-armed warrior roared. A battle of annihilation, in which both sides would fight with all their might, was about to begin.

◆

The demon-faced, six-armed warrior stood proud in the air, covering for the retreating fleet behind it. The beetle-like monsters surrounded it, filling the air with an unpleasant buzzing. The two sides stared at each other, and time slid by in silence.

“Okay then—let’s go, Ikaruga,” said Ernie. “We’re going to eliminate our enemy!”

Its Magius Jet Thrusters were spitting out intense trails of flame as they held Ikaruga aloft. The bug-type monsters started to move in reaction, as the ones to either side of Ikaruga advanced to pincer it.

The monsters spread their legs at basically the same time, shooting fluid bullets out of their joints. Their fluid melted silhouette knights by aerosolizing and turning into acid clouds. No matter how tough and strong Ikaruga was, it likely would not survive if it found itself caught in one.

Of course, it wouldn’t just brainlessly take the attacks. Ikaruga pushed more power to its thrusters to ascend, dodging the bursting white clouds. It now had the height advantage, so it shot its Bladed Cannons down at the bugs.

The burning hellfire lances ignited the air as they passed by. The spellfire pierced through the white cloud, but the bug-type monsters were already gone. They’d used their natural agility to change position. With an evasion ability that exceeded even that of a flying silhouette knight, these monsters were very threatening indeed.

While Ikaruga was keeping the monsters busy, the remaining monsters that hadn’t advanced were also approaching. They were relying on numbers to attack, but that wasn’t the only annoying thing about them.

“As I thought, these monsters aren’t moving individually. I can feel some sort of connection. Just giving monsters tactical

teamwork makes them quite the troublesome enemy.” Ernie had no reason to just allow himself to be surrounded. He always had his unit’s thrusters activated while firing Bladed Cannons to keep his enemies in check.

With so much distance between them, he couldn’t hope for much success. However, if he let this situation continue, he’d soon be surrounded by acid clouds on all sides.

“Annihilation is already a must…but it looks like it’ll be a bit tough to break down this teamwork. Whoa!”

Fluid bullets came flying up toward him. Ikaruga dodged, but that wasn’t the end of it. The bullets soared past it for a distance until they burst anyway—above Ikaruga’s head.

“So you’re not going to let me stay above you, I see!”

The acid clouds spread into an umbrella shape before slowly descending. Ikaruga shifted its thrusters to descend rapidly and escape from the cloud, which the bugs responded to with an acidic welcome—one so intense it could melt Ikaruga whole.

Ernie saw this and fed a large amount of mana into his machine’s Magius Jet Thrusters. Ikaruga’s thrusters kicked its speed into overdrive.

It weaved past the projectiles before they burst, approaching the monsters at speed and launching a volley from its Bladed Cannons as it passed.

The burning overspells stabbed into the monsters’ heads, burrowing inside and exploding, throwing their flesh and blood everywhere. This aerosolized too, resulting in large clouds of acid, though Ikaruga had already escaped from their encirclement.

“Since the enemy can use tactics, being reactive isn’t smart. I’ll need to take the initiative and—?!” Ernie gasped as he realized something off with what he was seeing on his holomonitor. He should have left all the monsters surrounding him behind, but one was still in front of him; it had stayed behind.

What shocked Ernie wasn’t that there were now more monsters—it was that the bug-type monster ahead of him was clearly different. It was a size bigger than what he’d been fighting, and its shell was a faded reddish-brown. There were more quickly oscillating wings on its back, and its abdomen was strangely swollen with a mysterious metallic luster.

Its creepy, irregular compound eyes shone with a hollow light as they glared at Ikaruga. It let out an ear-piercing scream that

sounded like someone plucking a stringed instrument as hard as they could.

At the same time, the bug-type monsters that had been chasing Ikaruga all changed their behaviors. While before they'd rushed straight at it, now they split into two groups to launch their fluid projectiles. And they didn't aim at Ikaruga directly, but to either side of it.

Ernie saw the clouds bloom to either side and almost immediately realized the intention behind it. "I see. So they've cut off my escape. I thought they were unusually cunning for monsters—so it was because they had a leader." The larger one in front of him was, in fact, the "brain" of this operation.

"Then *you* are the weak point!" Ernie didn't hesitate to have Ikaruga advance. As long as he got rid of the one ordering the others, their annoying teamwork would stop. Then, he could just get rid of them one by one. While their acidic fluids were a problem, they were still far weaker than Ikaruga individually.

The red monster extended its legs toward the rapidly approaching Ikaruga. Fluid sprayed from the joints as it let out a quiet cry from its open mouth parts. This was accompanied by the light of magic.

The surrounding atmosphere was gathered, swirling. The red monster's ability wasn't just to gain distance. It not only captured and aerosolized the fluid it sprayed earlier—it created a whirlwind with it.

The whirlwind tried to suck in everything and melt it, eventually turning into a full-on destructive acid tornado. It swirled and twisted like a serpent, stretching a white tongue out to attack Ikaruga.

"Now that's flashy! So you're the leader *and* the strongest, eh?!"

Ernie was sandwiched between acid clouds, and now a wide-area tornado was approaching from the front. The moment anyone would have thought Ikaruga was cornered, its thrusters twisted about to a different direction.

A pillar of fire stretched up above its head. Thrust paired with gravity to drop Ikaruga with great speed. True, the acid clouds were heavier than air, and they would gradually descend. But the keyword there was "gradually." Ikaruga went under the acid cloud-covered sky, describing a reverse arc as it aimed for the red monster.

However, the bug-type monsters wouldn't let it escape for free. They chased after Ikaruga, their wings unpleasantly buzzing all the while.

"I'd love to take out the head first, but it doesn't seem like I'll be able to leave these alone for too long!"

Ikaruga responded to the monsters' fluid bullets with flaming spears of its own. Explosions and acid clouds mixed together, coloring the sky.

Meanwhile, the red monster ascended to gain some distance, observing the fight between Ikaruga and its pawns from on high. Its compound eyes held a hazy light, which reacted to the battle below. Each time it changed its cry—almost like a song—its lackeys would start to move differently. This red monster clearly had the intelligence to understand the battle situation and give orders accordingly. It was clear to see how threatening and annoying such an ability was, looking at how hard a time Ikaruga was having despite the silhouette knight's ability to single-handedly destroy hordes of monsters.

Even someone as brilliant as Ernie was struggling as he was forced to shoot down the bug-type monsters that were bursting through acid clouds to attack. Even with Ikaruga's full might, it wasn't easy to bust through these enemies. Though he'd managed to shave away at their numbers a little, the monsters would change behaviors every time to deal with his strategies.

"Hrm, it seems like I have no choice but to chip away at them. Whoa!"

The bug-type monsters were attacking with fluid bullets from all sides, and his surroundings were filled with acid clouds. Ikaruga had been flying in straight lines, but now that had to change. Its Magius Jet Thrusters shifted, throwing it into a spin and blowing away the encroaching clouds.

"The worst part of these attacks is that dodging isn't the end of it. But they shouldn't be able to keep shooting them...forever..." Ernie trailed off heavily as he noticed something strange on his holomonitor.

The scenery should have been shooting by with how fast he was flying, but it was actually getting slower. The reason quickly became apparent: The Magius Jet Thrusters on Ikaruga's shoulders had lost a lot of thrust. Though the silhouette knight had avoided direct hits, it couldn't avoid the trace amounts of acid in the air. These trace amounts had gotten into the thrusters

to eat away at the Emblem Graphs inside, and it had gotten bad enough that they'd lost function.

Ikaruga lost the overwhelming power that was keeping it in the air. Its waist thrusters were still functional, so it could still move, but half its lifelines were near useless.

"So the acid clouds don't even need to hit me directly. I wasn't underestimating this threat, but...I think I still messed up?"

Though it boasted incredible power output, Ikaruga was also very heavy with all its various equipment. Its numerous Magius Jet Thrusters were hardly ornamental—they were necessary. The bug-type monsters swarmed in, seeing their prey's loss of mobility.

"Whew... I was wondering why they were just continuing to attack like this. So you were waiting for this to happen, huh? You think you can beat me now that I'm slower. You think this is a hunt, but I can't have you underestimating me!"

Ikaruga pointed its Bladed Cannons at the swarm of charging monsters and fired wildly. They nimbly dodged the burning crimson spears without losing any speed. They were going to make sure Ikaruga was dead now that it had weakened.

The monsters pointed their legs at Ikaruga, accompanied by chittering sounds of carapace scraping together. Fluid oozed out of their joints before they shot it out.

A shining line of silver ran across the bug-type monsters' sight. Before the monsters could react, something had flown toward them at high speed to crunch into their heads. It was Ikaruga's Rahu's Fists; the arms on its back had extended out in destructive punches. They were connected to the main body by silver nerves, and Ernie could freely control them.

The next instant, the fists' victims exploded into flames, and they fell from the sky. But in exchange, the limbs were destroyed. The bugs' fluids had touched the limbs directly, to say nothing of the fragile silver nerves. This was a huge loss for Ikaruga, but the sacrifice wasn't in vain.

"You monsters have another weak point. That's the time lag between your change of orders!"

Their sudden losses had left the bugs confused. Ernie didn't miss that chance as he struck out in a fierce counterattack. Fiery spears stabbed into the remaining monsters, blowing them to pieces.

Silence returned to the sky.

The unpleasant buzzing sound of their wings had disappeared, leaving only Ikaruga floating in the air, somewhat unsteadily.

“The fleet should have gotten to safety now. And...you’re the only one left.”

Ikaruga glared up at the large shadow above it, obscured by clouds of acid. The red monster was still there, hovering silently despite losing its pawns.

“I’ve lost my Rahu’s Fists, so all I have left are two Bladed Cannons and two Magius Jet Thrusters. It’s a little lacking for me to go wild, but...”

By now, Ikaruga could be considered heavily damaged. It hadn’t just lost a whole host of weapons, but half its thrust as well. As things stood, it was completely unable to display its usual power.

Furthermore, the nearby air was filled with leftover acid clouds. The last bug-type monster’s death had been the nail in the coffin. The resulting acid cloud had spread wide, and now it would be extremely hard to maneuver. Ernie and Ikaruga needed to defeat this foe under all these conditions.

As if to laugh at Ikaruga’s distress, the red monster let out a creaking sound.

It probably knew that Ikaruga would have to go through these thick clouds of acid to even start a battle with it. To the wounded silhouette knight, the distance was basically endless.

Even so, Ernie advanced. The remaining waist Magius Jet Thrusters worked at full capacity as Ikaruga flew in a straight line at the thick cloud of acid.

“The strength of these acid clouds is their gaseous properties. But at the same time, that is also their weakness.”

Ikaruga held up its two remaining Bladed Cannons. The moment they were about to fire, it twisted them inward. The resulting overspells shot out of the barrels in a straight line but changed direction midway, colliding with each other and exploding. The resulting fire and pressure wave expanded, boring a hole through the cloud.

The gaseous acid clouds were light. Ernie had intentionally used the overspells to clear them. Now that half of Ikaruga’s Magius Jet Thrusters were inoperable, it had more than enough mana to feed into its Bladed Cannons.

It continued firing, the bolts creating fiery blooms until there

was a complete path through the acid cloud to the red monster. Ikaruga burst through the residual fire to surmount the clouds the monster had thought impassable.

The red monster shot out fluid all around it in an attempt to stop the incoming Ikaruga. At the same time, it used magic to try to create another acid tornado, but…

“You’re too late! Closing the scrams! This is the end!”

Compared to Ikaruga’s initiative, the monster was a step too slow. Ikaruga came in, using its Bladed Cannons in melee form. The instant those blades were about to reach the red monster, though…

A large shadow flew in from the side with a howl. It was one of the underlings—it had hidden in the acid cloud.

This new arrival didn’t hesitate to jump in front of the blades. It didn’t even try to dodge; it just accepted the hits. This close in, there was no stopping. The attack split the bug-type monster’s carapace and cut through its innards.

“No… It protected the leader? A monster sacrificed itself?!”

No matter how much intelligence they had… Actually, the more intelligence a living thing had, the *less* likely it was to take suicidal actions. If the red monster was aiming for this, the strategy itself was far too bizarre.

The attack on the red monster was foiled, but the bug’s real aim was what came next. Bodily fluid spread from the monster’s gaping wound, aerosolizing into a cloud.

The monster hadn’t just protected its leader; it had also traded its life for an unavoidable acid cloud attack.

Ernie had closed his intakes as he’d moved into melee combat. Thanks to that, he wasn’t immediately affected by the poisonous properties of the acid, but his Magius Jet Thrusters weren’t so fortunate. They absorbed the acid and quickly lost thrust. Ikaruga had lost its momentum when it had collided with the bug, so there was no fighting gravity now. Ikaruga fell from the sky, having lost the flames keeping it aloft.

“Gah… Just a little more, Ikaruga! Please, just hold for a little longer!”

Luckily, falling meant Ikaruga was out of the acid cloud, and now Ernie took the crumbling Emblem Graphs and coaxed just a little bit more life out of them. The Magius Jet Thrusters spat out fire in a last-ditch effort, allowing it to land safely.

However, Ernie didn’t have the leeway to breathe a sigh of

relief.

A shadow fell on Ikaruga from above—the carcass it had just sliced through. It landed near Ikaruga with a splat. What fluids and other parts remained created another cloud that explosively spread. Ikaruga, heavily damaged and thrusterless, could not escape.

A cloud of death crept along the ground, swallowing Ikaruga whole.

◆

"Dammit! Hey, how's the battle going?!" The boss, David, was raging from the *Izumo*'s captain's chair. Thanks to Ikaruga's heroism, the fleet had managed to safely put some distance between itself and the swarm. The battle was now taking place on the other side of the horizon, and the tense atmosphere had lightened up a little.

"I don't know," Batson replied sulkily from the steering wheel. "It's not like we could afford to stop anywhere we could still see it."

"I know! Gaaahhh!" The boss slowly got up from the chair and plodded his way around the bridge. Eventually, he seemed to come to some sort of decision, and he raised his voice in an angry shout. "Okay, send a message to the other ships! The *Izumo* will turn back. We need to go get our kid!"

"I can't allow that," responded a quiet voice.

The boss turned around to find the Order of the Violet Swallow's captain, Tolsti Koskensarro. Because this was an emergency situation, he'd come from his own ship.

"Without the *Izumo*, our fleet's defenses will drop considerably," he said. "Right now, I am in charge of this fleet. I can't allow such selfish actions."

"We'll leave all the flying silhouette knights. That solves the problem, doesn't it?" The boss was stubborn.

Batson and the rest of the bridge crew were also on his side. After all, they were members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix—but Tolsti would not give his assent.

"We left our captain back there. It's only natural we should be there too," David said.

"But your captain's orders were to escape, Captain Hepken," replied Tolsti. "And even if the *Izumo* went, you would only hold

him back. Levitating ships are not suited to this battle."

The boss had no reply to that. A levitating ship would likely fall if it was exposed to those poisonous, acidic clouds, and even the *Izumo* was no exception.

That was why Ernie had told them to escape. Even if the *Izumo* were to go back, at best they'd probably just slow him down. Tolsti's logic was solid, while the boss was winning the emotional argument. The crew wasn't sure who to follow.

"As if I care," the boss said finally. "We can't just leave the kid there."

"You're right," said Batson. "Let's go—get everyone prepared." In the end, the boss didn't relent, and Batson followed his example. He was Ernie's childhood friend, so it was natural that his feelings on this were even stronger.

Tolsti glared at them. "That whole battlefield is filled with acid. You'll kill not only yourselves, but everyone on this ship. Why do you think he stayed behind?! Who's the one ignoring Captain Echevalier's will?!"

That put a hard stop on Batson, freezing him in his tracks. The steering wheel in his hands creaked under his powerful grip.

"If you don't like it, then I'll do it myself! Move!" The boss shoved Batson aside in desperation, latching onto the wheel. Tolsti grabbed his arm to stop him with all his might. Finally, the boss turned to look at Tolsti with murder in his eyes. As for the knight captain, he returned the gaze with equal power. Both sides faced off silently in a glaring contest.

"If the *Izumo* sinks, he will have fought in vain," Tolsti muttered, and the boss finally couldn't argue anymore. He audibly ground his teeth, but he slowly let go of the steering wheel.

Then, as if to break the tension in the bridge, a member of the Order of the Violet Swallow ran in. He saw the boss and Tolsti glaring at each other and hesitated, but his sense of duty allowed him to gather himself and read the report he'd come to give.

"Reporting, sir! We can confirm the safety of all flying silhouette knights but one! But..."

Tolsti motioned him to go on. The knight resolved himself and continued the report. "Um... She isn't part of the Order of the Violet Swallow, but...we can't find Instructor Alter."

A small murmur spread through the bridge. The boss looked

up with bloodshot eyes before slowly closing them and groaning. “The little girlie? I see... Of course. The kid’s not here, so naturally she wouldn’t be. Dammit. It’s unfair, going alone.”

He let out a long, long sigh and slumped to the ground. Adeltrude was more attached to Ernie than anyone, so there was no way she’d hesitate to go to his side, even if she faced certain death. The boss was a little jealous of the escaped girl, and now that he’d calmed down, he slowly stood back up.

“The fleet will wait here for a while,” the boss said. “Also, if there’s no sign of the kid coming back...”

“I understand,” Tolsti agreed. “I don’t want to leave him behind either. If it comes down to it, we’ll send the flying silhouette knights out to search for him.”

With that decided, the boss walked with heavy footsteps back to his captain’s chair and silently sank into it.

◆

In the end, they waited a couple of days for Ernie and Addy to return.

Yet Ikaruga and Sylphianne did not come back. Thanks to the ardent petitions of the Order of the Violet Swallow, flying silhouette knights were sent out as search parties, but they couldn’t even find the bugs, much less Ikaruga and Sylphianne.

“Let’s go back. Set our heading west—back home.”

Finally, after an entire week, the fleet decided to return.

Chapter 54: A Place Without Him

At the eastern border of the Kingdom of Fremmevilla:

A line of forts had been packed along the Monster Highway, and the knights inside were on watch for monster invasions when they suddenly noticed shadows in the air: large ships, their sails swelling with wind as they calmly flew.

“Levitating ships from the Bocuse Forest? And those crests… It’s the Order of the Silver Phoenix! They’ve returned!”

The knights saw the crests emblazoned on the sails and raised a cheer.

Multiple cargo ships surrounded the *Izumo* in formation. This fleet had set off to explore the Great Bocuse Forest several months ago, and now they’d safely returned.

◆

The end of the forest came, replaced by developed roads and forts, places filled with the breath of civilization and human activity. With this in sight, the bridge of the Wing Carrier *Izumo* was wrapped in a strange silence. Their long expedition was over, and they were finally home, but none of them seemed happy.

At the center of this silence was the man in the captain’s chair. The sturdy and muscular David Hepken sat—unmoving—with his arms crossed and head down. After a moment, he finally looked up.

“So we’ve come all the way back here…” His utterance sounded like a groan, and he narrowed his eyes at the scene unfolding beyond the window. He had none of his usual energy, as if the fire of his forge had gone out.

“Yeah, we’re back. It’s not all the same as it was, but we’ve accomplished our mission.” Beside the boss was the captain of the Order of the Violet Swallow, Tolsti. After that battle, he had taken command of the entire fleet and had been in the *Izumo*.

Though the boss lacked his usual vigor, he still stubbornly refused to give up his position as captain of his vessel. So, the seat was his. The boss wasn’t the only one either; Batson was still

at the wheel, and the rest of the bridge crew remained as well. None of the Order of the Silver Phoenix had relinquished their stations.

“From here on, we will head for the royal palace to report to His Majesty. Let me be the one to take on that burden,” said Tolsti.

This was something they’d have to do soon once they entered Fremmevillan airspace. The boss was spaced out, so Tolsti offered to take the job, but the dwarf didn’t respond right away. Silence stretched on for a little while, before…

“Sure. I’ll talk to everyone in the fort…and the kid’s parents.” David resolved himself. The heavy mood continued as the ships sailed through Fremmevillan skies.

◆

Fremmevilla welcomed its aerial fleet back with pride; Konkaanen boiled over with excitement. From the outside, the fleet didn’t look to have taken any losses, and everyone believed that they’d safely accomplished their difficult mission. The so-far inviolable Bocuse’s secrets were about to be unveiled, and the people had huge expectations for it.

However, a shocking report came before any of that. The captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, Ernesti Echevalier, had been lost along with his aide, Adeltrude Alter.

◆

Tolsti disembarked and headed for Schreiber Castle.

“To think that this would happen…” Leotamus muttered at the end of Tolsti’s long report before letting out a long sigh. “Indeed, I believed baselessly that he would come back, no matter who else fell.”

As he spoke, the gravity of this result seeped into him. They’d gained a lot, but it still wasn’t worth what they’d lost.

While the king anguished over this, Tolsti added more details to his report—details about the ferocious bug-type monsters with bodily fluids that could corrode metal. While the Twediannes had been covering for the levitating ships, Ikaruga had set out to stop them. In the end, though the fleet was safe, Ikaruga did not return, and neither did the Sylphianne.

“I don’t get it. He was so easygoing and selfish, but he would always be the first into danger when it was important. Does he just not know fear? Or...does he just like facing great challenges?” Leotamus wondered aloud.

The previous king, Ambrosius, had been the one to grant Ernesti his knight order. The boy had answered all their expectations, continuously producing incredible results.

These weren’t just limited to the creation of new silhouette knights. The order had also served as their greatest force against monsters.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix had stood up against any and all difficulties and won every time. And in the face of their overwhelming ability, Leotamus had forgotten that failure was even a possibility.

“At any rate, this is a very difficult situation. Ernesti is gone, and no one can fill the hole he’s left behind...”

No one in the world could serve as Ernie’s replacement. Not even the king could predict how far-reaching the effects of his disappearance would be. In a sense, Fremmevilla was being assaulted by unprecedented waves of change. Even so, as the leader of this kingdom, Leotamus had to deal with this problem.

◆

While Tolsti delivered his report, the *Izumo* made its way to Fort Orvesius alone.

As the large ship approached, the order members remaining in the fort boiled over with excitement.

However, it didn’t take long for them to realize that Ikaruga and the Sylphianne were absent. They should have been celebrating the fleet’s return, but their captain wasn’t there. It was only natural for them to be confused.

“What’s the meaning of this?! Boss? What happened?”

As the crew were off-loading the ship with stiff faces, Dietrich spied the boss and ran up to him. He’d been as excited as the rest of the order, but that quickly turned to even deeper confusion when he saw the expression on David’s face.

The boss was completely lacking his signature vigor. It was as if his normal overflowing, ferocious will had been plucked out whole. Dietrich hadn’t ever seen him in such a weakened state in the many years he’d known him, and that made him falter. He

could tell that something untoward had happened.

But Dietrich hardened himself and stood in front of the boss regardless. “Boss. Please, just tell me everything. What happened? What did you fight? And why…aren’t Ernesti and Adeltrude here?”

The boss looked to have his usual scrunched-up frown on, but actually, his gaze was unusually averted. Something just didn’t seem to mesh in his current behavior, and he spent a lot of time thinking before muttering an answer.

“We stumbled across some new monster. It looked like a bug, and we thought it wouldn’t be much of a threat outside of being able to fly. But its bodily fluids were terrifying; it could melt a silhouette knight.”

Dietrich’s eyebrows shot up. Out of habit as a knight runner, he immediately imagined himself fighting such a monster. He realized it would be a difficult prospect even with his skills.

“The flying silhouette knights couldn’t fight properly, since they’d be melted if they got close. There was nothing they could do. The only one able to fight was the kid’s Ikaruga. And, as always, he headed straight out.” Finally, the boss allowed his expression to soften in a wry chuckle. Dietrich could easily imagine what he was describing.

“The kid was amazing, even facing monsters that could produce clouds of acid. He kept those things perfectly suppressed and let the ships escape. But, in the end, it wasn’t a good matchup. After we got away…we lost sight of him in a cloud. We wanted to go save him, but we couldn’t. Only the girl went after him, as usual.”

Dietrich wasn’t the only one to hear this explanation—so did the members behind him. The information spread slowly through whispers and murmurs; Ernie was gone.

“Was there nothing you could do?” Dietrich asked a question that anyone else would have hesitated to. What could even be said? He couldn’t blame the boss. In the first place, no one could help in a fight that would put *Ernesti* in a tough spot. One of the few people who possibly could, Adeltrude, had already gone, and she’d disappeared too.

Neither could they blame the Order of the Violet Swallow. In fact, they’d accomplished their goal of protecting the ships well and should be praised. The *Izumo* and the rest of the fleet had returned safely—a wonderful result.

Dietrich was plenty angry at the situation, but he had nowhere to direct that anger. He mussed up his own hair furiously. The worst part was that the fight was already over. He couldn't even head off along with Addy.

Edgar had been listening as well. "The captain isn't coming back," he muttered. "Then...what will happen to our order?"

Many gulped as soon as they heard the question.

"Wh-What're you talking about? Either way, it'll... Well..." Dietrich tried to sputter an answer, but hesitation prevented him from fully finishing. He ended up crossing his arms and trailing off into silence.

Beside him, the boss let out another long sigh. "Honestly, with things as they are, I think it's lucky you all received offers when you did."

"Wha— You too, boss?! You talk as if...as if..." Dietrich trailed off once again. He just couldn't get the next words out. It felt as if he would make it true by saying it.

"The kid's not even here, so what're you trying to do?" The boss had asked that question himself over and over on the way back. By now, he was halfway resolved to the fact that Ernesti was gone. "Anyway, I'm going to rest for a bit."

The boss pushed Dietrich aside, looking much smaller than he usually did. Seeing that, Dietrich hesitated to chase after the dwarf. After quite a bit of waffling, he finally followed with quick steps.

Edgar slowly looked around at everyone that was left.

The boss wasn't the only one to have lost his vigor. Batson was also in extremely low spirits, as were the rest of the maintenance team. Though the *Izumo* had finally returned from its long trip, Fort Orvesius was still quiet, like its fire had gone out.

Edgar saw phantoms of a boy proudly announcing his achievements along with his weird ideas, and a girl that tagged along teasing him. It was shocking that the absence of just two people was enough to shrivel the Order of the Silver Phoenix so.

"H-Hey, everyone... What happened?" Helvi asked, looking around in bewilderment at the depressed crowd.

"We don't know what we should do...or rather, what we should have done..." Edgar's vague reply did not answer Helvi's question. In the first place, the Order of the Silver Phoenix existed only to go along with Ernesti's whims. They were tossed

about by his ideas, as well as sometimes by the kingdom itself, sticking their noses into wars or monster attacks or anything else. That was just how the biggest and strongest order of fools in Fremmevilla was.

No one could take Ernesti's place. His disappearance spelled the Order of the Silver Phoenix's end. This realization settled like a stone.

"Is this…it?" Helvi froze in shock. It was as if the road they'd been walking on had suddenly disappeared from right under them.

◆

"Wait, boss! There's got to be something…something we can still do!"

The voice coming from behind David got him to stop and slowly turn around. His expression was even more tragic than before, as if he were heading to his death.

"Dee… I'm going to Laihiala."

Dietrich immediately understood what he was going for and groaned.

"To their families," the boss continued. "I need to tell them what happened in the last battle. That's my job."

"Then take Batson with you," Dietrich suggested.

"You idiot. Are you really going to make him tell their families that he left his childhood friends behind?"

Dietrich opened his mouth several times, but words never came as the boss turned around, about to walk away.

He finally said, "Then I'll go with you. I can't let you do this alone as you are now."

Normally the boss would come back with some sort of jab, but this time he just silently nodded.

◆

The road to Laihiala Academy City from Fort Orvesius wasn't long. Ernesti and Adeltrude had been commuting from home every day, after all.

Dietrich and the boss left their horses at the entrance to the city, making their way to the Echevalier house on foot. The children's families were waiting there. Ernie's father wasn't

present, probably because of his work at the academy—but his mother, Selestina Echevalier, was there along with Adeltrude's mother, Ilmatar Alter.

The mothers immediately knew something had gone wrong when Dietrich and the boss arrived instead of their children. They kindly invited in the pair who were lost for words, and Tina calmly prepared tea for them. Once they'd had a chance to breathe, they opened their mouths to speak.

"Ernie... Something happened to him, didn't it?" Tina asked.

The boss downed the rest of his tea, hardened his will, and looked Tina in the eyes. "Ernesti...fought to protect the *Izumo*...and didn't return. I was there, as the *Izumo*'s captain. I managed to witness his last battle, though not the whole thing."

Once again, he went through what he'd explained already in Fort Orvesius for Tina and Ilma's sake. He told them what kind of danger the fleet had been in, that Ernesti had gone off to fight, and why he hadn't come back with them.

As the conversation went on, the color progressively drained from Tina's face. A terrible premonition came bubbling up from deep within her, and she desperately fought to keep the words that she was on the verge of losing.

Even after the boss finished what he had to say, she stayed frozen. Ilma, who was sitting beside her, gently covered her own face. Then, after a long breath, she spoke in a shaky voice. "Addy's with Ernie then...isn't she? So they aren't lonely."

One of the Alter twins, Archid, had recently gone back to Kuscheperka. Because both of her kids were gone, Ilma had been spending her time with the Echevaliers, who she was friendly with.

"Tina, those kids are—"

"It's fine, Ilma." Tina's face was still pale. She sounded strong despite that, but it might have been because she was talking partially to herself. "Mr. Hepken... That boy moved according to his own beliefs. He stood against the monsters to protect you all. That is the kind of knight he always aimed to be, but..."

She adopted a gentle smile. She was still shaken, but Matthias's words had come to her mind.

"Ernie does not break promises," she continued. "He promised to come back, so...I'm sure he's okay."

The two men had nothing to say to that, but they couldn't just silently bow their heads in apology either. They continued their

conversation for a while more, then Dietrich and the boss left the Echevalier house.

◆

With the sinking sunset behind them, they silently made their way back to Fort Orvesius.

What they'd just seen had yet to leave their minds. The mothers continued to believe in the return of Ernesti and Addy, who'd lost their silhouette knights deep in the Bocuse. The only explanation was that they were family.

Dietrich had been continuously asking himself what he could do, and not just as a member of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Then, when they'd nearly reached the fort, he suddenly spoke up.

"Okay, let's go."

The boss didn't turn back. For a moment, the only sound was the clap of his horse's hooves.

"Not even our lord captain would be able to come back all this way alone. So we need to go pick him up," Dietrich continued.

"How long do you think it took to come back all this way? Even if we left now, it would take the same time to get there," the boss replied gloomily without turning back.

"So what? This is our lord captain we're talking about; he won't die so easily. I'm sure he's surviving somehow. It's worth going."

"We'd need enough supplies to fuel the trip. There's no way we'd be able to gather all that ourselves. Also..." The boss was well-spoken in his argument. He'd already thought of everything Dietrich was thinking right now. That included the difficulties.

"If going back would've changed anything, we'd have done it during the battle!" the boss spat out before disappearing into the workshop.

Dietrich watched him leave, tightly gripping his reins. "Still... I'm not okay with this. There's no way he's dead."

He turned around resolutely.

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After that, a little fuss occurred in Schreiber Castle. An intruder had barged in.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Leotamus had been taking care of governmental affairs when he heard the fuss. However, before someone could answer him, the cause himself appeared, pulling along a gaggle of Royal Guards who were trying to stop him.

"I am Dietrich Künitz, Second Company Commander of the Order of the Silver Phoenix! I have come because I must beg something of you, Your Majesty!"

"Ragh! Only those with express permission are allowed past this point! This is lèse-majesté! Leave! I'm telling you to leave!"

Dietrich had forced his way past a human wall, but Leotamus showed no panic. He simply narrowed his eyes. "I'll allow this. Let go of him for now."

With the king's permission, the knights restraining Dietrich reluctantly let go and slowly stepped back. Dietrich sat down, his breathing still ragged.

"You're here about Ernesti, I assume," the king said.

There was no need to even wonder, as there would be no other reason for one of the Order of the Silver Phoenix to show up now. Dietrich took the time to calm his breathing and change to a kneel before he dispensed with the pleasantries and got straight to the point.

"I am, Your Majesty! I am seeking permission for the order to deploy to the Bocuse to rescue our captain!"

"No."

Dietrich had made a passionate plea, but he froze when he heard the king's immediate reply.

"Ernesti and his silhouette knight were quite literally our strongest, most overwhelming force. The monsters defeated it and even threatened the rest of the fleet. From what I hear, these foes are far too fearsome."

Dietrich looked about to spit fire, but the king steadily met his gaze and calmly continued. "What would you be able to accomplish by yourselves? You should know his strength best. How many forces do you think we'd need to defeat something that could bring him down, and how many sacrifices should we be prepared for?"

"I am aware of that, more than anyone else," Dietrich replied. "But we are the Order of the Silver Phoenix! We started directly under the king's control, and we've even fought a behemoth! What reason do we have to fear some hardship now?!"

But Leotamus still shook his head. "I know that too. But if you

were to lose as well, we would permanently lose the means. Do you know what losing all this would mean to this kingdom? I cannot allow it."

Though their captain was gone, the rest of the order was still there. The *Izumo* was also still in good shape, as were the knightsmiths who had built it and had all the skills and knowledge they'd accumulated.

Certainly, no one could compare to Ernesti's power and level of achievement. However, they couldn't afford to bet everything to get him back—especially when no one was even sure they *could* bring him back.

Dietrich clenched his teeth, stifling any reply. He didn't have the means to refute the king's logic.

Leotamus's next words were gentle. "Given the circumstances, I'll forget this impropriety ever happened. But be careful not to do this in the future."

Dietrich suddenly stood up from the kneel he'd been maintaining.

He glared straight at the king. Now they were way past mere matters of impropriety; this could get him immediately executed with no arguments. However, Leotamus saw the strong will in those eyes and simply sighed.

"I…fought in the same silhouette knight as Ernesti during the behemoth battle," said Dietrich. "I lost my way as a knight because of my despair, but Ernesti was the one who brought me back."

The Royal Guards slowly came up behind Dietrich. They were ready to subdue him at any time should something happen. But they couldn't help but stop at his words.

"That is why I followed him! That hasn't changed after all this time. We will stomp over any difficulties in our way and bust through any walls blocking our path! That is the way of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Guairelinde and I would happily march to our dooms for him."

With that, Dietrich silently bowed, turned on his heel, and left.

"Wait. What are you planning to do?" The king didn't sound like he was trying to stop Dietrich; it was just a simple question.

"I'm taking a vacation," came the reply.

"What do you think you can do by yourself?"

Dietrich smiled boldly, his back still to Leotamus. "Oh no, Your Majesty. I am not alone."

His meaning laid right in front of Leotamus's eyes—his Second Company had come as well, parting the crowd of Royal Guards. Each and every one of them was just as big a fool as their leader. They were also breathing hard, and they nodded firmly.

"My goodness. Fools, all of you… You didn't need to take after your captain this much," Leotamus said with a sigh.

"I'm afraid we are all fanatics who have entwined our hobbies with our lives," Dietrich said. "Well then, Your Majesty. Please excuse us."

There was no stopping Dietrich after that.

"Wait!" Leotamus called out. After he received no response, he sighed again. "I thought this might happen. Without Ernesti, his subordinates will go wild. The silver phoenix is quite difficult to handle."

"If you order it, Your Majesty, we can go arrest him right now…" one of the Royal Guards loyally, but timidly, suggested.

The king slowly shook his head.

"Are you sure? This is quite the lenient treatment."

"There is meaning in it if Ernesti really is alive and they manage to bring him back. Also, with how they were acting, I do not know how successful our attempts to stop them would be."

That being said, he wasn't going to leave them to their devices. With a slight wave of the king's hand, a man appeared from the darkness.

"I didn't really want to do this, but…" Leotamus muttered. He then said something to the man, who melted into the darkness as silently as he'd appeared.

"I knew it. The Order of the Silver Phoenix really are going to go off on their own. Hurry with the Order of the Violet Swallow's restructuring. Whether they succeed or fail, we must have a second arrow ready."

A Royal Guardsman bowed and left with his orders.

The king was now alone, and he thought back to Dietrich's words. He had claimed they would happily wager their lives to save their captain. That rang true, and while Leotamus was not as much of a warrior as his predecessor, he was not totally ignorant of the ways of knights.

"My goodness, how selfish… I'm jealous."

Though he was truly troubled, Leotamus was smiling.

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With Dietrich—fresh off his outburst at the royal castle—in the lead, Second Company rushed back to Fort Orvesius. They headed straight for the workshop, where Dietrich found the boss just standing there in a daze and immediately threw a punch at the dwarf.

“Owww! You bastard, what was that for?!” the boss shouted.

After that punch to the side of his face, the boss fell into a fury. He wasn’t actually hurt given a dwarf’s racial toughness, but he wasn’t mild-mannered enough to ignore a punch out of nowhere. He immediately counterattacked and sent Dietrich flying.

“Mgyargh?!” yelped Dietrich.

There was a big power difference between Dietrich and the boss. Dietrich flew in a neat arc before crashing into the floor, but then he got up like nothing happened. Company commanders were trained at least enough to not drop from a dwarf’s punch.

“Guh… That was a really nice hit! Now’s not the time to sit in a daze though, boss. We’re heading back into the Bocuse. Get the *Izumo* ready to set sail!”

“What?! You…idiot. I thought we were done with that conversation. What would you be able to do even if you did go?” The boss reflexively loosened his clenched fist and averted his gaze.

However, Dietrich wouldn’t let him escape. “If you’re going to just sit there, boss, who will repair Ikaruga?”

“Huh?! Repair…Ikaruga?! That’s ridiculous! Think of the monsters he fought! There’s not even a trace left. What are you even thinking?”

It wasn’t as if he’d gone insane already, no matter how easy it was for Dietrich to get carried away. While Dee was filled with a baseless and reckless confidence, the boss started to back up, finally starting to feel creeped out.

“Hm… Just think about it, boss,” said Dietrich. “Do you really think our lord captain would allow such a natural enemy of silhouette knights to exist?”

“Sure wouldn’t. You’re right… He *did* fly off full of killing intent.” The answer came immediately. Indeed, given Ernesti’s fanatical love of silhouette knights and his normal behavior, it

was easy to imagine what he'd do.

"I mean, this is Ernesti we're talking about," Dietrich continued. "He's not the type to die obediently when he's killed. Even if he did die, he'd probably return from the afterlife for revenge. So as knights of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, we need to rush to his side."

"You're being ridiculous." Not even the boss knew how serious Dietrich was. But if he had to guess, the answer would be "completely serious"—not that Dee was totally sane at the moment.

"Ikaruga's broken, right, boss?"

"Most likely," the boss replied after a moment's thought. "We looked, but we couldn't find it. It probably melted, given its opponent. If not, it's certain that it was destroyed, at the very least."

He thought back to the scene he saw through the *Izumo*'s bridge window.

The sky had been saturated with acid clouds thanks to Ikaruga's battle with the bug-type monsters, so he hadn't been able to see it directly. But, the occasional explosions and falling monster carcasses had indicated the battle was still ongoing. When they'd gone searching after, though, they'd never found it. It was hard to believe it still retained its shape.

"And not even Ernesti would be able to repair Ikaruga by himself in the state it's likely in. Though there is the chance he does something else ridiculous," said Dietrich.

"If he does, he'll still be grieving for Ikaruga." The boss looked down at his hands. He'd been appointed captain of the ship, a role he wasn't used to. His real expertise was in smithing. There was only one thing he knew his hands could do. "You really believe in the kid that much?"

"Not really. I just *know*."

The boss slowly put his hand down to his waist, grabbing one of the tools any real knightsmith always had hanging on their belt: a hammer. It was the most basic tool for any knightsmith, as well as his origin. Starting tool in hand, the knightsmith stood.

"You sure can talk," the boss said. "Hmph. Letting you inspire me is a shame I'll take all the way to my grave, Dee."

He'd found his goal. It might come to nothing; it might be too late. But he knew what he had to do.

"Second Company will escort you there. Fighting is a knight

runner's job. Leave it to us," said Dietrich.

"But, like, how are you going to fight? They used wide-area acid clouds. Even flying silhouette knights don't stand a chance."

Despite the large problem standing in their way, Dietrich didn't flinch. "I know. That's why I want to use javelineers. High-speed guided long javelins should pierce through before being melted. Let's bring a whole bunch."

The boss groaned. When it came to fighting, Dietrich was not to be underestimated—that was for certain.

The bug-type monsters were agile, able to dodge almost all spellfire. But with missile javelins, which flew fast and could be guided, there might be a chance. Ikaruga had already shown they could be beaten as long as they could be hit.

As an aside, thanks to the appearance of the short spear version, the original missile javelin had been renamed "long javelin."

"We're really going to do it, aren't we?" the boss asked.

They'd found what they should be doing. They had an idea of how to do it. While it would be terribly difficult, all they had to do was take action. The boss clenched his fist tight and put it out. Dietrich nodded silently and bumped the dwarf's fist.

"Hmph. This is just great. We knightsmiths will fix Ikaruga! Hey, guys!" The boss started moving frenetically. The surrounding knightsmiths had been watching their exchange in a daze, but now they wore ferocious smiles. "Pack all of Ikaruga's spare parts you can into the *Izumo*!!! It's going to be in tatters, so plan on replacing basically everything but its hearts!"

It took a long while for the knightsmiths to wake up and say, "R-Right!!!"

The one standing before the knightsmiths was no longer the despondent man who had lost himself. He was blunt and rough, but he was the most skilled of all the Order of the Silver Phoenix's knightsmiths: David "Boss" Hepken.

With the boss back to his usual self, the rest of the knightsmiths wouldn't let themselves be outdone. Their vigor came back in a rush as they all worked toward a shared goal.

The boss crossed his arms as he watched the knightsmiths run about. "Still...there are other problems. Not only will we need time to get that far, we'll need quite a lot of supplies. What're you planning to do about that, Dee?"

"Well, we'll have to push it a little. Basically—"

“Sorry to interrupt you when you’re just getting fired up,” someone interrupted, “but I don’t appreciate being left out of this.”

“Yeah! Don’t just scheme by yourselves.”

A pair of voices came from behind, interrupting their conversation. Dietrich, shocked, turned around to the newcomers.

“Edgar?! Helvi?!” he exclaimed. “Why’re you here? I didn’t call for you.”

“Do you really think we wouldn’t notice a fuss this big?”

Dietrich scratched his head. “We weren’t really trying to leave you out. I don’t like saying this, but we’re basically going rogue here. If we manage to get Ernesti back, everything will work out for the order. I chose to stay with the order, so I have to go. But Edgar... You already have another posting. You shouldn’t have time to go along with this ridiculousness.”

“Hey! Are you trying to say that *I* do?!” the boss yelled.

“Ha ha! There’s no way I’d let you stay here, right? You’re the only one that can fix Ikaruga.”

That was why Dietrich was so set on having the boss join in. With him, the rest of the knightsmiths, and Second Company, they would stand a chance at succeeding.

“Then why was I left out?” Helvi asked.

“Well, wouldn’t Edgar call you over right away?” Dietrich replied, flinching in the face of Helvi’s displeasure.

“You’re right. We’ve finished negotiations. Even if I could get them to delay finalizing it a little, I don’t know if that would cover a long trip into the Bocuse. It might make them angry. Maybe even bust this whole deal.” Edgar didn’t deny what Dietrich said.

Dietrich decided to respond to this clear inconsistency with an exasperated look, completely ignoring his own actions. “You do know. So why? Are you an idiot, Edgar?”

“To think the day would come that Dee would call me an idiot... I’m a little moved.” Edgar shrugged, but he quickly turned serious. “Without Ernesti, I wouldn’t have been able to get this far, whether it be in Earl or Aldirad. In the first place, that recruitment wasn’t solely thanks to my own strength anyway.”

He’d always been an excellent knight runner. Even if he hadn’t met Ernesti, he’d eventually have been able to distinguish himself. Still, his meeting with the boy had certainly sped that up a great deal.

“In short, I owe him,” concluded Edgar. “I can’t leave the order without being able to repay that debt.”

“What the heck? I don’t think Ernesti would care about debts or whatever.”

“Maybe not,” Edgar agreed. “But that’s still my reason. No matter how Ernesti feels, I can’t have him disappearing while I still owe him.”

“That’s your reason, huh? Fair enough.” Dietrich was also doing this for almost entirely personal reasons. In the end, the Order of the Silver Phoenix was a collection of rowdy, childish, and selfish people who could only charge ahead on their own paths.

“We’re facing flying monsters, right? Then this would be Third Company’s time to shine,” said Helvi.

“Seriously, why am I surrounded by idiots? Oh, fine… Let’s go do something stupid together, then!” Dietrich looked around at the gathered elements of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. First Company, Second Company, Third Company, and the knightsmiths were all here and moving as one.

Their goal was to save Ernesti and Adeltrude. At this point, no one would float the idea of the pair being dead. Even if they were too late, they wouldn’t stop.

But of course, there was still a mountain of problems to tackle.

“So? It’ll take two months to get there. The journey will be long, and we’ll need a lot of food to sustain ourselves, not to mention spare parts and weaponry. We’ll need everything we can get, so how’re you planning to get it?” the boss asked.

“About that… I was thinking we’d stea—no, *borrow* what we need.” Dietrich gave a schemer’s smile.

The boss seemed exasperated, but he nodded. Even Edgar, who normally took on the role of stopping things like this, didn’t object. At this point, they were going to go as far as they needed.

“Stop, you stupid brats. Do you even know what you’re planning to do?” called out an unexpected voice.

The voice of this sudden third party reverberated through the workshop. Everyone was shocked by this familiar voice, and they turned in unison to its source to see several silhouette knights shaking the ground as they entered the area. The voice belonged to the one at the front of the group, having come through its megaphone.

The machine had silvery armor with black stripes on it. It was intimately familiar to everyone from the order: the Silvatiger. And its knight runner was—

“So all you hoodlums were scheming together. My word, I feared the worst, and I was right.”

Dietrich sucked in a shocked breath. “The previous king?!”

Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla, the former king. He disembarked from his machine, stopping everyone with a scowl as they tried to hurriedly kneel.

“Order of the Silver Phoenix! How could you defy His Majesty’s decree, and even fall so low as to engage in villainy?! I’m disappointed in you! Have you learned nothing from all the battles you’ve fought?!” The former king’s angry shout thundered through the otherwise silent workshop.

Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla was the Kingdom of Fremmevilla’s tenth king.

Fremmevilla prided themselves as a country of knights, and following that, they gave tremendous respect to martial accomplishments. But its people were also skilled at the written word, which they used to sing the praises of the great rulers who had brought the kingdom this far. While he’d given the throne over to his son, Leotamus, Ambrosius was still as dignified and imposing as ever.

He was also the order’s great benefactor for having acted as a patron for Ernesti—who could have ended up a dangerous element—founding the Order of the Silver Phoenix and using Ernie’s talents well.

His loud rebuke poured cold water on the group as they were about to go wild. In the span of a breath, their momentum had been shattered. The workshop fell into silence, as no one had any response. They simply looked down at the floor.

“I didn’t create this order for you to waste your time recklessly with no plan.” Ambrosius stepped forward, causing everyone to shrink further.

Only Dietrich firmed up his will and stepped forward. He’d been the one to initiate all this. “You are correct, Your Majesty. However, we must go to rescue our knight captain!”

“And that led to the crimes you were plotting, I see. Then I ask you this: Do you really think such a haphazard sortie would succeed?”

Dietrich gave a pained grunt; he had no comeback. He knew

best that what they were doing was reckless and absurd, after all.

Ambrosius snorted approvingly, and after a breath, he looked over the group, starting with Dietrich. Then, his expression grew grim as he said, “When a knight heads off to battle, they must first make their success certain. So! You must start with laying the groundwork! It is deplorable to see you bumble about!”

“As you say, we have no exc— Huh? Your...Majesty?” Dietrich had expected to be ordered to stop this attempt, so he raised his head in surprise. Ambrosius was making a toothy trickster’s grin. This was like something his grandson, Emris, would do. Though it was probably more like Emris took after him.

“Listen, knights! We will be going on the offense! Our destination: Bocuse, the forest of monsters, and an extremely formidable enemy. Just a single trip is nowhere near enough to uncover all the forest’s dark secrets. However, it’s certain that it hides something capable of taking down Ernesti. Being hasty and hot-blooded will only sink our chances at victory!” Ambrosius swept his gaze over a dumbfounded David, Edgar, Helvi, and Dietrich.

“So you are the ringleaders of this scheme.” As soon as he said that, Ambrosius walked up to the group and dropped into a cross-legged sit. Right on the ground. As a member of royalty. He ignored their shocked looks. “Everyone, sit where you like. We’re going to have a lecture.”

The entire order was confused, unable to see what he was getting at.

“This is war, which means you all will be generals. It doesn’t matter how many soldiers you have—anyone who starts a war is a general. You’re going to go retrieve that little troublemaker, aren’t you?” Ambrosius smiled. “It will be a long and difficult journey, but it must be done. Still, you are all young and immature. Allow this old man to teach you a little something.”

Dietrich and Edgar shot each other looks, but they quickly turned back to the former king and stepped up, bowing.

“Please!”

“Heh heh heh... Still, an offensive into the Bocuse, eh? It’s going to be a big fight—I’m looking forward to it. Ten years ago, I’d have been leading from the front.”

“We wouldn’t stop you,” Edgar and Dietrich said in unison.

“Ha ha!” Ambrosius cackled. “Going wild is a young man’s

game. Also, I can't do as I please with His Majesty so close. But you guys! You barged into the castle and openly defied the king! Because of your recklessness, His Majesty's having a hard time taking the reins. Fools."

"Uh... My apologies, but..."

Once again, neither Edgar nor Dietrich had a response. Ambrosius brushed their silence off and took out a bundle of paper. "I know what you want to say. But remember this: A king cannot allow his people to act thoughtlessly, and he cannot pardon rash behavior. Did you really think he wasn't doing anything?"

The pair asked for permission before picking up the papers. It didn't take long for their eyes to widen.

"This is...a plan for a second expedition force?!"

"Very few people know about it. Did you really think His Majesty would just abandon Ernesti? You were too hasty. But it's also true that this failure really put a damper on a lot of people's enthusiasm. The ties between our kingdom and the Bocuse aren't something that can be undone in a single trip. In the end, this shouldn't be rushed." The former king stroked his beard.

Dietrich looked up from the papers. "I'm so ashamed, I didn't even think of how His Majesty was feeling. But we don't have much time. We can't just sit and wait for the next expedition."

Ambrosius saw that Dietrich would not bend, and he gave a wry smile. "Didn't I just tell you not to rush forward for nothing? The Order of the Violet Swallow returned, so enough time has passed already. What need is there for such panic?"

Two months had already passed since Ernesti fell. If they truly believed he was still alive, then it would be better to take time to prepare rather than try to save a few days out of impatience.

"Both silhouette knights and humans get hungry. If you desire victory, then you need to prepare. If you're going, you must win—and to win, we must build the foundation now." Ambrosius smiled as he spoke. It was the face of the vicious battlefield leader who was once hailed as a lion.

"Ernesti's importance needn't be said at this point. We cannot lose him. However, all of you are also too precious to lose. You are this kingdom's treasures. You cannot afford to just go off to battle." The former king's expression softened. "No amount of preparation is too much to ensure success. Also, if you need supplies, ask anyone who has them or those who seem like they

would help you. Ernesti is egotistical and whimsical, but he's still pretty good at negotiating."

While Ernesti was a hobbyist, he was also the great lord of presentations. He only talked about what he loved, but he also spared no effort to convince those he talked to that the effort was worth it. His overwhelming passion had moved many people.

But the problem was that no one else could negotiate with nobles or royalty as fearlessly as he had.

"R-Right... Um, it certainly reveals how great our lord captain was," said Dietrich.

"Indeed. Normally, I'd start with beating these lessons into your brain, but...well, we're short on time, no?" The former king's meaningful question was pointed to a certain elderly man who had come with Silvatiger in a separate silhouette knight before disembarking and kneeling himself.

A stir spread through the order members present. They were very familiar with his name.

"Duke Dixgard..."

Former Duke Cnut Dixgard raised his head and slowly shook it. "I handed my title over to my son the moment His Majesty did. Right now, I am just your average elderly man."

Despite what he said, his presence was definitely not that of a decrepit old man. He seemed sharp enough to bisect any opponent. Nobody would doubt him if he claimed to still be active.

"As His Majesty King Ambrosius said, with the loss of Ernesti, the desire to spread into the Bocuse has been mostly crushed. Personally...I don't think that is a bad thing. It is probably too soon for such notions." The former duke was mostly in line with Ambrosius. However, he still had more to say. "But that is only for now. Ernesti will surely be important for when the time is ripe. Make sure to bring him back. I will get you everything you need in order to do so. I promised, after all."

Dietrich and Edgar had somewhat stupid looks on their faces. After a while, Helvi and the boss (though it was hard to notice the changes in his expression) nodded.

"So you think Ernesti is alive too, Your Lordship?"

"Well, I don't believe something like that would actually be able to kill him," Dixgard replied. "So he lost his silhouette knight? He fell somewhere in the Bocuse? So what? That boy is

probably surviving right now on the blood and meat of monsters."

It was an awful statement, but everyone from the order agreed heartily because they could easily imagine it.

Ikaruga was just the manifestation of Ernesti's power. While it was certainly the greatest of them, it wasn't all he had. Ernesti himself housed an indomitable will and fearsome power within his small body.

Everyone here knew the kind of momentum he could generate when he had his eyes on a goal.

Now, another person appeared from behind the former duke. "I will lend my strength as well, though it might not be much."

"You too, Marquis Serrati?"

Marquis Joachim Serrati's territory was fairly close to the Great Bocuse Forest and was a large breadbasket that helped keep Fremmevilla fed. He'd spent a long time dealing with the Bocuse, and he also was on the side of being cautious about invading it.

"He's done a lot for me; I'd like to repay him, if only a little. Also...there's someone else I need to save."

He had something different to seek from this expedition.

Adeltrude had gone missing along with Ernesti. Her relationship to the marquis wasn't widely known among the order, so this did spark some confusion. However, even if they didn't understand the reason behind it, his help was very much needed.

"Order of the Silver Phoenix." With these reliable allies by his side, the former king spoke to the order members whose morale was greatly bolstered. "I know what meaning this battle holds. However, the enemy is the forest itself. There are times when you must fight as a warrior instead of a knight. Still, do *not* die! Live, and struggle! Never fall until you grasp victory and bring it home. Never forget that."

Dietrich and the rest of the knight runners all nodded in unison. With that, they were once again set to head into the great forest.

◆

Some time passed after that, and now a large fleet was parked outside of Fort Orvesius.

With the support of two famous nobles—Dixgard and Serrati

—they were able to prepare an amount of supplies equal to the first expedition's. With the Order of the Silver Phoenix's three companies and the flying silhouette knights from both houses, they also had a good amount of combat strength. On top of that, the *Izumo* had been stuffed full of the supplies already in the fort. It was now the order itself, basically.

"I never expected that you people would be coming with us," Dietrich said, his surprise evident. Arranged before him were knight runners from another order—members of the Order of the Indigo Falcon, dispatched by the former king.

"We've gotten enough battle and maneuver training in these machines. We won't drag you down," replied Nora Frykberg, the representative of their order. They were originally spies, but given the nature of flying silhouette knights, they were deemed necessary for this venture. Thanks to that, they were given priority access to Twediannes and had been training in them.

"Of course you won't. I saw how you fought in that last battle, after all. I wouldn't doubt your prowess now. I'll be counting on you." Dietrich had infiltrated a fortress with them during the war in Kuscheperka. Though they were somewhat different from normal knights, he knew their strength well, and he truly thought of them as reliable as he went to shake Nora's hand.

So, with the Order of the Silver Phoenix as the core, a new fleet was formed.

◆

Ambrosius stood in front of the gathered knights in battle dress.

Though it had only been for a short time, he'd been teaching these knights. They were all elites who had been through tough battles, but their expressions were now filled with more confidence and enthusiasm than ever before.

The former king nodded, satisfied, and proclaimed loudly, "Go, Silver Phoenix. Bring that selfish brat home!"

"As you will!"

So, with help from a great many people, the Order of the Silver Phoenix set off. Their destination: the Great Bocuse Forest. They headed toward battle, believing that Ernesti and Adeltrude were still alive. There was no telling what difficulties lay ahead of them.

However, none of them were the slightest bit afraid. The *Izumo* flew at the head of the formation as they went.

Chapter 55: Encounter in the Forest of Monsters

Rewinding time back several months:

Ikaruga had attempted to defeat the red monster that served as the leader of the bug-type monsters, but it tragically fell.

As if chasing after Ikaruga, which just barely managed to get to the ground safely, the bug-type monster's corpse fell as well. The landing impact crushed its body, spreading what was left of its fluids all around it. The monster's strengthening magic had vanished after its death, rendering its body brittle. The contents spilled out easily and instantly aerosolized.

The acid cloud formed rapidly, swallowing up Ikaruga. Now that it had lost all of its Magius Jet Thrusters and thus its unrivaled mobility, even Ikaruga couldn't get away unscathed.

"This is the worst! I need to get out quick, or this stuff's gonna melt me."

Ernesti tried to have Ikaruga run, but it fell to its knees after a few steps.

"Oh no... The crystal tissue!"

He'd closed the intake system to protect himself. However, it was impossible to completely close a silhouette knight off from its environment. The acid cloud freely worked its way inside the machine, and Ikaruga's crystal tissue was the first victim.

All Eastern Type modern silhouette knights, including Ikaruga, had increased strength thanks to strand-type crystal tissue, but the overall durability of the crystal tissue hadn't improved. It was too much to expect them to continue working while in a corrosive atmosphere.

Even worse, loss of crystal tissue didn't just mean the loss of Ikaruga's mobility. After all, the machine's mana pool came from its crystal tissue too.

The corrosive air caused Ikaruga to both lose muscle as well as chunks of its massive mana pool, complete with the mana still in it. He was in the worst situation possible, exposing the weaknesses of silhouette knights that he had never even thought of.

Unable to even stand up, Ikaruga could only make creaking noises as its outer skin started peeling off in tatters. It started losing its capacity frame now, further reducing its mana.

The situation was worsening at an accelerating rate. Losing mana meant problems for the Physical Boost spell strengthening Ikaruga.

What was worse, Ikaruga's intake was shut off to protect from the corrosive air. It had lost the overwhelming mana supply that raised it to the peak of strength.

Ikaruga's disintegration did not stop. The strongest silhouette knight had already lost all mobility. All it could do was sit and wait to completely dissolve.

"I can't move. In fact, I doubt Ikaruga is still in its original shape. *And* escaping's not an option either."

Ernie was surrounded by corrosive air. He didn't know that it was also poisonous, but even if it wasn't, he'd be burned by acid if he stepped out.

When the collapse reached the cockpit, his life would end.

Ernesti heaved a long sigh. "So this is it." He slowly sank back in his seat.

Now that he was surrounded by acid and had no choice but to wait for Ikaruga's end, there was no point in struggling.

"Agh, shoot. I'm going to break my promise with my mom. We finally managed to build the Wing Carrier, and now it seems like I won't be able to show it to her."

The sudden recollection caused Ernie to furrow his brow. He started to think of any possibility he could survive, no matter how slim the chance was.

However, reality was harsh.

A weird noise came from some part of the silhouette knight. The Physical Boost spell was finally weakening, and the acid's corrosion was spreading. There was no more leeway; he was likely down to the final piece of armor protecting him.

"So it's finally all over... It's too bad, isn't it, Ikaruga? I wanted to keep going, more and more, forever. I wanted to go wild with you more," Ernie muttered, caressing the keyboard in front of him with a slight smile.

"At least... At least I got to meet my end with you. I mean, I've already died once. Now, though, I get to die in the cockpit of a giant robot. That's lucky."

Dying in the cockpit of a humanoid robot was always going to

be how this crazy mecha otaku met his end. It just happened to be now instead of later. It wasn't a matter of preparation or resolve; in a sense, he'd always been aiming for this.

Ernesti Echevalier had lived his life with humanoid robots, and that was how he would end.

But...

Even if Ernie had given up, there was someone who hadn't. Someone who never would, when it came to him.

As if to pierce through his melancholy thoughts, multiple sources of light flew in from the sky—spellfire from a silhouette arms. These bolts went off as soon as they hit the ground, exploding according to their script. The overspells' explosions caused shock waves that bored a hole in the cloud.

The bombardment continued, multiple bolts striking over and over in quick succession. A bad shot could have blown Ikaruga away as well, but whoever was shooting didn't seem to care.

Finally, all of the acid cloud around Ikaruga had been dispersed, leaving a wide hole. A mermaid knight made a beeline for this clear area.

"Give! Ernie! Baaack!"

It was Adeltrude in her Sylphianne. She was firing her machine's Magius Jet Thrusters at full blast and spewing ether out of her silhouette knight's Etheric Levitator to rapidly descend. It was as if she was trying to crash into the ground.

"I finally found yooouuu! GOOO!!!"

As soon as she caught sight of the almost completely wrecked Ikaruga, she slammed on the brakes. She also started supplying her machine's Etheric Levitator with more ether and spread the Sylphianne's fin stabilizers to increase its air resistance. That allowed her to adjust its speed so that the Sylphianne would just graze the acid cloud before ascending again. But before it went back up, it shot out its towing anchors.

The anchors flew forth, trailed by shiny silver lines. The tips were pincered, and they responded to Addy's commands, flying freely through the air toward Ikaruga. They then bit into the now brittle armor of the silhouette knight, firmly latching on.

As the Sylphianne ascended, it started to reel in the anchor. With that, Ikaruga was lifted up and brought quickly out of danger.

Addy wore a satisfied smile, but it quickly clouded. "Ah—Aaah?! No!!!"

It had seemed to be going well, but that trend did not continue.

She had indeed cleared the area of the acid cloud. However, she hadn't gotten rid of all the acid; a trace amount still remained in the cleared area. Though it was thin, it was enough to melt the fragile silver nerve connecting the towing anchor.

Addy saw the silver nerves snap one by one, and she had the Sylphianne twist, rapidly turning around. At the same time, it ejected ether from its Etheric Levitator to descend once again. That was when the final wire snapped, dropping Ikaruga.

"You're coming with me!!!"

At max acceleration, the Sylphianne charged into Ikaruga's body. It managed to connect before the stricken silhouette knight fell into the acid cloud for a second time and grabbed on firmly. Addy continued on, trying to rise to a safe height, but...

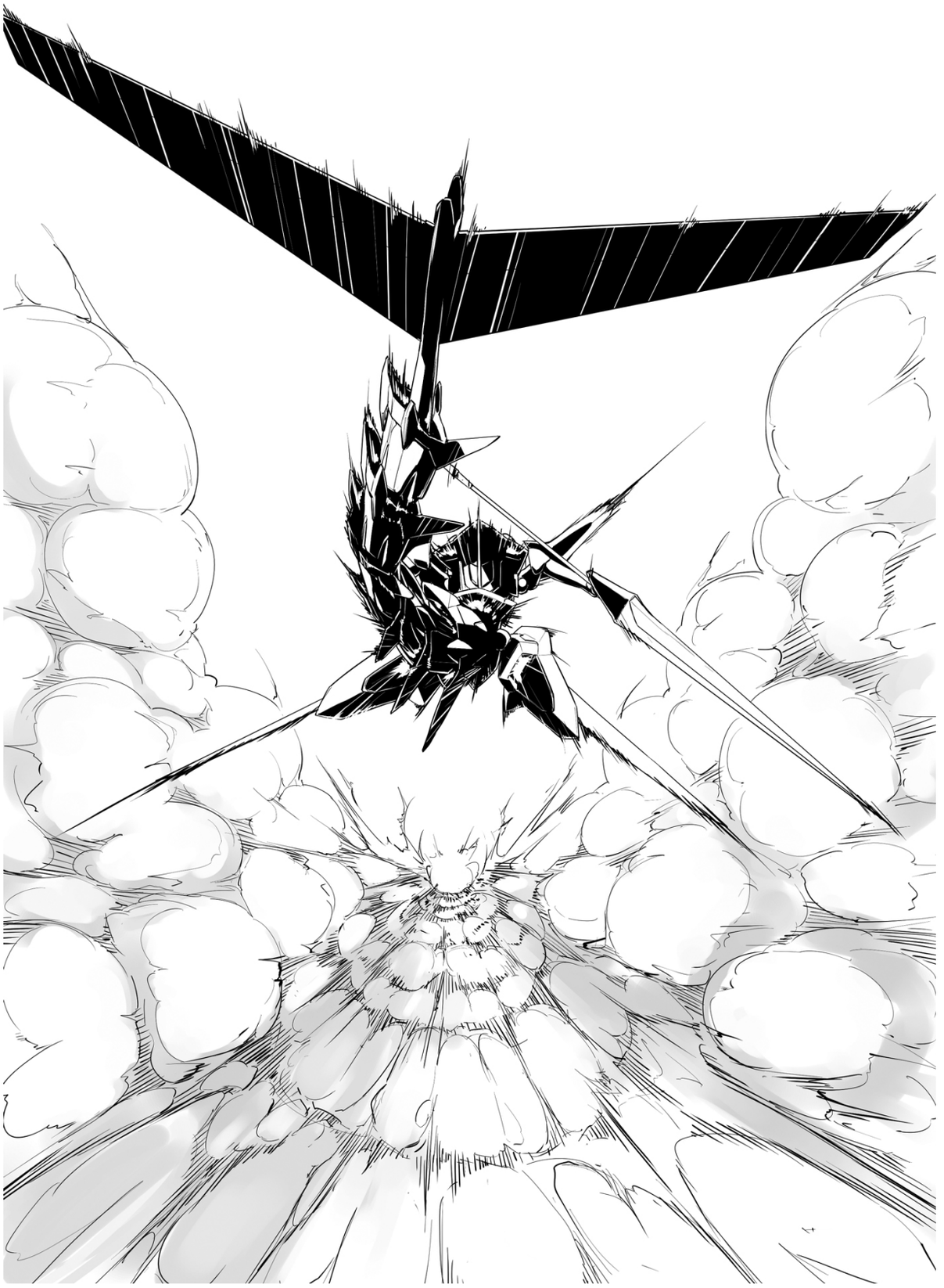
"What? I'm not going up?! Why?! Just a little more, Sylly! Come on!"

They were still descending. The Sylphianne would not stop its fall.

There was no way for her to know, but the reason for this lay in one of the defects of the windine style—though it might be better to call it a defect of the Etheric Levitator itself. The principle behind the machine was that enough high-purity ether would create a Levitating Field, which would allow the machine to float. Rapidly injecting, then ejecting the ether in quick succession would cause the ether density inside the device to become unstable, making it impossible to build a strong enough Levitating Field.

Without the help of a Levitating Field, the Sylphianne could not stay in the air.

Luckily, it had accelerated quite a bit to catch up to Ikaruga, so it managed to fly out of the acid cloud's range. However, they were far from safe. After all, they were still descending. They were already almost on the ground. Flying silhouette knights couldn't ascend with only the help of their thrusters and fin stabilizers. Addy prepared herself as she watched the ground get closer and closer.



She had the Sylphianne shift to get a better hold on Ikaruga. Then, she controlled her breathing. “Please, Sylly! Protect Ernie!”

She then activated all the ether suppliers left inside her machine, rapidly increasing the amount of ether in the levitator. Then, the Sylphianne twisted so it was flying upside down.

“Sorry!” Addy shouted before activating her gear ejector. Instantly, the cockpit broke apart and pressurised air launched her into the sky.

She’d been given a hateful amount of training on the device before being able to pilot it. Right away, she spread the Descendrad’s arms and caught the air. Then, she stabilized herself and looked for the Sylphianne.

At this point, the Sylphianne made contact with the ground. Because it was flying upside down, it protected Ikaruga as it crashed. Its momentum carried it through trees, snapping them in twain while gouging a furrow out of the ground and throwing up a dust cloud. Armor was peeled away from its body and crystal tissue was scattered as an unbearable noise reverberated through the area.

It had crashed into the ground with some force; it wouldn’t have been weird for the Sylphianne to be crushed to pieces. However, in the end, both the Sylphianne and Ikaruga had stopped with both more or less whole.

The Levitating Field had been lost due to unstable ether, but the final forceful injection of ether had returned a small amount of Levitating Field strength to the machine. This had served as a cushion, greatly lessening the damage on the Sylphianne.

Still, its slide along the ground had acted like a file. The damage was deep; it had basically been destroyed. Things were especially bad on the upper half’s back. Most likely, even the area’s inner skeleton was damaged.

The bottom half wasn’t untouched either. Rainbow-colored light was spilling out in places, as the impact had damaged the Etheric Levitator, causing ether to leak out. With that, the Sylphianne could no longer take to the sky.

But in its arms, Ikaruga’s torso was safe.

◆

Addy used Aero Thrust to travel through the air to her Sylphianne. Getting out of the armor was too much trouble, so

she just ran to Ikaruga as she was.

She was about to climb up to the cockpit, but she was shaken when she realized how seriously Ikaruga had been damaged. Pretty much all of its outer skin and even crystal tissue was gone, revealing the metal innards. It looked like a corpse exposed by the rain.

She shook her head to get rid of the tragic scene she was imagining. Her goal wasn't Ikaruga itself, so it didn't matter how tattered the machine was. Since the solidly made torso was left intact, its contents should be safe.

As soon as she finished climbing up to Ikaruga, she started banging on the warped armor. "Ernie! Ernie! Are you okay?! You alive?! Please, answer me! Aaagh! This is in the way!"

It didn't take long for her to tire of yelling. She suddenly pulled out her gun-like staff and started slinging magic. The now-brittle torso armor was blasted away with a single fireball, leaving behind a smoking black hole.

The sunlight filtering through to the forest floor illuminated the inside of the cockpit. Addy peeked inside to see Ernie deep within, curled up in his seat with his eyes closed. At first glance, he seemed to be unhurt.

Addy leaned forward to confirm that he was alive. "Please be alive, Ernie... Werp?!"

Her face ran into something elastic and clear before she could get there.

It didn't take long for Addy to realize what it was: a casting of Air Suspension. Ernie had created the spell, which was good at supporting movement. She knew what its presence here meant.

Addy stuck to the compressed ball of air, and slowly it started to sag. As she was sitting on it, Ernie opened his eyes and started to sluggishly move.

"Urgh... That shaking was awful. Is that...Addy? So you saved me. Still, we were about to be turned into mincemeat...weren't...okay."

Before he could finish his line, Addy jumped into a hug. She didn't hold back her strength, eliciting a grunt of pain from Ernie.

"Thank goodness you're alive, Ernie. You're alive! Ernie! Ernie!"

"W-Wait, that hurts. I'm fine, don't worry. So please, let up a little... I'm dying..."

Addy was crying while holding tightly onto Ernie. Every squeeze made him croak like a squished frog. In the end, it took

some time for her to calm down.

"Whew, I thought you were going to finish me off..."

"Ugggh... Ernie... Ernie... I thought you were done for! I made it... Urgh... Heh heh heh, so soft and smooth, feels so nice..."

Though she'd loosened up, it seemed Addy was not willing to completely let go of Ernie. She maintained her hold on him while caressing him and rubbing her cheek against him. Every once in a while, a droplet fell onto his cheek. Ernie hugged her back, stroking her hair to try and calm her down.

"It's fine. I'm alive. You saved me, Addy."

"Yeah..."

"But, Addy, I asked you to protect the ship. So you ignored me."

"But!" Addy loosened her hold so she could look Ernie in the eye. "I may have left the ship, but you were alone, Ernie! And I saw Ikaruga fall..."

The conversation seemed to remind her of what she'd seen, as she started to lose her composure once again, tears overflowing.

A troubled look flashed over Ernie's face. "And you saved me thanks to that. But one wrong move, and you would have been in danger too, Addy."

"That doesn't matter! I'd rather die with you than be left behind in a world without you, Ernie!"

Finally, Ernie had to let out a long sigh. "I guess I can't be careless with my own life, then. I'll need to watch out from now on."

"That's right! I'll never forgive you if you don't!"

Finally, Ernie leaned up to Addy's ear and softly whispered, "Thank you, Addy."

Then, he kissed her on the cheek.

Addy instantly stopped crying, but she instead looked extremely unsatisfied. She fixed Ernie with a steady stare, silently petitioning for something.

"Uh...?"

"That's not enough. I won't let you go until you give me a better, longer kiss."

Ernie adopted a put-upon smile, but he brought his face closer to hers and plugged her mouth.

◆

After all that, they finally went outside and took one more silent look at the two ruined machines.

One had been destroyed after crashing into the ground, while the other had lost its original shape after being mostly melted by acid. Each machine had given everything it had to either protect its pilot or to fulfill its orders.

Eventually, Addy turned back, casting her gaze to their surroundings. A clear line through the thick vegetation was left along the ground where Sylphianne slid. Other than that, it was just endless, undulating forest. The glory of human civilization was nowhere to be found here.

“Now what do we do…?” Addy muttered.

Now that the battle was over, the skies were quiet once again. The fleet had likely already left; they couldn’t imagine it would come back at the risk of encountering the bug-type monsters again. In other words, they were stranded in the Great Bocuse Forest.

Once that realization dawned on her, Addy got the chills. Up until now, no matter what battlefield they were in, they’d been with their fellow order members from Laihiala Academy. They’d never been so isolated.

Silence reigned for a long while as Ernie stared fixedly upon Ikaruga’s wreck.

Addy walked over and was about to call out to him, but after some hesitation, she closed her mouth. When she thought of the feelings and effort Ernie had put into making Ikaruga, she realized that nothing she could say would help.

“Heh heh! Heh heh heh… Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!” he laughed.

Addy was shocked. It seemed to her that losing Ikaruga had done a number on Ernie.

However, what he said next seemed to come completely out of nowhere. “Ah ha ha! Ha ha! Okay… Yeah, let’s break it all. That bug monster most likely obtained such strong acid to melt through monster shells. It’s quite literally the natural enemy of silhouette knights. Such a thing is unneeded in any world I live in.”

Depending on the listener, that line could have sounded terribly arrogant. However, since coexistence was not an option, one side had to disappear. There was no doubt he’d take steps to be certain his side would be the one remaining.

“We need to weed out every last one, no matter what…but

look at the state Ikaruga and the Sylphianne are in. We're severely lacking in combat strength. This is bad. The first thing we need to do is repair this." Ernie was muttering to himself, counting out their goals on his fingers.

Then, he started to take action. "Now, I wonder who will be faster? Will they return home and come back to get us first? Or will we manage to fix this by ourselves before then? What do you think, Addy?"

"Hwuh? U-Um... I dunno. Getting dumped in this harsh situation was way too sudden."

"True... We have far too little information on this place. Let's start with scouting out the area and securing our safety. Addy, gather up everything we can bring with us."

"Uh, huh? O-Okay." Addy was flabbergasted, seeing Ernie move on and give instructions so efficiently while showing no sign of his earlier sentimentality. His constructiveness in the face of these problems was so striking that it made her worried about whether he really had a firm grasp on reality.

"Aren't you scared, Ernie?" she asked. "We're right in the middle of the Bocuse, you know? We have no idea how many monsters are out there."

"Yes, this is scary," Ernie agreed. "I'm very scared of dying, forcing us to leave Ikaruga and the Sylphianne to rot in this place."

It seemed he was worried about something completely different. Goals were fundamentally different for a fanatic whose every start and end point went back to silhouette knights.

"So let's apply what we learned in school," said Ernie. "What are our guidelines when we're separated from our order? What survival skills do we have? We've practiced a lot, haven't we?"

"We never considered getting lost in the middle of the Bocuse with just the two of us," Addy commented.

They'd been thrown into the middle of a forest teeming with monsters, their silhouette knights had been destroyed, and there was basically no chance of their friends saving them. Any normal person would think they were just waiting for death.

But would these two stop out of despair? Would they capitulate to their suffering? Would they freeze in fear?

"Also, what are the problems we'll face as we try to repair Ikaruga? I tried thinking about it, but I came up with so many huge issues that I don't know where to start. But..." Ernie

smoothly drew his gun-like staff from his hip. He looked at the dully shining blade, and his grin deepened. “Problems that can be solved by cutting or blasting them away aren’t really problems at all. Don’t you agree?”

“It’s scary how positive you’re being, Ernie,” Addy muttered.

Once again, Ernie started to take action.

The end of a robot was really just the opportunity for a new one. Right now, it was time to start taking steps toward reviving the beloved machines that had given everything for their sakes, even though the road ahead would be fraught with endless hardships. Once he had an objective in his sights, Ernesti Echevalier would never stop. After all, his fanaticism was so strong that even death wouldn’t stop him.

“So, let’s start with securing our livelihoods,” said Ernie. “We need to find a place we can use as a home.”

That was when a huge shock ran through Addy’s system. “Th-That means… Wait… Is this the sweet life of my dreams?! Cohabiting with Ernie?! I think my motivation’s gone through the roof!”

In the end, Addy wasn’t one to talk. She was just as big a weirdo as Ernie.

◆

After that, the pair pored over every inch of Ikaruga’s and the Sylphianne’s wrecks, stripping all the usable supplies and materials they could.

It was convention to have silhouette knights stocked with some supplies in case of emergency. Luckily, Ikaruga was no exception. In the Sylphianne’s case, all the supplies were already out, ejected along with Addy in her Descendrad. They had a small amount of medicine, some blankets, simple cookware, and some rations. There was no need to worry about food for the moment.

The next thing to confirm was their combat potential. It needn’t be said that their silhouette knights were totaled. Given that, the greatest asset they had was Addy’s Descendrad. Ernie looked at the silhouette gear with jealousy, so Addy was about to hand it over, but…

“You should keep using it, Addy. After all, it won’t fit me…”

It wasn’t as if Descendrads were customized completely to

their wearer, but they *were* made to match the intended pilot's basic build. Ernie was outstandingly small, so if he'd wanted to use one, it would have to be specially made. Still, the sad look on his face was worse than when he'd lost Ikaruga.

At any rate, for weapons he had two Winchesters as well as a Wire Anchor attached to his waist. Though he couldn't help but think he didn't have enough machines, he quickly shook his head to get rid of the thought.

"For now, we need to secure a source of water," Ernie said. "If I remember correctly, there should be a river nearby."

They packed their luggage together and fastened it to the Descendrad. With the strength of a silhouette gear, lugging around their luggage would pose no problem. The Descendrad was made to be useful in exactly this situation in the first place, and they were now finding out firsthand how well it was designed.

So, with their preparations done, the pair walked off into the forest.

◆

Not wanting to tangle with the undergrowth, Ernie was leaping between trees and rocks while sniffing deeply. He'd guessed the general direction he needed to go before searching, and now he saw rustling in front of him.

"There you are," he said. "I won't let you get away."

He was looking at a beast much like a rabbit that was darting deftly between the trees. He launched himself forward with an Aero Thrust, shooting off like an arrow.

The beast was pretty fast, but not enough to escape from the prince of high-speed mobility. Ernie passed it by, cutting its neck with Sonic Blade as he did so. Blood gushed forth in a fountain from the creature as it fell, just as he'd planned. Now that he'd gotten his prey, he hung it from a tree to drain the blood. He then repeated this a few more times, collected his kills, and turned back, satisfied.

His kills hung from his gunstaff as he dashed lightly through the forest. He left the dense vegetation for a more rocky spot.

"I'm back, Addy. I got dinner for us," Ernie said.

"Okaaay. Welcome back, *honey*!" As soon as she heard his voice, Addy came out of the tent. She was in weirdly high spirits.

“I’ll get to butchering it right away. Would you prepare the fire please, Ernie?”

“Right… By the way, Addy, why do you look like you’re having so much fun?”

“I mean, I’m waiting at home for you to come back, Ernie… Of course I— Hweh heh heh heh heh heh…” Addy interrupted herself, breaking out in a creepy giggle.

“This is just a temporary shelter while we survey the area and stabilize our situation. Wait, did you think we would just settle down here?”

Ernie doubted whether Addy had her priorities straight. She might have nodded, saying that she understood, but anyone could see she was excited. In the end, Ernie decided to leave her alone for now, since this was better than her being depressed.

Ernie handed over his catches before producing some dried branches he’d gathered. They could make as much fire as they wanted using magic, but making all the heat they needed that way would be both meaningless and take too much effort. So, they needed good old-fashioned fuel.

◆

A week had already passed since they were stranded in the forest.

It hadn’t taken them long to find a river after setting off from their silhouette knights. Then, they’d traveled upstream while setting up temporary bases and hunting food when needed.

Addy’s Descendrad was serving as their base. It was possible to lock its joints and use it as a frame by draping a tarp over it to use as a tent. It was perfect, as all they had to do was fold up the cloth and they could leave.

“I know you have the Descendrad, but I feel guilty for making you carry everything all the time, Addy,” said Ernie.

“Don’t worry about it! This one’s like our house right now, isn’t it? I’ll…make sure to properly protect our home!” Addy’s reasoning was bizarre, but she was overflowing with motivation, so Ernie decided to let it go. Being motivated was important.

Today’s meal was grilled meat and a stew made of mashed-up nuts and vegetables. Since they were getting as much of their food as they could from the forest, every meal was pretty much the same.

“The fact that there are edible creatures nearby saved us,” said Ernie.

“It’s too bad, though. We don’t have a lot of seasonings, so the best we can do is grill them with herbs.”

They weren’t in the most comfortable of environments, but Addy was doing her best. Her cooking skills were actually quite impressive. She wore a broad grin for some reason, watching Ernie as he ate, but he let that go as well.

Such was the nature of their somewhat aimless journey.

The humans were alone in a meandering prison of natural threats. Their sphere of safety was overwhelmingly small, and it felt like they’d be swallowed up by the trees if they let their guards down.

Fremmevillan knights were taught how to survive in a forest during the course of their education. But even that didn’t cover a situation with no end in sight.

Still, they were adapting to their new circumstances. They were displaying none of the sorrow people would usually have if they were trapped in such a terrible place. Neither were they in despair at the countless threats to their lives. If that were enough to break his will, Ernesti Echevalier would never have gotten to where he was. He always went too far, after all.

Furthermore, both of them were blessed with great strength. All they had to do was watch out for threats over a certain level—any monsters duel-class or above, really. So, they were actually able to be surprisingly bold in their choices.

◆

“Mrm… It’s morning.”

The first thing that Addy saw when she opened her eyes was the blurry tent cover that was draped over her Descendrad. It was basically only good for keeping out the elements, but it was still their precious “home” for the moment.

The surroundings were getting brighter as the rising sun started to illuminate the area. It was yet another morning in the forest. Addy shook off her remaining sleepiness and immediately grabbed on to the person next to her.

There was only one other person with her in this feared Great Bocuse Forest: Ernesti. Addy grinned; Ernie usually woke up before her, but the reverse did sometimes happen. Those times

were some of her favorites.

She could see Ernesti's sleeping face in the light of the dawn sun. He'd always looked young, and the defenselessness of sleep only enhanced that. He was the same age as her, but he was still as small as always, fitting perfectly inside her arms.

"Eee hee hee hee! Aah, Ernie is so cute..."

Her fingers gently traced his face, gliding along his cheek. It felt soft, smooth, and youthfully bouncy. Her expression devolved into a slovenly grin, but she quickly pulled that back.

"But he always pushes himself if I take my eyes off him for even a moment."

That was how they'd gotten stuck in this forest. Everything he did always had a sort of danger about it. Saying that he was always straightforward with what he wanted might have *sounded* nice, but in his case, those desires were often dangerous. Because he was rash and capable, he was hard to deal with. Though in most cases things worked out, even a slight failure had the potential to kill him instantly—like this whole adventure.

"Yeah, I need to make sure not to let him go alone next time." With that decision made, she peered at Ernie's sleeping profile again. In the end, stopping Ernie never even crossed her mind. It would generally be impossible, after all.

While she gazed at Ernie's sleeping face, she could feel an urge rise within her. She brought her face closer while being careful not to wake him up. She could hear the faint sounds of his sleepy breathing, and feeling it on her face made pleasant shivers run up her spine. It tickled enough that she thought she might burst out laughing, but she withstood it, carefully got even closer, and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Mm, Ernie is so soft..."

As if it were only natural, she slowly lifted her upper body. Then, she approached his lips, moist and plump like a fresh fruit...

But she was stopped as something grabbed hold of her cheeks. Addy opened her eyes slightly to see the exasperated face of a very awake Ernie.

"Good morning, Addy. So? What were you about to do while I was asleep?"

"Good morning, Ernie. I'll wake you up with a kiss, so feel free to go back to sleep for a while."

Ernie sighed. "Do you even hear what comes out of your

mouth?" He moved quickly, Addy's face still in his hands. For a mere moment, their lips overlapped, and then they were once again apart.

"There, our good mornings are done. Get up properly, Addy." With that, Ernie rose while Addy was blushing with a melting smile.

She rose with a start and glommed onto him. "Agh, Ernie! I love you so much!" She immediately started to let out a creepy giggle, which made Ernie sigh again. Doing something about this would be too much of a pain, so he just spaced out while she held him.

They could hear the faint sounds of awaking forest life from outside the tent, including a distant howl from some beast. It was unthinkably calm for monster territory.

"We'll be able to go back home, right, Ernie?" Addy asked quietly while maintaining her hold on him.

He slowly stood up, and this time he was the one to gently hug her. "We definitely will. Along with Ikaruga and the Sylphianne, of course."

"Yeah."

Ernie pecked Addy on the cheek once more before exiting the tent. "Now then! Let's start with breakfast. Then, we should decide which way we want to go today."

They would be traveling through the forest today as well. Their handmade map was gaining information, but they still had no clear destination.

Then, one day, they found *it*: something that would drastically change their futures in this forest.

◆

Ernie suddenly stopped as they were making their way through the forest.

He strained his ears, moving closer to a nearby tree as he did so. As he stuck to the tree and stood still, he could feel a faint tremor.

"It's far off...and heavy. Most likely a duel-class monster. Or maybe higher than that."

"Are we going to avoid it again?"

"That is the fundamental plan. But I want to figure out where it is. Let's climb this tree to search."

Normally, duel-class monsters spelled death for anybody not inside a silhouette knight. However, the two of them were a bit inhumanly strong, so they *could* fight one. Still, it would be a lot of trouble, so it was better to avoid it if possible.

Ernie and Addy (who was wearing her Descendrad) quickly climbed up a nearby tree. Then, with a wider field of view, they carefully surveyed the area. Eventually, they found a large *something* moving around.

There were actually two large things, stomping through the forest with heavy footfalls. As expected, they were roughly duel-class by their size alone. However, Ernie and Addy still gulped and widened their eyes in shock.

They could see one of the giant things through the gaps in the trees. It was, in fact, a giant humanoid.

“No way! A silhouette knight all the way out here?!” Addy exclaimed.

“No,” Ernie replied after a moment’s hesitation. “No, it’s not a silhouette knight. Something’s off. Wait, it can’t be!”

The pair of giants were wearing ridiculously large beast bones, presumably from monsters duel-class or above themselves. Similarly, their bodies were draped all over with processed “equipment” that looked like it was made of monster leather or armor. But even all this could be explained as strange silhouette knights.

Yet there was one more crucial, decisive difference.

They could see that one of the giants sported a singular, moist eye that was darting around, and it was breathing hot, damp mist. Bits of its arms and legs were exposed, revealing what looked like organic tissue.

Indeed, they were true, live giants, not man-made mechanical ones.

“Giants, not silhouette knights,” Ernie said after some more observation. “Living, duel-class giants!” That realization made him shudder.

Eighteen years had passed since he’d been born in this world. In all this time, he’d gotten used to the concept of gigantic living things made possible through magic.

So thinking about it, a humanoid giant wasn’t all that weird. If a beast could get huge, then naturally humanoids could too.

However, humanity had created mechanical giants and had been using them as weapons all this time. To them, giants

represented humanity's greatest fighting force.

"No way... Giants can't exist. Th-That's not okay," Addy muttered.

That was how terrifyingly incongruent the presence of real, living giants was to them. Addy was thrown into confusion, trembling with anxiety.

Ernie held her hand tightly and gave her a small smile before pointing at the giants. "If you look closely, they're wearing armor fashioned out of monster shells. That means they have the skill to manufacture things, and thus some sort of culture. It's possible they may understand language."

"Fwha?! Uh, er, right. Th— Whaaat?!" Addy shouted.

Meanwhile, Ernie was closely observing every move the giants made.

Their size made them heavy, and it gave them corresponding physical strength as well. Also, they were most likely under the effects of Physical Boost. Both were holding simple weapons, had five-fingered hands, and seemed around as dextrous as a human.

Their armor was also likely made of monster corpses. Bones, leather, and shells were the main materials; Ernie couldn't see anything metal. They were also wearing decorative things that looked to be made of fur and feathers, which told him that their culture had the concept of decoration.

The more he watched, the more Ernie smiled. "Okay! We're following those giants, Addy."

"Wha?! Oh, you're serious, Ernie." Naturally, Addy shook her head, looking like she hated the idea. She didn't like any monster, but she especially didn't want to get near something unknown like silhouette knight-sized giants.

"If we can get those giants' armor... We might be able to do something about the outer skin. But what about the inner skeleton? It'd definitely be hard to 'source' bones from them. That just leaves crystal tissue, and that's going to be a problem too. Still, this would make things way easier than when we had nothing at all."

"*That's* what you're thinking about?! Hey, those giants are alive. Shouldn't you be more like...surprised...or something?" Addy looked at Ernie, astonished that he'd already accepted what they saw. Passing straight through the surprised phase to immediately start thinking about how to use them indicated

Ernie was missing some mind screws.

“I wonder how advanced their technology is?” Ernie asked. “Do you think they’d have smiths? If so, it’d be really good for us if we could get along with them.”

“They probably don’t! Ernie, calm down. This isn’t reassuring me.”

Certainly, if giants had smiths, they would work more efficiently than normal human smiths. Still, the idea of asking these unknown giant humanoid monsters (assumed) to smith for them all of a sudden was insane. There weren’t many people in the entire world who had fewer scruples about reaching their objectives than Ernie.

“Well, yes, they may be threatening,” he said. “But this is way more interesting than just wandering around the forest aimlessly by ourselves. Let’s go!”

“Ernie… Oh, it’s already useless.”

Even in the face of the unknown, Ernie was still Ernie. With a goal in mind and a method in sight, he would not stop. Addy quickly gave up on resisting this plan, and the two of them sneakily followed the giants.

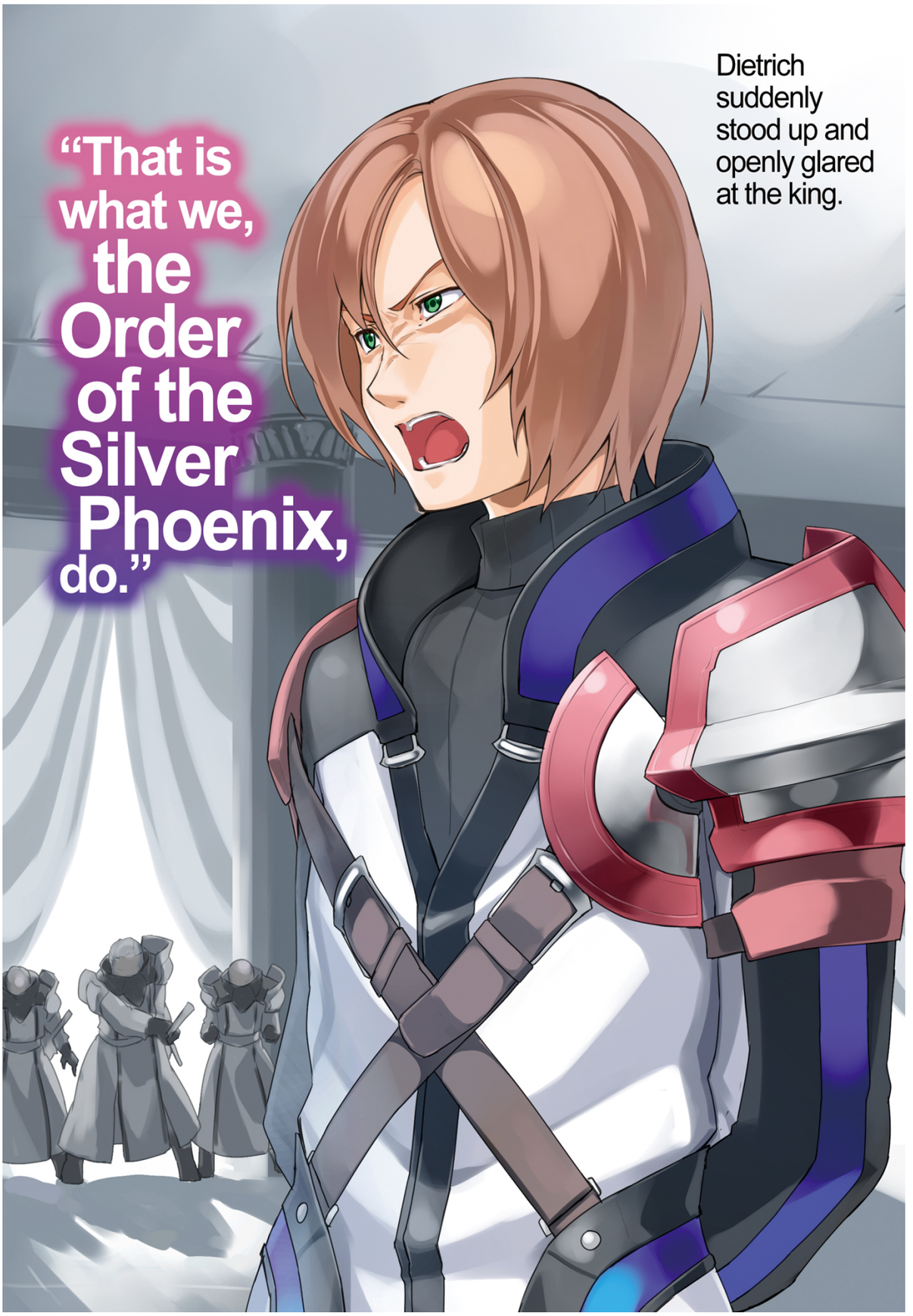
The large and dangerous forest was currently home to some small guests.

Meanwhile, flying ships were once again sent to retrieve these guests.

Then, there was the strange race of giants living in the forest.

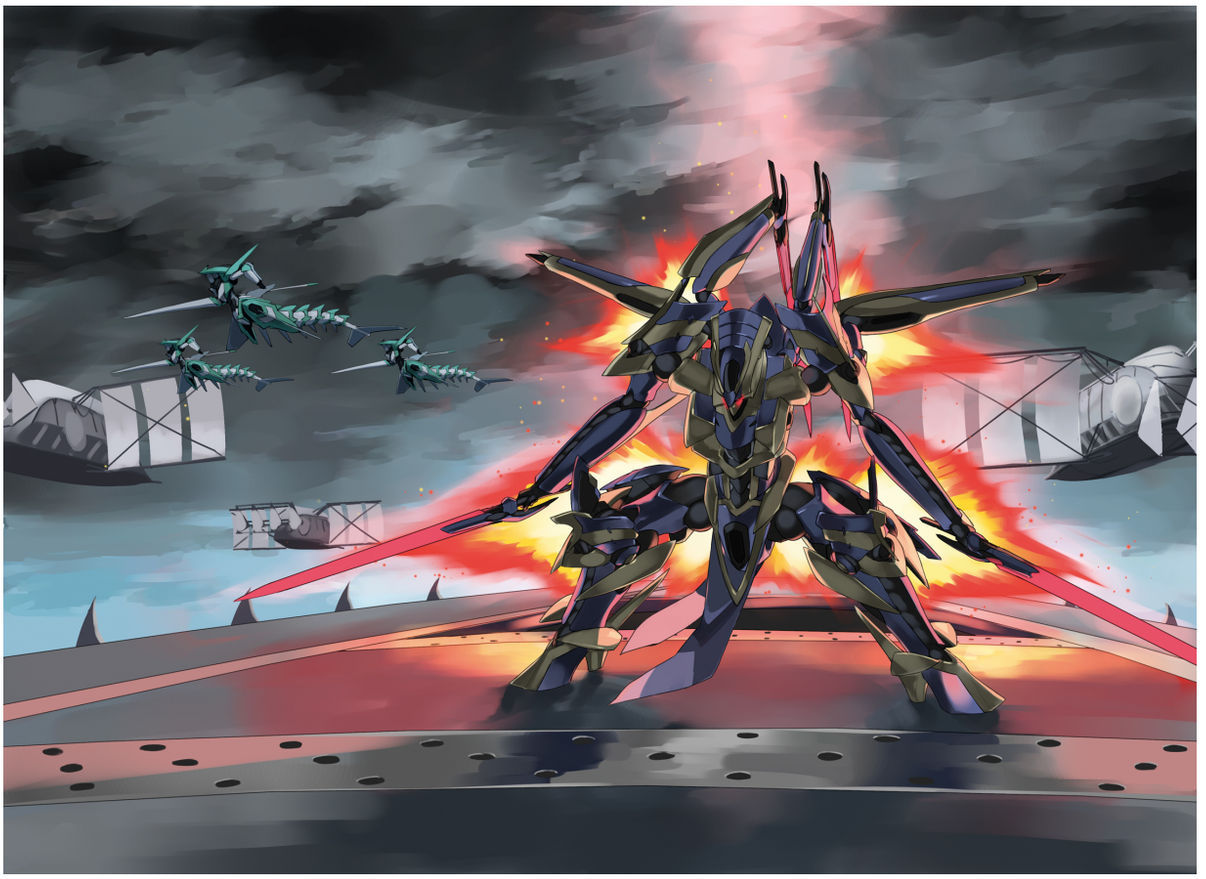
The intersection of all this would lead to major and unprecedented change for the fearsome Great Bocuse Forest.

—To Be Continued in *Knight’s & Magic 7*

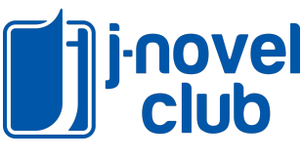

Dietrich suddenly stood up and openly glared at the king.
“That is what we, the Order of the Silver Phoenix, do.”











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